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# EDITORIAL

# Education for sustainable futures: Comparative dialogues

***Co-editors, Special Issue 2024***

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The 2023 OCIES Conference was held in beautiful Samoa, hosted by the National University of Samoa. The call for papers for the Special Issue following the conference attracted just under 30 abstract submissions. Following selections of abstracts and blind reviews, ten completed manuscripts were received within the 2024 Special Issue timeline. The papers explore and suggest insights on enacting education policy in the Oceania and Asia contexts relating to student and teacher well-being and success, teacher preparation and practice, learning program design, and the importance of culture and context to sustainable development in education.

We extend our appreciation to all reviewers for their time and work on enhancing the quality of the final manuscripts. We extend a heartfelt thank you to Professor Carol Mutch, Associate Professor Rasela Tufue, Dr Adreanne Ormond, Dr Anna Joskin, Dr Anne Shinkfield, Dr Daniel Couch, Dr Grace Ji, Dr Irene Paulsen, Dr Martyn Reynolds, Dr Philip Wing Keung Chan, Dr Rebecca Spratt, Dr Shaoru Annie Zeng, Dr Sofia Ali, and Dr Sonia Fonua. We further thank our editorial team: Dr Niusila Faamanatu-Eteuati and Associate Professor Rasela Tufue from the National University of Samoa and Ms Pine Southon and Dr Martyn Reynolds from Victoria University of Wellington. We sincerely thank Dr Philip Wing Keung Chan, Joint Senior Editor of the IEJ:CP and his team for supporting this Special Issue 2024 project to completion.

This Special Issue opens with an in-depth exploration of how the Oceania Oralities Framework (OOF) (Sanga & Reynolds, 2023) enables deep sense-making of what education means to local communities from the perspectives of *tok-stori* participants. The paper highlights the potential of the OOF to support sustainable education by identifying what education means and why to local communities. This identification is made possible by ontological holism, abstract analysis of education understandings rooted in the spiritual space, ordering of cultural principles as orderings of space, and acknowledging the performance aspect of oralities. In so doing, Sanga and Reynolds and their group of authors offer methodological insight into applying the OOF to help communities make meaning through an oralities approach.

Amton Mwaraksurmes then explores the lesson-planning practices of Mathematics teachers in Vanuatu concerning national education policy advocating student-centred learning and teaching. His work suggests that teachers undertake most of their lesson planning without consideration of or reference to national policy on student-centred learning, struggle to enact student-centred learning for new mathematics curriculum, often do not receive needed professional development to support enactment of student-centred teaching and learning and

are constrained from supporting student-centred learning in the absence of a variety of teaching and learning resources. Mwaraksurmes' analysis provides insight into implementing a student-centred learning policy in a developing country context where factors constrain teachers from fully realising the potential of such a policy for transforming student learning.

The paper by Effrel and Mwaraksurmes utilised a Community of Inquiry approach to explore the online learning experiences of 60 primary school teachers in Vanuatu during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their research identified challenges and opportunities for teachers to shift to online teaching modes using technology. The contribution of their case study from the experiences of Vanuatu's primary school teachers is a welcome addition to the literature on teacher experiences of the shift to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Rasela Tufue and Grace Sootaga report on qualitative research that examined factors that influence students' extrinsic and intrinsic motivation to study and do well in school. Their research with students in Samoa suggests the central importance of recognition and encouragement from teachers and other individuals in the student's network, expectations from parents and family, and factors related to the classroom learning environment. Tufue and Sootaga's article highlights the importance of supportive relationships to students' school experiences and potential for success.

Rasela Tufue and Floraleta Losi explore teachers' and students' perspectives of teaching and learning in composite classes within the context of Samoa education policy, which allows composite classes in schools with fewer enrolments. Student and staff voices are integrated throughout the article, presenting a compelling and nuanced case of composite class teaching and learning challenges and opportunities. The paper makes a strong argument for re-evaluating the composite class policy in Samoa's context under current levels of resourcing and support for teachers.

Grace Xuecong Ji, Philip Wing Keung Chan and Penelope Kalogeropoulos discuss a research project that explored the impact of the Double Reduction Policy in China, presenting a contrasting education context to the other research papers in this Special Issue. The paper illustrates how an education policy designed to combat a particular issue, in this case, declining student well-being, negatively impacts teacher workload and well-being. Ji, Chan and Kalogeropoulos' research suggests an opportunity for enhancing policy design and enactment processes to improve the positive impact of education policies such as the Double Reduction Policy.

Gayleen Tarosa's paper explores the induction experiences of new secondary school teachers in Vanuatu, drawing on the perspectives of new teachers and their principals. Beginning teachers in her research experienced similar challenges but responded to them differently. Tarosa's research provides insight into an important part of teacher preparation for teaching critical to developing countries' aspirations for quality education for sustainable development. Such insight is highly relevant in the current climate of teacher shortages in the research context of Vanuatu and across Oceania. Tarosa's paper makes important connections for policy to support professional learning and well-being for beginning teachers in Vanuatu. There is a welcome indication that applying Tarosa's research findings to policy and practice has already started in Vanuatu.

Anne Shinkfield explores the disentangling of ideas about cultural differences and socioeconomic disadvantage within the context of an early years learning programme in Australia. Shinkfield's paper suggests a local solution to a global problem by grounding early years education in local culture with the engagement of family members in school learning

activities. Her work makes an important suggestion for the design of early years learning programmes for Indigenous children in Australia, framed within the culture of children's families.

The group collaboration paper by Shaoru Annie Zeng, Sun Yee Yip, Grace Xuecong Ji, Yaqing Hou, Hongzhi Zhang, Philip Wing Keung Chan, Zane Diamond and Geraldine Burke examines the extent to which community engagement and resources are evident in lesson planning for a particular curriculum priority. The curriculum theme in question is Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia Cross-Curriculum Priority in the Australian Curriculum. Using an analytical tool to compare selected elements, such as types of community resources, community engagement strategies concerning stated educational aims, and the link to lesson planning elements, provides a practical example of how the enactment of curriculum policy can be comparatively examined using lesson plan artefacts.

Adreanne Ormond and Martyn Reynolds' paper examines the experiences of Māori tertiary students in Aotearoa New Zealand through video dialogic research. Their work centres Indigenous student voices and experiences and demonstrates the importance of cultural connection for student success in higher education. Ormond and Reynolds' paper reinforces the centrality of relationships in supporting academic success and provides insights for improving tertiary education support systems for student well-being and success. The Special Issue ends with a Community piece and two book reviews. Titled, a 'Scholarly responses to UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report 2024 Pacific Technology in Education: A tool on whose terms?' a group of OCIES scholars offer a cutting-edge contextual and insightful response to a pertinent UNESCO global policy.

Overall, the articles in this Special Issue contribute to the discussion on educational quality for sustainable futures, which was the theme of the 2023 OCIES Conference. The papers examine issues key to the debate on education quality, such as student and teacher well-being, teacher preparation and practice, the systemic pressures on teachers and students, and the importance of education policy and practice to culture and context. As a collection of papers, they provide insights into the challenges and opportunities in implementing education policy where there is often a gap between policy intention and implementation. The papers span diverse methodological approaches within qualitative research and integrate cultural perspectives in their research designs and analyses while sharing a common concern for the practical application of research to inform education policy for sustainable development. Together, this suite of papers constitutes a dialogic contribution from members of the OCIES research community to the wider scholarship on education for sustainable futures. We congratulate all authors for their contributions to this Special Issue. We commend these papers to our readers and hope you enjoy the contributions articulated therein.

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# Oceania oralities research and sustainable education: Exploring layers of engagement

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*Oralities research has a central place in supporting sustainable education in the Oceania region because it has the potential to reveal what education does and could mean to communities at the local level. In this way, oralities research can assist interventions that key into and make sense of local ontological positions. The Oceania Oralities Framework (OOF) is an analytical tool that supports links between Oceania oralities and research. It provides a grounding for theorising Oralities research, supporting research design and shaping analytical scope in data treatment. This article extends the reach of the framework by drawing from a* tok stori *session held at the OCIES 2023 Conference at the National University of Sāmoa, Apia. In the article, we approach the OOF in a way that points to some of the layers in the potential contribution of the OOF to oralities research. These focus on holism, framework elements, cultural principles and oralities as performance. The approach adds to the framework's value to support an appreciation of Oceania oralities across the region and points to how oralities research can support sustainable education. Formal education can be adjusted to fit the needs and perspectives of Indigenous groups and minorities only when their voices can be heard on their own terms.*

*Keywords: Oralities research; Oceania Oralities Framework; tok stori, Indigenous education*

## INTRODUCTION

Sustainable education involves policies and practices that support people, communities and ecosystems. Sustainability in education requires educational ideas and practices that are tenable, systemically healthy and durable or long-lasting (Jeronen, 2020). Key indicators of sustainable education include relevance or appropriateness, the production of wellbeing and the operation of values coherent with those of the wider society(ies) that the education seeks to serve. Research that aims to support sustainable education must, therefore, be capable of

garnering local voice, placing that voice in context and appreciating depth of meaning. Oralities research offers these qualities and can be regarded as a significant way forward to support sustainable education development in the Oceania region, as elsewhere (Kovach, 2010). Comparative and international education (CIE) research that does not employ approaches that can deeply 'hear' Indigenous groups and minorities whose communication practices are well established and orally constructed will likely miss opportunities for transformational change.

The Oceania Oralities Framework (OOF) of Sanga and Reynolds (2024) was created as an analytical tool to support developments in the field of oralities research. Publications are in hand (e.g., Cagivinaka et al., 2024) that theorise oralities research design and navigation for oralities researchers. This article extends the reach of the OOF through a layered approach, which involves probing meaning that exists at various 'distances' from the 'surface' of an experience. Below the layer of audible words, we point to holism, specific framework elements, space-framed cultural principles and performance as layers of oralities research that can be ordered through the OOF. These layers are of value in CIE because they attend to deep analysis that moves beyond the 'what' of education and towards the 'why', emphasising links and relationships, not abstraction and separation. The reasons for education are as much a part of sustainability as the provision of buildings, teachers and curriculum. Thus, we suggest that Oceania oralities research has a central place in supporting sustainable education in the region because of its potential to reveal what education does and could mean to communities at the local level, assisting any researched interventions to key into and make sense of local ontological positions.

In this paper, we begin by offering background information about oralities scholarship in CIE in Oceania. We then consider the nature of frameworks and apply this discussion to the OOF. We then describe the specific context of this paper, a *tok stori* session from the OCIES 2023 Conference at the National University of Sāmoa, Apia, in methodological terms. Next, we render voices from *tok stori* participants to illustrate four of the multiple levels at which the OOF offers value in oralities research. Finally, we draw conclusions that point to the value of OOF-supported oralities research for sustainable education in the Oceania region.

## OCEANIA ORALITIES SCHOLARSHIP

Oralities research exists in many places in the world, such as in Indigenous communities in Canada (Kovach, 2010) and Australia (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010; Geia et al., 2013) and various Caribbean communities (Nakhid, 2021). Oralities scholarship deals with what Kovach (2010) calls the 'conversational approach" to research, which 'involves a dialogic participation that holds a deep purpose of sharing story as a means to assist others [which] . . . is relational at its core' (p. 40). An orality is a codification of conversation, a mode of dialogue that is habitually practised and well-understood in context. The research literature presents various Oceania oralities, including *tok stori* (Sanga & Reynolds, 2023) and Hawaiian talk story (Affonso et al., 1996; Sentell et al., 2020). Each of these terms is an umbrella or entry point that alludes to multiple local and contextual oral forms of encounter (Sanga & Reynolds, 2021; Vaioleti, 2013). *Talanoa,* in various forms, has, since the work of Vaioleti (2006), been perhaps the most obvious Oceania orality in the research literature. Oralities research is progressively taking place among approaches supporting improvements in sustainable education (Sanga & Reynolds, 2019).

Oceania oralities research is on the move, and OCIES has played its part in anchoring and developing this trend. The 2017 conference, held in Nouméa, hosted the first OCIES conference *tok stori* session, a step that promoted Oceania oralities as conference topic and mode.

Subsequently, a body of OCIES conference-related *tok stori*-centred articles has developed, including Sanga et al. (2018), Fasavalu and Reynolds (2019), Sanga, Johannson-Fua, et al. (2020) and Mahuri et al. (2023). Away from conference-related publications, oralities-centred articles published in the OCIES journal have included Fa'avae (2018), Iromea and Reynolds (2021), Dorovolomo et al. (2022) and Koloto (2023). This article adds to the OCIES-oralities CIE discussion.

## THE OCEANIA ORALITIES FRAMEWORK (OOF)

Various functions have been proposed for theoretical frameworks, including classifying (Cook et al., 2008), enabling comparison and evaluation (Rearick & Feldman, 1999) and describing (Jarrassé et al., 2012). Ordering is the sequencing of matters that are related and connected. Ordering as a process enables description, classification, comparison and evaluation to be held together. Through ordering, the OOF has ambitions of encouraging the further disciplined exploration of the potential of Oceania oralities research in and beyond education—and, by extension, in CIE in other locations.

Frameworks tend to be more open and encompassing than generally specific, contextual and descriptive models. The openness of the OOF provides a grounding for dialogue between diverse oralities researchers and their interests and between holistic (Sanga et al., 2018) and analytically structured (Sanga and Reynolds, 2019) accounts of oralities. Indigenous groups whose connections with land, sea and sky have developed the customary dialogic practices that researchers progressively seek to leverage in new contexts should be the primary beneficiaries of oracies research. In terms of education, it is they who sustainable education should serve.

As discussed in Sanga and Reynolds (2024), the OOF is modelled on a woven mat from Milne Bay, Papua New Guinea. The framework seeks to support clarity and development in Oceania oralities research through explicitness, discipline and attention to the ontological foundations of customary oralities, particularly in research contexts. The woven circular design encloses an incomplete set of elements: identity, presence, relationality, influencing agents, spiritual, visual, digital, numerical, text, oral-aural, spatial and a space for future extensions. These are analytical categories that researchers can use to think through when engaged in oralities research. Between the elements are relational spaces. These spaces provide opportunities for the contextual embodiment of the elements and their relationships. As a result of its configuration, represented in Figure 1, the OOF offers high-level abstract and local contextual avenues for appreciating oralities as research and performance.

Figure 2 shows how researchers can populate framework elements with aspects of context. In this case, the information is derived from the Gula'ala of Malaita, Solomon Islands (Sanga & Reynolds, 2024). The interplay between a (partial) ordering framework and local context renders the OOF valuable in the diversity of Oceania, where both recognition of uniqueness and the relationships inherent in regionalism are valuable.

**Figure 1. The Oceania Oralities Framework**

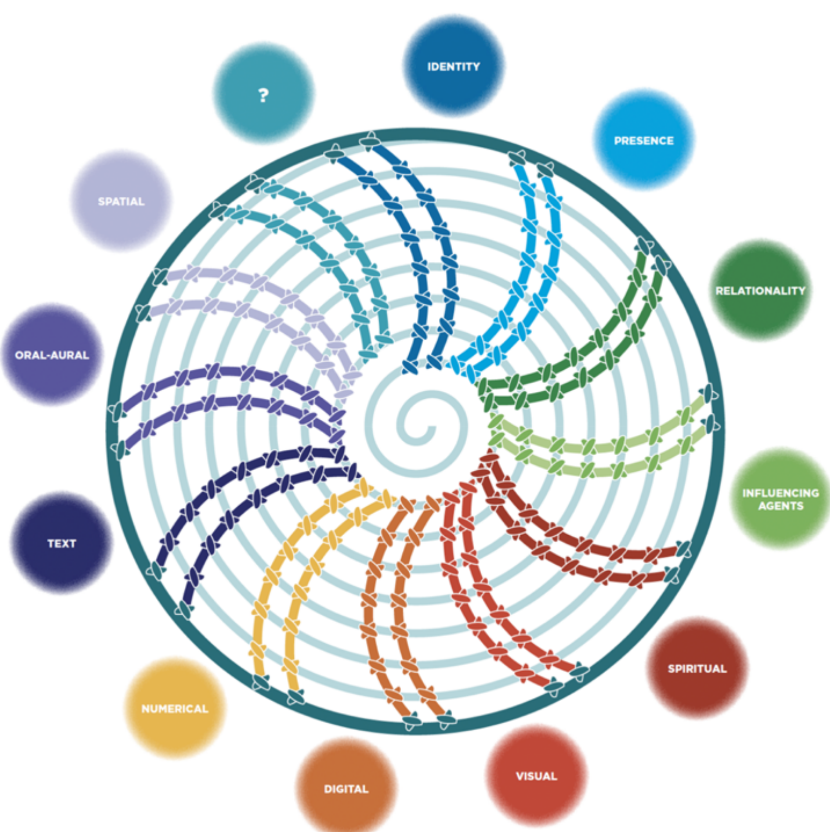
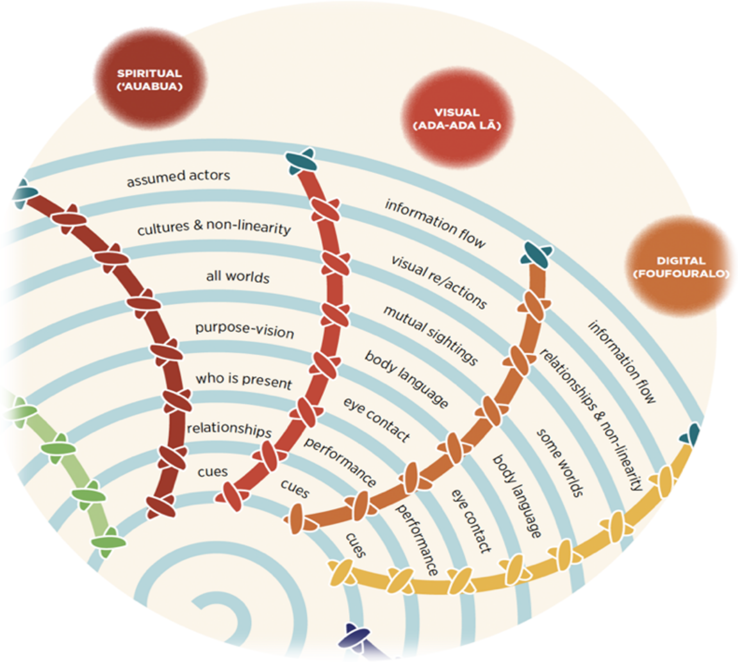



**Figure 2. Detail of the Oceania Oralities Framework from Sanga and Reynolds (2024)**




Figures 1 & 2 taken from: K Sanga and M Reynolds. (2024). Telling it like it is: A framework exploration of Oceanic Oralities through the example of tok stori. In Y. Usef Waghid & A. Alsafour (Eds.), Values education and beyond: Implications for emotional learning. Koninklijke Brill NV.

The layered nature of Oceania oralities and oralities research has a central place in supporting sustainable education in the region because this form of research has the potential to answer longstanding questions such as 'Education for what?' (Bugotu et al., 1973) from local ontological positions. In this example, the 'for what' of sustainable education is not merely a matter of national policy but is also the product of philosophy and lived experience at the community level.

## METHODOLOGY

The main focus of this article is a *tok stori* session entitled *Exploring Oceania Oralities* held at the OCIES 2023 Conference at the National University of Sāmoa, Apia. *Tok stori* is a Melanesian orality or dialogic form increasingly used in research contexts, including through conference storying sessions. Briefly, *tok stori* involves dialogic storying in a space made safe by relational care and the sense of being a *wantok*, one who has obligations to others, in this case, other *tok stori* actors. Agreement or consensus is generally redundant in a *tok stori* (Iromea & Reynolds, 2021; Sanga & Reynolds, 2020b; Sanga et al., 2018), where mutual understanding is prioritised. The co-authors of this paper were either invited *tok stori* participants from the conference session, variously from Fiji (Vilive Cagivinaka), Sāmoa (Tepora Wright), Vanuatu (Amton Mwaraksurmes), and Papua New Guinea (PNG) (Anna Joskin), or session instigators from Solomon Islands (Kabini Sanga) and the United Kingdom (Martyn Reynolds).

Tok stori is a relational activity (Sanga & Reynolds, 2020b; 2023), and in this case, previously developed relationships were methodologically significant. The instigators knew the invited participants as previous students, co-researchers, co-authors and/or colleagues and friends. Consequently, there was team confidence to conduct a *tok stori* across a wide canvas.

The instigators offered minimal direction to the invited *tok stori* participants in the form of a copy of the OOF, a brief prior discussion of the framework, and the request to think and then story about what stood out to them from the OOF. This approach aimed to access the positional expertise of participants, honouring the potential of *tok stori* to accommodate the diversity of interest and focus while creating relational closeness. A wide-ranging set of storied responses eventuated. A recording was made during the *tok stori* session, which was transcribed, and relevant extracts were member-checked.

We curate the diverse conference *tok stori* contributions here as the core of the article as layered discussions. The curation process involved one member of the authorship team being responsible for carefully listening to what was said in the conference session to establish a pathway into the material appropriate for a written exegesis. The technique of fitting the analysis to the storying session (rather than the other way around) supports the prioritisation of the stories.

Through careful listening at the time and subsequent re-reading of transcripts of the conference session, the core of each speaker's contribution emerged and was then member-checked. Each core idea was then considered in the light of the other contributions, allowing the development of a layered arrangement. The layered arrangement privileged both separation and connection between the ideas through layers of abstraction, moving from the conceptual to the oralities performance. Since this article does not aim to report on a single session but seeks to illuminate the ways people appreciate the oralities in which they engage, we supplemented the conference session with subsequent online and face-to-face *tok stori*. In addition to the invited speakers, many others contributed to the conference *tok stori*. Unfortunately, the recording of this section of the session failed. However, we recognise these contributions through acknowledgment.

In the next section, we approach the storying from the 2023 conference session through four layers: holism, framework elements, spaces populated by cultural principles, and performance. Figure 3 represents these layers and suggests ways researchers might understand oralities encounters, privileging one or another layer according to intent and context.

**Figure 3. A layered approach to oralities research through the Oceania Oralities Framework**

## FINDINGS

This section presents findings about the layers apparent from the conference *tok stori* session. We suggest four levels as ways of appreciating aspects of Oceania oralities: ontological holism or interconnectedness that frames all oralities activities; abstracted analysis of oralities, supported by the elements on the OOF; acknowledging the presence of a culture's prioritised principles in the spaces between OOF elements; and oralities as performance. The order of the layers is intended to suggest the links between ontology and performance, as well as the value of the OOF in mapping the kinds of connections involved.

### Level #1: The OOF frames ontological holism

Oceania peoples are diverse, and the OOF does not claim to order all aspects of every Oceania life, a fact clarified by positioning a question mark (?) in its fabric; however, the circular shape and woven structure of the OOF point to the ambition to honour the holistic logic of many Oceania ontologies. Vilive's contribution to the conference *tok stori* illustrates how oralities researchers can privilege ontology in oralities research. This is evident through a discussion of

the correspondence between the framework and the holistic sense of reality it seeks to order embodied in Vilive's references to the Fijian philosophical and ontological understanding of the *Vanua*. Here, we draw out two aspects of his storying to present ontological foundations accommodated in the OOF: relationships in space and life as a connected journey.

**Relationships in space**

The circular shape of the OOF represents holism in Oceania ontologies. All points in a circle are connected and are related through the enclosed circular space. The circularity of the OOF asserts the 'overall' layer as the primary intent of the model—a framing device for ontological relational space. When thinking of oralities in a Fijian context, Vilive explains that the relational storying space is not only occupied by those sitting together. Neither is it populated by separate individuals who happen to be in the same room. Instead, Vilive remarks: 'You did not come here alone. We all came with others'. This statement refers to people's attendance at the conference and the web of relationships contributing to who one is in any dialogic space.

'*Coming with'* makes sense to Vilive because, according to the *Vanua*, he is connected to 'those who came before me' in a situation where 'my responsibility is to prepare and nurture things for the future – the young ones – that's the Vanua'. This understanding suggests that a person's position in time and space is always connected to the positions of others. In this, relationships are as significant as entities. Awareness of this state brings obligations to act in nurturing ways––caring for others whether they are physically or metaphysically present. An orality encounter is an opportunity to enact such obligations. This involves appreciating that 'wisdom is in the people sitting beside you'.

Holistic relationships in the OOF are not restricted to the human but include other forces and entities. This is most clearly visible in the OOF elements of the Spiritual (which encompasses invisible forces and entities) and Influencing Agents (which order the human and more-than-human). These elements sit alongside and at the same level as elements that may seem more human-centric, such as Visual and Oral-Aural. When people participate in an orality, all the entities they relate to are present. Vilive explains the self as 'where you are from; families, totem—all these things make me a Fijian—a tall palm tree called *saqiwa, plus koli* or dog'. These elements sit with him in the orality and inform who he is, what he hears and how he speaks. Thinking about oralities research at the ontological level means that the understanding of orality actors' contributions can be enhanced by appreciating the context of wider relationships and, therefore, the whole self of participants.

**Life as a connected journey**

Vilive's contribution to the *tok stori* articulates time as a holistic field in which life as a journey takes place. Time, in some understandings, is linear, a constant flow that separates the past from the present and the past and present from the future. In Oceania, views of time can be embedded in spatio-temporal complexity (Māhina, 2010) so that time and space are related in a unity. Time can also be structured around relationships and episodes, so that it has different meanings depending on one's temporal position in relation to the relationships and episodes (Telban, 2017).

The dialogic nature of life for many Oceania people means that the past and future travel with oralities actors into the present in a visceral way. For example, tears shed in *tok stori* (Fasavalu & Reynolds, 2019) or at face-to-face *talanoa* sessions (Fa'avae et al., 2022) indicate the vitality of relational links across time and space. In circular time, life becomes a journey of return, a

*malaga* (Lilomaiava-Doktor, 2009) in relational space. This is a valuable notion when considering the relational space at the heart of Oceania oralities.

Vilive highlights the way the OOF accommodates holistic ideas of time. In the *Vanua,* he explains, 'Life is circular. It continues in the afterworld'. In addition, 'knowledge is re-used', built from already known elements and gifted to the future for clarification, adaption and further re-working. For Vilive, learning from oralities research involves appreciating the complexity of space and time: 'I will take back to my country, and I will teach my students that even though we may be separated by oceans . . . we share common views. We may have different ways of approaching things but at the end of the day we all want the best for our people, not for me.' This is because in life as a connected journey, it is important to have 'big hearts to accept whoever came ashore to be part of our journey', a factor of particular importance in 'multi-racial Fiji'. Continued dialogue is a feature of Oceania oralities because oralities are not limited by present time but exist in holistic time, continuing into the future.

## Level #2 The OOF orders abstractive analysis

Within the OOF are multiple elements; categories that provide order for oralities researchers when thinking about methodological design, data, analysis and so on. These elements are interwoven in a holistic ontology but can provide helpful analytical categories for abstractive analysis. Here, we use one element as an example of how the OOF can help order analytical thought and consequent action in oralities research. Tepora's contribution to the conference *tok stori* session focussed on the Spiritual element and illustrates that thinking through a construct of this nature can reveal matters of importance in the context of oralities research.

### Conceptualising the spiritual

There are many ways of understanding the OOF element of the Spiritual. As with all OOF elements, a sense of openness invites diversity. Tepora's contribution to the *tok stori* elucidates four ways of understanding this element. First, she presents the idea of intergenerational trauma where 'some are saying that trauma—drowning or fire [for example]' is passed down as 'something that is not explained by the physical right now'. Intergenerational trauma has been characterised as collective hurt that requires spiritually orientated healing (Gabel, 2019) or may be investigated through epigenetics (Henriques, 2019; Zimmerman, 2023). Second, the Spiritual can also encompass organised religion, such as Christianity. Typical of Oceania people, Tepora notes, 'we grow up in Christian homes . . . we learn about Christian theology'. Through religion, the OOF Spiritual element can order human-divine relationships. Third, Indigenous spiritual understandings are held by many communities in Oceania, such as the Sāmoan notion of *mauli*. As a fourth and umbrella perspective, Tepora suggests the Spiritual element in the OOF can embrace all things 'relating to the unseen—not of the body, so of the spirit, nevertheless present and [to be] acknowledged'. This umbrella approach is pursued here.

Taking an inclusive approach to the Spiritual element, Tepora illustrates situations where unseen spiritual matters are often ignored in education. 'For example, policy has unseen aspects'. The language of 'inclusive v mainstreaming' creates a 'negative space' where the 'unseen nature of the bond that holds us together' is downplayed in favour of 'separation'; the whole child is hidden behind attention to a limited set of skills. Similarly, 'second chance education' invokes ideas about education as 'competitive', a system in which there is only 'one way' to proceed. This diminishes the 'completeness' of the individual in a materially orientated discussion. Language can ellipse spirituality but 'informs behaviours and actions' so that the

*mauli* is 'not considered in [education] policy'. Habitually framed discussion can ignore the ubiquity and significance of the unseen.

**The spiritual potential of the oralities space**

Since the spiritual is present in all contexts, the OOF element of the Spiritual points to the significance of the unseen and immaterial in Oceania oralities encounters. In Tepora's view, this means 'being aware—there is a greater potential for good things to happen by acknowledging mauli'. Acknowledgement of the spiritual applies to the content of oralities sessions, such as in the policy examples above. However, attending to the Spiritual also conditions how an orality is understood. Tepora points to the constructive potential of 'openness at a deep level' in encounters with oralities. She reflects that although 'offering a [Christian] prayer or blessing' at the start of a session acknowledges spiritual connections, this act may 'harness the form, not the [full] power' of the Spiritual. To go further, one might consider the unseen orientations that oralities actors have toward each other and the act of storying. For example, mutual spiritual openness can lead to actors *'coming to understand not through explanation'*, which, in turn, can produce relational connections of significance beyond the matters discussed.

Vaai (2014) discussed orientation and space in terms that are helpful here. Vaai reminds us of the potential in storying, to face someone as well as look through the other person's eyes in what Tepora calls 'the direction in which they see, and the potential that all this "seeing" can enable'. On a material level, we generally 'talk to' and are 'facing each other' across the physical storying space. Tepora's concern for the *mauli* asks questions beyond this. For example, what is the potentiality of 'facing with' and 'talking with'? These metaphysical terms centre unseen bonds of unity and suggest that the significance of relational interactions between oralities actors can go well beyond the audible and visual. Since Oceania oralities involve safe and living space, open concepts of time and value placed on enduring relationships, such questions are highly appropriate because they focus on unseen aspects of holistic ontology. As Tepora says, 'For the spiritual aspect, some of us might be speaking from a different space sometimes that the other person doesn't fully understand . . . [or] there could be spiritual communication going on'. The OOF element of Spiritual encourages researchers to consider and then investigate unseen and undiscerned dimensions of this nature. For CIE, attention to the spiritual nature(s) of educational spaces offers nuanced ways of understanding how those involved might understand their educational experiences. For example, awareness of the spiritual dimension of the *vā* shifts classroom conduct from a solely transactional series of events to a flow of events that connect and/or separate those involved in spiritual terms. CIE that takes account of the spiritual (Anae, 2010) potential of educational spaces can pursue sustainability and success in ways well beyond measured academic achievement.

**The value of abstraction**

The element level of the OOF offers ordering that can promote the development of deep accounts of any area in focus. As illustrated by the *tok stori*, the OOF element of Spiritual names and legitimises localised and potentially plural understandings of the spiritual that validate community understandings of life. As a result, the words in storied accounts can be augmented by unseen matters such as intergenerationality, relationships to the divine, the kinds of spaces invoked by language, the orientation to the openness of oralities actors and the spiritual potential of the communication taking place. In this way, the element level of the OOF promotes a fuller account of oralities encounters and the ontologies to which they are relevant.

### Level #3 - The OOF orders space for a culture's prioritised principles

Abstracted elements within the OOF, such as the Spiritual, are valuable when ordering an appreciation of Oceania oralities. However, the OOF configuration also creates space between framework elements. These are relational spaces in which ontological matters emerge in how people understand parts of their context. We use the term 'a culture's prioritised principles' here to point to ontologically driven contextual understandings that inform the execution of oralities in the field. This term emphasises context since any such principle is developed in a cultural context. The term also emphasises that principles are neither fixed nor absolute; the idea of prioritisation makes space for contradictory or shifting principles at work for a cultural group from which those involved make contextual choices as prioritisation.

Although always operating, a culture's prioritised principles are a particularly valuable methodological tool in Oceania oralities research. This position is supported by the OOF because, through the relational spaces provided in the framework, the OOF makes visible those elements of culture that inform any discussion of localised methodologies in a more global frame. By way of example, we discuss an example of a culture's prioritised principles positioned between the OOF elements of Spatial, Visual, Relationality and Identity. This principle is 'gender-as-separation'. Here, we focus on the space between the elements of Spatial and Identity because separation is generally spatial, and gender is an informant of identity.

#### Space and gender linked by a culture's prioritised principles

The literature indicates the significance of the relationship between gender and spatial ordering in Vanuatu. Hess (2009) discusses gender as a non-negotiable aspect of Vanuatu *kastom.* She says, 'appropriate distance or social space between agents (people and places) is expressed as respect' (p. 28). For example, Hess shows how clothing for males and females reinforces gender and role separation, as do differing activities undertaken in gender groups. Ni-Vanuatu's application of gender can also be seen in the non-human world, such as categorising some food products (Jolly, 1994), a means by which various staples are ordered within a holistic ontology.

Amton, a researcher and tribe member from Vanua Lava, offered stories to the conference about operating cultural principles in everyday contexts. Shared heritage underpins such principles, and Amton observes that the 'OOF image reminds us of the Vēnēm system, the tribal system for our 16-18 tribes . . . Basically everything is there—leadership, relationships, how the tribes can all be related—we come from the same origin.' Significantly, he points out that 'One of the ideas we all expect from all of the tribes on the island is . . . respect'.

Respect is key to understanding the operation of the cultural principle of gender-as-separation. Four examples of *kastom* behaviour given by Amton provide a grounding for discussing the principle of gender-as-separation in oralities practice and research. These involve eye contact, separated spaces, gendered knowledge, and gendered activities and discussions.

#### *Application of gender-as-separation*

Eye contact is a very significant element of gendered *kastom* in Vanua Lava. In the conference session, Amton related that a 'father and a daughter should not make prolonged eye contact', their gazes generally remaining separated. Some spaces are separated: 'We demonstrate respect when men and women go swimming in the river, the men will be upfront, and the women must use another spot downstream.' Further, gender and subject expertise are linked, so that, for example, women are knowledge holders about 'cultural weaving of mats . . . yam planting and some aspects of fishing'. Fishing on the reef is a women's activity but deep-sea fishing is done by males. In situations where *kastom* oralities are practised, 'land discussions will be generally

conducted by males'. However, 'in community settings, meetings are open'. Thus, in *kastom* life, gender and space intersect as ordering categories and can be jointly articulated through the cultural principle of gender-as-separation.

***Gender-as-separation in oralities engagement***

Amton's contribution to the *tok stori* also shows how a culture's prioritised *kastom*-derived principles provide ordering in oralities engagement, which is unsurprising since the same ontology is at play. Gender-as-separation can be seen in oralities seating arrangements. For example, in an open meeting, when males and females are present, the space between a man and woman who are not married to each other may be occupied by the woman's father or spouse. In addition, the man and woman 'would not be directly facing'. In circumstances when this is difficult to arrange, those involved might simply 'face away' to create distance. As indicated in the literature (Sanga & Reynolds, 2020a), not all knowledge is public, and gender-as-separation can act as an axis of restriction on sharing. Since some subjects 'belong' to one gender or another, researchers should reflect on the gender composition of storying groups to seek veritable information. Finally, the order of speakers in an oralities research engagement can reflect the cultural principle. Women may pause until men have spoken before offering their contributions, 'waiting their time' not as inferiors but as a matter of ordering driven by Vanua Lava cultural groups' prioritised principle of gender-as-separation. In such circumstances, weight is not attached to contributions by sequence, but *kastom* is respected by employing time as a separating element.

Amton's stories regarding the prioritised principles of gender-as-separation illustrate the relationality between OOF elements. In the examples given, gender is a key element of identity and informs *kastom* relationality – how one relates and to whom (and what). Space (and time) operate to separate genders so that respect is maintained according to context. Through its configuration, the OOF affords spaces in which researchers are supported to identify and execute as relevant a culture's prioritised principles, a facility of increased value where not all involved are steeped in local *kastom*. Oralities research is valuable precisely because it can operate according to the relevant *kastom* ontology, and delineating cultural principles as a methodological consideration is of great help in achieving this aim within the dynamism of research contexts.

## Level #4 - The OOF orders analysis of oralities as performance

People experience Oceania oralities as performance. Although the OOF layers of ontology, elements and space for cultural principles point to the complexity and depth of oralities encountered when a group assembles to t*alanoa* or *tok stori*, the core activity is enactment of relationality through meeting, speaking and listening. Ontology frames performance, elements exist within performance, and cultural principles shape performance. However, without an oral encounter, these aspects remain as potential to be realised.

### Performance and relationships

Oralities as performance is focussed on what people do, a layer that is informed by who they are in the context of the engagement. In many Pacific ontologies, people are relational beings, and context shapes relationships. For example, understandings of the *vā* include ideas of closeness and distance and/or connection and separation (Anae, 2010; Ka'ili, 2005; Wendt, 1999). These are matters that describe relationships between entities rather than the entities themselves. In Melanesia, to be a *wantok* is not a solo or personal matter but a social construct focussed on contextual relationships (Fito'o, 2019; Nanau, 2018). In Fiji, *veiwekani* (Nabobo-

Baba, 2015) mediates relationships between people in the *vanua*. As Vilive pointed out in the conference session, no one comes alone; we are all linked through space and time. As an example of the value of the OOF to frame the discussion of Oceania oralities as performance, we draw on Anna's contribution to the OCIES conference *tok stori* by focusing on the performative aspect of the OOF element of Influencing Agents as she experienced this in Papua New Guinea, her home.

**Performing as an Influencing Agent**

Anna's account during the conference session of Influencing Agents in Oceania oralities draws on her own experience and self-conceptualisation as a contributor in many oralities encounters. In many of these, she relates to others as a teacher. She says, 'I wear my teacher's hat with pride . . . [inspired by] Christ's first role as a teacher'. Anna explains, 'What I try to do [in *tok stori*] is to connect the spiritual aspects with relationships . . . My faith, how can I influence my students, my children, my faith, my country'.

Three domains of influence exist in Melanesian society: *kastom,* or the traditional domain, church or the religious domain, and the institutional domain, which includes democratic institutions and the education system of schools, colleges and universities. Each domain competes for influence, and *kastom* is generally the strongest (Sanga & Reynolds, 2022). On traditional matters in village settings, relationships exist in which Anna's role in performing *tok stori* requires gendered management within *kastom* parameters. However, in the institutional domain in Papua New Guinea, as an educated woman, advocate for women and underserved groups and a culturally aware person, Anna has space to 'recognise the potential of the person you already were'. She says, 'The PM listens to academics when they speak . . . So, when he attends and talks about issues, he listens . . . to a small woman. I come from a male-dominated country, but I carry the identity of a person who has studied and gained a PhD.' Anna describes this aspect of herself in *kastom* terms, metaphorically linking the *kastom* and institutional domains. '[In kastom] you go to the hausman (man's house) to be trained in initiation . . . I have been initiated into that Western concept of research'. As a result of this process, she is responsible for performing as an influencing agent, 'navigating between women in PNG and decision making—influencing decisions.'

**Oceania Oralities as performative pedagogy**

Anna describes great value in using the Melanesian orality of *tok stori* as pedagogy. She seeks to use the orality to influence her students through 'good stories . . . stories that make a difference'. This does not mean rejecting the need to examine problems and issues through *tok stori,* but it captures Anna's relational role as 'mama-teacher-meri (mother-teacher-woman)' in her working context—someone who is obliged to show love, is focused on education as a positive force and is positioned to look at life from a woman's point of view. Her position as an Influencing Agent drives her to claim and thereby model 'equality of participation' as she 'claims the influence' of her initiation and academic position.

Many elements of the OOF can be implicated in oralities as performance. Identity can be expressed in performance, including gender as an aspect of identity, as discussed above. Similarly, the OOF Visual element can be used to order appreciations of Oceania oralities as performance. Facial expression and gestures are obvious aspects that can sit under this element and form part of how actors perform oralities. Equally, the OOF Oral-Aural element is available to order appropriate aspects of oralities performance. Researchers and teachers will benefit from considering how oralities actors present themselves and their stories as a performance. Researchers should also consider the nature and significance of their own parts in oralities as

performance; communication and configurations of relationality are among the consequences of how the performance of oralities researchers is read and understood.

## DISCUSSION

This article makes a case for the value of the OOF in ordering thought about Oceania oralities by using the four example layers of holism, specific framework elements, space-framed cultural principles and performance. Holism frames oralities through ontology; framework elements provide guides for abstractive analysis; the spaces between elements host contextual ideas and practices such as a culture's prioritised principles; and performance points to enactment as a key aspect of Oceania oralities. The need to consider further the potential contribution of layered exploration of Oceania oralities to sustainable education remains. This can be explored by revisiting the four example layers.

First, Oceania oralities research that is sensitive to ontology can garner local voice, place this in context, and appreciate depth of meaning. In many Oceania societies, educational activities taking place in the institutional domain are not truly separable from *kastom* and church domains (Sanga et al., 2023). Sustainability is tied to the fit and negotiation between educational practice, *kastom* and church-based understandings of the world. For example, Vilive's understanding of time in the *Vanua* links the past and future through the present. Sustainable education is integrated into the past through cultural understandings and practices, and in turn, promises an uninterrupted but developing future.

Similarly, the *Vanua*-derived holistic explanation of space in Vilive's account is ecologic and relational. Sustainable education can involve ideas of educational space focused on the wellbeing of people and place that do not place care for one in competition with the other. Thus, research guided by the OOF that privileges ontological understandings is likely to be able to understand local ways of framing sustainable education.

Second, the OOF approach to Oceania oralities provides opportunities to prioritise within a holistic framework through abstraction. Tepora's contribution to the conference *tok stori* portrayed the Spiritual as encompassing religious, indigenous and collectivist understandings of the physically unseen. The unseen can shape what is regarded as good and what can be justified in contexts such as education. Education is sustainable when it is tenable and is contested and dysfunctional when institutional values compete with those of the home. Unseen aspects of peoples' realities hold consistent sway across all their activities, including education. As a result, research that can access local voice and abstract contextually relevant overarching factors is valuable. Other elements of the framework that are clearly valuable for abstractive analysis in the pursuit of sustainable education include identity, which can be used to abstract who one is, could be, or is encouraged to be in educational contexts, and relationality, which can be used to abstract the way relationships in education support or erode sustainability (Paulsen, 2018).

Next, the spaces between elements in the OOF can be populated with contextual matters such as a culture's prioritised principles. Educational sustainability is supported when contextualisation is understood deeply (Sanga, Maebuta, et al., 2020). In research terms, this means framing inquiry in ways that make local sense and provide optimal chances of gaining veritable information. In practice terms, this means finding appropriate contextual information through research and translating it into operational forms in classrooms, schools and educational systems. The OOF contribution of holding space for recognising matters such as

cultural principles supports enhanced research into sustainability through process and potential product.

Finally, attention to the performance aspect of Oceania oralities research adds a local flavour to the truths suggested by Patti Lather (1986) and Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) that the researcher is a key aspect of the research context such that ideas of objectivity are irrelevant and misleading. Identity, Visual and Influencing Agents are all aspects of researcher performance mapped by the OOF in oralities research. Authentic research that seeks to support sustainable education requires researchers to be present, contributing to narratives about what education is and could be, perhaps through offering expertise, perhaps through constructive ignorance (Townley, 2006), which can lead to deep thought by oralities actors. For example, encouraging communities to think beyond fixing present education systems through storying can support sustainable education. In contrast, passive so-called 'objective' approaches might lead to minor changes and essentially more of the same. Honouring the 'Rethinking Pacific Education Initiative' (Van Peer, 2006) requires provocation, challenge and critique. This is a potential role of the researcher in storying contexts, as illustrated by Anna's story of deliberate influence.

## CONCLUSION

This article drew on *Exploring Oceania Oralities,* a *tok stori* session held at the OCIES 2023 Conference at the National University of Sāmoa, Apia, to illustrate how a layered approach to the OOF has value in supporting sustainability in education. Key elements of the argument included paying attention to ontology, mapping elements that can structure abstraction, holding space for contextual matters, and considering how performance in oralities can contribute to sustainable outcomes. Given that those involved in the session brought experiences from diverse cultural and geographic locations across the Oceania region, the discussion also shows how the framework nature of the OOF enables conversations across traditions, knowledges and spaces. In a way, the framework operates as a connective and shared body of water, as understood by Hau'ofa (1994), mapping the potential of regionalism to respect and transcend localism. Since sustainable education is a fractal of a more general sustainable life, this aspect of the OOF has potential in the increasingly complex and apparently progressively divided world in which we seek to live well together.

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# Teachers' perspectives of factors affecting lesson planning practices in Vanuatu mathematics classrooms

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*Sustainable education is becoming a hot topic in debates and discussions worldwide. There are concerns that current education systems are not providing for the needs of all people in a sustainable way. Many countries are taking steps to ensure a type of education that will sustain their citizens and meet the challenges of tomorrow. In Vanuatu, such attempts are made through official documents such as the National Curriculum Statement (NCS), a policy statement to improve teaching, learning and teacher education. The NCS states that good teaching requires carefully planned strategies. This study investigated Vanuatu's secondary school teachers' perspectives on the factors that affect their lesson-planning strategies for achieving student-centred learning. Twenty secondary school mathematics teachers in Port Vila participated in this 2022 study. First, mathematics lesson plans were collected and analysed to evaluate whether the teachers could plan student-centred learning. Second, the teachers were interviewed individually to gauge their views on factors hindering their attempts to design student-centred learning. Data collected was analysed using a thematic analytical tool. The findings revealed the need to support teachers in lesson planning, particularly designing and using student-centred learning strategies.*

*Keywords: Student-centred; lesson planning; problem-solving; mathematics classroom;, Vanuatu; sustainable education; tok stori*

## INTRODUCTION

Education and the future are inseparable; that is to say, it is not possible to discuss educational issues without visualising the future. Our perceptions about what the future might look like should form the basis for the type of knowledge and skills necessary for the next generations (Holfelder, 2019). This visualisation about future education is significant in sustainable education, which implies that future education should be *better* than the status of education as we know and experience today. There is no hope if tomorrow's education system involves the same philosophy of education the struggling world currently experiences. A new philosophy of education must entail sustainable learning (Hays & Renders, 2020). In education, sustainable learning implies a proliferation of new curriculum materials and a sharper focus on teaching and learning. A focus on teaching and learning requires teacher training and development to be prioritised as key areas for development.

Cassity et al. (2023) have recently produced a report on teacher development in Vanuatu. They pointed out key issues and steps necessary for supporting teacher development in Vanuatu, including improving knowledge of curriculum content, student-centred pedagogies, and lesson planning. The report by Cassity et al. (2023) came following the introduction of the Vanuatu National Curriculum Statement in 2010 (Ministry of Education & Training, 2010). The reports argued that contrary to the traditional teaching method in which children are expected to be passive recipients of information, learning should be active. Children should be encouraged to interact with their teacher and others in the classroom. The argument required research in Vanuatu focusing on teacher development, particularly teaching and learning. This paper contributes to research on teacher development in Vanuatu by focusing on the mathematics teachers' perspectives on the factors that affect their planning practices in support of active, student-centred learning approaches.

## THE LITERATURE ON MATHEMATICS EDUCATION

This brief literature review focuses on student-centred mathematics education, specifically on the planning and effectiveness of lesson preparation.

Jones (2011) contends that good lesson planning requires teachers to spend considerable time thinking about the types and learning styles of the students in their classrooms so the lessons are effective. In mathematics lesson planning, for instance, teachers must imagine and anticipate what might occur during the lesson. Teachers need to anticipate the types of questions students might ask, the tasks that will engage students in mathematics learning and the types of materials or resources, such as textbooks, that might be needed. Hence, time spent on planning can lead to effective and meaningful lessons.

Effective and meaningful classroom lessons in student-centred education are based on the constructivist learning philosophy, where children create their own learning and are guided by their teachers (Shah, 2019). What does a constructivist lesson or student-centred learning look like? A student-centred lesson is a lesson that supports students to be 'active' (Matsumoto, 2022). Students become active learners when they are talking, sharing and dialoguing with their peers as well as with teachers, in contrast to passively receiving information from teachers. Matsumoto (2022) believes that when students are active, their minds are engaged in mathematical thinking.

An effective classroom lesson should encourage problem-solving. Polya (1948) puts forward the view that mathematics should be informal, enabling students to solve mathematical problems by using and trialling different approaches. This fallibilist view of mathematics led Polya to devise his well-known four steps in solving problems: (1) understand the problem, (2) devise a plan, (3) carry out the plan, and (4) look back. This method is similar to the mathematical thinking process advocated by Tohir et al. (2020), though Polya separates devising the plan from carrying out the plan.

Crespo (2003) describes an effective lesson as one where lesson activities are planned and presented in an *implicit way,* thus giving the opportunity for students to discover. This implies that when teachers frame classroom problems in an unfamiliar way and the problems are not straightforward, it opens rather than narrows the mathematical scope of the activity. In effect, space for learning in a constructivist tradition is created when teaching is indirect.

Another way to engage students and thus make lessons effective is by questioning students. Aziza (2021) observes that when teachers ask open-ended questions in class, students answer

these questions with a variety of responses. For example, ‘A rectangle has a perimeter of 30m. What might be the area?’ This type of question can provoke students’ thinking and lead to student discussion.

Classroom lessons that involve students in active learning require teachers to be well-informed about the content of their subject and student-centred pedagogical skills. This is true in Vanuatu as elsewhere. In the next section, I will present contextual information on Vanuatu and the methodology used in this study.

## METHODOLOGY

The Republic of Vanuatu is roughly 800 kilometres west of Fiji Islands and 1,800 kilometres east of Australia. Vanuatu gained independence from France and Britain in 1980 but retained French and English as languages of instruction in schools. The main centre of Vanuatu is Port Vila, which is located on Efate Island. There are 18 Anglophone secondary schools on Efate. Five of these schools are located in Port Vila. Over one thousand secondary school teachers (Ministry of Education and Training, 2022) teach in government-run schools and are appointed by the Vanuatu Teaching Service Commission (TSC).

This study investigated teachers’ perspectives on the factors that affect their lesson-planning practices, including their student-centred learning strategies. The study’s intent is to use the findings to provide guidelines for enhancing the quality of teacher lesson planning.

The main research question was:

1. What is Vanuatu secondary school mathematics teachers’ perspectives on the factors that affected their lesson planning practices, including student-centred learning strategies?

This question assumed that scrutinising teacher practices helped to better understand teacher planning practices.

The study sub-questions were:

- 1.1 What do the lesson plans look like? (That is, how is planning represented on paper?); and
- 1.2 What are the mathematics teachers’ perspectives regarding the factors that affect their lesson-planning practices, including student-centred learning strategies? (This question interrogated the factors at play behind the teachers’ planning practices).

This study used a qualitative research approach. Austin and Sutton (2014) posit that in a qualitative research approach, researchers do not seek to generalise their findings from a wider population but seek to understand the feelings and thoughts of the study participants. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate for this study. A survey of lesson plans and interview methods were used to collect data. Necessary efforts were made to avoid research infringements. First, the researcher sought and gained ethics approval from the Education Authorities to carry out the study in schools. Second, the researcher spent many hours explaining the study to the participants in meetings and obtained the participants’ consent to take part in the study.

The researcher has taught in the Vanuatu school system for over 20 years, at secondary school and teacher training college levels. This long period has given the researcher considerable familiarity with the Vanuatu Education system and the current culture in schools. Twenty

teachers from five secondary schools in Port Vila participated in this study in August 2022. Of the 20 teachers, 18 agreed to be interviewed and provide lesson plans. The researcher analysed the lesson plans using a survey schedule focusing on the lesson topic, lesson objectives, and tasks for teachers and students. The rationale for focusing on these areas of the lesson plan was to gain a sense of the nature of the lesson. The researcher then interviewed 12 participating teachers using the Vanuatu Bislama language. The researcher later translated the Bislama script into English (both versions are provided below). Each interview lasted between 20 to 30 minutes. The interview protocol was framed loosely using the question, 'Why do you think it is difficult to design student-centred learning experiences?'. The reason for using Bislama is because it is the first language of all the teacher participants. In Bislama, teachers could express themselves freely and truthfully. Each interview was audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis purposes.

To protect the identity of the participants, codes were used to report on their actual words as recorded in the interview scripts. Each participant was given a code, such as TE01, TE02 . . . TE20 (TE means teacher and 01 means the first participant).

All participating teachers in this sample were teaching in Anglophone secondary schools. Some teachers were university graduates, but most graduated from the Vanuatu Teacher's College and have been teaching for over five years. Teachers were familiar with the school and classroom routines in their respective schools. The thematic analytical tool (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017) guided the researcher in analysing the interview scripts and understanding the emerging themes or patterns. This sample's 40% lesson plan and 60% interview ratio is sufficient to understand what happens in the Vanuatu classroom.

## FINDINGS

In this section, findings about lesson planning are presented in terms of lesson objectives and format. An analysis of four factors that affect lesson planning follows.

## Lesson plans

### Lesson objectives

Lesson plans surveyed had learning objectives framed with *active* and *passive* imperatives. The form used varied. For example, in one mathematics lesson plan, the objective was to get the students to '<u>Define</u> trigonometry as the measure of triangles' and '<u>label</u> sides of triangle correctly' (TE13). In another lesson plan, the learning objective was for the students to '<u>Locate</u> the point of intersection and the coordinate of two or more linear graphs' (TE10). In yet another lesson plan, the objective was for students to 'Label' the sides of right-angled triangles (TE12). The imperatives (underlined) used are active in that they indicate the expected action of students planned by teachers. These imperatives appeared to create space for students to be active.

However, although active, these imperatives also narrowed the scope of inquiry because of how they were designed in the lesson. For example, the word 'define' (TE13) required the students to recall the definition of trigonometry, thus narrowing the scope of inquiry. Similarly, the imperatives 'locate' and 'label', as used in the context of the lessons above, narrowed the scope of inquiry in that students were required to recall rather than to think. The learning tasks in another lesson plan required the students to 'write' down the coordinates of the point of intersection of a particular graph and then to 'draw' the table of values (TE08). Again, while

the imperatives were active, the way they were framed in the lesson plan gave little opportunity for investigation, thus narrowing the students' tasks. Tasks outlined in other lesson plans were framed similarly: using active imperatives but demanding little thinking.

Analysis of the lesson plans revealed that although the learning objectives were written using active terms that could superficially have been interpreted in an active way, the potential for the lesson to engage students in the learning was undermined by the closed nature of the associated learning tasks.

The learning objectives in some of the lesson plans surveyed were framed using passive terms. For example, the learning objective written in one lesson plan on angles required the students to 'know that angles in a triangle make up 180 degrees' (TE07). The word 'know' is ambiguous because it is not definite and lacks clarity about what students are expected to demonstrate to show learning. Hence, in this context, using passive imperatives such as 'know' will likely promote a passive learning environment. In this case, for example, teachers could have opted for terms such as 'identify' or 'create'.

**Format of lesson**

*Traditional format*

In a traditional lesson format, the teacher transmits all the knowledge, and students passively listen and are expected to absorb everything that is transmitted. Six lesson plans surveyed had certain aspects that contained phrases that could promote subjunctive spaces of inquiry. For example, in the lesson outline below, the objective was to get students to write the trigonometric ratios or formulas needed to find the unknown length or angle of a right-angled triangle. Note that in the plan, the steps were clearly outlined (TE05). 'Tr' indicated teacher.

A. Introduction:
1. Tr. explain the reason to learn the concept of this lesson.
2. Recap on last lesson
3. Explain the tasks for this lesson

B. Development:
1. Tr gives notes on the 3 ratios – Tangent, Cosine, and Sine of an angle then explain.
2. Do some examples of writing the ratios together.
3. Students should develop own rule of doing it correctly (Tr can give hint to assist).
4. Exercise on practicing the idea then correct work together with students explaining their answers.
5. More questions of different forms be given (to capture the idea) – select students to response.

C. Conclusion:
1. Ask students how this concept should be helpful to find the unknown length or angle of a right-angled triangle (Response: substitution then solving of equation).
2. Homework: Think about how to substitute and solve the unknown for the next lesson.

The data above revealed that although the lesson plan showed a traditional view of learning, in that it began with an introduction followed by examples and notes, followed by exercises and ended by giving homework, lines B3, C1 and C2 provided a sense of learning that could engage students in a meaningful way because it portrayed the idea that learning is the student's responsibility rather than the teacher's.

The excerpts below from one of the interviews portrayed a similar view to lesson planning:

> *Long mi, taem mi go insaet long class, fes samting mi mekem, mi talemaot wanem nao bai mifala i mekem long class. Afta mi givim sam notes mo explen smol long students. Afta mi givim wan or two examples. Sam taem mifala ino gat inaf textbook, bai mi mas raetemaot ol questions or exercises long board nomo afta askem ol students blong mekem ol exercises ia. Afta mi jas go raon and spos students i gat question, oli jas askem mi. Samtaem we tae mi shot mifala i jas mekem quick correction lo few of the questions. Ol narawan mi lego kasem next lesson nomo (TE11).*
>
> The first thing for me to do when I enter the class is to tell them what topic we are going to do in class. Then I will write brief notes on the board followed by my explanation of the topic with one or two examples. When I finish and in cases where we do not have enough textbooks, I get to write up questions on the board then ask them to do the questions. Then I circulate and if students have questions, then they get to ask me for further explanation. Sometimes when we run out of time, I just correct a few of the questions together on the board and leave the rest for next lesson (TE11).

The data above revealed a rigid form of planning where the teacher controlled the knowledge. This view of planning and learning reflected a traditional format of planning lessons.

*Student-centred format*

A student-centred format shows flexibility in learning and shifts its focus from the teacher to the students. Two of the seven lesson plans surveyed reflected a student-centred planning format. For example, one of the lessons was on investigating the sum of the interior angles of a triangle (TE09). The lesson objective was to get students to 'prove the sum of interior angles of a triangle'. The imperative 'prove' implies the idea of investigation, asking questions, trial and error, and being on the lookout for possible answers. Second, the development part of the lesson (or main part of the lesson) planned a student activity where they investigated the sum of the interior angles in a triangle. This was then followed by questions that accompanied the activity. The questions were: 'What do you notice about the 3 angles when arranged so that the vertices meet at a point? What can you say about the sum of the interior angles of triangles? Can you determine the sum of interior angles of triangles without a protractor?' (TE09). These questions are crucial for opening the scope of learning, which is important in constructivist learning.

The data above revealed that some participating teachers understood what it is like to plan a student-centred lesson for their students. However, given the infrequency of this kind of planning, it seemed that teachers needed more support to fully realise the potential of pedagogies based on constructivism or are student-centred. The next section presents the findings on teachers' perspectives on factors affecting their planning practices.

**Factors affecting lesson planning**

This section presents the four factors teachers reported affecting their lesson planning: absence of policy, curriculum textbooks, support systems and general planning challenges.

*Absence of policy*

Teachers interviewed stated they were unaware of any policies relating to teaching and learning mathematics in their schools. They stated that even though they were teaching within their mathematics departments, they knew nothing of any school or departmental policies on teaching and learning mathematics.

> *No, mifala long ples ia ino gat polisi. Long maths department mifala igat ol maths equipment nomo. Taem mifala I faenem difficulty blo tijim wan topic, ale mifala evriwan i sit daon mo decide se ating bai yumi go olsem ia. Yumi traem this method fastaem mo luk olsem wanem (TE01)*
>
> No, we don't have a policy here. We only have mathematics equipment. When each one of us finds difficulty with teaching a topic, we'd get together and put our ideas together as to how to teach the topic and we'd try out our proposed methods (TE01)
>
> *Ino gat any polisi olsem ia (Teaching and Learning mathematics). Mi no save remember se mifala i bin tokabaot wan polisi long side blong tijing mo learning mathematics (TE04).*
>
> There is no specific policy on how teachers should teach mathematics. I don't remember us talking about any policy to do with teaching and learning (TE04).
>
> *To be honest, ino gat wan polisi blong tijing mo learning mathematics. Mifala i tij nomo follem wanem method mifala i save mo follem maths syllabus (TE18).*
>
> To be honest, there are no policies for teaching and learning mathematics. We just teach according to what method we think is best and we follow the mathematics syllabus (TE18).

While there is evidence of the existence of some relevant policies in some schools, these seemed to target areas other than teaching and learning mathematics, as is evident from the following excerpts:

> *Yes i gat ol polisi olsem blong marking wetem assignment. Spos students i handem in assignment wan dei after due date, certain percentage blong mark bai I cut off be mi no save long side blong blong polisi blong tijing. Hemia, taem mi kam, oli no bin soem long mi nating. Ating ino gat long form (TE20).*
>
> Yes there is a policy for marking and assignments. If students submit assignments a day late, a certain percentage of the mark will be cut off . . . but I am not aware of a policy for teaching and learning mathematics. Maybe it's not in written form (TE20).

The comments above pointed to the absence of a policy to guide the teaching and learning of mathematics, or at least recorded an absence in the teachers' experience. It must be noted that at the time of the study, the Vanuatu National Curriculum Statement had already been published and circulated to schools.

*Curriculum-textbooks*

The textbooks used in the Junior Secondary schools included those for Years 7, 8, 9 and 10. The participants revealed that they found it difficult to use the current mathematics textbooks to plan student-centred learning:

> *Mi no ting se ol textbuk I sapotem wan student-centred learning. Textbuk I gat nomo plante exampols mo exercises we students oli save mekem afta long wan activity. Emi (texbuk) no containem kind activity we I save promotem wan student—centred learning. The textbooks provide straight formula, and all these be oli no wokemaot se hao nao yu gat that formula ia olsem se ol students bai I wokem aot. These textbooks I givim ol exercise and examples nomo we mi ting se I promotem traditional teaching (TE19)*
>
> The textbooks do not promote student-centred learning. It only contains lots of examples and exercises that students can do after an activity. It does not contain activities that could promote student-centred learning. The textbooks provide straight formula and all these but, they (textbooks) do not require students to investigate and find out for themselves why the formula was derived. These textbooks only provide examples and exercises, which, to me, gives a picture of traditional teaching (TE19).

> *Mi luk se ol texbuk we yumi yusum I no givim any ideas long tija blong yumi save developem wan student-centred learning. Hemi (textbuk) mekem tija mo students i stadi idea nomo inside mi yusum. So mi traem blong yusum other textbooks nomo blong traem faenem sam activities . . . ating hemia nao I mekem se tija I focus long textbuk nomo (TE17)*
>
> The textbooks we are using do not give ideas to teachers in terms of preparing a student-centred learning lesson. They only give ideas for teachers and students to study. So, I use other textbooks to find activities. That could be the reason why teachers rely heavily on textbooks (TE17).

The textbooks not only appeared to harbor traditional forms of teaching and learning mathematics, but they also presented a challenge for teachers in terms of designing student-centred activity:

> *Texbuk we yumi yusum I gat flap exampols mo exercise. Hemi reflectem wan traditional teaching. So jalens blong wan tija hemi blong transletem ol exampols ia ikam long wan good student-centred activity (TE16).*
>
> The textbook we are using has many examples and exercises. It reflects a traditional view of teaching. So, the challenge for a teacher is to translate these examples into student-centred activities. (TE16)

The teachers believed that the absence of appropriate textbooks made it difficult for them to plan student-centred learning. While textbooks were said to be the issue here, at the time of the study, it was believed among teachers that new mathematics textbooks would be circulated in schools.

*Support systems*

Participants also expressed the view that there was no support mechanism to provide them with professional development. They claimed that neither their mathematics departments, the schools, nor the Ministry organised professional training for them, targeting student-learning approaches. These excerpts illustrate their views:

> *Hemia ino gat anything blong helpem mifala. Mi ting se mi needim hemia (sapot) plante (TE14).*
>
> There is nothing to help us. I feel I need it (TE14).
>
> *For the last two years ino gat any sapot we school itsem i givim long ol tijas. And mi ting se I should gat sapot from tijas college or from else long side blong student-centred learning because basically jalens I stap long ples ia nao. You can train to be a student-centred teacher, be taem yu kam long field, you follem crowd of tijas (TE15).*
>
> In the last two years there has been no support provided by the school to the teachers. I think there should be support provided from the Teachers College or elsewhere because this is where the challenge is right now. One can train to become a student-centred teacher but when he or she comes to the field, it's easy to follow the crowd of teachers (TE15).
>
> *Mifala I stap gat smolsmol meeting lo dipatment level mo samtaem mifala gat workshop olsem blo helpem mifala be I need blong gat moa olsem (TE11).*
>
> We do have meetings at the department level and sometimes we have workshops to help us in our teaching, but we really need more of this (TE11).

The views above have expressed the need for on-going support for mathematics teachers in schools.

*Challenges in planning*

The participants also described the challenges they faced in planning lessons. The excerpts below show a range of these challenges:

> *First, long experiens blong mi, mi lukim se taem mi disaenem gud hands-on activities, bai oli students oli rili eager blong faenemaot answers. Bai oli rili folem learning. Be taem mi jas go mo explen and explen, it's like students oli explorem anything. Taem we students oli faenem samting (TE06)*
>
> First, in my experience so far, I see that when I design hands-on activities, students are eager to find out the answers. They really get on with learning. But when I go and just explain and explain, students don't explore anything. When they (students) find out things for themselves, that's a source of motivation for them. So, I find that if I can design a good activity, students will find it more interesting compared to the materials simply being explained to them (TE06).
>
> *Mifala ino gat inaf risos. Samting we i hard long me hemi hao nao blong desaenem wan student-centred activity based lo topic we i stap long syllabus. Hemia hemi wan jalens. Ating spos mifala i gat risos bai mifala i save desaenem activity. Be hemi bigfala jalens ia. Mifala ino gat inaf texbuks we i follem Student-centred approach so taim mi jekem internet, mi faenem plante material we hemi student-centred be jalens long mi se hao nao blong adaptem materials ia ikam long classroom blong mi. So samting we hemi hard se blong desaenem wan Student-centred activity and mi wish mi gat plante moa training long side ia (TE02).*
>
> Resource-wise, we do not have adequate resources. The hardest thing for me is to design my own activity based on the concept to be taught as outlined in the syllabus. This is the challenge. If we have all the available resources, we can easily design this. There is a lot of challenge in designing student-centred activities. We do not have textbooks tailored towards student-centred so when I search the internet, I find mathematics materials that are student-centred, but I find it a challenge in trying to contextualise these materials. I guess the how part of designing student-centred activity and wish we have more practice in this (TE02).

These teachers know the benefits of student-centred learning in that students get motivated when they discover things for themselves. However, the lack of resources, the pressure to teach to the syllabus, and the difficulties that teachers experienced in planning student-centred lessons are all issues that teachers encountered and that affected their planning. If teachers found it difficult to plan student-centred learning, problem-posing was likely to be hindered, as seen here:

> *Taem we mi stat teaching, mi follem method we mi explen fastaem mo afta givim exampols after givim exercise, mi faenem se students oli faenem i hard blong understandem wanem mi stap tijim (TE03).*
>
> When I started teaching, I followed the method whereby I explain first, then I give a few examples, and then follow with exercises from the textbook. Students find it hard to understand what I teach using this method (TE03).

The data above has revealed that the format of lesson plans portrayed the traditional view of lesson planning practices. Further, the lack of a clear policy relating to teaching and learning mathematics, the absence of good mathematics textbooks and the lack of other suitable resources undermined learning opportunities. The relationship between the two views of learning portrayed in the data is worth considering in Vanuatu education. Maintaining a traditional teaching and learning perspective will continue to promote rote learning. However,

student-centred learning could promote active learning, though this approach could be challenging for the teachers.

## DISCUSSION

This study sought to explore Vanuatu mathematics teachers' perspectives of the factors affecting their planning practices, including student-centred learning strategies. The study began with a survey of the lesson plans and then went on to capture the teachers' perspectives via interviews. The implication of the study findings now be discussed.

The study revealed that teachers used active terms in framing their learning objectives. These terms are theoretically capable of eliciting active learning. However, there needs to be more awareness of how to effectively develop active imperative terms to plan student-centred learning experiences. Teachers (e.g., TE13 and TE10) used active terms but the actual lesson plans showed a narrowing of the scope for learning. Mathematics teachers must, therefore, be aware of how to use imperative terms that create the opportunity for students to engage in learning. This is important in lesson planning because it is consistent with good lesson planning practices as advocated by Jones (2011) and other experts in the field of teaching and learning.

The study also revealed the types of lesson formats being practiced by Vanuatu teachers. The typical lesson format, starting with a brief introduction followed by examples and ending with exercises, if not carefully considered and could perpetuate traditional teaching where teachers remain the experts. This format suggests that the current beliefs about teaching and learning in Vanuatu do not follow the constructivist tradition and allow teachers to continue to rely on transmission models of education. This observation is consistent with the view that what teachers plan in a mathematics lesson reflects their beliefs about mathematics (Henney & Stemhagen, 2024).

The study further revealed that participants lacked awareness of a policy on teaching and learning mathematics and relied on a limited selection of textbooks. These factors contributed to the teachers' difficulties in planning student-centred lessons. Stodolsky and Grossman (1995) noted that it is important to have clearly articulated policies on teaching and learning to guide teachers. Where there is no policy, teachers are left to their own devices, and systemic problems remain hidden. If policies on teaching and learning mathematics are clearly defined and articulated, associated problems, such as lack of support systems and employment of materials that support student-centred learning, are likely to become evident and can be addressed. A policy that can drive a system towards a student-centred learning approach is crucial for promoting subjunctive spaces of inquiry. It should be noted that both the Vanuatu National Curriculum Statement (Ministry of Education and Training, 2010) and the report by Cassity et al. (2023) included policies on teaching and learning and student-centred learning. Thus, policies are present on paper but have yet to be manifested in the classroom.

The study also revealed the apparent lack of a support system for mathematics teachers. Although the views of the participating teachers may not reflect the views of all Vanuatu teachers, having a support system or mechanism in place is vital for teachers. Teacher support at the department level is of the first order of importance. Departmental support provides teachers with direct guidance when they need it the most. Other authorities, such as the Ministry, may also provide support. Wherever support comes from, teachers need to be provided with opportunities to learn and become creative in their own settings.

Broadly speaking, the study revealed the need to support mathematics teachers in designing learning materials that include student-centred learning strategies. Taking the work of Harris et al. (2013) 'student-centred Schools' into consideration, the Vanuatu education system could develop a framework for supporting current teachers so that they can be confident in providing effective learning for Ni-Vanuatu[1] children both now and into the future for sustainable development. *Sustainable education*[2] is about the future, and if we do not critically review our education and our teaching and learning philosophy now, it will be more challenging to map out the best possible education for Vanuatu in the future.

## CONCLUSION

The participating teachers in this study have demonstrated their dedication and commitment to teaching in schools, both in their lesson planning and interview discussions. The study also revealed the teachers' views on some factors hindering their planning practices, including student-centred learning strategies.

Vanuatu must consider how to frame the type of education that is sustainable. Sustainable education could provide Ni-Vanuatu children with the means to sustain themselves in different scenarios in the future. For instance, in the event of a natural disaster such as a cyclone, Ni-Vanuatu children should know what to do to be resilient. Ni-Vanuatu educationists must be willing to engage in *tok stori*[3] about what is important for Ni-Vanuatu children in the future. This line of thinking concerns the education needed for future generations. It must include considerations on the current status quo of education in Vanuatu, such as the nature of planning taking place in mathematics classrooms and the perceptions of teachers involved. The work of Ni-Vanuatu and Pacific Island scholars, such as Niroa (2001), Niroa and Sanga (2004) and many others, should be the basis for Ni-Vanuatu scholars to start with as we step away from passive education and into a future where our up-and-coming young citizens are active in classrooms and, with perseverance, active in Vanuatu society.

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[1] Refers to a native or naturalised citizen of Vanuatu.
[2] The type of education that sustains people in different circumferences.
[3] The Melanesian form of communication involving storytelling and relational interactions.

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# Shifting from face-to-face to online teaching and learning: Growth opportunities experienced by Vanuatu primary school teachers

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*Opportunities for teachers' growth and development are important to support sustainable education in Vanuatu, Oceania, and beyond. Recently, in Vanuatu, as elsewhere, online learning has become significant, and its occasion under COVID-19 circumstances has been portrayed as a disruption. This study investigated the growth opportunities experienced by Vanuatu in-service primary school teachers during the shift from face-to-face teaching to online teaching and learning in the COVID-19 era. The research engaged sixty teachers across the six provinces of Vanuatu, exploring opportunities from both social and cognitive perspectives. Diverse growth opportunities in the form of sustaining learning benefits were uncovered. These included developing skills in independent learning, using available ICT devices, and designing personal study approaches. Hence, what may have been seen as a disruption is partly revealed as providing opportunities for professional growth and learning for the participants. Understanding growth opportunities, especially in circumstances of change, is important when approaching issues of sustainable education in Vanuatu and is relevant in Oceania and elsewhere.*

*Keywords: online learning, opportunities, exploring, teachers, sustainable, ICT infrastructure, interactive apps*

## BACKGROUND

Since the 1990s, the world has seen significant changes in the education landscape because of the ever-expanding influence of technology. One such development is the adoption of online learning across different learning contexts, whether formal or informal, academic and non-academic, residential or remote. Researchers and trainers began to witness schools, teachers, and students increasingly adopt e-learning technologies designed to allow teachers to deliver instruction interactively, share resources seamlessly and facilitate student collaboration and interaction (Elaish et al., 2019). Yet, according to Rasheed et al. (2020), issues concerning the challenges to the implementation of online learning continue to build. Contextual examples include that online teaching and learning are affected by poor network coverage, particularly in rural and remote areas. Coverage issues are worse during cloudy weather conditions in most rural areas of Vanuatu. In addition, the geographical challenge of the islands covered by high mountains and separated by vast expanses of sea make transportation and communication,

including network coverage, difficult between the islands, further isolating communities and complicating ICT infrastructure development.

In Vanuatu, all schools were closed during the COVID-19 pandemic, and schools in the capital, Port Vila, were immediately instructed to shift to home-school learning packages for early childcare and primary-level education. Secondary and tertiary-level schools opted for virtual learning (Ministry of Education and Training, 2019). The Vanuatu Institute of Teachers Education (VITE) followed suit, using online tools like the Moodle platform to deliver its special exit primary in-service diploma program. This led to the admission and enrolment of in-service primary school teachers into VITE for training via online delivery. Generally, for VITE in-service students, learning sometimes occurs through real-time interactions, where students engage directly with tutors and peers. At other times, learning occurs asynchronously, allowing students to work independently without immediate interaction or guidance from tutors. COVID-19 also disrupted this pattern. VITE works with English- and French-speaking sections of the Vanuatu population, a linguistic complexity that results from the country's former condominium status under two colonial powers, Britain and France. Bislama is a common language.

Our experiences in re-learning to teach online and the apparent lack of research on the effects of the shift from face-to-face teaching to online teaching in the context of Vanuatu suggest a need to study how teachers deal with online work opportunities. This study explores the opportunities that Vanuatu primary school teachers encountered in online learning from social and cognitive standpoints using a strengths-based key question: 'What are the opportunities for studying through online teaching and learning?'

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Definitions

Many scholars have provided their perspectives on what online learning is. For example, Usher & Barak (2020) and Huang (2019) posit that online learning is a learning environment using tools like the Internet and electronic devices to deliver information. There are many benefits claimed for online learning. For example, Daniel (2016) argued that online learning paves the way for greater flexibility, allowing students to study at their own pace and time. Martínez-Caro et al. (2015) suggested that online learning yields personalised learning through interactive tools that enable experiences tailored to students' learning styles. Online learning helps learners to rely on themselves; instructors are no longer the solitary knowledge source but guides and advisors (Joshua et al., 2016). Learners also gain deeper insights into information through activities carried out in the classroom through an interactive video facility, which allows prompt responses from learners to activities (Gautam & Tiwari, 2016).

### Benefits

According to Radu et al. (2015), online learning has cognitive benefits. These include allowing learners to gain control of their online learning time. Learners can also make autonomous decisions about how to spend their online learning time, making the learning experience more student-centred. Gautam and Tiwari (2016) noted that the value or quality of learning online is maintained despite the changes in time use because learners can go back to the same instructions and explanations. This is unlike face-to-face situations where explanations of the same concept may change depending on who is involved.

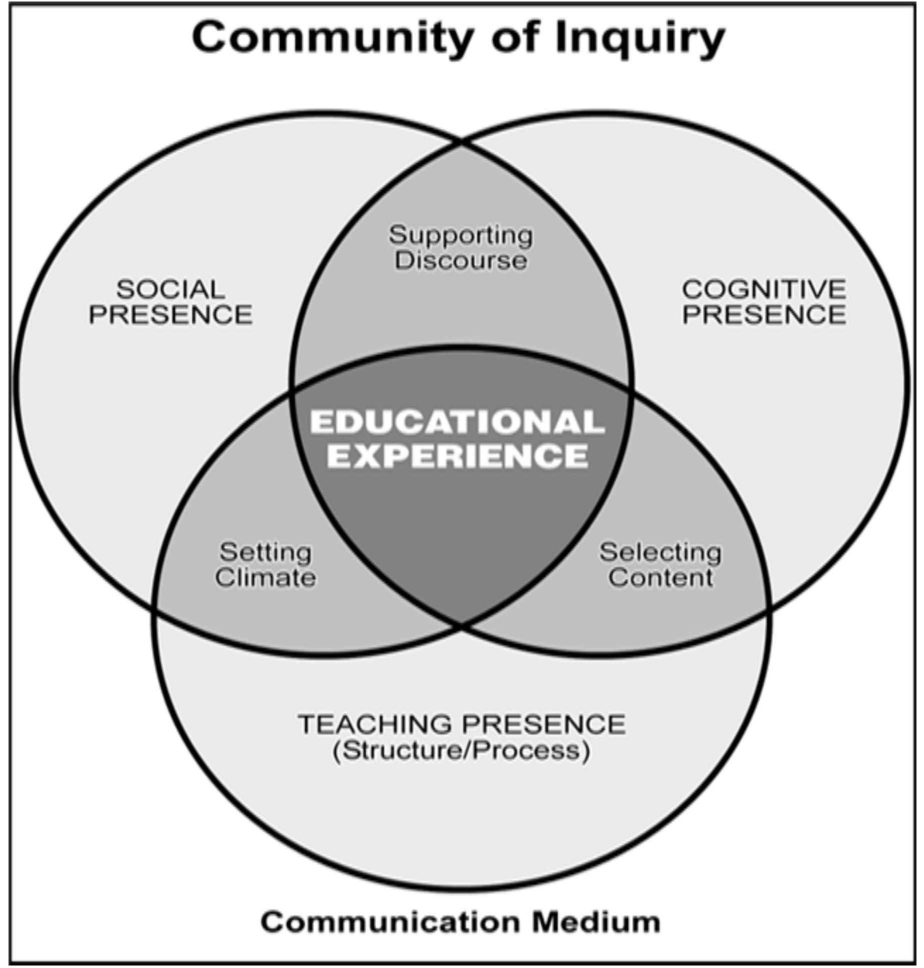
**Issues**

Most studies of online learning use are based on assumptions about hardware, software, and the availability of expertise. Under lockdown conditions in Vanuatu, these assumptions were more or less invalidated. Some of the candidates interviewed in this study shared ICT devices such as laptops with other members of their families, whereby the children use the laptop during the day and the parent, who is a teacher, uses the laptop in the evenings or vice-versa. Thus, even where hardware is present, it is not always available. Some teachers in Vanuatu do not even own a mobile phone and use those belonging to their family members upon request. They have to pay for data and develop credit to use the device. These individual difficulties are in addition to poor network coverage in rural and remote areas.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in the concept of Community of Inquiry (COI). COI is based on the early works of Dewey and Vygotsky (Garrison et al., 2000) on constructivism. In general, COI benefits from the nature of the constructivist theory of learning as participants actively engage in discourse about a particular subject. Figure 1 illustrates COI

**Figure 1: Community of Inquiry**



*Adapted from* Garrison, D.R., Anderson, T., & Archer, W. (2000). Critical inquiry in a text-based environment: Computer conferencing in higher education. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 2(2-3), 87-105, 88.

Figure 1 shows the process of making learning more meaningful through the presence of three interdependent factors: social, cognitive and teaching. Social Presence refers to participants being together in a learning environment. The primary importance of this element is its function as a support for Cognitive Presence, indirectly facilitating the social process of critical thinking carried on by the community of learners. According to Garrison et al. (2001), cognitive Presence 'is the extent to which learners can construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse and also focuses on higher-order thinking processes' (p. 8). For example, as learners go through an online course outline and identify the expected outcomes by the end of the course, they understand what they are expected to do for assessment and how to apply the acquired knowledge and skills from the course content in their contexts.

Teaching Presence is the design, facilitation and direction of cognitive and social processes to realise personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes (Anderson et al., 2001). This aspect works by outlining how an institution makes decisions on the structure of its online delivery and program content.

Our learning experiences influenced the choice of the theoretical framework for this study. It deals with the type of learning where we are actively engaged by talking and asking questions of colleagues. Our learning embodies social-constructivist theory when discussions lead to new ideas and understanding. The COI framework also provided a flexible approach to deciding what research methodology to use.

## METHODOLOGY

To restate, the study asked: What are the opportunities for studying through online teaching and learning in the context of primary teachers studying at VITE?

The qualitative tool used for the study was one-to-one interviews managed through a set of open-ended questions. The questions centred on the types of social and cognitive challenges related to online learning for in-service primary teachers in Vanuatu. The interview approach provided an opportunity to collect considerable information and explore people's responses to situations they experienced. The general approach adopted to the topic supported an investigation of the opportunities encountered by Vanuatu in-service primary school teachers when studying online.

The interviews conducted by the researcher allowed insights into each candidate's subjective experiences, opinions, and motivations – as opposed to facts or behaviours. The dialogic situation provided opportunities for the interviewer to make sense of the interviewees' opinions expressed through gestures and facial expressions. In some instances, when using open-ended questions, there was no need to ask any further prepared questions as responses to the areas of researcher interest were given without further prompting.

Sixty teachers participated in the study. They had been teaching from 20 to almost 30 years in primary schools in Vanuatu. Their ages ranged from late 30s to almost 60 years old. There were more females than males and more English-speaking than French-speaking participants. The research was conducted over six to ten months due to travel restrictions because of lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic. In poor weather conditions, flights to the outer islands were cancelled, and, at one stage, the researcher was stranded for several days due to flight cancellations. Such is the Vanuatu context.

Candidates' experiences in online learning ranged from two semesters to three years in synchronous and asynchronous sessions. The most common online interaction was the candidates' participation in weekly scheduled synchronous sessions through Zoom meetings with VITE course instructors and a weekly Moodle learning platform with such activities as readings, videos and forum discussions along with assessment tasks. Forty per cent of the candidates taught and resided in rural, remote areas and had to travel to main business centres to access the network once or twice a week after classes or over the weekend.

The research was carried out with the approval of the USP Research Office and the Office of the Director of Vanuatu Education Services. The interviews were conducted in Bislama, the researcher's and the participants' first language. Interviews were mostly between 7 and 15 minutes, with the longest lasting 21 minutes. Each interview was audio-recorded and then transcribed into English, with member-checking taking place. Each interviewee was given a code name during the analysis phase for confidentiality purposes. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2014) was conducted through a line-by-line reading of the transcripts. Then, each developing theme was tested, and new themes were added as the study progressively focused more on the range of responses rather than the frequency of expressions regarding opportunities for online learning. Thus, the study's aims were achieved by qualitative rather than quantitative means.

## FINDINGS

This section presents three themes from participants' responses to the interview questions. These thematic clusters relate to ideas about prior knowledge, the benefits of online learning, and suggestions to improve the online learning experience.

### Previous experience

A question about previous experiences or prior knowledge in online learning revealed some insightful perspectives:

> Ben: It is my first time doing an online course and taught and helped me a lot with ICT skills which improved.
>
> Kensinet: First-time experience helps me in my research and try hard to understand what online is about.
>
> Odessa: I enjoyed it and learned a lot of things through the online experience.

These responses demonstrated the high level of enthusiasm that participants have for online work and the positive impacts online engagement has on their learning despite this being their first time involved in the change in the mode of learning from face-to-face to virtual. It seems that the VITE students were ready and willing to be challenged—a good quality for a prospective teacher.

A further response adds nuance to the theme:

> Helen: Online learning is good for people our age to learn through it. It broadens my mind on how to research by myself and assignments and teaching as well. I extract a lot of knowledge from the content that I am studying online instead of someone telling me.

This indicates gratitude from a mature learner who may have assumed that further studies are more for the younger generation. Online learning provided a perfect opportunity for her to

resume studying as an adult while also working. It seems she gained confidence as a learner, independently 'extracting' relevant content as opposed to being given it face-to-face. The development of confidence was shared by others:

> Hilda: I learn to study by myself. I create an atmosphere of a self-learning space which in my life I have never done. I create a goal to focus more on my study which I have never done before. It eliminates and lowers a lot of distractions in my life.

> Lorry: I experienced that I have more time to work on my study at a speed which I, the learner think is correct or suitable to suit my learning pace. Also, it allows me to do more research and compare to direct conduct with the teacher who may not allow me enough time.

These extracts indicate the pleasure of independent learners taking ownership of their studies through online learning, enhanced by the flexibility to attend to their studies at their own pace and time. Thus, although COVID may have disrupted life, and despite the difficulties of Vanuatu's context regarding availability of online facilities, VITT students gained from their first opportunities for online learning.

**Benefits of online learning**

When discussing the benefits of online learning, there was a variety of responses. One benefit is the opportunity to tailor the learning context.

> David: I have plenty of benefits. One is that I feel safe when I am alone and also I am comfortable. There is no pressure from the teachers or lecturers. I do not see other learners to observe whether they are doing better than me so I may feel discouraged.

Privacy is valued by David, since it protects him from comparing himself to others and the negative consequences of this. He enjoys avoiding social pressure by engaging with online materials in safety.

David also raised the practical benefit of cost-effectiveness. Although computers and other hardware are expensive, in his experience these costs are not carried by the students. Instead, online learning is cost-effective. He says:

> David: The other one is it is way cheaper; I don't have to travel overseas or get from home to campus or class as well no bus fare to go and return every day. I can access everything from home. This is another way of how it benefits me in terms of saving up.

For those students on a limited budget and with financial responsibilities, this advantage is significant.

Joyanne points to the benefit of the responsibility for her online studies resting with herself.

> Joyanne: I learn something every day. For example, in face-to-face when the teacher is absent then I do not learn anything that day . . . whether the teacher is present or not the content and task are there with instructions as to how to carry out my task online so the student does not miss out on learning. . . The courses can be accessed anytime, anywhere and tutors can follow students' progress quickly and whether they have submitted their work on Moodle as they are recorded in drop-box so students cannot lie and make up excuses that they submitted their assignment but went missing because the Moodle system will show time and date which work are submitted.

Joyanne's narrative pinpoints the value of content and instructions in online learning, independent learning, accessibility and consistency in monitoring assignment submissions

without bias. Establishing a level playing field and placing responsibility in the hands of the student through technology is helpful to keen learners like Joyanne.

Carlos described social advantages that, to some extent, contrast with the privacy valued by others.

> Carlos: Another benefit is that online learning is a global learning platform, I can interact with anyone from another place. A good example is I can post in students' forum discussions which I am doing right now, to communicate with students from other campuses doing the same course as me in the comfort of my home, also we get to share our thoughts and ideas on common topics.

Rantes spoke of both advantages: sociality and privacy:

> Rantes: Online learning brings diversity. It widens your learning space, classroom, or your environment in the sense that you are not surrounded by walls, you have a wide diversity of people to interact with. Online learning does not look at the age group, compared to face-to-face settings sometimes you walk into a classroom and see a lot of younger students and you hold back as you feel uncomfortable . . . Also, you can have a one-to-one interaction with the tutor [without] [t] the fear of being judged, criticised, or laughed at. Besides your tutor who is a human like you . . . you have a virtual library and everything all in one place.

It is clear from these comments that the elements of the COI; Teaching Presence, Social Presence and Cognitive Presence, are configured differently by the learners, according to their circumstances. However, all the comments display the students finding their own benefits in the way teaching, social situations and learning opportunities are viewed.

Some student found benefits from online learning beyond their perspectives. As an example:

> Zedalina: Helps me to manage my time at home, how to manage my time at school, and my time in the online courses that I am doing. When I am studying at home it helps my kids to copy the studying model that I am doing, and they get closer to me to attend to their studies from primary to secondary and boost their morals to be interested in what they are learning in schools and try harder. For the older ones, it helps them to attend to their assignments on time.

An important aspect raised here is role modelling to family members to learn from how their parents attend to online learning from home through time management, independent learning, eagerness and determination to get learning tasks done on time.

Finally, participants discussed the advantages related to supporting their time management:

> Floyd: Another one is that the topic or contents are in Moodle which I can access anytime, I just need to click on which topic to learn from or which assignment I need to attend to when the due date is approaching and also to get instructions as to what to do next.

> Nerry: Course material comes in soft copies, so I do not have to print to carry them around. It is interesting because it is available anytime and makes work easier to handle so that I can teach and attend to study at the same time. You type and submit at the same time. All the support you need is at your fingertips such as Google for research, browsers as libraries, and many more.

Floyd and Nerry noted the advantages of online or 'soft' material and the way these impact time management skills since materials, assessments and timetabling are all linked in online.

In general, the narratives in this theme speak volumes about the benefits of online learning shared by the participants, such as promoting independent learning and access to learning content anytime and anywhere. In addition, there was often a balanced comparison between online learning and the disadvantage of face-to-face learning.

### Improving online learning

To capture the participants' thoughts on how to improve online learning, the question was asked: In your view, what is the best way forward? The interaction between the participants and the researcher opened the opportunity for the participants to express themselves. The excerpts that follow capture some of their thoughts.

> Rantes: Adopt a blended mode of delivery between online and face-to-face to start with what mode of learning the students are familiar with and induction of what mode of learning the students should apart to from a distance through virtual delivery.
>
> Alice: Suggest that there be some face-to-face time or intensive session to explain the content to us out here on the island.
>
> Asneth: Need intensive workshops to help assist us with our better understanding of the content to do well in the study program.

These candidates requested some face-to-face sessions or a blended mode of delivery to suit the learners' needs.

> Cindy: If the institution could run an effective ICT workshop at the beginning of the study and enlighten us on how to go about studying online without the presence of a tutor, it would help a lot.
>
> Dionie: It is more proper for the institution to run ICT skills workshops at the beginning before the main course commence. So that students do not take up too much time to learn the required ICT skills but go straight to courses online.

Cindy and Dionie voiced concerns about the need for ICT training before commencing fully online delivery.

> Ginette: Readings must be carefully selected, ensuring that only essential or relevant materials are uploaded for learners to read on the given topic.
>
> Dunstan: Institutions should train learners to be selective in content engagement. For instance, for in-service teachers, content—especially readings—should be summarised and concise, focusing on what is immediately applicable and necessary for their professional development.
>
> David**:** Readings must be selective. This focused approach helps avoid overwhelming students and ensures they engage with key content.

Ginette, Dunstan, and David highlighted content selection about learners' prior knowledge and experiences.

> Floyd: Best if tutors or online learning personnel would create a space for those like me if we do not understand or need help, we could raise our queries there instead of asking the questions in front of everyone as many of us a shy. When the tutor sees the question, they can respond, or other students can also contribute to it.

Floyd spoke about creating a 'virtual query space' for students to ask their personal questions, and to be themselves without fear of being exposed or ridiculed by other learners.

> Qwenie: Needs monitoring of students' online progress by tutors and communicating very clearly when to open and close forums etc. Make time to meet students once a week or month with a meeting log between them. Check students' levels of prior learning before enrolling them in a course through a checklist of what they know already and what is new that they need to know and provide extra support for the students who need it the most for example year 10 leavers etc. Tutors need to cooperate well with students and get to know them and how they learn to assist them effectively.
>
> Hilda: Give timely and effective feedback on assignments to students to reassure them that they are doing the right thing, so it motivates us to keep up with our studies.
>
> Norris: Tutors need to respond to students' queries on time to motivate them to keep their interest in their studies to continue.

Qwenie, Flora, Norris and Hilda pointed out that trainers' roles in monitoring, diagnosing learners' prior knowledge, and providing feedback are important in online learning.

> Wilma: a course diagnostic assessment should be done to find out where the students are at in their knowledge of the content before starting the course so that each student is provided with the right content, they need to complete a course or a full content to complete a course.
>
> Seth: If we want to move online forward, we need to start an online learning curriculum from ECCE upwards, so they move into primary and secondary with ICT literate skills and all.
>
> Carlos: I take ownership of learning through the improvement of time management skills, timetabling, and attending to tasks with a positive mindset.
>
> Obed: Instead of providing so many soft readings, just provide a textbook or handbook containing all. So that you just must pick it up and read it anytime. Probably if the online courses are 50% online and 50% face-to-face then it will be more effective for the learners. Good for institutions to have a sub-center in the provinces for the students to have access to a learning space with ICT devices and a supervisor to assist students with their studies online on the ground.

Obed suggested that hard and soft copies of learning materials be made available and that learning centres are established in the provinces to provide student study spaces.

All in all, the excerpts regarding suggestions for improvement were inspired by the opportunities the participants had experienced. They offered suggestions for future consideration, and more importantly, as learners, they hoped to implement the recommendations to enhance their online learning approaches.

## DISCUSSION

### Addressing the research questions

The research question 'What are the opportunities for studying through online teaching and learning?' is addressed above under Theme 1 – *Prior Knowledge* and Theme 2 – *Benefits of online learning*. Participants Ben, Kensinet, Odessa, Helen, Hilda and Lorry provided insights demonstrating their prior knowledge of online learning. One or two excerpts from the interviews revealed the positive nature of participants' first-time experiences (e.g., Ben and Kensinet). Other excerpts under the first theme showed that the participants had more experience in online learning. Most participants may have had opportunities to attend workshops or training in online learning before this study.

Data excerpts that address Theme 1 show the social aspect of the study. Some participants are new (may not be confident), whereas others had more experience (may show signs of being very confident). Theme 1 highlights participants' enthusiasm as they reflected on how their ICT literacy improved through engagement with online learning. Furthermore, candidates noted that their prior knowledge was both revived and enhanced by using various online interactive apps and platforms. This allowed them to bridge the gap between their existing knowledge and the new skills, experiences, and knowledge required for effective online learning.

Excerpts from participants David, Joyanne, Carlos, Rantes, Zedaline, Floyed and Nerry presented under Theme 2 show the participant's appreciation of the usefulness and benefits of online learning. For example, David pointed out benefits including *self-pace*, *cost-effectiveness* and *safety*. Rantes and Carlos pointed out the benefits of experiencing *no age difference* in classes and the possibility of online *one-to-one learning*. In Theme 2, other beneficial factors of online learning emerged, which included prompting of independent learners and accessibility of content. Participants were aware of how online learning works to their advantage particularly at their age and engagement in employment while studying as well.

### Aligning the findings with the literature

The study findings appear to align with the reviewed literature. For instance, the participants revealed that independent learning, accessibility and flexibility are benefits of online learning. Joshua et al. (2016) reported that online learning helps learners to rely more on themselves so that the instructors are no longer the only source of knowledge but serve as guides and advisors. In addition, Radu et al.(2015) pointed out the benefits for part-time students, travellers or relocators to attend to studies from anywhere at any time. As to the maintenance of content standards, one participant noted that she liked online learning because the content or learning material is 'not erased from the board' when compared to some face-to-face teaching and learning strategies. This point is supported by Zhang et al. (2006), who claim that learning apps such as interactive video permits learners to watch all activities conducted in the classroom and listen to instructors as many times as needed.

Because of adult learners' maturity, they are expected to be all-rounders who can handle their studies as they go about managing their everyday responsibilities. With the increasing presence of adult learners in higher education, educators should strategise to improve the conduct of distance learning experiences that can fit into the reality of adult learners' extraordinary circumstances (Bok, 2021). Successful learning for adults in distance education depends not on course content, design or delivery alone but on understanding adult learners as persons with busy, valuable lives (Bok, 2021). These literature-based statements describe the lives of Ni-Vanuatu study participants. The alignment of literature and the Ni-Vanuatu experiences suggests that some matters are common to online learners everywhere despite contextual issues of geography, network quality and access.

## CONCLUSION

This study showed that Information, Communication and Technology, including online learning, offer considerable benefits. According to Naseer and Zahida-Perveen (2023), online learning environments foster additional learning experiences where learners can interact, collaborate and take ownership of their own learning. Similar benefits of online learning have been revealed in this study. Study participants were able to take steps to improve their own abilities to deal with online learning and teaching issues. Participants seized opportunities for safety and ownership of learning and acted further in support of their own learning.

This study has also uncovered challenges in online learning. To address the challenges, particularly of timely access, VITE as an institution needs to develop flexible distance and virtual learning policies and procedures. This might mean incorporating online teaching and learning while building sub-centres in rural and remote areas where learners can access learning resources more easily. As part of the VITE program entry requirements, learners might be required to own appropriate hardware or have easy access to ICT devices—for instance, a computer lab and reliable network coverage- as prerequisites for enrolling in online programs or courses. This might, however, have an exclusionary effect. An additional recommendation is that a practical delivery plan with monitoring of learning progress and learner participation is developed and implemented, including attention to a blended mode of delivery to suit Vanuatu's context and cultures of learning. Similarly, MOET should review its online policies to incorporate children and adult learning platforms and opportunities, learning from the experiences of online learners such as those in this study.

Finally, this research shows the range of opportunities adult learners in Vanuatu have encountered in online learning despite the issues involved. Both benefits and recommendations for improving online learning are ripe for further investigation using other research methods and in other Vanuatu contexts. Online learning has great potential, and research has a part to play in maximising learning benefits.

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# Motivational factors influencing students' learning: A Samoan case study

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*When students leave the schooling systems prematurely, a common question is: How can students be motivated to remain and be successful in their educational journeys? The qualitative research discussed in this article examined the factors motivating students in a Samoan context. Fifteen primary school students were interviewed about the factors influencing their learning. The findings did not reveal intrinsic motivation as a significant drive for student participants. On the contrary, extrinsic factors (e.g., family expectations and positive learning environments) took precedence over internal motivations. This finding suggests that other factors, such as students' culture, may significantly influence students' motivation. Future research could further explore whether or how intrinsic factors may influence students' academic success within a Samoan context.*

*Keywords: Motivation; Samoa; student success; culture; learning*

## INTRODUCTION

When students fail or drop out of school systems, educational systems and, particularly, teachers are scrutinised and criticised as a cause of student failure. However, other factors can influence students' academic performance. It is important to understand what motivates students to be successful at school. Motivation is a key determinant of academic success, influencing how students engage with their studies, persistence, and overall performance. Research has shown that various motivational factors, such as intrinsic interest and external rewards, play significant roles in shaping students' academic outcomes. This study aimed to examine factors that affect students' academic performance within the Samoan context. Particularly, we examined intrinsic and extrinsic motivations and the impacts of social and environmental influences. By understanding these factors, educators and policymakers can better develop strategies to enhance student motivation and improve educational outcomes.

### Context

In the Samoa Development Strategy (SDS) (Government of Samoa, 2016), the role of Education is connected with the 'improvement of quality of life for all Samoans' (p.31). For instance, the aim is to increase and broaden access to education so that everyone in Samoa is educated and productively engaged. Key SDS outcomes relate to 'increased access to education

and training opportunities especially for vulnerable groups'; and ensure 'that every child that enters year 1 can complete year 8'. This goal is also accentuated in the Education Sector Plan 2013-2018, with one of its priority goals being to improve the quality of Education through effective teaching strategies. The strategies are deemed critical factors for enhancing students' experiences. However, despite numerous initiatives to improve teaching and learning, the Education Sector Plan 2013–2018 review revealed disappointing results for numeracy and literacy at primary and secondary levels and in mathematics and science subjects at the secondary level (Ministry of Education, Sports, and Culture, 2019). In addition to the poor results, there was the finding that many students dropped out of the Education system, a factor noted as a risk in the Education Sector Plan 2019-2024 report (Ministry of Education, Sports, and Culture, 2019). These factors raise questions concerning students' motivation to attend school: How is motivation associated with these factors? And are students motivated in their educational journeys? Research shows that students' motivational level can highly influence their academic performance; hence, it is crucial to investigate the factors that may influence students' motivational levels in the Samoan context.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Motivation is a critical factor in student engagement and achievement within the educational context. Schunk (2002) pointed to numerous studies exploring the relationship between student motivation and academic success, drawing attention to the factors influencing students' motivation, such as social, external rewards and environmental influences. These factors will be further examined.

### Culture

Cultural influences can be both intrinsic and extrinsic. Education systems worldwide are shaped by cultural contexts, which influence student behaviours, attitudes and motivations within the classroom; for example, with respect to values and beliefs, cultures that stress personal growth, self-expression, creativity, innovation and autonomy foster intrinsic motivation because individuals are encouraged to pursue what they find fulfilling. Similarly, cultures that value learning and skills mastery will be reflected in individuals being intrinsically engaged in educational activities. However, cultures that emphasise external achievements, such as awards, grades and social status, may influence individuals to be extrinsically motivated. Additionally, social pressure can be an external motivator, particularly in collectivist cultures like Samoa, where group harmony and family expectations are paramount, and individuals can be extrinsically motivated to meet societal or familial expectations.

Yamamoto and Holloway (2010), when exploring the impact of parents' expectations for their children's academic performance, emphasised the role of sociocultural factors in shaping expectations and how different cultural backgrounds can lead to varying expectations and educational practices. In Samoa, students might be motivated to contribute positively to their families and communities. The Samoan culture is deeply rooted in communal values, respect for authority and interconnectedness. It places values on community, family and respect for authority. Hence, individuals from this cultural context will likely develop a strong desire to uphold familial honour and contribute to their community. This ambition can significantly impact their engagement with school learning activities. The cultural concept of *fa'aaloalo* (respect) can affect students' extrinsic motivation to strive to please their teachers and parents and be successful in their academic efforts.

Tuiasosopo (2009) advocated for integrating Samoan cultural elements into the curriculum to positively impact students' engagement and intrinsic motivation by increasing the relevance of schooling to students. Sapolu and Malupo (2018), in their study on the impact of motivation on the learning satisfaction of Samoan students in New Zealand, stated that cultural values and community support played a crucial role in shaping students' motivation and satisfaction levels. Ryan and Deci (2000) noted that students are more motivated when they see the relevance of the learning material to their personal interests or future aspirations. Their intrinsic motivation increases once they detect the connection between what they are learning and real-life situations. Sapolu and Malupo (2018) found that intrinsic motivation (such as personal interest in or enjoyment of the subject) significantly influenced the learning of Samoan students compared to extrinsic motivation (such as grades, rewards or approval from others), which influenced learning satisfaction to a lesser extent.

### Parental expectations

Another factor that could affect student motivation is parental involvement. High parental expectations of academic success are generally linked to better academic outcomes. In a meta-study, Castro et al. (2015) examined the relationship between parental involvement and students' academic achievement. They found that parental involvement can have a positive though moderate impact on academic achievement. Further, Jeyne's (2005) meta-analysis found that parental expectations were among the strongest predictors of academic success.

Similarly, Fan and Chen's (2001) meta-analysis found a positive impact of high parental expectations on students' academic performance. Wang and Sheikh (2014) emphasised the role of parental expectations in boosting students' academic outcomes and resilience. Yamamoto and Holloway (2010), when exploring the impact of parents' expectations for their children's academic performance, highlighted how high parental expectations inspired children to achieve better academically, while unrealistic expectations resulted in stress and negative outcomes. Parents' expectations can act as a motivating factor and are extrinsic. For example, a student can be driven to study to please the parents because s[h]e is expected to learn and be successful.

### Rewards and recognition

The impact of external rewards, such as symbolic rewards like praise and recognition, has been shown to generally boost student motivation more effectively than tangible rewards, such as money and prizes. These symbolic rewards can elevate students' self-esteem and encourage positive behaviours. The issue with using external elements to motivate students is that students might study hard to earn rewards rather than for the enjoyment of learning itself. Intrinsic motivation is driven by personal satisfaction, enjoyment or a sense of accomplishment — a student may be driven to study because of the joy that comes from learning. Wong and Thomson (2014) found that while many teachers use rewards to boost motivation, excessive reliance on them can negatively affect students' intrinsic motivation and long-term academic achievement.

### School environment

In addition to rewards and recognition, research highlights the influence of the learning environment on students' academic performance. For example, Rafiq et al.'s (2022) study on the impact of the school environment on students' academic achievements at university reveals the significant impact of the school environment on students' academic achievements. They found a strong correlation between good academic performance and factors such as physical

environment, teacher support, timing and discipline, goal orientation, extra-curricular activities and reading facilities.

### Teacher-student relationships

Studies show that when teachers establish a good understanding of students, this helps foster a supportive and motivating classroom environment. Becker (1952) and Brandmiller (2020) noted that poor relationships often exist between students of lower social status and their teachers due to differences in social background. In Samoa, where interpersonal connections are deeply cherished, teachers play a crucial role in educating, mentoring and guiding students. As well as influencing students' academic achievements, teacher enthusiasm positively correlates with students' motivation (Keller, 2016; Dewaele & Li, 2021). Van Petegem et al. (2005) submitted that teachers could tangibly demonstrate their well-being through positive student interactions, such as smiling, using humour, providing feedback, and designing engaging activities. In essence, when teachers are mentally and emotionally well, it reflects how they connect and communicate with their students, creating a positive and productive learning environment. Establishing a supportive and respectful connection between teachers and students encourages students to actively participate in class and take ownership of their learning.

### Teacher pedagogical practices

Research indicates that the interaction of teaching methods with student participation is linked to increased intrinsic motivation. For instance, when students feel their opinions and choices are respected, they are more likely to be motivated to learn. Hattie and Timperley (2007) advocated the value of providing effective feedback focusing on specific goals and strategies because it enhances students' self-efficacy and motivation.

An interesting phenomenon is the connection between external motivation and punishment avoidance. For example, Skinner (1938) theorised that when people are motivated by external factors, such as rewards or fear of punishment, their actions are driven by the consequences imposed by others rather than their own internal desires. Therefore, teachers who prioritise disciplinary measures over supportive guidance may contribute to extrinsically motivated behaviours. For instance, disengaged students can be extrinsically motivated to avoid punishment. Based on our own experience as educators, we note that the idea of students being motivated to learn to avoid punishment is a prevailing concept in the Samoan classroom. This notion of being driven into doing something is extrinsically centred. While this motivation may drive students into learning, it can be temporary compared to an inner motive. Hence, a balance between intrinsic and extrinsic is an important consideration for teachers.

## THE NEED FOR RESEARCH

The literature review has highlighted studies on motivational factors for students outside of Samoa; hence, there is a need for a study within Samoa on the perceptions of students who learn within the Samoan context. Filling this gap, this study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What primary factors influence students' motivation to learn in the classroom?
2. How do cultural norms and values affect students' motivation?

3. How do family expectations and socio-economic background impact students' learning motivation and aspirations?
4. How do teachers' instructional approaches and teacher-student relationships affect students' motivation?

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

When delving into factors that motivate students in their academic performance, Self Determination Theory (SDT) and Functionalist Theory offer a comprehensive lens to analyse and understand the multifaceted motivations behind students' performance. Deci and Ryan (2015) explain that SDT is a theory of human motivation that enables examination of a wide range of phenomena across gender, culture, age and socioeconomic status. SDT categorises two types of motivation: autonomous motivation and controlled motivation. Autonomously motivated individuals are self-regulated and can act under their own volition. Individuals influenced by controlled motivation act out of obligation or by the use of coercion without the privilege of choice. Autonomous and controlled motivation can be differentiated by the intrinsic or extrinsic forces that lead to action (Deci, 1975). While intrinsic motivation is reflected in individuals who act of their own volition because of their interest or love for the activity, extrinsic motivation involves using stimuli or incentives such as rewards, prizes, scholarships and desire for social approval to prompt behaviour. Students can be extrinsically driven to succeed by threats of punishment (Deci & Cascio, 1972), assessment deadlines (Amabile et al., 1976), and surveillance (Plant & Ryan, 1985). Some students may also be extrinsically motivated to gain approval from friends or fulfil family obligations.

Functionalist Theory (Parsons, 1959) focuses on the interconnectedness of various elements of a society and how they collectively contribute to its stability and overall functioning. Concerning Education, the theory enables examination of how different aspects of the educational system work together to promote student learning and motivation. The functionalist framework can be applied to analyse how social structures and norms within educational settings influence student motivation. For example, the expectations set by teachers, parents, and peers can significantly affect a student's drive to succeed academically. The concept of interconnected systems stresses how elements like family, community and educational policies influence student motivation. Understanding these interactions can help identify factors that either enhance or hinder motivation.

Having established the foundation of our study with SDT and Functionalist Theory, we now turn to the methodologies employed in this study to investigate student motivation.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employed a qualitative research approach. Neuman (2014) noted that qualitative research is about depth rather than breadth. Researchers draw upon qualitative methods to develop a deep understanding of a phenomenon experienced in a particular setting rather than draw broad conclusions about a particular aspect of human behaviour. In this study, the qualitative method allowed for in-depth probing and further interviewing of student participants based on their responses on what motivated them to be in a classroom. This qualitative research methodology was deemed suitable for exploring the culturally influenced motivator that may not be easily quantifiable.

Before starting the research, consent was enlisted from participants regarding their participation. Purposive sampling was used to select respondents likely to yield appropriate and useful information (Kelly, 2010). The sample was selected from a rural primary school, with seven students from Year 7 and eight from Year 8—a total of 15 student participants. Due to time and researcher constraints, study participants were selected based on convenience and accessibility.

For this study, eight semi-structured interview questions were developed to interview the 15 participants. The interview questions were developed based on the SDT and Functional theory. Semi-structured interviews (Dejonckheere, 2019) involve predetermined questions with some probing questions to obtain data from the respondents. Semi-structured interviews effectively gain insights into hidden aspects of the different students' motivations in the classroom. Easwaramoorthy (2006) stated that an interview is a way to get information from a person by asking questions and hearing their answers; it is a conversation for gathering information' DeCarlo (2018) stated that interviews are intended to discover participants' experiences, understandings, opinions or motivations.

The interviews were individually conducted in the teacher's classroom (one of the researchers of the study) before school, during intervals or after school. Each interview lasted 40 minutes. A tape recorder was used to record the information, which was later transcribed and analysed.

The data was analysed using the thematic analysis approach of Miles and Huberman (1994): becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes and defining themes. The themes were derived from analysing participants' responses to the research questions and in connection to the predetermined categories that guided the analysis. Data was analysed according to extrinsic and intrinsic factors that affected students' learning, and three major themes emerged with their own subthemes. The major themes were: External Rewards and Recognition, with the sub-themes of Recognition and Encouragement, Grades and rewards; the second theme of Environmental Factors, with sub-themes related to classroom environment and teacher-student relationships; the third theme was Social Influences with the sub-theme of Parental expectations. These findings will be presented in the next section.

## FINDINGS

The study aimed to examine factors that affected students' academic performance within a Samoan context, focusing on intrinsic and extrinsic motivations and the impact of social and environmental influences. The following sections are a thematic presentation of the findings.

### External rewards and recognition

External rewards and recognition emerged as an important theme when considering what motivates Samoan students to perform well academically. While the literature on external rewards and recognition emphasises tangible rewards, such as prizes and certificates, in addition to striving for high marks and academic recognition, this study only highlighted the value of being recognised and acknowledged, plus the importance of striving for good grades.

#### Recognition and encouragement

Social recognition acknowledges the role of social approval and refers to the notion of being acknowledged either by the teacher or those within the students' inner circle. The findings showed that 90% of the students indicated recognition and acknowledgement as an important

motivating factor. Participants noted that recognising and celebrating their achievements, whether big or small, can boost confidence and motivation. That is, when their academic efforts are publicly acknowledged, it can motivate students to do more. One student has this to say:

> Whenever my teacher praises or says a good comment on any of my work including my home works, I feel so happy and that makes me want to continue on doing greater things and work harder each day. (Year 7 student)

### Grades and rewards

Several students highlighted the value of grades and rewards as a significant motivational factor. For example, about 30% of students indicated being motivated by rewards and grades, as noted by this student:

> The rewards from each activity and assignment including rankings and grading, were what kept me going but most importantly, if you want to be the best you have to try your greatest to be the one. I tried my very best to maintain my ranking and grades so I could make my parents and teachers proud. (Year 8 student)

In summary, while rewards and recognition act as motivators, students found these to be insufficient on their own. The classroom environment, discussed in the following section, supports the proposition that external motivators are effective.

## Environmental factors

As alluded to earlier, while many students identified external rewards and recognition as key motivators, the learning environment they are part of is also vital. According to the literature, the school environment, such as positive classroom dynamics, supportive teachers and institutional support, such as resources and facilities, are important motivational factors. The findings of this study supported this proposition.

### Classroom environment

About 85% of the students stressed the importance of a safe learning environment where the teacher encourages students to care for and support one another. Participants emphasised the value of being in a safe and inclusive learning environment as this gives them a feeling of comfort and inspiration to learn:

> In my classroom, our teacher always tells us to be friendly or help everyone that needs help, this what motivated me more because I used to be shy and now I am not anymore. (Year 8 student)

Students indicated a safe environment as being one without bullying. Several students raised the importance of addressing bullying, discrimination and other negative behaviours to create a positive and happy learning environment.

### Teacher-student relationships

In addition to a positive classroom environment, a positive relationship between students and teachers can affect student motivation. An indication of a positive learning environment that enhances motivation is when teachers show genuine care for their students, are good role models and inspire significant engagement with students. About 80% of students emphasised how this relationship helps boost their enthusiasm to do well in the classroom. In a supporting comment, a student explained:

> At first I was scared to ask the teacher questions when I did not understand an activity. But when I started asking him questions, that made me realise that what I needed to do in order to do great in my own studies is never be afraid to ask questions. (Year 7 student)

To sum up, while recognition, rewards and classroom environment play major roles in motivating students to excel in their academic pursuits, they are inadequate by themselves. As discussed next, social influences also significantly impact student motivation.

## Social influences

According to the literature, social influences in terms of parent expectations and family pressure are crucial elements for understanding motivation. This study also found parental expectations to be a significant motivational factor, as noted below.

### Parental expectations

About 50% of students noted that parental expectation is a driving force for them and one of the main reasons encouraging them to strive to do better at school. According to the participants, they deeply empathise with their parents and the daily struggles parents face to ensure their children can attend school. Hence, for children, one way to express appreciation to their parents is by doing well in their studies. The comment below illustrates these sentiments:

> I love how my parents sacrificed so much just to get me and my siblings to school. They sell our crops and fish so we can get money for school fees and to put food on the table. I want to make them happy and proud and this is what keeps me going for their own sake. (Year 8 student)

Obviously, parents who emphasise the importance of education and provide support can positively impact their children's motivation.

Overall, the findings indicate that while external motivators, such as rewards, recognition and parental expectations, are vital for Samoan students, they work best when paired with a nurturing learning environment.

# DISCUSSION

The study found that external factors, namely, external rewards and recognition, social influences and environmental factors, are significant motivators for students' academic performance. The following sections discuss the study's findings in further detail.

## External rewards and recognition

The study found that external factors, such as rewards and recognition, motivate students to perform well academically, as predicted by other studies. For example, Deci (1975) noted that intrinsic motivation is reflected in individuals who act of their own volition because of their interest or love for the activity. Extrinsic motivation involves using stimuli or incentives, such as rewards, prizes, scholarships and desire for social approval to prompt behaviour. Students in this study are motivated by being recognized and acknowledged by the teacher or family members, especially their parents. Some students can be extrinsically driven to succeed by threats of punishment (Deci & Cascio, 1972) and surveillance (Plant & Ryan, 1985); others may also be extrinsically motivated by wanting to gain approval from friends or to fulfil family obligations. This appears to be the case with these Samoan students. In addition to being extrinsically motivated by a sense of recognition and acknowledgement from teachers or family

members, obtaining grades and rewards, such as certificates or scholarship sponsorships, also serve as external motivators for students in this study. These tangible outcomes align with cultural and social expectations for success and achievement. In Samoan culture, family expectations can play a significant role in shaping students' academic performance.

## Social influences

The literature supports the study findings concerning the impact of social influences on student motivation, such as parental expectations influencing students' academic achievement. For instance, Castro et al. (2015) found that high parental expectations can significantly boost students' academic achievement. In the Samoan culture, family and community are highly valued, and parents' expectations can carry a lot of weight, as noted by more than half of the students. Parental involvement in a child's education can significantly impact their motivation, and Samoa is no exception. For instance, Finau (2018) found that parental involvement in children's education is common in Samoan households. This is evident in parents investing time and money in their children's education with the expectation that they will be successful. This parental expectation can create a sense of obligation for a Samoan child to do well academically because they do not want to disappoint their parents. One crucial way parents support their children is by monitoring their progress and setting clear expectations for performance. When parents are actively engaged with teachers in monitoring their child's progress and addressing academic challenges, students are more likely to stay motivated. Moreover, when parents attend parent-teacher meetings and offer encouragement and guidance, students are more likely to feel motivated in their academic pursuits. What is also worth noting is that in Samoa, where competition seems to be the norm, students can be driven to compete in their exam results to bring status and esteem to the family name—a motive that can be classified as extrinsic (Fairbairn-Dunlop, 1991).

## Environmental factors

This study's final motivator for students is connected to the classroom learning environment. The literature consistently underscores the significance of a positive classroom environment for motivating and supporting academic achievement (Rafiq et al., 2022). The Samoan culture emphasises community, respect and relationships, which can be leveraged to create a supportive and motivating educational setting. Additionally, promoting a safe and inclusive classroom environment where all students feel comfortable expressing themselves without fear of discrimination or bias makes them more engaged and motivated in learning.

This process requires dedication to building strong and positive relationships with students; strategies can include greeting them warmly, getting to know them individually and showing genuine interest in their lives in and out of the classroom. Students cannot be motivated to engage in class discussions if the classroom environment is not conducive to their learning. Parsons (1959) discussed the role of the school class in socialising individuals and maintaining social order from the functionalist framework perspective. In that perspective, educational institutions are key social structures that contribute to the stability and functioning of society by providing a structured environment. Schools help maintain social order and prepare students for their future roles in the workforce. The structure can motivate students by providing them with clear goals and expectations; hence, the teacher's role in supporting and motivating students cannot be overstated.

The study's findings stressed the importance of teacher-student relationships as a motivating factor —a concept echoed by Ryan and Deci (2009), who maintained that supportive instructors

lead to autonomously motivated students who internalise the course material better and achieve higher grades. The key is to build respectful, culturally sensitive and supportive relationships that encourage students to engage actively in their learning journey and strive for academic success while honouring their cultural heritage. When teachers create supportive learning environments that consider students' cultural needs, students are more likely to excel academically and uphold their cultural values. Brandmiller et al. (2020) indicated that the differences in students' socio-economic backgrounds may hamper the teacher-student relationship. However, if the teacher is well equipped to cater for everyone's needs, including those from different socioeconomic backgrounds, these dissimilarities may not affect students' desire to learn.

Overall, the study's findings provide evidence that extrinsic motivators are more important than intrinsic ones. Such a finding contradicts Sapolu and Malupo's (2018) study findings, who found that intrinsic motivation, such as personal interest in or enjoyment of the subject, more significantly influenced the learning of Samoan students than extrinsic motivators, such as grades, rewards and approval from others. The study's findings are unexpected but might be attributed to the nature of the Samoan context. For example, a notable phenomenon in most Samoan classrooms is the issue of student passivity, which can be attributed to the very hierarchical nature of the Samoan culture. For example, students may not have the desire to learn for the sake of learning but to satisfy those in authority.

### Balancing intrinsic and extrinsic motivation

It is crucial to strike a balance between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in the Samoan classroom. While extrinsic motivators can provide short-term incentives, they should be aligned with intrinsic values to maintain long-term engagement and motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2008). For example, while both types of motivation drive students to learn, the sense of fulfillment from either may differ. For instance, intrinsic motivation, driven by students' interests and passions, may result in a deeper engagement with learning and a higher academic performance. In contrast, extrinsic motivation driven by external rewards, such as social recognition within the community or meeting family exceptions, can also drive students to excel academically. However, external motivators may not result in the same level of personal satisfaction as intrinsic motivators. Balancing these motivations can help students achieve their academic goals while fulfilling their personal and social aspirations. Encouraging a supportive environment that values both types of motivation can benefit students overall.

## CONCLUSION

This study has provided valuable insights into the motivational factors influencing Samoan students' academic performance. While the findings align with existing literature concerning the significant roles of extrinsic factors on students' academic performance, the absence of findings on the impact of intrinsic motivation is concerning. Participants demonstrated that external factors such as parental expectations, grades, and external rewards, as well as environmental factors such as the learning environment, which encompasses the teacher-student relationship and pedagogical skills, drive them in their educational trajectories. It is fair to argue that while external rewards can boost motivation in the short term, they may undermine intrinsic motivation over time. For example, students who receive frequent tangible rewards may become less interested in the learning activity and more focused on the rewards. Hence, a balanced approach that combines intrinsic and extrinsic motivators tends to be most effective.

For example, providing external rewards for initial engagement and gradually shifting towards intrinsic motivators can help sustain long-term motivation and engagement.

## Study limitations and recommendations

The study is limited in several ways. First, it was limited by the scale of participants. Expanding the research to include more students from urban and rural schools would enable a closer examination of its wider value. A future comparative study could utilise survey and interviews to gather information from more schools from urban and rural areas and private schools. Further research is also needed to explore additional dimensions of motivations specifically related to the Samoan cultural context and its implications for educational policy and practices and how they interact in shaping students' educational journeys in a Samoan classroom. However, on a global scale, the work points to the importance of context in students' motivation and acts as a warning to those who might uncritically generalise from one context to another, especially from Western contexts to cultural spaces which are greatly different.

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# The impacts of composite classes on the teaching and learning process

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*Composite classes (also known as multigrades) are beneficial in several ways but have challenges for teaching and learning. This study aimed to explore participants' views concerning their experiences in teaching and learning within a composite classroom setting in Samoa. Specifically, the study sought to determine composite classes' impacts on teachers' instructions and students' learning. Using a qualitative approach, ten teachers and ten students from two rural primary schools were purposively selected to participate in this study. Findings showed that composite class structuring benefited students by promoting academic and social skills but also presented significant challenges. Many students and teachers found it highly distracting, making effective learning nearly impossible. With respect to teacher instructions and classroom management, teachers found it challenging to manage a mixed-ability classroom, as they needed to differentiate instruction to ensure that all students received an equal opportunity to learn. Findings have implications for policymakers and teacher training. For example, the Samoan Ministry of Education must find effective ways to make this class composition work. Similarly, the Samoan teacher training institution must provide teachers with the tools to effectively work in a composite classroom.*

*Keywords: composite classes; Samoa education; teaching; learning; teacher education*

## INTRODUCTION

Composite classes, also known as multilevel or multigrade classes (Little, 1995), are used worldwide, predominantly at the primary school level. In this arrangement, class structuring may involve combining grades, such as 1 and 2 or 4 and 5 within the same class. This structure is often implemented to address teacher shortages, uneven student enrolments, and resource constraints and to provide a flexible solution for managing diverse educational needs within a single classroom. The United States has a long history of composite classrooms, and it has continued to use such classes as a method of child instruction even after the practice of graded schools became the norm (Anderson, & Pavan, 1992). This type of class composition is also found in Africa, Europe, and Pacific Islands countries, including Samoa. According to Little (2003, citing Berry, 2001; Little, 1995, 2001; Mason and Burns, 1997; Pratt, 1986; Rowley, 1992; Thomas & Shaw, 1992; Veenman, 1995), the impacts of multi-graded and mono-graded teaching on student achievement in both Commonwealth and non-Commonwealth countries, is

inconclusiveness. Given this inconclusiveness and, in particular, a lack of research information on the impact of composite classes on student learning in Samoa, this study examined the views of participants (teachers and students) concerning their experiences of teaching and learning within a composite classroom environment in Samoa.

The study focus aligns with the broader theme of 'Quality Education for Sustainable Futures: Comparative Dialogue'. By investigating the effectiveness and challenges of composite classes in Samoa, we contribute to a comparative dialogue on how different educational structures can support or hinder the goal of providing quality education. Composite classes, with their unique structuring and demand for innovative teaching strategies, offer insights into sustainable educational practices that can adapt to various contexts. Understanding these experiences from a local perspective enhances the global conversation on sustainable futures in education, emphasising that quality education must be adaptable, inclusive and sensitive to the specific needs of different communities.

This dialogue is crucial as it highlights the importance of localised educational research in informing global practices and policies aimed at achieving sustainable futures. By examining composite classes in Samoa, we not only shed light on the specific challenges and successes in this context but also provide valuable lessons that can inform educational strategies worldwide.

## STUDY CONTEXT

The Government of Samoa's Strategy for the Development of Samoa 2016–2020 (SDS) highlights priorities, including quality education and training improvement. It stresses increasing and broadening educational access to ensure everyone in Samoa is educated and productively engaged. The SDS advocates for improved quality of teaching and learning, as stated in the Education Sector Plan 2013-2018, which aims to enhance the quality of education and training for all learners through effective teaching and curriculum. However, the Samoan education system faces unique challenges, particularly in rural areas. Despite a national literacy rate of 97% (Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture (MESC), 2020), the quality of education varies significantly. Rural areas often struggle with limited resources and facilities.

In contrast, urban schools usually have better infrastructure and access to educational materials. Composite classes, where students of different ages and grades learn together in the same classroom, are common in rural areas. This approach helps to address issues like teacher shortages and uneven student enrolments. However, it can also lead to overcrowding, making it difficult for teachers to provide individualised attention and effectively manage classroom dynamics (MESC, 2020).

The prevalence of composite classes in Samoa highlights broader issues of educational inequality and resource allocation. Overcrowded classrooms can strain teachers and students, leading to potential declines in educational quality (MESC, 2020). Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort to improve infrastructures, provide adequate teacher training, and ensure all students have access to quality education regardless of location. This involves enhancing physical resources and developing strategies to support teachers in managing composite classes effectively.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This review examines definitions and rationale for composite classes as well as the benefits and challenges associated with this educational structure.

## Problem with definition

The many definitions of composite classes have been a cause of confusion for many scholars in this area. Multi-age classes are any mixed-grade class formed by choice (Rasmussen University, 2023). Multigrade is a mixed-grade class formed out of necessity (Litte, 2004) Thomas (2012) defines a multigrade class as ‘the combination class, in which students from two adjacent grades are grouped within one classroom under one teacher’ (p. 1). In Commonwealth countries, various terms are used to describe multigrade settings, for example, combination class, vertical grouping, family grouping, composite class, mixed year class, split class, double-graded class and unitary schools (Little, 2003). As noted, these many definitions can be very problematic; however, the rationale (Little, 2003) for creating composite classes is worth discussing further.

## Rationale for composite classes creation

According to Cornish (2010), the rationale for creating multigrade classes varies. In many instances, multi-grade classes are implemented for administrative purposes, such as when there are fewer teachers than grade levels or uneven enrolments. The establishment of multigrade classes, therefore, allows administrators to more efficiently utilise their resources, as only one teacher is needed to teach multiple grade levels. Little (2003) reported that multigrade classes arise from demographic necessity rather than pedagogical choice in many countries. Small, uneven intakes and financial constraints impede the allocation of one teacher to every grade in every school. Consequently, education administrators sometimes combine single-grade classes from traditional education (conventional type education) with multi-age or non-graded classrooms for pedagogical or philosophical reasons.

Multigrade classes are generally found in rural and remote areas with low enrolments, and one teacher is responsible for teaching multiple grade levels (Little, 2003). For many countries, multigrade teaching occurs in economically underprivileged and geographically remote rural contexts. Similarly, Thackray (2023) found that composite classes are common in small rural or outback schools, attributing the initiative and self-reliance seen in rural students to this style of schooling.

Overall, the rationale for establishing composite or multigrade classes is typically based on total school enrolment, individual grade level enrolments, the number of available teachers and the effective use of resources (Cornish, 2010; Lindstrom & Lindahl, 2011; Saqlain, 2015). While the economic underpinnings of this classroom structure are evident, the question of its effectiveness and implications for students’ academic achievement remains debatable.

## Composite classes: benefits

Generally, the effects of composite classes range from broader positives to narrower negatives. These impacts are connected to students, teachers, classroom instructions and the curriculum.

### Impact on students’ academic development

Studies indicate composite classes can boost student attainment, particularly in their early years. For example, research from the University of Strathclyde (Gehrsitz, 2021) found that younger students (Year 1) in mixed year groups (Year 1 and Year 2) improved performance in numeracy and literacy. This improvement in academic learning can be attributed to the support offered to younger learners by their more able peers. Similarly, at-risk students can be positively influenced by their higher-achieving peers (Thomas, 2012). Thomas (2012) noted that having

multiple-level students in the same classroom benefits lower-level students because they receive guidance and support from their higher-level peers, which can bridge knowledge gaps and motivate them to work harder. There is also the possibility that high achievers emulate each other within the composite class setting. For instance, Kuzmina and Ivanova (2018) discovered that students who learn alongside high-achieving classmates tend to observe and mimic their behavioural styles, problem-solving strategies, learning goals and motivation. Their study supports the idea that students comparing their academic performance to slightly better-performing peers are more likely to improve their results.

### Impact on students' social and emotional development

Studies also show composite classes can foster cooperation and understanding across age groups. For example, Proehl et al. (2013) showed that multigrade settings can foster a sense of community and shared responsibility among students. As such, older students often develop leadership skills, while younger students benefit from peer learning. Several Scottish studies presented the positive impacts of composite classes on the cognitive and social development of students (Welsh, 2018). Chen's (2006) study conducted in mixed-grade classes noted a positive impact on social-emotional development and social variables such as 'liking school', which can be attributed to students' increased opportunity to interact with different age groups, helping them develop better social skills.

The diverse experiences and backgrounds in composite classes foster better student understanding and relationships. Moreover, composite classes offer opportunities for students to develop social-emotional skills, such as nurturing and leadership. Quail and Smyth (2014) suggest that older students who combine with younger ones tend to behave more responsibly, understanding the importance of being good role models. This often leads to the older students acquiring leadership abilities and the younger students gaining confidence from working with older peers.

### Benefits for teachers

Teaching composite classes can offer several benefits for teachers. One significant advantage is professional growth because managing diverse age and ability levels enhance teachers' skills in differentiated instruction and classroom management. This experience makes them more versatile educators (Brisbane Kids, 2024). According to Smith (2023), composite classes allow teachers to tailor their instruction to meet the diverse needs of students, promoting individualised learning plans and differentiated instructions. Teachers can group students based on skill levels rather than age, allowing for more flexible and effective teaching strategies. Additionally, composite classes encourage the adoption of innovative teaching strategies to engage students of varying abilities, leading to more dynamic and effective teaching practices (University of Technology Sydney, 2023). These environments foster collaboration, with teachers working closely with colleagues to plan lessons and share strategies, creating a supportive teaching community (Brisbane Kids, 2024).

## Challenges of composite classes

### Challenges to student learning

Despite the positive impact of composite classes on student learning, studies have highlighted the negative impacts of this type of class composition on students' progress (Perry, 2017). For instance, mixing students from different levels of skills can lead to confusion and frustration for some students (Nyoni & Nyoni, 2012).

### Impact on teachers

While teaching composite classes has some advantages, studies also reveal that teachers perceive teaching these classes as more stressful than teaching single classes. Mulryan-Kyne (2004) noted that, given the choice, many teachers prefer single-grade classrooms because of the more straightforward curriculum and classroom management. A negative correlation between emotional exhaustion (a sub-dimension of burnout) and teachers in composite classes has been found. Taols (2014) found that many teachers in multi-graded classrooms feel isolated and unsure about their teaching strategies, contributing to their stress. Teachers often need to cover multiple topics in a single class, making managing challenging, especially when some topics are more advanced than others.

### Curriculum challenges

Little (2003) noted that teachers of multigrade classes face challenges in organizing the simultaneous delivery of graded curricula to two or more grades. Teachers struggle to deliver a national curriculum designed for monograde schools. One significant disadvantage of composite classes is the lack of individualised attention and instruction because teachers must cater to students with varying knowledge and skill levels. Cornish (2012) argued that it is more challenging to teach composite classes compared to single-grade classes with students at the same level. Larger class sizes pose additional challenges for teachers, such as setting and enforcing behavioural expectations, monitoring students and providing individual attention.

### Pedagogical strategies

According to Cornish (2006), many teachers in combined classes employ conventional pedagogical strategies, including whole-class instruction and teaching each grade independently. However, the effectiveness of these techniques in all types of small schools remains uncertain. The effectiveness of composite classes largely depends on the teaching strategies employed and the support provided to students.

### Teacher quality and training

Effective teachers can create an environment where all students can learn despite age differences. Studies (Wilson, 2003) show that composite classrooms require more materials, time and organisation, and teachers with specialised training in instructing mixed-age groups. Teachers must devote more time to composite teaching, which requires additional planning, programming and documentation. Different teacher preparation initiatives, instructional materials and evaluation techniques are needed to implement composite- compared to single-class structures (Cronin, 2019).

There is an assumption that in multi-grade classes, teachers can provide more individualised instruction because teachers can tailor the lessons to the specific students in the class. However, this view is unrealistic because it is challenging for teachers to address each student's needs within one level, let alone within a mixed level. Composite classes have different needs from single classes, including more teacher preparation, classroom materials, and thorough teacher evaluation. These classes require more coordination and collaboration among teachers, and more support for students with special needs.

Given the added complexity and responsibilities, it would be irrational for a principal to assign composite classes to the least qualified teachers. Composite classes need teachers who are well-trained and qualified to teach (Watson et al., 2006). Little's (2003) statement that teacher training rarely addresses the needs of multigrade classes resonates with our teacher training

program. To achieve successful outcomes, teachers must be well-trained and supported by sympathetic policymakers, administrators, school principals and parents. An issue identified in Scottish studies is that parents often do not trust their children to be in composite classes (Welsh, 2018).

## NEED FOR RESEARCH

The literature reviewed highlighted the benefits and challenges of composite and mixed-grade classes. In Samoa, research on composite classes is non-existent. Hence, the impetus for this study is to explore the experiences of teachers and students concerning composite classes.

The questions guiding this study are:

1. What are the participants' views concerning the rationale for creating composite classes?
2. What are teachers' views concerning their teaching experiences in a composite class?
3. What are students' views concerning their learning experiences in a composite class?

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework used in this study is underpinned by Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978), which suggests the importance of support and guidance offered for the less-able learner from a knowledgeable individual through social interaction. In composite (multigrade) classes, learners of different ages and abilities learn together, and the more capable learner (one with more knowledge) can assist the learner who needs more assistance within their ZPD (called peer learning). Differentiated instruction, where teachers tailor their support to meet each student's ZPD, can provide appropriate challenges and scaffolding. Collaborative learning, which occurs in group activities, can encourage students to work together and promote social interactions and cognitive development, which are important considerations in this education model.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach was employed in this study to gain detailed insights into participants' thoughts and experiences concerning composite classes (Rahman, 2016). This approach aligns well with Vygotsky's ZPD theory because it allows for an in-depth exploration of how social interactions and scaffolding impact teaching and learning. For instance, we were interested in participants' views on how composite classes affect teachers' classroom instructions and student learning.

From an ontological perspective, this study assumes a constructivist stance, recognising that reality is socially constructed and understood through individuals' experiences (Bryman. 2016). Epistemologically, this aligns with interpretivism, where knowledge is gained through understanding the meanings and contexts of participants' lived experiences (Crotty, 1998).

A qualitative methodology is particularly suited to understanding the nuances of educational practices in composite classes, where peer learning, differentiated instruction and collaborative activities play critical roles. As Denzin and Lincoln (2011) and Flick (2014) suggest, the researcher plays a crucial role as a data gatherer, analyst and interpreter of participants' experiences. This aligns with Vygotsky's emphasis on the importance of social interaction and support in learning, making qualitative research an ideal approach for this study.

Open-ended questions in a questionnaire document were used to collect the data. In this manner, the participant's voice can be heard and coordinated with descriptive data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). According to Hyman and Sierra (2016), questionnaires should be designed in a format that participants can easily understand and respond to. Open-ended questions offer respondents an opportunity to provide a wide range of answers.

Two sets of questionnaires were developed and distributed to the participants—one for 10 teachers and another for 10 students—the 20 study participants. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants. Rai and Thapa (2015) describe purposeful sampling as a non-probability method where researchers choose participants based on specific criteria, including specialised knowledge of the research topic. The participants in this study were chosen based on their experiences and how they connect to the indicated purpose of the research; they were from two primary schools located in rural areas that implement composite classes.

### Data analysis: Thematic and content analysis

In our research, we employed thematic (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and content analysis (Enago Academy, 2024) to analyse qualitative data collected through the open-ended questionnaire.

#### Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was our primary tool for identifying and interpreting patterns within the data. This approach allowed us to delve deeply into the participants' experiences and perspectives. We followed the following steps in this process:

1 Familiarisation with the data: We first read and reread the data to familiarise ourselves with it.

2. Generating initial codes: Next, we identified and labelled significant data features because this helped us organise the data into meaningful groups.

3. Searching for themes: We then grouped codes into potential themes, recognising patterns and relationships within the data.

4. Reviewing themes: We refined themes to ensure they accurately represent the data.

5. Defining and naming themes: At this stage, we focused on naming each theme, which we presented as findings in the final report. We also used participants' insights to support various aspects of the findings.

#### Content analysis

We also employed the content analysis technique (Enago Academy, 2024) to complement the thematic analysis by quantifying certain elements within the data. This method provided us with a structured way to interpret qualitative findings. We followed these steps:

1. Coding for frequency: We identified the frequency of specific themes or codes within the data and highlighted patterns and trends.
2. Contextual analysis: At this stage, we examined the context in which these themes appeared, providing deeper insights into the data nuances.

## Ensuring validity and reliability

To enhance the validity and reliability of our analysis, we employed the inter-rater reliability strategy. This is where we, as researchers, coded the data to ensure consistency. We also discussed any discrepancies in the data and worked together to resolve emerging issues (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011)

# FINDINGS

The study examined participants' views of teaching and learning experiences within a composite classroom setting. Three major themes emerged from the data analysis (related to the research questions): the rationale for composite classes, the benefits and challenges of composite classes for students and the benefits and challenges for teachers.

## Rationale for establishing composite classes

The question concerning the rationale for composite classes was directed at teacher participants. Most teachers highlighted the issue of teacher shortages and low school enrolments as a rationale for establishing composite classes. For example, one teacher reported that only five teachers were posted to their school of eight levels; hence, certain class levels had to be combined:

> The reason for combined classes is due to shortage of staff. We have six teachers including the principal (Teacher 1)

## Benefits (for students)

Composite classes were viewed by teachers as beneficial for students because of the academic support provided by older peers and positive interactions among students. For example, two teachers said:

> Students from lower level is able to learn from the student at the higher level which is advantageous for the student at the lower level (Teacher 6).
>
> In composite class setting the younger students in year 2 gets the opportunity to learn from older students in level 3 (Teacher 7).

Students also added their voices regarding the benefit of composite classes in connection to academic skills:

> I can learn from an older students from another class especially when we do shared reading or a pair activity (Student 3)
>
> I like working with students from other class because they help me with my spelling (Student 4)

Concerning composite class benefits in association with social and peer interaction, an example of a comment from one of the teachers was:

> Composite class is good in that students will have good interaction and learning from each other (Teacher 3)

A few students indicated their opinions concerning social interactions. For example, one student said:

> It is fun to learn in a combined class, I enjoy group activities with student of the other level because I learn new ideas from them at the same time we are able to develop a friendship (Student 1)

### Challenges (for students)

According to the majority of teachers, some of the challenges of this type of class composition for many students are connected to learning disruption:

> Composite class is annoying and too noisy (Teacher 8)
>
> It can be very frustrating teaching in a small classroom with more students (Teacher 3)

The view was also shared by the majority of students, who indicated they do not like composite classes as they disrupt their learning:

> Most of the time this type of class makes me insecure and sick because of the loud noise students make. I lose concentration on a topic and sometimes I do not hear what the teacher says because of too much noise (Student 7)

Moreover, some students expressed annoyance at older level students taking charge of the classroom, particularly in the teacher's absence. The issue of bullying (amongst students) is a prevailing issue in education systems worldwide, which seriously affect students learning:

> What I dislike most about this type of combined class is because sometimes I am bullied by older students without the teacher's knowledge (Students 4)

The observation from some students is that teachers seem to be struggling with how to teach in the combined class structure, which seems to have affected their ability to study. This student stated:

> Combining with another class is not good because there are too many of us in the same room and the teacher seems to be having a hard time teaching us . . . sometimes it is hard to hear the teacher (Student 4).

### Challenges (for teachers)

Findings also highlighted challenges faced by teachers in combined classes. For example, when teachers were asked how combined classes affected their teaching role, the most frequently cited reasons were connected to the following aspects: classroom management, differentiated instruction for multiple levels, managing class assessment and teacher well-being. Teachers view challenges of classroom management as a grim chore. The majority of teachers indicated having difficulty managing students within this context:

> The issue with combining classes affects my class management for how can I plan a lesson to suit two different levels? It can be very frustrating teaching in a small classroom with more students (Teacher 3)

Additionally, teachers indicated they had issues differentiating instructions for multiple levels. Additionally, teachers noted the issue of trying to differentiate instructions for varied abilities within each level:

> There is a whole lot to plan and teach . . . you have to teach two different levels, e,g., I teach year 2 and year 3 so it involves a lot of work trying to plan for 26 students altogether (Teacher 7)

Concerns about lesson preparation and classroom management are other difficulties teachers highlighted when responding about instructing in composite classrooms. For example, each level is to be assessed based on separate curriculum content, which can become laborious for teachers:

> It is hard because you will have a big class with different levels so you have to be flexible with your lesson planning and teaching and various ways to assess students given their different abilities (Teacher 6)

Integrating curriculum content is another challenge for teachers. The underlying principle for integrating the curriculum is reducing the required time for differentiated instruction for each level. However, this idea appears idealistic and may not be practical:

> Lesson planning and trying to manage resources to use for different levels within a composite class can be very disheartening for me (Teacher 4)

Teaching within a composite class was also viewed as affecting a teacher's wellbeing, as noted by this teacher:

> Teaching in a composite classes is very challenging . . . it causes me to have high blood pressure which is very frustrating (Teacher 5)

### Benefits (for teachers)

While there are teacher-related challenges, one of the benefits, according to some teachers, is connected to the academic support that students from lower levels receive from upper-level students. This was perceived as an additional help for the teachers when students support each other in their academic skills and thus reduce the teacher's workload:

> The positive interaction between the different age groups is a positive thing . . . I can also see an advancement in the learning of my students who are in lower levels (Teacher 3)

Overall, combined classes have some benefits but can be challenging. This type of class composition is both challenging and beneficial for students, while for teachers, the challenges seem to outweigh the benefits.

## DISCUSSION

We now discuss the study's findings on the experiences of teachers and learners about composite classes. The discussions focus on the rationale for establishing composite classes and the perceived impacts of this type of class composition on students and teachers.

### Rationale for composite creation

The study findings align with the reviewed literature. A low student enrolment is often the economic rationale for creating a composite class. However, multigrade classes (Murphy, 2018) may also be formed by choice because of their perceived benefits.

In the Samoan situation, the rationale for composite classes is mainly economically driven. For example, teacher shortage and cost efficiencies are the underlying drivers for creating composite classes in the Samoan context (Mulryan-Kyne, 2007). Wilson's (2003) research notes that administrative and economic considerations tend to lead to the formation of composite classes. He noted that composite classes are created for one of two reasons: either because it is an economic or administrative necessity to deal with shrinking enrolments or small

enrolments in sparsely populated areas or because the creators believe that giving children a 'developmentally appropriate' education will have positive effects. Findings are consistent with the idea that a limited number of students are normally enrolled in certain schools in rural areas; hence, for convenience purposes, the Samoan Ministry of Education would post a limited number of teachers in these schools, resulting in combined and mixed-level classes.

### Impact of composite classes on students

In alignment with the reviewed literature, this study finds that the benefits of composite classes for students are connected to peer learning, where younger students learn from older learners. Vygotsky (1978) theorised that the value of interaction between older and younger learners results in developing younger learners' social and academic skills. In this study, several students, especially those at lower levels, noted the academic value of learning from higher-level students. Some students liked composite classes because of the assistance they received from older peers on their spelling and reading.

This finding supports the results of a study conducted in Norway (Angrist et al., 2019), which revealed an increase in the reading and writing skills of younger learners. Younger students may be inspired and encouraged to learn by interacting with classmates who have already mastered reading and writing. Younger students usually look up to older students and are influenced by them, whether it is by their behaviours or their academic learning.

However, students also may have to deal with different behaviours of their peers, such as bullying, which can be detrimental to their learning. For example, although younger students acknowledged the value of learning with upper-level students in the same classroom, they expressed their discomfort about learning in overcrowded, noisy classrooms where older students sometimes bully them. Students working in a threatening and noisy environment will likely lose their desire to learn. While it is true that students may face various behavioural challenges from their peers, it is important to note that these issues can be effectively addressed through proper classroom management techniques and interventions.

### Impact of composite classes on teachers

This study shows that managing a composite class can be challenging for teachers. For example, teachers highlighted the challenge of managing a class with varied behaviours given the different levels of students. These findings align with those of Ronksley-Pavia et al. (2019), whose research in Australia revealed that teachers struggled to maintain the quality of content material in composite classes. The behavioural issues that arise from a crowded classroom cause management difficulties.

Teachers in this study also voiced their frustration over differentiating instructions for each level, such as creating lesson plans that would suit the needs of every student in the classroom. This issue aligns with the findings of a study conducted in Scotland, which showed that due to the vast diversity of students in a composite class and the amount of effort, organisation and preparations involved, teachers preferred teaching single grades. Similarly, Mulryan-Kyne (2004) argued that many teachers find multigrade teaching more difficult and less satisfying than single–grade settings due to the complexity of managing different curricula and student needs simultaneously. Doing continuous assessment while trying to adapt instructions to the varying levels of students can be daunting for teachers.

## CONCLUSION

This study explored participants' views on the impacts of composite classes on their teaching and learning. The study noted that there are benefits and challenges for students and teachers. Benefits are connected to the value of peer learning, which is where younger learners learn from older peers. However, composite classes can also be stressful because of bullying by older students and classroom noise.

Although some teachers found peer learning was a positive aspect of composite classes, they pointed to challenges associated with differentiating class instructions to meet individual student's needs. An additional challenge is managing a class with different types of behaviours, which can be attributed to students' differences in level and age. It is clear from the findings that while there are benefits, students and teachers seem to be struggling with this type of class composition.

The study results indicate that the Samoan Ministry of Education and those involved in the teaching and learning process should re-examine the effectiveness of composite class organisation if quality learning is to occur. The literature matches effective learning to quality teaching, including teachers' knowledge gained from professional development and training and school infrastructure, such as the classroom environment. As the study has indicated, if teachers and students struggle in the learning setting of a composite class, the likelihood of effective learning occurring is uncertain.

Hence, Little's (2003) observation that because multigrade schools will likely remain a key feature in many Commonwealth countries for an extended period because they are the most effective method to achieve universal primary education, teachers and students in multigrade settings must receive enhanced support from those who create national curricula and design teacher education programs.

### Recommendations

While indicative, the study has uncovered several nuanced challenges about the Samoan composite class structure. Because these challenges have immediate implications for the Ministry of Education and the national teacher training institution, the following recommendations are offered for consideration:

- The Samoan Ministry of Education reassesses the policy, practicality and effectiveness of the composite class.
- The Ministry of Education considers how the Samoan curriculum can be structured to better support teaching and learning in the Samoan composite class.
- The Ministry of Education conducts appropriate in-service training for teachers to support their needs in composite classes.
- The Ministry of Education recruits more teachers to address the issue of teacher shortage as this impacts class composition and class sizes and learning.
- The Faculty of Education of the National University of Samoa to ensure that teachers are effectively trained to teach in composite classes.

## LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations to this study. First, the study sample is too small to be representative of the entire Samoan composite class population. As such, an evaluation study involving more schools and personnel involved in composite classes, such as those from the Ministry of Education and teacher educators, is recommended. A future evaluation study could focus on the effectiveness of composite class composition based on students' academic achievement.

Second, the instrument used in this study, an open questionnaire form, does not provide as rich data as open-ended interviews. Future research might consider individual in-depth interviews to gauge participants' views more comprehensively.

Finally, further research is needed to examine how the curriculum in composite classroom is structured. This should include factors such as class sizes, the age and academic levels of students, available resources, and the skill levels of teachers because all these aspects significantly affect the effectiveness of teaching and learning.

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# Teacher workload and intensifying demands: Lessons from the Chinese double reduction policy

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*The 2018 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results revealed a negative correlation between student academic achievement and wellbeing in China, indicating that higher academic performance often coincides with lower student well-being. In response to these findings and the broader issues within the Chinese education system, the Double Reduction Policy was introduced in July 2021 to reduce the volume of homework and limit the scope of off-campus subject-based tutoring.*

*This article examines the impact and challenges of this policy within a school by employing semi-structured interviews to gather qualitative data from various stakeholders, including teachers, students and parents. The study identified several findings and challenges, including inadequate quantity and quality of after-school services; an unclear teacher remuneration system, which causes uncertainty and stress among teachers; and a mismatch between the expectations of parents and the goals of the double reduction policy.*

*The study employed network governance theory and Mohe under the concept of Asia as the method to understand how teachers and other stakeholders manage and allocate resources to adapt to the new policy requirements. Network governance theory suggests that teachers are willing to collaborate and share their resources to enhance students' learning experiences despite potential personal and professional sacrifices. This article argues for better after-school services, improved homework-setting practices, a clear teacher evaluation system and the alignment of parental expectations with policy goals. It suggests leveraging off-campus resources and fostering collaborative efforts among stakeholders to overcome these challenges. Additionally, it suggests a shift from an exam-oriented educational system to a more holistic approach to address the underlying issues affecting student well-being and academic achievement in China.*

**Keywords:** *student wellbeing; academic achievement; teacher workload; education reform; double reduction policy; Network governance and Mohe*

## INTRODUCTION

The reciprocal and interconnected relationship between wellbeing and learning is important. Wellbeing positively influences student learning outcomes, and success in learning enhances student wellbeing. However, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OCED) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) as an international benchmark revealed a negative correlation between student academic achievement and wellbeing in China, indicating that higher academic performance often coincides with lower student wellbeing. The Chinese Double Reduction Policy (DRP) was introduced in July 2021 to reduce the volume of homework and to limit the scope of off-campus subject-based tutoring (Ministry of Education, 2021c).

To compensate for the two reductions, an extra two hours of afterschool service sessions were introduced (Ministry of Education, 2021c). By 22 September 2021, it was found that 96.3% of the 108,000 schools surveyed for compulsory education had provided after-school services. Over 5.3 million schoolteachers participated in these services, and around 77.4 million students signed up for them (Ministry of Education, 2021b). As of the end of October 2021, 99% of compulsory education schools nationwide reported offering after-school services (Chen & Zhao, 2022), indicating a successful implementation of the DRP (Lu et al., 2022).

The DRP positions teachers at the forefront of educational reform, significantly altering the landscape of academic expectations and workload. To strike a balance between alleviating academic pressure on students and upholding educational quality, teachers must navigate new challenges as they adapt to these changes (Jin & Cheni, 2022). Collaborations with students, parents, and principals are crucial to ensuring the policy's effectiveness in achieving educational outcomes (Ministry of Education, 2021b). Through the lens of network governance theory, the study reported on in this article examined the increased workload and intensified demand encountered by teachers in a school case study and explored how various stakeholders collaborate to address these challenges.

The overarching research question to guide this study is: What are the challenges and strategies for teachers under the newly implemented DRP in China?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

From 2009 to 2018, the PISA consistently ranked Chinese education at the top. This high-performing Chinese model is frequently referenced and borrowed by other countries and regions, such as Germany and the United Kingdom. However, this 'Chinese model' represents students' outstanding academic achievement at the expense of their health and wellbeing. To rectify this perspective and to promote a more 'student-centred' approach to enhancing school education (Yesil & Aras, 2024), the Chinese government introduced the DRP in July 2021 to reduce the amount of homework, limit off-campus subject-based tutoring, and implement after-school services. The following sections discuss the literature addressing the various challenges and strategies of teachers engaged in DRP.

### Extended duties and working hours for teachers

Chinese teachers work longer hours than their international counterparts, who average 40.8 per week (OECD, 2019). The introduction of the DRP has worsened this situation (Teng et al.,

2024). The policy has heightened teacher expectations and responsibilities regarding homework assistance and extracurricular activities during the additional two hours of afterschool services (Ministry of Education, 2021a). Fang et al. (2024) found that over one-third of teachers participated in the after-school service at least three days per week. Cao et al. (2022) reported that teachers' daily on-campus time stretched up to 11 hours under the policy. Teachers were especially burdened with extra responsibilities, including more administrative work, homework redesign and corrections, preparations for after-school services and policy-related activities (Teng et al., 2024; Yang, 2022). The new requirements resulting from DRP require teachers to labour for an additional 1.5-3 hours per day on class preparations and homework corrections (Liu, 2022).

Furthermore, due to the staff shortage in the after-school service sessions, subject teachers were required to run non-subject activities, such as physical education, music and arts, which they are not trained for, thus causing them extra stress and emotional issues (Jin & Cheni, 2022). Research indicated that teachers tended to show lower motivation and job satisfaction after introducing the DRP (Cao et al., 2022). The increased work pressure significantly intruded on teachers' private time, causing a significant work-life imbalance (Xiao, 2024). Senior teachers reported their physical wellbeing was impacted due to the increased workload (Liu, 2022), and younger teachers with families reported losing time to care for their own families. The resulting job dissatisfaction has led to conflicts between school and teachers.

### Inequitable incentive for teachers

Despite the extended workload and time, after-school services subsidies are not yet fully in place, leaving teachers' rights insufficiently safeguarded (Xiao et al., 2024). Hence, this is causing teachers' dissatisfaction with their compensations under the DRP (Fang et al., 2024). A survey of 16,166 head teachers found a discrepancy between the actual after-school service subsidy received by head teachers and the amount they anticipated receiving (Liu & Zhao, 2022). Schools in Jiangxi Province charge each student RMB 600 (approximately A$120) per year, while schools in Henan Province charge over 10 times more (RMB 6,600 RMB, approximately A$1,320) (Yang & Chen, 2022). This inequitable incentive system has further exacerbated conflicts and reduced teachers' job satisfaction (Xiao et al., 2024).

### Unrealistic expectations of teachers by parents

Family-school collaborations have become more crucial to the policy's successful implementation (Ministry of Education, 2021a). However, collaboration between schools and families has not yet formed because of a lack of detailed practical measures from the central government, such as clarifying the roles of families and schools (Wang & Ru, 2022). Chinese parents tend to have higher expectations of teachers (Chan et al., 2021). Because parents do not fully understand their duties as required under the DRP, they delegate entirely their children's educational responsibilities to teachers (Cao et al., 2022). Parents even hope teachers can compensate for what they have missed from off-campus tuition reduction (Xu, 2023). This has created a mismatch of expectations and conflicts between parents and teachers about parental involvement in students' education (Zhao, 2022). Yang (2022) reported that some families have taken an extreme approach by assuming a *shuǎi-shǒu-zhǎng-guì*（甩手掌柜）(referring to people relegating all their responsibilities to others or avoiding any active involvement in their work) position with minimal parental engagement in their children's education. Teachers were found to play multiple roles, including classroom teacher, security guard, school nurse, and

counsellor, as well as being in charge of dormitory and dining arrangements for boarding students (Ren et al., 2022).

### Mitigating teachers' workload and compensation for teachers' additional work hours

The literature points to some strategies for reducing teachers' workloads. Yang et al. (2023) found that because implementing the DRP in schools is difficult for teachers, it demands the collaborative efforts of all stakeholders, including the government, schools and families. A strategy is for the government to allocate additional funding and systematically shift financial allocations to afterschool services to compensate teachers for their additional after-school services (Liu & Yuan, 2024). While parents have expressed their disagreement with schools charging them fees (Li & Zhen, 2022), it is worth noting that parents are willing to pay higher-end off-campus tuition at the market price of RMB 500 (approximately A$100) per hour (Song, 2022). The Ministry of Education has promulgated a notice of 'Key points of the work of the Teacher Affairs Department of the Ministry of Education in 2023' to remunerate teachers for participating in afterschool services (Ministry of Education, 2023). Jiangsu Province offers teachers a minimum salary of RMB 60 (approximately A$12) per lesson (Yao & Zhang, 2022).

### Enhancing professional support and flexible working hours for teachers

Eliminating administrative or non-teaching tasks is one of the essential strategies to reduce teachers' burdens. In this way, teachers can concentrate on their teaching and professional development (Zeng & Du, 2023). It is noted that the DRP has resulted in a substantial increase of 29.4% in teachers' administrative responsibilities (Yang, 2022). Also, flexible working hours for teachers has provided teachers with greater autonomy in managing their time and for relaxation, thereby allowing them to regulate the time spent on campus outside of their teaching responsibilities (Liu, 2022; Ministry of Education, 2021a). Finally, Psychological support and counselling are also essential services to teachers.

### Strengthening parents' involvement in their children's study

The DRP emphasised the importance of good family-school collaboration and defined, clearer roles and responsibilities for schools and parents (Yuan, 2022). The successful implementation of the policy appears to strongly correlate with the trust and effective involvement of parents (Zhang & Xiong, 2022). Parental involvement in their children's education positively influences students' socio-emotional status and academic performance (Xu, 2023). The academic motivations of students are significantly influenced by the interests of their parents (OECD, 2018). Parents appear to find it more beneficial when teachers instruct them on facilitating their children's learning at home (Cooper et al., 2006). Wang and Ru (2022) argued that schools should provide more opportunities for teachers and parents to interact, including by establishing parent-teacher associations (PTAs); inviting parents to participate in student activities; increasing the scheduling of individual or group meetings with teachers; and initiating the development of a comprehensive collaboration plan to benefit students' successes.

## NETWORK GOVERNANCE AS A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Network governance is another mode of governance, an alternative to bureaucratic governance and market governance. It is defined as a 'self-organising, inter-organisational networks characterised by interdependence, resource exchange, rules of the game and significant

autonomy from the state' (Rhodes, 1997, p. 15). The popularity of network governance is seen in the adoption by governments to accommodate the interests of multiple participating stakeholders in policy or decision-making. Often, network governance is carried out through decentralisation, policy collaborations, partnerships, negotiations and resource exchanges. Network governance is supported by a growing body of research and practice in the modern world (Ball, 2008). Under this approach, the sovereign state does not exert hegemony or absolute authority (Chan, 2014). Instead, the state enables a wide range of actors to participate, interact, solve complex problems and attain collective objectives (Klijn, 2008; Koppenjan et al., 2004). Network governance has been credited with enhancing efficiency and promoting fairness in response to socio-economic coordination (Milner et al., 2020).

Ball (2008) applied network governance theory in Education. Disagreeing with the 'hollowing out' of this framework in Education, Ball advocated network governance as 'a new modality of state power, agency, and social action, and indeed a new form of state' (p. 748). Further on, Ball refuted the notion that networks are neither a complete replacement of the hierarchy and market governance approach nor fundamental alteration in the way the state governs education. Instead, he argued it is a 'mix between the different elements of government—bureaucracy, markets, and networks' (Ball, 2016, p. 559). Therefore, the application of network governance has elicited diverse opinions between political science and Education.

Scott and Thomas (2017) claimed that network governance is a form of social coordination that brings together the joint efforts of government agencies, businesses, and members of communities to address public issues. Ball and Junemann (2012) and Goodwin and Grix (2011) argued that network governance has become a more prevalent practice for governments to engage various stakeholders from different sectors to cooperate in creating and implementing policies in the public and education sectors. In Education governance, Unlike the government hierarchical control and inter-school competition market emphasising parental choice approaches (Whitty, 2000), network governance has been utilised as a method to enable collaboration among government, schools and communities in the Education reform process (Sheldon & Van Voorhis, 2004). It is also a popular strategy for facilitating the turnaround of persistently low-performing schools and building school capacity through the joint efforts of external- and internal-school stakeholders (Meyers & Hitt, 2017; Muijs, 2010).

Policy-related studies are increasingly being seen as a cultural phenomenon (Baice, 2023). The concepts of network governance and policy networks are interwoven in the studies of the Chinese context. Their social and political science applications are becoming increasingly prevalent among Chinese scholars. The direct translations of 'network governance' in Chinese is *wangluo guanzhi* (网络管制) or *wangluo zhili* (网络治理).

Various empirical studies have applied network governance and policy networks to public policy and management issues, revealing that Chinese policy-making initially concentrated on China's Communist Party (CCP) and Central Government, then progressively expanded to non-state policy actors, such as stakeholders and interest groups from various sectors. The studies examined rural taxation reform (Tang, 2004), politics in the provincial legislatures (Xia, 2008), public health insurance reform (Zheng et al., 2010), collaborative environmental governance (Huang et al., 2022), rural governance performance (Jiang et al., 2023); and it further extended to educational research, including examination of the complexity in university governance (Lang & Wang, 2024), interactions between multiple actors in school turnaround (Tao, 2022), transformation of state-owned enterprise schools (Chan, 2019), school-to-school collaborations (Fang, 2022), and implementation of *Suzhi* education in the Chinese Party Schools (Zhou, 2023).

Even though there appears to be an increasing trend in the growth of the application of the network governance concept in China, the topic is still under-researched and far from being mature (Chan, 2014). The main concept of network governance was simply translated from Western literature and applied into a Chinese context with the possible meaning (Chan, 2014; Zheng et al., 2010). Due to existing issues in China's public governance, such as a relatively weak public voice and the reliance of social organisations on government, many Chinese studies view network governance as a promising and innovative approach with potential significance to advocate in public governance (Zheng et al., 2010).

## ASIA AS METHOD

Western theoretical frameworks have been playing a dominant role in social science research, and Asian scholars have struggled to fit existing Western theories to Asian contexts and explain Asian-specific phenomena (Zhang & Chan, 2023). 'Asia' is a convenient term for distinguishing a local situation from its Western counterpart (Bowring, 1987). Chen (2010) regarded 'Asia as the "method" or an imaginary anchoring point and that societies in Asia can become each other's point of reference, so that the understanding of the self may be transformed, and subjectivity rebuilt' (p. 212). 'Asia' has three main components: translation, base entities and inter-referencing (Zhang & Chan, 2023).

To localise the concept of network governance better in the Chinese context, Ming Xia (2000) has initiated translating network governance to Chinese *Mohe* 磨合, a grinding process of automation used as a metaphor to describe different new components that adapt and fit each other to function harmoniously. Inspired by Xia, Chan (2014) applied network governance theories to state-owned enterprises' transformation through the lens of 'Asia as a method'. This new 'Asia as a method' research started to become popular, not as a challenge to Western theory but as a transformation of Asian ideas to the West and a supplement to the existing theoretical bodies. The study reported in this paper aims to explore the application of network governance theory further in the Chinese context.

## METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative approach. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews at a Zhejiang Province, Southern China public school. A semi-structured interview was employed in this study. Galleta (2013) notes that this form of interview allows versatility and flexibility such as particular aspects of research questions to be explored, as well as unique perspectives and insights on the study topic to be provided by the participants. In this research, we interviewed one school principal, one administrator and five teachers. Each participant was interviewed for 45 minutes with the same set of questions to accurately gather and combine consistent responses (Bryman, 2012). Interviews were audio-recorded on an electronic device. Parents and junior secondary students were involved in focus groups and invited through an advertisement on the school noticeboard or personal acquaintances and references (snowballing) (O'Leary, 2017).

Thematic analysis was utilised to analyse and make sense of interview transcripts. Core themes were identified and interpreted through coded text (Bryman, 2016), aiming to identify and explain the key data elements guided by the research question (Clarke & Braun, 2017). In this research, we prioritised the researcher's ethical obligations by ensuring that the participants were fully informed, their confidentiality was maintained, they were not subjected to physical

or psychological harm, and the data was collected anonymously (O'Leary, 2017). This study obtained approval from the University Human Research Ethics Committee before the data collection process.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section reports the research findings by outlining teachers' challenges after implementing the DRP in their schools. It also discusses strategies to overcome the challenges.

### Heavier workload and longer working hours for teachers

The teaching workload and external duties have been significantly increased after the implementation of DRP. Three teachers shared their views on this matter. Cathy, a Mathematics teacher, explained:

> Before the double reduction policy, we conducted three teaching sessions per day, but now we teach an additional two sessions, including an after-school session and an evening session.

Zoe, leader of teaching and research group, mentioned that teachers are required to work during the weekend:

> I am required to come to work on Sunday evening for students' evening session; we worked between Monday and Friday evening. Each of the five main subject teachers will be responsible for one weekday evening per week.

Sunny, an Information technology teacher, expressed:

> Teachers often feel overburdened with energy, particularly after finishing their evening class at 9 p.m. and arriving home at 10 p.m. Then, they need to arrive at school at 7 a.m. the following morning. Their daily workload is too much for them. The challenge to the family is very prominent. Teachers are taking care of other people's children, but they cannot take care of their own children.

There are several solutions to address the aforementioned challenges, such as arrangements in which the school provides housing for instructors who live a long way away from the school and offers flexible teaching arrangements.

Naomi, a Chinese teacher, argued that shared accommodation will be provided to the teachers when needed.

> If teachers are required to conduct the first morning session at 7:30 a.m. after the late evening class the previous day, they cannot return home because their houses are outside the school's district. The school will provide apartment-style accommodation.

Cathy, a Mathematics teacher, mentioned the flexible teaching arrangement at the school.

> The school tries its best to accommodate the teachers. The teachers are giving two half-days (previously just one-half day) to rest and recover. Additionally, teachers can exchange their after-school sessions or evening sessions with other teachers if they have urgent matters to attend to. This flexibility is great.

Implementing the DRP in schools is tough for teachers because it has increased their workload and lengthened their working hours. This point supports Liu's (2022) findings that teachers stayed at school for more than 11 hours. Their private time has been largely squeezed by the demands of school and parents, leaving them feeling helpless in managing their own families

(Yang, 2022) and resulting in a work-life imbalance (Xiao et al., 2024). Teachers are important stakeholders, so school officials do their utmost to support them by providing temporary accommodation and flexible teaching arrangements. Several studies support the availability of flexible working hours (Fang et al., 2024; Liu, 2022; Ministry of Education, 2021a), but temporary accommodations are school-based innovations found in this study. Network governance provides a lens to examine how these stakeholders (in this case, teachers and schools) work or negotiate with one another to get good outcomes. This framework enhances efficiency and promotes fairness, but the negotiation process takes a while (Milner et al., 2020).

### Inequitable incentive for teachers

The DRP has placed new demands on teachers to extend their work hours. It is a form of exploiting the teacher without proper compensation. Teachers are not motivated to work longer hours or even weekends.

Hubert, a science teacher, expressed:

> Our government assigned all responsibility for student education to schools and teachers, but not to parents or the community. This is not only an incorrect premise, but it also represents exploitative behaviour. Why don't parents and the community take responsibility in this area? Compared to commercial private supplemental tutoring operations, teachers earn a much lesser remuneration for their extended work hours. The teacher will get a maximum of ¥ 780 per semester, for two times a year. They are not adequately rewarded for their efforts.

Zoe, a leader of teaching and research group, added:

> My school offers three daily extra sessions for students, with a fee of around ¥500 (A$100) every semester. This is equivalent to one day's tutoring fees in off-campus commercial tuition centres prior to the double reduction policy.

To remedy this issue, teachers and parents proposed some strategies. For example, Hubert, a Science teacher, suggested that the schools identify whether this 'service' is a public welfare activity or market behaviour. If it is for public welfare, there should be no fee; if it is a market behaviour, the school needs to charge the full market price. Now, it is somewhere in between. She added, 'if parents pay ¥ 500 per session, they will pay more attention to their child's learning, also the teachers will feel more valuable and motivated'.

Yolanda, a Year 8 parent, even proposed a bigger idea:

> We are willing to pay the tutoring fee if the school invites off-campus training providers to take care of classes, while the school provides the venue.

However, not all the parents interviewed had the same thoughts. Penny, a Year 9 parent, expressed:

> We are working class anyway, not rich. It is ok that the school charges at the moment is reasonable for us. The previous off-campus tuition fees were too expensive.

However, Zoe, a leader of the teaching and research group, added,

> We devote in this teaching profession because you love it, rather than the salary only.

Financial incentive is one of the important factors in valuing an individual's labour and efforts. However, a gap exists between schoolteachers' actual payment and their anticipated amount,

lowering teachers' work motivation and job satisfaction (Fang et al., 2024). Teachers feel discouraged by the inequitable compensation compared to the market price of off-campus tuition. However, parents react differently to the willingness to match the school charges with the commercial tuition fees (Song, 2022). Research revealed that some school teachers were previously involved in off-campus tuition prior to the DRP (Pan, 2024), with a higher payment from those institutions (Wang, 2023). The market prices for private tutoring vary across regions in China, normally ranging from 80 RMB to around 200 RMB per hour (approximately A$16 to A$40) (Chusan, 2023). In this case, the equality of teachers' compensation for afterschool services is questionable compared to the market price of off-campus tuition.

Thus, the situation requires the government to set clear remuneration policy guidelines and more financial allocations for schoolteachers. The Ministry of Education (2023) has identified the urgency of safeguarding teachers' remuneration in afterschool services at a central government level. As a neighbouring Province to Zhejiang, Jiangsu Province offers teachers a minimum salary of RMB 60 (approximately A$12) per lesson (Yao & Zhang, 2022). This provides a good model and gives hope to teachers in Zhejiang to get more reasonable compensation.

Rhodes (1997) argued that network governance results in 'significant autonomy from the state', thereby 'hollowing out' a central government's power in the policy community. However, as a base entity, China's centralised state power grants the Central government extensive authority to implement its policies. Therefore, *Mohe*, under Asia as method concept, is not required to exclude the centralised control and provides another lens to examine this Chinese case.

### Unrealistic expectations of teachers by parents

Some parents seem to 'handover' their kids entirely to their teachers, with no regard for their children's studies and no communication with schools. Cathy, a Mathematics teacher, noted:

> Parents cooperate minimally at this school, with some simply giving over their children. Teachers carry major responsibility for the learning of many 'left behind' students [whose parents work in other provinces], despite their parents' seeming lack of interest. They don't even attend parent-teacher interviews.

However, some parents can go to the other extreme, contacting their children's teachers through all communication channels, including social media and making phone calls outside school hours.

Wendy, a Year 8 parent, described this relationship as follows:

> If I don't understand something, I'll send the teacher a WeChat message, and if that doesn't work, I'll phone him. The teacher is capable of doing this. I frequently communicate with the teacher. Allow him to assist me in encouraging my children, because ten sentences of encouragement from a parent may not be equivalent to one sentence from a teacher . . . It's great that the DR policy lessened parents' load, as teachers handled a lot of work that we didn't have to do.

Fey, a Year 7 student, indicated that:

> Since private supplementary tutoring is no longer available outside of schools, I will seek guidance from our teachers. For example, if I am unsure about a science issue, I will submit it to my teacher over WeChat and ask for his help. He will get back to me shortly and teach me how to solve it. I believe I can comprehend him since he always speaks to me through audio messages.

Yolanda, a Year 8 parent, added:

> We want to help our children with their academics, but our lack of understanding and the complexity of the school curriculum limit our abilities to help.

Zoe, a teacher, stated:

> Students finish their lunch, dinner, and the most of their schoolwork. Teachers are under a lot of pressure; it takes up too much of their energy.

The tensions described refer to the discrepancies in the interpretations of 'supervision' of children's studies between parents and teachers. The school established an innovative parent-child cloud platform to actively engage parents. Principal Julia explained:

> We also offer parent-child cloud platforms as a new space specifically designed for parents. They also participated in and worked on several cloud platform projects, such as mobile phone issues, communication on learning environment creation, and so on. In this way, the school influence how parents improve their involvement.

Balanced family-school collaboration became more crucial to the policy's successful implementation. At one extreme, parents' handing their children over to teachers without any communication with schools is causing many problems for the teachers. These findings align with the research conducted by Yang (2022), which shows that certain families tend to adopt a *shuǎi-shǒu-zhǎng-guì* 甩手掌柜 belief, resulting in limited parental involvement in their children's education. At the other extreme, frequently contacting teachers outside of school hours disrupts teachers' family lives, impacting their work-life balance. Chinese parents tend to have higher expectations of teachers (Chan et al., 2021). They do not fully understand their duties as requested by the DRP, so they relegate entirely their children's educational responsibilities to teachers (Cao et al., 2022). The school has set up a parent-child cloud platform to educate parents on adequately involving themselves in their children's education.

Teachers, as key frontline stakeholders, are critical to the success of the DRP implementation. This study offered insights into teachers' perspectives, revealed teachers' struggles and showed how schools can better support teachers through a qualitative approach. Zeng and Du (2023) cautioned that the heavy workload could lead to teacher burnout and, ultimately, resistance to the implementation of the DRP.

## CONCLUSION

This empirical study examined the challenges school teachers face and their perspectives on the implementation of the DRP. The findings indicate that teachers are experiencing an increased workload, longer working hours, and falling short of expectations for compensation. The DRP outcomes for teachers have led to a significant work-life imbalance and diminished teacher motivation. The study also highlighted the necessity of collaborative efforts to achieve successful educational outcomes under the policy. School officials have implemented flexible teaching arrangements to support teachers and provided temporary accommodations. However, with parents expressing mixed opinions on paying for afterschool services, government intervention is needed to establish clear remuneration guidelines and allocate more financial resources to schoolteachers.

This article uses China's DRP as an example to explain why actors in a network deploy their own resources in exchange for other actors' resources to achieve their goals. The concept is generally useful and fruitful for understanding the policy process in China. *Mohe* has the

potential to offer a framework for analysing the policy-making process in the West, particularly in countries where state power persists and is unavoidable.

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# Supporting sustainability: The professional learning of beginning teachers in Vanuatu

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*The importance of sustaining training for teachers cannot be overestimated. Trained teachers require continual professional development to keep up with changing contexts. Ongoing training is particularly important for beginning teachers as they start their professional journeys. Vanuatu, a small island state in the southwest Pacific, is currently grappling with significant obstacles to providing effective ongoing professional development for its teachers. To ensure children's academic success in Vanuatu, as elsewhere, it is imperative to have well-prepared and proficient teachers who can navigate the complexities of education in a rapidly evolving world. To pursue this matter, the article reports on the findings of an interpretive qualitative case study that makes meaning of the professional learning experiences of new teachers in the Vanuatu context. The study assumes that new teachers' voices, perspectives and motivation are important when investigating professional development. The study objective was to critically explore the professional learning support provided to them in Vanuatu's schools. To this end, seven new teachers' experiences and perceptions of professional learning were complemented by the perceptions of four school principals involved in their support. The findings reveal general satisfaction tempered by a lack of formal feedback and evaluation mechanisms. As a response, the article proposes an induction program contextualised to the local environment and sustained over time as a vital solution to enhance teachers' professional development, thereby positively impacting the learning outcomes of children in the future.*

*Keywords: Beginning teacher; teacher induction; sustainable education; teacher professional development; schools as learning communities.*

## INTRODUCTION

This study provides a contextualised exploration of the induction experiences of beginning secondary teachers in the Republic of Vanuatu, emphasising sustainability in education. By aligning with the first objective of Vanuatu's *Ministry of Education and Training Corporate Plan 2013-2017*, which aims to 'improve the quality of education' (Vanuatu Ministry of Education and Training, 2013), this research addresses the immediate challenges faced by novice teachers and the long-term sustainability of teaching practices. While various aspects of Vanuatu's education system significantly impact educational quality and warrant investigation, this study focused specifically on the transition of beginning teachers into secondary schools and how their early formative experiences foster professional growth within their chosen careers.

Beginning teachers play a crucial role in education, bringing with them their personal and professional identities, pedagogical knowledge, and life experiences (Palmer & Scribner, 2007). However, transitioning from pre-service education to a teaching role can be complex and challenging (Kearney, 2014; Langdon, 2010). Many countries have established induction programs to support beginning teachers. Such programs are continually reviewed to ensure their effectiveness. These programs are essential for achieving quality education because they help new teachers navigate their new roles and apply their knowledge. Currently, there are no such programmes in Vanuatu.

The importance of sustaining ongoing training for teachers cannot be overestimated. This study explored the induction experiences of beginning secondary teachers in Vanuatu, a Pacific country with a dual language education system (French and English medium schools). A qualitative case study was conducted to investigate the perceptions and experiences of new teachers as they transition into secondary schools and develop as professionals in their early careers. Knowing the experiences and perceptions of beginning secondary teachers in Vanuatu of informal induction is extremely useful. Knowledge in this area helps develop structures that can support future beginning teachers in the first years of their careers and perhaps contribute towards their licensing and registration when such formal processes are fully in place. Thus, this study aimed to help secondary school leaders and policymakers understand the experiences and perceptions of beginning secondary teachers. It aimed to enable policymakers to design and implement effective induction programs to support teachers in the profession. Such induction programs are a key to quality education in contexts such as Vanuatu. Ultimately, this study seeks to contribute to the Republic of Vanuatu's aspiration for improved educational quality as stated in corporate plans (Vanuatu Ministry of Education and Training, 2013, 2022).

## VANUATU

The Republic of Vanuatu, formally known as the New Hebrides, is a Pacific archipelago comprising 83 islands. The most recent census records a total population of 272,459 (Vanuatu National Statistic Office, 2016). The population is spread widely over Vanuatu's six provincial regions. Port Vila, Vanuatu's capital on Efate Island, and Luganville on the island of Espiritu Santo are the two largest towns. Vanuatu is culturally and linguistically diverse, with over 113 languages (Simons & Fenning, 2017). There are three official languages: colonial English and French, and the local Bislama language, a form of Melanesian Pidgin. Vanuatu is described as the most vulnerable place on earth because of its location and small land mass in relation to natural hazards (Wele, 2015). Climate events, including drought, coastal erosion and flooding, occur in the Vanuatu islands and adversely affect citizens. Most recently, Vanuatu has been described as 'having the highest disaster risk worldwide' (Day et al., 2019, p. 6).

Natural events, such as cyclones and volcanic eruptions, are highly disruptive in the Vanuatu context and considerably affect the provision of education. Regardless of natural events, teachers must ensure that they complete the syllabus each year because all students have to sit an examination at the end of the school year to move on to the next level of study. Teachers, especially in rural areas, must show resilience and initiative without close support. These circumstances place great emphasis on the professional learning of beginning teachers.

### Education in Vanuatu

Like other Pacific Island countries, formal classroom-based education for the Indigenous Ni-Vanuatu began with the arrival of Christian Missionaries in the 1800s (Siegel, 1996). The first curriculum aimed to provide basic literacy and numeracy. It was Western-oriented and

supported Bible reading so that conversion to Christianity would be easier (Hindson, 1995; Sanga & Walker, 2005). In 1906, the governance of Vanuatu fell under the joint control of France and England as the New Hebrides Condominium (Crowley, 1990). The joint colonial governments extended the curriculum (Lingam et al., 2014) beyond its religious origins. In 1980, Vanuatu gained political independence, forming the modern Republic of Vanuatu. In 1983, the Ministry of Education began using the *School Administration Act* to administer schools (Tarosa, 2013). The education system is currently administered under the *2014 Education Act No. 9 of the Republic of Vanuatu*.

Politically independent Vanuatu inherited a dual system of education from the period of French and English colonial rule (Siegel, 1996) and many philosophies and ideologies of governance and education from the former colonial system. Religious practices and leadership remain closely connected to school practices and leadership, and it is often the case that schoolteachers support or lead community and Church activities.

Because teachers in Vanuatu's primary and secondary schools are required to teach using French or English and not Bislama, the local lingua franca, Ni-Vanuatu teachers have to deliver education in a non-dominant language. Teachers may be unable to speak the indigenous languages of the students in their classes. Students have to learn the educational content and the language of instruction simultaneously. When education is delivered in a non-dominant language, there are recognised negative consequences for academic success. (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2016). Despite this, Vanuatu's dual system of Anglo-French education persists. This situation places great significance on appropriately preparing new teachers, most of whom, especially in the primary sector, are graduates of the Vanuatu Institute of Teacher Education (VITE).

## PREPARING TEACHERS

### International experience

School organisation and induction programs can impact teachers' practices and learning (Buchanan & McEwen, 2020; McKinsey & Company, 2007). Induction is a crucial phase in a teacher's career, leading to their integration into a professional community and continuous learning (Tickle, 2000). Many countries have invested in induction programs to improve teacher development, teaching quality and student success (Massey, 2016; Shannon, 2023). The literature highlights the significance of professional learning, particularly during the induction stage, for motivating and supporting teachers throughout their careers (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Grudnoff, 2007; Main, 2009).

Beginning teachers play a significant role in the educational landscape, bringing formative experiences that impact their personal and professional identities and pedagogical knowledge from their initial teacher education (Palmer & Scribner, 2007). Teacher identity involves understanding oneself as a teacher and seeking, constructing and reconstructing meanings about oneself and how to be interconnected with others (Gibbs, 2006; Palmer & Scribner, 2007). Beginning teachers also bring life experiences into their teaching roles and are expected to learn from their new setting.

Shifting from pre-service education into a teaching role in a school is extremely complex and challenging (Kearney, 2014; Langdon, 2010) as beginning teachers seek to make sense of themselves in their new context and to find ways to apply and extend their existing and developing knowledge. Many countries have established induction programs to support beginning teachers through this complex time and help new teachers address their challenges.

Many researchers believe that the induction of beginning teachers is a core element in achieving quality education (Cameron et al., 2007; Hattie, 2003; Kearney, 2014).

### Vanuatu experience

Reflecting on international experiences, three main areas of teacher preparation in Vanuatu require attention: induction, mentoring and policies that frame support. Induction programs with professional development, mentoring and a reduced teaching load can help new teachers adjust to their first post. However, there is a lack of consistency in professional development opportunities for beginning teachers in Vanuatu, with no specific policies to support them beyond the initial recruitment phase. This can lead to 'transition shock' (Corcoran, 1981) and negatively impact teachers and their development. Access to information, training and professional development is crucial to new teachers' success, but currently, these are challenging and inconsistent aspects of the Vanuatu education system.

Introducing a mentoring system within schools could be a valuable initiative for supporting beginning teachers' professional development. As with other countries, Vanuatu's beginning teachers form their professional identities through a combination of home and school experiences. A formal mentorship system could guide them during their early professional years. However, mentoring for new teachers in Vanuatu is currently ad hoc or non-existent. Without mentoring, beginning teachers in Vanuatu are sold short.

Finally, beginning teachers in Vanuatu lack formal policies of support and protection. Instead, they are expected to be personally resilient. A policy that prioritises teachers' professional development, including that of beginning teachers, is needed to address this situation. This policy should provide consistency in treatment across schools and be accompanied by professional learning programs implemented by the Teaching Service Commission. Additionally, educators require professional development in educational leadership to implement support and protection programs effectively. This study provides pointers to solutions in the area of early teacher development for Vanuatu.

## THE RESEARCH

Given the context of education in Vanuatu generally and that of new Ni-Vanuatu teachers specifically, research into beginning teachers' entry into the teaching profession is vital. This study captured the journeys of beginning teachers and their principals as the teachers transitioned into their first teaching role in a Vanuatu secondary school. It provides valuable information about what might be in the gaps between induction, mentoring and support. This study specifically identifies required informal induction elements and, consequently, proposes a contextually appropriate model to better support beginning teachers in Vanuatu. The research focused on secondary education, but much of the information will likely apply to the primary sector.

Feiman-Nemser's (2001) work on teacher induction has been foundational in understanding the critical role of comprehensive support systems for novice educators. Her seminal studies outlined that effective teacher induction is not merely about orientation but involves a structured process that enhances teachers' professional development and teaching efficacy. Feiman-Nemser (2001) notes that teacher induction serves multiple functions: it aids in the transition into the profession, fosters ongoing learning and development, and ultimately promotes student achievement. Central to her theory is that new teachers benefit most from mentorship, collaboration and reflective practices, which collectively facilitate their adjustment and growth

in an increasingly complex educational landscape. By emphasising the importance of community and collaboration, Feiman-Nemser advocates for induction programs that not only support teachers' emotional and professional needs but also align with broader systemic goals of educational quality and equity. Thus, this study is needed to enhance the quality of education and support a more sustainable system of teacher professionalism.

Knowing the experiences and perceptions that beginning secondary teachers in Vanuatu have of informal induction is extremely useful. The knowledge can support the development of structures to help future beginning teachers in the first years of their careers. It can, perhaps, contribute towards their licensing and registration when such formal processes are fully in place. This research helps secondary school leaders and policymakers understand the experiences and perceptions of beginning secondary teachers and enables them to design and implement effective induction programs to support teachers into the teaching profession. Ultimately, the aim is to contribute to the Republic of Vanuatu's aspiration for improved educational quality, as stated in corporate plans (Vanuatu Ministry of Education and Training, 2013, 2018).

## METHODOLOGY

An interpretive research paradigm involving a relativist ontology and a constructivist epistemology was used to ground the study. The research explored, made meaning of and theorised the perceptions of beginning secondary teachers' experiences (complemented by principals' experiences) during the early years of teaching to find strengths and solutions. Meanings are constructed by beginning secondary teachers as they engage with the world and view and interpret their world experiences (Crotty, 1998). The study mainly focused on co-constructing knowledge of the induction experiences and perceptions of beginning secondary teachers and their principals.

The research methodology resembles an intrinsic case study because it looked at the early stage of the beginning secondary teacher's professional journey. The first year or two of teaching provided the temporal boundaries of the study and mirrored the gap into which effective mentoring might be inserted. The University of Waikato's Ethical Conduct in Human Research Regulations guided the study. The research was conducted at several school sites as a collective case study to address the ethical issue of identifiability. The findings are reported collectively (and using pseudonyms) to protect participants' identities.

The study involved a small number (7) of beginning teachers who graduated from the VITE (now known as the School of Education for the National University of Vanuatu) and the four principals of the schools to which they were assigned. The key data were collected in two phases (at the beginning and end of the year) using interviews. Reflective journaling and document analysis were used to make observations and support understandings of the beginning teachers' experiences. The work of Saldaña (2016) was used to make sense of the data for the initial data coding and integration of the ideas through a cyclic coding process into categories and emerging themes. In turn, these understandings were used to formulate recommendations regarding induction in Vanuatu.

## FINDINGS

The selected findings illustrate the balance between challenges and opportunities understood by beginning teachers in the study. The selection aims to ground future initiatives to better support beginning teachers while acknowledging the strengths these teachers bring with them to the profession.

## Challenges

There is a plethora of literature on the challenges beginning teachers experience in the field. These challenges refute the impression that beginning teachers may have that teaching is an easy job (Tickle, 2014). Education in Vanuatu presents challenges generally experienced by beginning teachers and those unique to each context. Here are two examples of challenges that are centred on resources and time.

### Accessing teaching resources

Accessing the necessary resources to meet curriculum requirements was a common challenge for beginning teachers in this study. Resource limitations are broadly experienced in schools in Vanuatu—impoverished resourcing impacts most subject areas, especially in the more remote islands of the nation. In particular, science is an equipment-intensive subject and science teaching resources in many schools are limited. Sheena spoke about the challenges with resources that she faced:

> I did not feel like I was going to be able to teach all these classes because there were no resources. So, it was another burden for me to find my own resources to teach the classes . . . Some of my resources I had to ask for from teachers at . . . and . . . schools. For science I looked through the resources I had, and did research on internet, and then gave the summary notes to my students.

Sheena was fortunate to be in school early in the school year, so she managed to identify the resource challenges and worked to resolve them. However, she also highlighted that teaching science relies largely on evidence observed by the human senses, and her approach of simply giving summary notes may not have been highly effective compared to more engaging and hands-on learning experiences.

Kylie also commented on resources and worked out a solution:

> I teach English years 9 and 10. That was so hard for me because there were no resources at this school. So, I had to wait for a week or two. I called other schools nearby for their resources to get them and [make] photocopies.

In his context, Ray described his struggle to access technology:

> Another challenge is that there are not enough computers to use for lesson preparation and the internet. Many teachers do their work on the computer and they do not have enough of them (computers) for us all.

Teachers with experience may have developed resource banks and nurtured relationships, enabling them to access resources such as computers more easily. New teachers enter the profession without these advantages and support, and it may take time and a great deal of effort to develop the materials and networks required.

### Time constraints

Completing the year's syllabus is vital in Vanuatu, where the education system has an examination-driven curriculum. Time for learning becomes an important factor in fulfilling expectations each year. However, the beginning teachers in this study revealed several challenges with time.

Beginning teacher participants were particularly impacted by the time available for teaching and learning in a year when schools closed early due to political expedience. Viviane described the challenge of completing her year’s work:

> This year is quite short due to the mini South Pacific Games. We were really rushing as we were approaching the end of the year. It came to a time where I had to stop planning my lessons because time was too short. We were squeezing everything together . . . Exams were also coming up. We were working against time.

In an examination-driven education system, examinations serve as gatekeepers to the next level of student education.

Sheena reported her time pressure more generally:

> I found out that I had not done much when semester was about to end. I covered the term one topics but I did not go through the term two topics, because the students learn very slowly and I have to follow their pace . . . Another thing that drags us back is that we have to copy notes on the blackboard and wait for students to . . . copy all the notes. You go through the notes with them, then give them exercises to do. Doing this takes up a lot of time.

The pace of student work is critical in losing valuable teaching and learning time. Pace is related to the lack of resources because handwriting teaching and learning materials are time-consuming.

Ray shared how logistics affected time pressures that impacted his work:

> We do not have enough time to run extra classes as some students travel to school daily from different villages and [use] varied forms of transport . . . [D]uring the two weeks break, it took some students a week or two extra to return to school the next term. Therefore, we did not have enough time to complete the syllabus.

Beginning teachers are surprised by time constraints. While more experienced teachers may be prepared for such happenings and plan accordingly, the new VITE graduates were not prepared nor supported to be prepared.

## Strengths and enablers

Three of the four principal participants indicated they did not provide much professional support for their beginning teachers. The beginning teachers confirmed this in their accounts of their first years of teaching. Despite the lack of support, the beginning teachers did not leave their teaching duties entirely. Instead, they remained until the end of their first year of teaching. This section looks at the factors that supported beginning teachers through their early careers as they tried to find ways to enable them to survive.

### Accessing and forming effective professional relationships

The Head of Department (HOD) role is a leadership role that most secondary schools in Vanuatu include in their school structure. The principal participants used HODs to take care of their beginning teachers. As most schools use HODs for informal orientation for new staff, beginning teachers acknowledged the role of HODs in helping them settle into their schools and demonstrated an understanding of the HODs' responsibilities. Thus, the beginning teachers called on HODs when they needed their help with teaching or other areas. Viviane elaborated on this point using an incident that she encountered which was quite sensitive:

> I don't know but I think I followed the procedure by taking the first step from me as the subject teacher to the HOD. The HOD will decide where to go from there . . . To me I would say, when situations arise, the best thing to do is to talk with the student and inform the HOD, that would be the first step. Then it would be out of my hands.

Viviane revealed her understanding of line management within her school, which is a vital development for a beginning teacher. Beginning teachers need to know which door to knock on when a difficult situation arises.

For some small schools, beginning teachers are the HODs themselves, so they do not have the privilege of working alongside an experienced HOD. Schools may regard beginning teachers with VITE qualifications as more educated and capable than untrained and unqualified teachers filling vacant positions. Sheena, who was given the role of HOD in her small school, needed to work successfully with other HODs:

> For the HOD [role], we always discuss strategy—ways to run interesting classes . . . we looked at the examination graph sent from the Examination Office in Port Vila. We found out that our students are very weak in mathematics.

Sheena's experience revealed the importance of working collaboratively with other HODs. She was able to continue her growth as a teacher by learning from and being informally mentored by others who were in similar roles. At the same time, asking a beginning teacher to perform an HOD role is a significant expectation of someone so new to the profession.

**Individual professional learning and development**

While challenging, accessing information and furthering professional development was an essential element of success for a beginning teacher. The beginning teachers in this study spent time reading when they found things difficult, and there was no one to help them. Sheena talks about reading to enhance her independence as a teacher:

> I realized I have to read more so I do not depend on my colleague, and now the students are more comfortable with me and so I am teaching the class alone.

While her colleague taught the remaining hours, Sheena was uncomfortable teaching just a few hours of her subject with a senior class in her school. Reading helped Sheena improve her self-confidence, enabling her to teach the class herself, even at a senior level.

Other participants described similar experiences of using reading to better survive the challenges of being a beginning teacher. Ray commented that:

> [A]s it is my first year, sometimes the topics are new to me, and I spend more time reading and trying to find more information.

Beginning teachers revealed that reading from among the schools' limited resources or going back to their VITE lectures and books was of great help in their first year of teaching. In the face of minimal professional support, reading helped beginning teachers to teach unfamiliar topics.

**Engaging with colleagues**

The beginning teachers highlighted the importance of building effective relationships with their school colleagues. David described how his colleagues were important role models for him as he developed as a teacher:

> I learnt from my colleagues that time management is very important. In the afternoon, after class they would come into the staffroom and prepare their lessons for [the next day]. That is what I saw in them, so I tried to copy or imitate how they did things to help my teaching.

The actions of more experienced colleagues informed David's activities, which helped him in his teaching.

Peers from VITE who were now teaching colleagues were helpful when the beginning teachers approached them. When they first arrived at their new schools, some beginning teachers were uncomfortable asking their new colleagues questions. Instead, they used Facebook and Messenger to contact their VITE colleagues in other schools to discuss their problems. In this way, they found answers to questions regarding their teaching. Kylie recounted how she communicated with her VITE peers:

> I was thinking about my VITE friends (colleagues), but they were not here. They were in other schools far away from me. So, for me to need help, I just have to call or contact them on Facebook chat, asking them, 'Can you help me with how to teach this topic or that?' When I need help, I just have to contact them.

Beginning teachers leave initial teacher education with self-concerns, and when they arrive at their schools, they tend to have high expectations of their students and themselves (Fuller & Brown, 1975). Having advice from a more experienced colleague or friend may become very helpful when expectations are not met.

**Using the internet**

In a context where professional support was sometimes lacking for beginning teachers, technology became a form of support for some. Lucille described how she used technology to support her teaching:

> Within these two years, we did not have much material, so I tried to download [resources] from internet and also improvise a lot for my experiments

Lucille was in her second year of teaching. Having experienced a lack of teaching resources in her school, Lucille learned how to conduct an experiment by watching videos on YouTube. She used videos to teach herself and showed them to her students to help them understand science concepts. Sheena, another beginning teacher, reported:

> When I found that I could not answer or help them (students and staff in the Maths, Agriculture & Basic Science (MABs) department meeting), I just went on the internet to find solutions."

Kylie also used online resources:

> I did some research on internet to find ways to teach. The internet helps me so I can teach better inside the classroom, as I am teaching a senior class.

In Kylie's school, the senior class refers to years 9 and 10. As the senior class's subject teacher, Kylie was in a leadership position. She was the teacher that other teachers could go to for help; however, Kylie herself needed extra help as a beginning teacher to teach this senior level in her first year. She used the internet to get information to aid her teaching as there were no other senior teachers to whom she could turn.

All the above beginning teachers identified the internet as a form of help. The internet has been important for these participants, scattered as they are through Vanuatu's islands in their first year(s) of teaching. It is a way to sustain professional and personal relationships and access teaching material and information to develop their pedagogical content knowledge.

**Using reflective journals**

In this research project, reflective journals were given to each beginning teacher at the end of their phase one interview. Within the research, the purpose of the reflective journal was to serve

as a data generation method. Many beginning teachers commented on how the reflective journals helped them professionally through the early year(s) of their teaching career.

David commented on the value of the journal to his development as a teacher, particularly regarding developing reflective teaching practice, but also with leadership:

> The reflective journal helped by making me reflect and improve. So yes, it helped a lot with my teaching inside the classroom, and it also helped me with my responsibilities and roles.

David found the journal helpful as he performed his teaching duties and Deputy Principal responsibilities. The opportunity to reflect on his decisions and lessons was valuable to him through his first year of teaching.

Nelsa, one of the second-year beginning teachers, made this concluding remark about the professional value of the reflective journal:

> Before we finish, I just want to say thank you for the reflective journal that you have given me. After I have worked with the journal, I have improved with my teaching and learning. I just wish that other teachers can also have this. There are some teachers in this school who really want this, and they want me to print [the journal prompts] and give it out to them so that they can have access to this, and they can also do their own reflective journals and reflect on their own lessons and see how they can help the classes that they're teaching.

Although intended as a method of data generation, the reflective journals clearly impacted the individual beginning teachers and, beyond this, some of their colleagues, who saw the professional value of the thoughtful engagement with one's teaching practice that the journals provided.

### Other enablers

The beginning teachers in this study mentioned a few other enablers that had an impact. Involvement in extra-curricular activities supported the beginning teachers to embrace their new roles. Sports is positioned as an extra-curricular activity within the Vanuatu education curriculum. Within the hierarchy of the curriculum, it is not given the same status as English or Mathematics. In secondary schools, it is regarded as a non-core subject. Despite this, Ray shared how taking part in sports helped him in his teaching:

> I have attended sports programs and it helped me . . . attending sports programs in school and out of school made me able to organize. I can now organize sports activities, and give advice to students on the playground. I have also learnt [new information] from some of the meetings that we attended.

Ray found that being involved in sports improved his organisational skills. Sports also helped him develop positive and trusting relationships with his students and other colleagues involved in sports. He developed skills he could not develop while at VITE, thus broadening his knowledge of how he would deal with students in different situations.

There was no specific professional support offered to the beginning teachers by schools or higher authorities within the Ministry of Education and Training during the research period. However, two participants mentioned training that consisted of helpful elements. Nelsa described an ad hoc training session that she attended with some Australian educators passing through the region:

> So far there have been no workshop or training, but I remember the time when there was a yacht that came over. There were some expatriates from Australia who came over and went into one of these classrooms (in Nelsa's school) and talked about how they teach some

> concepts in Maths . . . about how we can get students to understand the particular concept. That was helpful to me.

Nelsa commented that the talk, which was just an hour long, was helpful to her as a mathematics teacher.

Kylie also described attending a workshop:

> I attended a workshop because they appointed me to be the Assistant Academic Principal for the school. All Academic Principals attended this workshop . . . They (workshop attendees) were reminded about how to work, and they discussed ways to help schools . . . After that workshop, when we came back, we had to inform other teachers about it. We are all trying to work on what my colleague and I learned at the workshop.

Although very new in the job, this leadership position opened up an opportunity for Kylie to engage in professional learning that she found personally useful in her first year as a beginning teacher. The appointment of junior staff to leadership positions in schools is not new in the Vanuatu context, especially in smaller schools in more remote areas.

### Summary

The findings presented here revealed that beginning teachers experienced various challenges in their first years of teaching and coped by using various enablers. When faced with inadequate resources, a school year that for some beginning teachers was shortened at both ends by a late arrival and then by an early closure to accommodate a regional sporting event, the beginning teachers experienced feelings of isolation and frustration. They struggled to manage their student learning and behaviour. Difficulties in the classroom were exacerbated by the sometimes-significant additional responsibilities assigned to each beginning teacher. In the face of these challenges, the beginning teachers in this study successfully employed various strategies to help them survive and make sense of their new teaching, administration and leadership roles. Through their first years of teaching, the beginning teachers experienced the perception of professional development. Whether the actions taken by the beginning teachers positively impacted their teaching practice and enhanced their professional development is an important new question that has emerged from the findings of this research project. Having presented the key findings from the study, I now turn to a discussion of the findings.

## DISCUSSION

The findings clearly show that the Vanuatu education system expects a lot from its beginning teachers. This includes the two key areas reported here: accessing materials in contexts where these are in short supply or non-existent, managing time, and completing courses in contexts where decisions about annual timetables and interruptions, scheduled or otherwise, are not in beginning teachers' hands. On top of these challenges is the potential for natural disasters beyond anyone's control. The educational literature argues that pre-service training should not be the end of a teacher's professional learning, and there is evidence that the professional learning of a teacher should include pre-service education, induction and then continuous professional learning development (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Wilson et al., 2011). The findings suggest that in the absence of much formal help of this nature, beginning teachers in Vanuatu seek their own solutions and training. This includes accessing professional relationships within the school hierarchy, engaging with colleagues—often known to them through VITE and contacted through social media, personally directed reading as professional development, and the internet as a source of information and resources.

Despite these evident strengths and enablers, the advice of Feiman-Nemser (2003) is valid. She cautions that ‘if proper support for . . . [beginning teacher] learning is not provided, they may leave teaching or stay clinging to practices and attitudes that help them survive but not serve the education needs of students’ (p. 26). This may be true for beginning teachers who depend on their own agency to survive their first year of teaching and who may revert to how they were taught in school. While the individual efforts of teachers in the study can certainly be praised, it is evident that there is no system in place to evaluate the result of their efforts.

Monitoring the performance of beginning teachers is important in supporting the development of skills, the effective creation of resources and time management. Most of the participants in this study did not have their professional performance evaluated by any senior authority during their year of teaching, so whatever strengths they displayed were not measured against outcomes or placed as part of a developmental journey by a skilled observer. Thus, while they could find material and seek advice, the wider context of teaching and learning was not addressed by a more experienced professional.

However, all the participants were satisfied with their achievements in the classroom. This is where Vanuatu needs to be cautious. Beginning teachers may successfully reproduce practices that they are familiar with or take advice on practice from well-meaning peers, but these practices may not necessarily be helpful to student learning. Kagan (1992) cautions that if beginning teachers repeat the same practice throughout their teaching career, they may not be as effective as teachers who go through appropriate induction programs and continuous professional development. Thus, Ni-Vanuatu students, who are the nation's future, may bear the consequences of poor teaching (Knowles, 1988; Ryan, 1986).

In 2018, the Vanuatu Education Support Programme reported that ‘while student[s] would benefit immensely from input of effective teachers throughout the instruction process and can be a source of inspiration and motivation for students, identifying such teachers in the context of Vanuatu remains a huge challenge’ (VESP, 2018, p. 2). This study's findings help us understand the scarcity of inspiring and motivating teachers in a situation where beginning teachers are essentially left to themselves. Vanuatu teachers are not supported after graduating from their initial teacher education institution. While the beginning teachers in this study revealed that they wanted to continue to learn, the learning space and human resources were not always provided to them.

## IMPLICATIONS

This study has implications for several players in the field of teacher preparation in Vanuatu and beyond. Locally, implications involve the creation of training pathways, teacher induction, and the development of policy by the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) in Vanuatu––linked to the Teaching Service Commission (TSC) and, regionally, the Educational Quality and Assessment Programme (EQAP).

The first implication based on the findings of this study is the value of formal professional learning pathways for beginning teachers in Vanuatu. This must be considered an important priority for Vanuatu’s education system. Formal induction programmes that lead new teachers to fully integrate into their professional community (Kearney, 2013) are vital to addressing the gap identified in this work and echoed by the 2018 VESP report cited above. An induction programme may help to ease the transition shock that beginning teachers face and potentially allow beginning teachers to achieve more in their classrooms than simply survive their first year. The lack of formal induction programs mandated by the MoET means that professional

development and relationship building are ad hoc and may simply involve reproducing an education system that has documented poor outcomes.

Secondly, understanding education in Vanuatu needs to shift towards recognising the importance of induction for beginning teachers, which needs to have several elements, including, in skeletal form:

- A thorough understanding of the school context conveyed through a full orientation
- A manageable workload appropriate for their entry into the profession
- Supportive and high-quality input from an Associate Teacher or mentor allows them to form relationships, develop critical professional skills and improve their teaching practices
- Monitoring to ensure that the quality of education provided by teachers and the associated educational outcomes for students are improving
- Access to resources adequate for the teaching they are expected to conduct and/or support to design effective resources for educational purposes

A third implication is that while the agency of all individuals in Vanuatu's high-risk natural environment is essential, in the educational context, this agency needs to be recognised, valued and managed rather than left to chance. The positive experiences beginning teachers have had through this study of reflective journaling suggest the potential of processes that encourage self-knowledge and could form the basis of a way forward under supervision.

A further implication is that formal induction programmes should be mandated by the MoET in Vanuatu and designed with the leadership of the TSC. Utilising the elements discussed above would benefit beginning teachers, school communities, and the educational system in Vanuatu, more generally, where improving educational quality is a primary objective. Feiman-Nemser (2012) claims that induction when viewed as a longer-term professional development activity within a school, can positively impact the entire teaching staff. She notes that 'professional communities are strengthened as teachers across experience levels work together to improve their teaching and their students' learning' (p. 163). As observed by Tucker (2019), "you cannot produce the improvements needed in student performance unless you improve the teaching skills of your current teachers and fully support and make the best use of the new teachers you will want to hire' (p. 139).

A final implication of this study, joint action, has already begun to be enacted. From 2023, the MoET, through the EQAP and TSC, have worked on induction by developing a policy on Teacher Development and induction of beginning teachers is included as a component within the policy. A team from EQAP, TSC, MoET, and the author have further developed a draft induction manual that should be piloted next year. Hopefully, progress in this important area acknowledges the balance of issues experienced by beginning teachers and the existing strengths and enablers they display and matches their struggles and enterprise with centrally organised support. In this way, education in Vanuatu will be more sustainable, and the children well-served.

## CONCLUSION

This article provides insights from a study examining the experiences and perceptions of novice teachers in Vanuatu as they embarked on their teaching careers. The findings indicate that all participants encountered significant challenges upon entering the profession but demonstrated resilience in overcoming these obstacles. While this resilience is commendable, it highlights a critical gap that Vanuatu must address by implementing a more sustainable initiative,

specifically a structured teacher induction program, which other countries have successfully adopted. By adopting such a program, the performance of teachers is likely to improve, leading to enhanced student outcomes and ultimately fulfilling the primary objective of the MoTE's Corporate Plan.

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# Towards quality education: A ‘learning for school’ program developed from the foundation of the family’s culture

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*Across cultures, young children learn primarily within their family, with the family’s culture positioning the values, language and purpose of children’s learning toward the family's goals. Quality education begins within families. Children’s learning within their families is critical to their educational success at school entry age. Naturally, Western schooling is based on young children’s experiences within the culture of Western families. With the spread of Western education across nations, a global problem for families of non-Western cultures has emerged regarding how adult family members can prepare their young children to learn in the Western culture of school while retaining and enhancing their family-centred learning.*

*This paper offers original insights from research into a local solution to this global problem. It discusses a ‘learning for school’ program developed from the foundation of the family’s culture. Located in central Australian communities and initiated by Indigenous families, this program emphasises the role of the family. It respects the family's cultural values, which frame young children’s learning of the practices of the school’s culture.*

*A case study grounded in sociocultural learning theory explored how this program enabled the families to prepare their young children for learning at school over the first 20 years of this bi-cultural program. Within this research, the inductive analysis of program documents, personal journals and family conversations revealed unique findings regarding the learning content and the families’ cultural ways of learning. The findings were interwoven to shape the program for the families’ purposes.*

*The findings of this research are particularly relevant to non-Western nations and communities. As Tuia noted in 2020 when discussing the impact of colonisation, family values and culture are at risk of ‘melting’ in the ‘rush’ for education. This paper offers an evidenced pathway for re-instating young children’s learning for school within the family through the cultural ways of the family as they guide their children’s journey towards quality education.*

*Keywords: Learning within the family; playgroups; young children learning for school; cross-cultural families; learning within relationships*

## INTRODUCTION

A pervasive global problem for families of non-Western cultures is how to prepare their young children to learn in a Western school culture while retaining and enhancing the learning within the family's cultural values. The families in this program observed that their children were not learning at school and requested assistance in developing a community Early Learning program within which they could prepare their children for school.

The literature has two contrasting views on why children lack readiness to learn at school. One view is that some form of family disadvantage limits children's opportunities to learn within their families before attending school (Brown, 2017). From this view, at a global level, early years programs are often implemented as interventions to provide children with the additional experiences they may have missed (Heckman & Masterov, 2007). At the local level, early years programs are often implemented for Indigenous families in central Australia to 'overcome generational disadvantage' (Mason-White, 2013, p. 3). This view places minimal value on family culture.

The other view is that children's experiences at school-entry age are shaped by the cultural differences between the families and the school's cultures (Spodek & Saracho, 1996). Within this view, the usual assumption of family disadvantage as the reason for children's early experiences is questioned, as their experiences may instead reflect their early life within their non-Western family's culture (Fleer & Williams-Kennedy, 2022; McTurk et al., 2008; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). This second view recognises the value of family culture.

Cultural differences are frequently recognised in children's early learning, but, as Ball (2010) points out, there is more 'rhetoric' about responding to these differences than 'evidence' (p.1). Refreshingly, this research extends our knowledge about recognising cultural differences in young children's learning by offering a response rather than mere recognition as well as a response to through evidential findings rather than rhetoric.

The research reported in this article was conducted in a local program. The program was eminently suited to advancing knowledge about dealing with cultural differences in education because the participating families were from a different culture than the school's and were living within acknowledged family disadvantage (SCRGSP, 2000). As a result, the local program has two crucial aspects. First, it is positioned in the context of families choosing to prepare their children for learning at school, in contrast to programs where children are not prepared for learning at school by their families. Second, the program has its foundation in the difference between the cultures of the family and the school, in contrast to early years programs that address a foundation of family disadvantage. By way of clarification, the basis of this article and program is that school culture, educational systems and most early years programs that prepare children for school are derived from Western culture, while the families of the local program are from an Indigenous culture.

In this paper, I first use diagrams to situate the local program within the broader global problem for families of non-Western cultures as they experience formal education. I then describe the local program and the research methodology before reporting the research findings and discussing the implications of the findings. I draw attention to this research's contribution to comparative dialogue and practice, noting that the findings present a family and culturally based solution to the global problem of how families of non-Western cultures can prepare their children for learning in the Western culture of school while maintaining their children's learning within their family and cultural ways.

## SITUATING THE LOCAL PROGRAM SOLUTION WITHIN THE BROADER GLOBAL CONTEXT

Diagrams 1 to 4 illustrate the bi-cultural nature of the research problem and the connections from children's early learning within their family to the families' cultural goals and goals of economic participation. The generic content of these diagrams is intended to create a shared space across cultural groups for comparative dialogue about the issues and findings of the research that is 'grounded in the local yet embedded in the global' (Chan et al., 2018, p. 1).

**Diagram 1. Western Culture Family Goals**

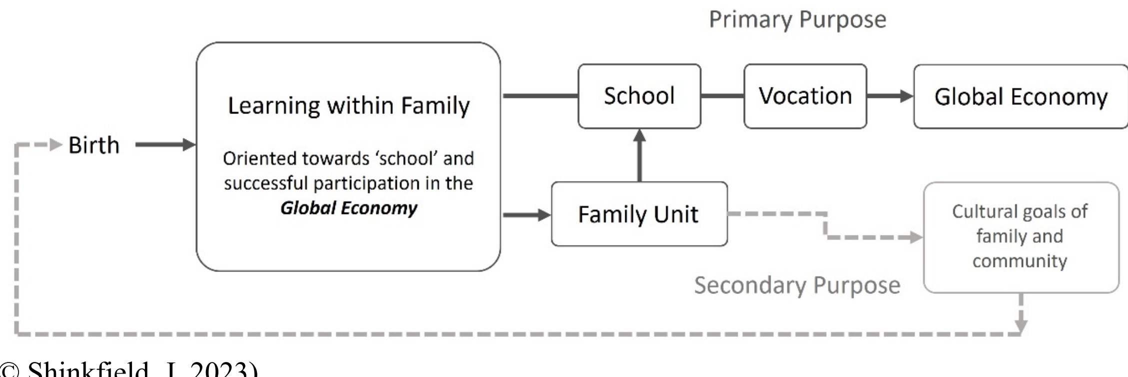


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Diagram 1 illustrates the learning journey of young children in a Western family culture. Their early learning in their family is orientated primarily towards the family's cultural goals, which include school and participation in the vocational and global economy. In Western cultures, young children's learning within their family is expected to prepare them for school learning because schooling is the next step towards their family's cultural goals (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

**Diagram 2. Non-Western Culture Family Goals**

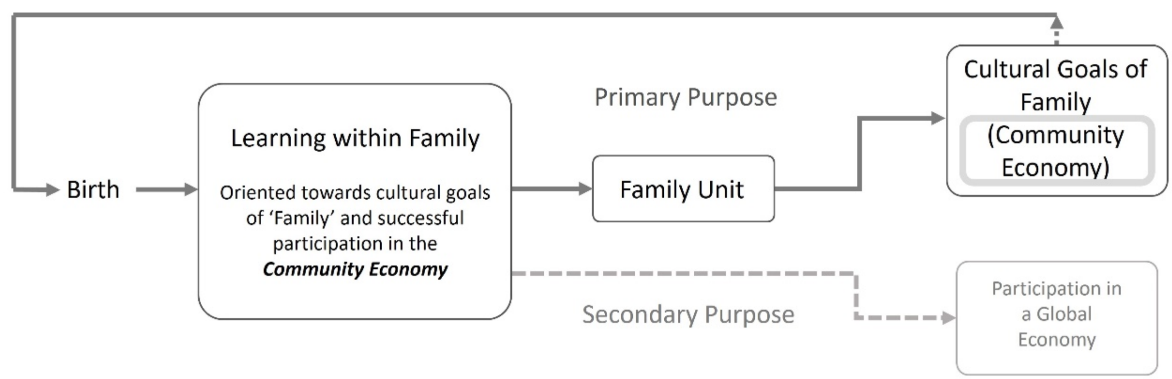


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Diagram 2 illustrates the learning journey for young children within a non-Western family culture, such as the Indigenous children of this program. Their early learning in their family is orientated primarily towards the family's cultural goals and participation in the community economy. However, in many non-Western cultures, the emerging influence of Western culture has created a secondary purpose: participation in the global economy (Chinnammai, 2005).

Although, ideally, there should be complementarity, economic participation may exist in competition with family goals.

**Diagram 3. The complex problem for non-Western families and the emerging global economy**

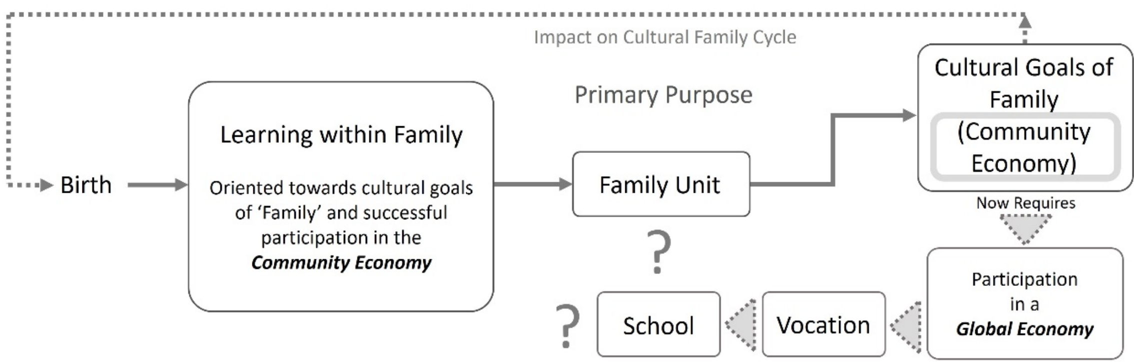


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Diagram 3 illustrates the complex problem created for non-Western families by the global economy's increased influence on their families and communities. While their young children's learning is still orientated within the family, sustaining a community economy becomes increasingly difficult outside of participation in a global economy. This difficulty impacts the family cycle because successful participation in the global economy is primarily determined by successful participation within the Western school and vocational educational systems. Diagram 3 explicitly highlights the lack of connection (? & ?) between young children's learning within the family and the introduced Western cultural educational systems. This disconnection reflects the situation many may find themselves in, including the families and communities of this local program (Harris, 1990).

**Diagram 4. A local program solution to this complex global problem**

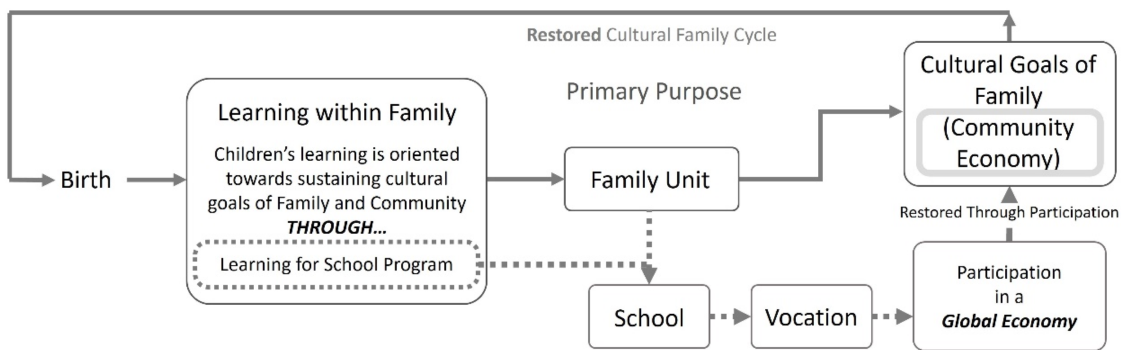


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Diagram 4 addresses the disconnections within Diagram 3. It situates this local 'Learning for School' program as 'learning within the family', establishing the connection between children's early learning within their families and the educational systems of school and vocation. Importantly, this new and additional learning for young children is framed within the families' values, language and cultural ways. Therefore, the learning-for-school program is a means for families to reach an extended set of goals (Rogoff, 2003).

Having situated this local program within the broader global problem, the following section briefly outlines its context.

## THE PROGRAM AND ITS BEGINNINGS

The playgroup program was developed in response to families' requests for assistance in preparing their young children for learning at school. The families were located in remote Indigenous communities of the Western Desert area of Australia. Indigenous languages predominate in each community (Glass, 1990), with Harris (1990) describing Indigenous people living across these communities as 'confident and unconscious carriers of traditional culture' (p. 3.) My family moved to the community in 1993. My husband and I initially worked as teachers. Because my husband and his family had lived in an Aboriginal community in rural Western Australia when he was a child, our family was known by some community members.

Western schooling had only been a part of these families' lives for about 12 years. However, the families had already recognised that their children were not doing well at school and concluded that their children were not prepared for learning at school. One day, near the end of our second year as teachers, senior Indigenous women in the community asked me to assist them in preparing their children for school and to teach them how to do this.

I was surprised by their request but, as I wrote in my journal at the time:

> I was not overly concerned . . . because, as I told myself, I knew what was helpful for children to know prior to day one at kindy, both as a teacher and as a mother, and they knew their children and their ways of helping their children learn new things. (Shinkfield, 2022, p. 1)

The primary invitational factor was that they asked me to help them as family adults – they did not ask me to help their children. Consequently, I was pleased to work alongside them in the shared development of a new program because I firmly believe that families are the best teachers for young children and that if children are not ready for learning on day one of the school system, it is difficult for them to catch up.

The program commenced in 1995. It was called 'Little Kid's School' and was for family adults and their 0-4-year-old children. The families said they wanted their children to learn:

> [S]chool readiness activities, especially early literacy in their (home) language, to make it easier for children to learn at school. (Shinkfield, 2022, p. 81)

During 1995 and 1996, the families and I met together every school day morning in a community room that I set up as a 'kindy-like' early learning environment. Through shared participation, the families became familiar with the activities, routines and expectations required of children at school, with the family adults guiding their children's learning in their cultural ways and their home language. In the family's culture, the family structure is that of the extended family and 'everyone is regarded as being related to everyone else' (Glass, 1990, p. 26). Therefore, adults from a child's extended family brought children to playgroups. To recognise and respect this reality, the term 'family adults' will be used in this article rather than the word 'parents'.

During the program's establishment years, I kept daily journals of the activities and responses of the adults and children to observe what model the playgroup program developed as the families shaped it to meet their purposes with their children. By the end of 1996, after about

300 playgroup sessions, the chosen sequence of activities and routines had been established with the families. This sequence was still framing the program in the early 2020s (Shinkfield & Jennings, 2006; Shinkfield, 2022).

## SITUATING THE RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGY

I was the playgroup's Program Facilitator/Educator for various blocks of time between 1995 and 2019. During that period, I maintained an archive of historical documents about the program, journal notes, program journals and operational documents.

At around the 20-year mark of the program, by which time the second generation of young children participated, the families asked for the story of the program's development to be documented so that their children and future generations would know how the program had reached this stage. Consequently, the research, a qualitative exploratory case study (Yin, 2014) of the program, began in 2015 and was conducted in conjunction with the ongoing program. The community elders informed me that it was fitting that I take on the researcher role to gather the information in collaboration with the families and write the story of findings of this research about their community program (Shinkfield, 2022, p. 56). My researcher positionality was firmly shaped by my extensive experience living in the communities and working alongside the families in this program for over 20 years. Consistent with my relationships with the families over the years, my additional role as a researcher was relational, set within the 'nuanced complexity of locating oneself' with research participants (Chin et al., 2022, p. 33).

Research data was gathered across multiple sources, with fieldwork, observation and auto-ethnographic descriptive strategies utilised within the study's bilingual and bicultural context (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995). Program documents, both current and historical, informed the understanding of the program's day-to-day development and operation. Observations, descriptions and reflections about the program written in my program journal contributed to the rich collection of observations as a data resource for this research despite not being written for this purpose. Semi-structured conversations with current program participants were held in 2017 and 2018. I also kept a research diary as a data source to document personal observations, questions and reflection and to integrate my reading, observations and data through 'writing as a method of inquiry' (Richardson et al., 2005, p. 959).

The community elders chose representative participants for the semi-structured interviews, reflecting the families' collectivist culture. The participants were from the current generation of family adults who had participated in the program over the last five years, with invited participants spread across family community groups (Shinkfield, 2022).

From the start of the research process, inductive analysis facilitated the search for meaningful data by 'refining and revising categories' to group the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 209). To create the story of the program's development chronologically, as the families had requested, I used a method of ordering 'events over time' (Miles et al., 2014, p. 194), identifying the program's 'key episodes' (Stake, 1995, p.40). Throughout the inductive analysis, my focus moved from the family adults, children and program to the role of the family adults with their children in the program to the enablers within the program's facilitation that enabled the family adults to prepare their children within this program. Subsequently, four common themes emerged within the data across the periods, identifying four major findings regarding how the program enabled the families to prepare their children for school. Ethics approval was granted by Monash University, Victoria, for this research, Project Number 8722.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The research question for the study was, 'How does the playgroup program enable family adults to prepare their children for school?' The research revealed four findings:

1. The program is a learning program.
2. The purpose and content of this program are to prepare children for learning at school.
3. Learning is within the family.
4. The tasks and place of the program facilitator are situated in the relational context of walking alongside the families.

Each of these findings has its basis within the family's relational culture. Rogoff (2003) writes that 'cultural practices fit together and are connected' (p. 368). In this program, the findings are interwoven in each activity and shape the development of the program for the families' purposes. Each finding contributes to understanding how the program enabled the families to achieve their purpose of preparing their children for learning at school.

### Finding 1: This program is a learning program

This finding revealed three ways this program is a learning program: as a program of new learning, an adult learning program and a learning-through-participation program. First, this is a program of new learning that the families had not yet had the opportunity to learn. By recognising the cultural differences discussed above, it was possible to position this program as new learning for the families because they knew their children could not learn another culture's practices within the child-rearing practices of their family and culture (Hamilton, 1981; Kearins, 1984; Rogoff et al., 2017).

> Why do you bring your little child to playgroup? Nintirringkula . . . to get learned (Family conversation, 2018). (Shinkfield, 2022, p. 143)

Locally, this bi-cultural playgroup has always been likened to a bridge between the two cultures, with the family's culture contributing to the cultural and linguistic ways of learning and the program's culture contributing to the program's content, environment and facilitation. It is on the bridge that the families participate in this learning together. In the literature, the importance of coming to a shared bi-cultural space for new learning is reflected in the writings of Moore (2023), which describes a bridge-like place of learning as a relational space; of Nakata (2002), which identifies it as a 'cultural interface' (p. 5); and of Tuia and Iyer (2015) which call for the negotiation of a 'third space' that includes Western education, and family and cultural values (p. 130).

Second, the adult learning program reflects the initial request from the family adults 'to help them prepare their children for school' and 'to teach them how to do this' (Shinkfield, 2022, p. 4). From the beginning, the program's play and learning environment doubled as a situated learning environment for the family adults (Merriam & Baumgarten, 2020) so they could simultaneously learn and participate as teachers in this learning program with their children.

Third, the learning-through-participation nature of the program reflects the sociocultural context of the community's families. Similar to learning within a community of practice, the learning of the family adults is situated in the context of their purpose and shared family learning, with each day's activities demonstrating the expectation that families would become

increasingly knowledgeable in the context of their ‘changing involvement [in the] legitimate peripheral participation’ within the activities and routines of the program (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 284).

Surprisingly, little literature in early childhood program research reflected this finding. In contrast, each aspect of this finding was saturated in relevance to the literature regarding sociocultural learning (Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978), learning within a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and learning programs for family adults (Merriam & Baumgarten, 2020). Perhaps this was to be expected, with Fleer (2003) noting that the focus of guiding young children’s learning within the early childhood literature is usually child- rather than family-adults-centred.

### Finding 2: The purpose and content of this program is to prepare children for learning at school

Three related findings make up Finding 2. First, the single purpose of this program is to enable family adults to prepare their children for learning at school, reflecting the prioritising of the cultural place of the family adults as their young children’s teachers. Thus, the purpose of this program was not simply to prepare children for school but to enable family adults to carry out that responsibility, as they had requested.

> For me, it’s important to bring my kids so that they can learn, you know . . . so that they can get learned when they’re young and small. (Family conversation, 2018) (Shinkfield, 2022, p.114).

Within the literature, the finding of this single-purpose program contrasts with the dual purposes of many other early childhood programs, which are strongly linked to ‘changing the course of disadvantage’ (Mason White, 2013, p. 3). The single purpose as a learning program contrasts with the purpose of supported playgroup programs, which are geared more towards supporting the parents within the context of the program rather than assisting parents in guiding their children’s learning (Williams et al., 2015).

Second, the finding is that the program’s content is the additional set of learning-for-school experiences of children within families in the Western culture. Consequently, these young children have two distinct sets of experiences during their early life within their family: one within the culture of their home and one with their family at playgroup for the cultural purposes of the school. Interestingly, there was no expectation that the program activities would be carried out in the cultural context of home, as the cultural separation of activities was intentional (Harris, 1990). This decision, however, contrasts with literature that presses for strong links between children’s learning at home and school, which could indicate the need for further research into cultural factors within this expectation (Evangelou & Wild, 2014; World Bank, 2019).

In framing the learning-for-school content as additional to learning within the family’s culture, I describe the program’s content as the ‘repertoires of practice’ for the school culture. I have borrowed this term from Gutiérrez and Rogoff (2003), who recommend that ‘when learning new cultural practices . . . everybody is able to, and benefits from learning to do things more than one way, expanding their “repertoires of practice”’ (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003 as cited in Rogoff et al., 2017, p. 879). Harris (1990) also used this term, describing the process of learning the repertoires of activities, skills, and routines of the Western culture of school as like a ‘giant role play’ (p. 16). Significantly, this framing identifies these additional experiences as ‘not having been learnt yet’, which Rogoff et al. (2017), when considering the differences within

child-rearing practices across cultural groups, explained as 'in today's world, it is often an advantage to know the skills necessary for school. But it is not a deficit to not know how to do so "yet"' (p. 879).

> For the families, once they walked in through the gate to participate in their new program of additional experiences each day, there was no link to any family disadvantage or deficit that may exist within their family situation outside the gate. (Shinkfield, 2022, p. 133)

Third, the programs' purpose and content combine as an introduction to the Western cultural practices of learning at school. Consequently, there were no apologies for the different cultural expectations within the program. These differences were requested and expected in the cross-cultural learning program so that family adults could teach their children about such cultural expectations in their language and cultural ways before school. In contrast, the literature frequently notes the absence of any introduction to the school's culture (Mason-White, 2013). However, it is likely that once children are at school, it is too late to introduce them to the school culture as the time for introductions is over and immersion is in place.

**Finding 3: Learning is within the family**

This finding reflects the prioritisation of young children's learning within the cultural ways of their families, with the place of family adults as the young children's teachers defined by their family's culture, not the program's culture. Although the new forms of learning were not possible within their homes, it is possible to stage the learning process within their family in the playgroup as an out-of-home but within-family environment. Three family-related factors contribute to this finding.

First, family adults are their young children's teachers, as the families had initially requested. Consequently, children learn new and unfamiliar cultural content within their known family and cultural ways of learning (Rogoff, 1990). Within diverse cultural contexts, Rogoff (2003) describes the ways family adults teach their children as 'guided participation in cultural activities' (p. 283), explaining that the ways families interact through 'mutually bridging meanings' and 'mutually structuring activities' are constructed within the family's cultural ways (Rogoff, 2003, p. 299). Therefore, families could teach their children new content in the same cultural ways and language they use in everyday learning at home (Shinkfield & Jennings, 2006)

> I tell her, I read to her in our language, then after that, I explain her. I tell her, oh, turn the page, then she turns the page. She always watches me when I read it. Then I tell her, 'Something hiding there, got to lift it, have a look, then what's in there?' (Family Conversation, 2017). (Shinkfield, 2022, p. 119)

Secondly, the families' home language is the language for learning in this program. Although the content is new, young children continue learning in their home language (Ball, 2011). This finding is demonstrated in each day's program during the shared family Storytime routine, with young children, from babies to four-year-olds, enjoying picture storybooks written in their home language with their family adults (Shinkfield & Jennings, 2019). Additionally, the home language made the place of the family adults essential to the program, both as teachers of their children and translators for the program facilitator and the children.

Thirdly, learning within the family meant learning within their extended family, a finding that illustrated the 'interdependent' and the 'communal' nature of family learning in this culture (Merriam & Baumgarten, 2020, p. 286). Through the shared extended family's responsibility

for children (Fleer & Williams-Kennedy, 2002; Glass, 1990; Hamilton, 1981), many adults within the communities had the opportunity to bring a family child to playgroup. Consequently, the knowledge of the program's purpose quickly spread across the communities, further embedding the program across family and community life. Within the literature, however, the daily embedding of cultural family structure in a program is minimal, with writers suggesting instead that an extended family structure requires special consideration when implementing early years programs (McTurk et al., 2008; Mildon & Polimeni, 2012).

### Finding 4. Walking alongside: The tasks and place of the program facilitator in relational practice

This final finding identified four essential tasks of the program facilitator. These tasks underpinned Findings 1, 2, and 3 and enabled the families to participate in the program with their children.

The tasks of the program facilitator were and remain:

- Taking responsibility for operating the learning program within the workplace expectations of the program's culture
- Planning, implementing and modelling the sequence of learning-for-school activities and routines in the program with the families
- Negotiating cultural differences within the program, upholding the program's cultural authenticity and sharing cultural knowledge about the purposes of these activities within the practices of the school
- Supporting the alignment of the program's Western cultural content with the families' cultural ways of learning

From the beginning of this program, the families asked for a learning facilitator—they did not ask for a room full of resources or a teacher for their children. Finding 4 demonstrated how prioritising the parents' cultural place as the teachers of their children prescribed the role of the program facilitator as assisting and teaching the family adults so that they can guide their children in this new learning. Within the literature, Cole (1985) uses the concept of the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) to explain the roles of the family adults and the program facilitator as 'participants who exercise differential responsibility by virtue of differential expertise' (p.155) within the two cultures of this shared learning environment.

Finally, and of the utmost significance, this finding confirmed that the program facilitator's tasks are positioned within the relational practice of walking alongside the family adults in this shared program development. Therefore, in the context of mutual relationships and respectful collaboration, for these families, participating relationally was the key to their learning (Johannsson-Fua et al., 2020; Reynolds, 2022).

## IMPLICATIONS FROM THE FINDINGS

First, I return to questioning assumptions regarding children's early learning in the literature. These four findings work towards untangling the implications of cultural differences from arguments about family disadvantage in the case of the experiences of children from diverse cultures at school-entry age. Responding to recognising the difference between school and family culture, this learning-for-school program was developed from the foundation of the family's culture rather than the program's. Significantly, in this program, the families distanced

themselves from the pervasive disadvantage narrative that frequently accompanies their participation in programs of Western cultural origin. Knowing that their young children could not learn the practices of the Western school culture within their family culture, the family adults requested a new learning program in which they could purposefully participate as teachers of their children. Consequently, the findings encourage a closer inspection of learning-for-school programs with culturally diverse families to ensure that the programs' foundation strengthens the place of family adults, as well as the family and cultural values in young children's learning before school.

Secondly, returning to the global problem acknowledged in this paper, the findings demonstrate that families of diverse cultures can prepare their children for learning at school through a participatory program that has, as its foundation, the culture of the families. The 'problem' of the family culture has now become the 'solution' as the foundation of this new learning program. Family adults can be their children's teachers using their cultural ways and language. The result is the enhancement of the role of family and cultural values in young children's learning-for-school, as illustrated in Diagram 4. The findings suggest the conditions for a learning-for-school program developed from the foundation of the family's culture that could provide a model for developing family-centred learning-for-school playgroup programs in non-Western cultures beyond the immediate context of Western Australia.

## CONCLUSION

I conclude this paper by advocating that the journeys of children of families of non-Western cultures towards quality education should begin as a shared family journey within their family's cultural values and language. The interwoven findings of this research reveal that families can prepare their children for learning in the different culture of the school by positioning their family adults as their teachers, guiding the children through shared participation in a bi-cultural program. The findings reveal that this is possible within a program developed on the foundation of the family's culture rather than the program's. Consequently, the story and findings of this paper may 'help improve the social, cultural and educational life situations for former colonised Indigenous people living in a globalised world' (Tuia, 2013, p.214).

The local program described here is a single case. However, by positioning the findings as a local solution to a global problem, the program can contribute within the broader framework of implicit comparative research. The evidenced pathway described above for (re-)instating young children's learning within the family enables families to prepare their children for learning at school. Importantly, it also necessitates the ongoing central positioning of family and cultural values in young children's journeys towards quality education. I close with the words of a valued Indigenous colleague, who frequently reminded the families of this local program that it is essential that young children learn from family adults and in family cultural ways because 'children are the future of our community'.

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# Comparative analysis of planning with community resources across learning areas in the Australian Curriculum: Impacts, strategies and challenges

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*The study reported on in this paper analysed how community resources are integrated into four areas of the Australian Curriculum: Languages (Chinese), The Arts (Visual Arts), Sciences, and Humanities and Social Sciences (Economics and Business). It examined four case studies to compare the use of rural resources and local partnerships for achieving educational goals and fostering sustainable practices for teaching the Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia (AAEA) Cross-Curriculum Priority in the Australian Curriculum. Using a dimensional comparative framework, the study evaluated community resources, engagement strategies, educational objectives and impacts on lesson planning. Findings indicate that effective community engagement enriches educational experiences by enhancing linguistic skills, creative expression, scientific inquiry and economic understanding. The study highlights the benefits of adapting educational strategies to local contexts and notes that such integrations support educational quality and sustainability. It concludes that leveraging diverse community resources is essential for improving educational outcomes and promoting sustainability across disciplines.*

*Keywords: community resources; Australian Curriculum; educational Sustainability; comparative qnalysis*

## INTRODUCTION

Australia is described as 'the most successful multicultural society in the world, uniting a multitude of cultures, experiences, beliefs, and traditions' (Australian Government, 2017, p. 7). The country has benefited from the contributions of millions of migrants over centuries, shaping various aspects of Australian society. Throughout the extensive history of integration, successive generations from diverse cultural communities have preserved rich historical, social and cultural resources. These resources offer valuable evidence of their contributions and demonstrate their integration into the national fabric. They are key assets enhancing Australia's capacity to develop a sustainable multicultural society.

The Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia (AAEA) Cross-Curriculum Priority in the Australian Curriculum reflects Australia's extensive engagement with Asia in social, cultural, political and economic spheres (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2024). Despite its importance, studies indicate that implementing AAEA content in the Curriculum remains limited. Previous research found that the content in the Australian Curriculum that has been included to support the AAEA is unevenly distributed across learning areas, with gaps in alignment between the national curriculum and state-level adaptations (Zhang et al., 2020). Furthermore, the lack of adequate teaching resources and professional development in culturally responsive pedagogy creates challenges for teachers seeking to implement the AAEA (Moroney, 2023). The absence of sufficient resources places additional burdens on teachers and limits the ability to embed AAEA effectively in their lessons. Discussions surrounding Asia literacy also highlight instances of historical and contemporary cultural bias against Asian communities, underscoring the need for improved cultural education (Al-Natour, 2022). Addressing the deficiency of quality teaching resources for the AAEA requires innovative approaches to integrating the community into the curriculum, marking it an urgent agenda for research and practice.

The study reported on in this paper provides a case-oriented dimensional comparative analysis of the integration of community resources within four distinct learning areas of the Australian Curriculum: Languages (focusing on Chinese), The Arts (Visual Arts), Sciences and Humanities and Social Sciences (specifically Economics and Business). A dimensional comparative framework guides this study, focusing on four key dimensions: Types of community resources used, community engagement strategies, educational objectives addressed, and impact on lesson planning considerations. This framework enabled a detailed assessment of how community resources contribute to educational quality and sustainability across multiple subjects.

By examining the case studies, the study provided insights for educators by identifying effective strategies for integrating community resources within different learning areas. The comparative approach offers subject teachers cross-disciplinary insights into community-engaged pedagogy, allowing them to adapt successful strategies from other areas to their own practice. This study aligns with the Quality Education for Sustainable Futures: Comparative Dialogues theme by exploring how community-engaged pedagogy contributes to sustainability education across different learning areas. Each case study illustrates how utilising local resources enriches lesson content and fosters sustainable practices by promoting community connections, cultural heritage preservation and real-world problem-solving. These educational practices encourage students to engage meaningfully with their communities, contributing to social and environmental sustainability. The insights from these distinct learning areas collectively support a dialogue on sustainable education, emphasising the potential of community-engaged

pedagogy to shape future-ready learners and enhance the role of education in building sustainable futures.

The research questions guiding this study were:

1. How are community resources integrated into lesson planning across four distinct learning areas of the Australian Curriculum?
2. What are the impacts, strategies, and challenges associated with this integration in promoting educational quality and sustainability in alignment with the AAEA?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review examines the role of community-engaged pedagogy in enhancing lesson planning and teaching practices, highlights the benefits and challenges identified in existing Australian research on the impacts and gaps in community engagement in education, and introduces the dimensional comparative framework used to evaluate the integration of community resources across various learning areas.

### Community-engaged pedagogy in lesson planning

Community-engaged pedagogy in lesson planning involves the deliberate integration of community resources, knowledge, and experiences into the educational process. This pedagogical approach prioritises collaboration between educators and community members, ensuring learning experiences are relevant to students' lives and responsive to local contexts and needs (Coles-Ritchie et al., 2022; Jiang & Tham, 2023).

The approach emphasises the shared development of lesson content through the active participation of local organisations and community stakeholders (Smith & Sobel, 2010). Such collaboration ensures that lesson plans are culturally relevant, address the needs and interests of the community, and incorporate local knowledge and resources (Epstein, 2018; Khalifa, 2018). Engaging the community in lesson planning fosters inclusive educational practices by allowing students to connect learning with real-world situations, reinforcing educational outcomes while promoting greater cultural awareness and community cohesion. It also enables educators to tailor instruction to better align with the values and aspirations of the community, enhancing student engagement and learning outcomes (Epstein, 2018). At the heart of community-engaged pedagogy is the belief that education should not be confined within the walls of a classroom but should connect students to their lived experiences and surroundings through meaningful interaction (Hopkins, 2018; Lowery & Jenlink, 2019; Quay, 2013). This dynamic approach empowers students to see themselves as contributors to their communities and encourages active, participatory learning rather than passive information absorption.

In the context of lesson planning, community-engaged pedagogy requires educators to thoughtfully incorporate local resources and learning area expertise into their teaching strategies. Doing so enriches lessons with diverse perspectives and knowledge that reflect the community's unique cultural, social and environmental characteristics (Campion, 2018; Epstein, 2018). Moreover, it promotes sustainability by reinforcing local knowledge systems and fostering long-term partnerships between schools and communities. In summary, community-engaged pedagogy in lesson planning represents a powerful educational approach that bridges the gap between the classroom and the community, enhancing students' learning experiences while fostering meaningful, reciprocal relationships between schools and their communities.

## Existing research and the Australian context

In the Australian context, several studies have examined the impact of community engagement on educational outcomes in key learning areas. For instance, teaching Chinese with the involvement of local communities enhances linguistic skills and intercultural understanding. By engaging with local Chinese-speaking communities and cultural organisations, educators can provide students with authentic language learning experiences deeply connected to Chinese Australians' cultural and historical heritage (Orton & Scrimgeour, 2019; Zeng & Ehrich, 2024). This approach supports language acquisition and helps students appreciate the broader cultural narratives. However, research focusing specifically on leveraging rural resources in Chinese language education remains limited, especially in regional areas where these resources are underutilized (Chen, 2015; Scrimgeour, 2014).

Similarly, research in science education highlights the benefits of community partnerships in strengthening STEM learning. These partnerships provide co-curricular development opportunities, teacher professional growth, and access to community expertise that enrich curriculum design (Lopez et al., 2016; Timko et al., 2023; Townley, 2020). Such collaboration also improves teachers' professional development and pedagogical content knowledge (Aslam et al., 2019; Kelley et al., 2020; Kleinschmit et al., 2023). Situating STEM education within the community makes lessons more relevant to students' lives, increases engagement and fosters critical decision-making skills (Bølling et al., 2019; Flanagan et al., 2019; Holmes et al., 2021). Some studies also found that localised learning for STEM pedagogy enhances students' decision-making skills in real-world situations, nurturing students into active and informed citizens about STEM-related societal issues (e.g., Herman et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2020). Additionally, localised STEM learning promotes pride, respect and social responsibility, encouraging students to advocate for their communities and environment (Flanagan et al., 2019; Herman et al., 2019).

In Visual Arts education, intercultural understanding plays a vital role in fostering creativity and cultural awareness (Lum & Wagner, 2019). The Australian and Victorian Curriculum emphasise the significance of visual arts in cultivating creativity, critical thinking and respect for artistic traditions. However, the Australian Curriculum gives greater focus to culture, identity and connections to heritage, particularly for First Nations Australians, while the Victorian Curriculum places more emphasis on personal expression and experimentation (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2024; VCAA, 2024). Although the Victorian Curriculum encourages intercultural engagement, it has gaps in its explicit inclusion of Asia-Australia engagement beyond early primary years (Foundation to Year 2) (VCAA, 2024).

In business education, community-engaged pedagogy offers mutual benefits for students, educators, and communities by connecting theory with real-world practice (James & Schmitz, 2011). It encourages critical thinking on the social impact of financial decisions and promotes ethical actions. Community involvement also enhances curriculum relevance and fosters professional development through networking and collaboration (Tunjungsari, 2015). However, challenges include resistance to shifting from traditional profit-driven business models toward more ethical approaches, navigating cultural differences and building stakeholder trust (Sudirjo et al., 2024; Wittmer, 2004). Effective collaborations with a broad network of stakeholders—including educational institutions, community groups, and government agencies—are essential to integrate diverse perspectives into the learning process (Tunjungsari, 2015).

## Theoretical framework: Dimensional comparative framework

This study utilised a dimensional comparative framework to analyse the integration of community resources within four distinct learning areas of the Australian Curriculum. A dimensional comparative framework provides a structured approach for systematically comparing multiple cases along predefined dimensions or criteria (Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2014; Wagner, 2021). In this study, the framework facilitated a cross-disciplinary comparison by focusing on four key dimensions: Resources Used, Engagement Strategies, Educational Objectives and Planning. Considerations.

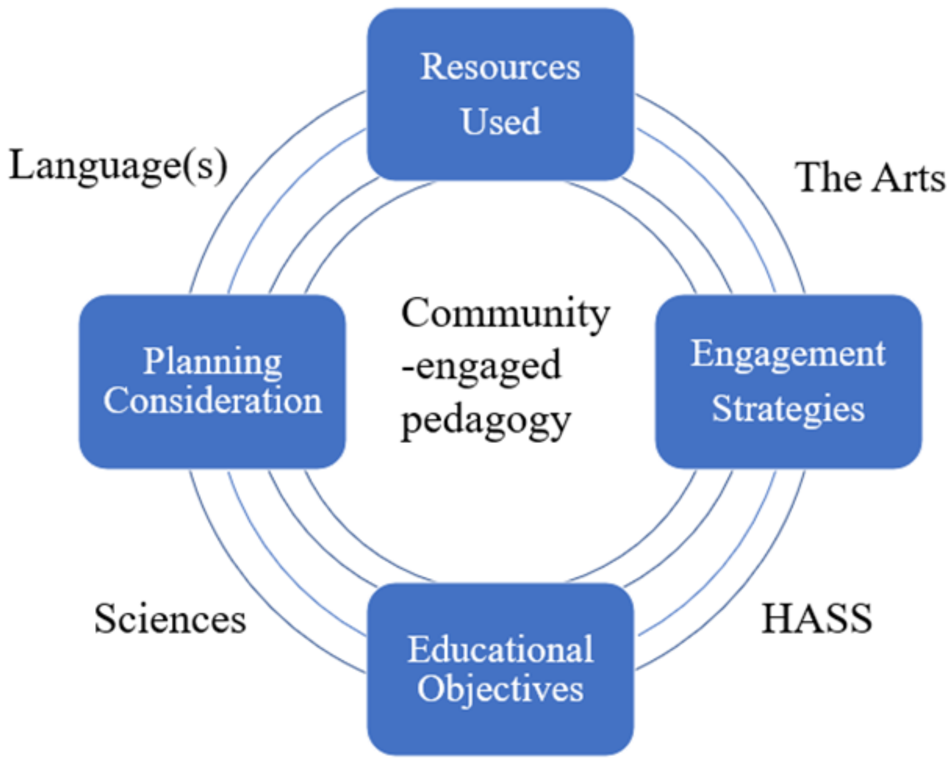


**Figure 1: Comparative framework for community engagement across four learning areas**

Figure 1 illustrates the dimensional comparative framework employed in this study. It shows how the four learning areas (presented as case studies) were analysed through the four dimensions, all framed within the concept of Community-Engaged Pedagogy. This central theme underscores the study's focus on how the dimensions work together to improve educational practices by integrating community resources. By using the same dimensions across each case study, the framework enabled a nuanced analysis of commonalities and differences in how a community-engaged approach is implemented in lesson planning. This structured comparison helped identify which strategies and resources are effective within specific learning contexts (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017; Chen & Hsu, 2020; Wagner, 2021). Ultimately, the framework provided valuable insights into the applicability and impact of community engagement within different subjects, offering practical recommendations for educators.

## METHODOLOGY

As noted, this study applied a case-oriented dimensional comparative analysis to explore the integration of community resources within four learning areas of the Australian Curriculum. Each learning area served as a case study focusing on four dimensions: types of community resources used, community engagement strategies, educational objectives addressed and the impact on lesson planning considerations. This approach allowed for detailed examinations within each learning area and cross-disciplinary comparisons, providing practical insights for educators across subjects (Porta, 2008; Rihoux, 2008).

The comparative dimension was intentional, aligning with this journal's focus by offering transferable insights across learning areas. This structured comparison helps teachers adapt community engagement strategies to suit different subjects, offering practical guidance for lesson planning.

### Data collection

The research team conducted multiple visits to the Melbourne regional area (Ararat and Ballarat) to establish connections with schools, community members, museums and libraries. The visits were crucial for identifying suitable resources and understanding how these could enhance lesson planning within each subject area. The team also engaged with educators, community leaders and cultural organisations to explore opportunities for collaboration and identify local knowledge that could support curriculum objectives.

Following these visits, the team reviewed the Australian and Victorian Curriculum in the relevant learning areas. The review aimed to ensure that the selected community resources aligned with educational standards and addressed each learning area's specific needs and goals, providing a coherent framework for integrating local resources into classroom teaching. The primary aim was to design lesson plans that connect local resources with curriculum objectives, offering students a deeper and more meaningful learning experience.

### Data analysis

The analysis in this study was structured around key dimensions using the theoretical framework outlined in the above literature review. This dimensional approach ensured that each case study was evaluated consistently, allowing for meaningful comparisons across subjects.

First, the study identified and categorised the various community resources utilised within each learning area, including cultural organisations, local businesses and environmental sites, providing insight into the kinds of resources available to educators and how these were leveraged to enhance learning. Second, the study examined the methods used to engage these resources, such as partnerships, cultural exchanges and collaborative projects. These data analysis strategies were essential for determining the extent to which community resources were embedded into teaching practices (Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2014; Wagner, 2021).

Third, the study focused on assessing the specific educational objectives targeted through community resources, ensuring that the objectives aligned with the broader aims of the Australian Curriculum. This dimension demonstrated how community engagement contributes meaningfully to students' academic outcomes. Finally, the study explored how integrating community resources influenced lesson planning, including examining adjustments made to curriculum delivery to accommodate community input and improve learning outcomes. The

analysis highlighted the flexibility required of educators and illustrated the practical implications of using local resources in lesson planning.

## FINDINGS

### Case Study 1: Languages (Chinese Mandarin)

Year Level: Upper Primary

Lesson Plan Summary:

This case study examined a one-hour lesson plan within the upper primary Chinese language curriculum, focusing on the historical significance of Ararat during the Gold Rush era. The lesson aims to integrate language learning with cultural understanding by connecting key Chinese vocabulary to the experiences of Chinese immigrants in Ararat. Students were introduced to vocabulary related to the Gold Rush, such as ‘gold’, ‘adventure’, and ‘Chinese people’

The lesson incorporated multimedia content, including short videos and images of Ararat’s historical sites, to help students contextualise the vocabulary within the broader narrative of Chinese migration to Australia. In collaboration with local Chinese cultural organisations, students engaged in language practice in meaningful, community-based contexts, enhancing their linguistic proficiency and cultural awareness. Role-playing activities were incorporated, simulating interactions between students and local community members, allowing students to use their language skills in practical, real-world scenarios. These activities were aligned with the curriculum objectives to ensure that students could connect their classroom learning with the cultural and historical relevance of Chinese migration to Australia.

### Case Study 2: The Arts (Visual Arts)

Year Level: Foundation to Year 2

Lesson Plan Summary:

This visual arts lesson was designed to engage Foundation to Year 2 students in exploring Chinese cultural symbols through hands-on artistic activities. The focus was on the mythological significance of dragons in Chinese culture and the symbolic use of red and gold, representing good fortune and prosperity. Students created artworks inspired by these cultural motifs, using drawing and painting exercises to explore personal interpretations of the symbols.

The lesson utilised resources from the Gum San Chinese Heritage Centre (GSCHC) and the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV), where students were exposed to various Chinese artworks and cultural narratives. The lesson deepened students’ understanding of Chinese culture and artistic traditions by incorporating discussions and visual references from these sources. Including community-based projects and practical art activities fostered creative expression and intercultural understanding, reinforcing personal connections with Chinese culture.

**Case Study 3: Sciences**

Year Level: Year 9 or 10 Science

Lesson Plan Summary:

This science lesson focused on the chemical processes involved in fermentation, using kimchi production as a practical example. Designed for Year 9 or 10 students, the lesson connected scientific theory with real-world applications, allowing students to explore key concepts such as chemical reactions, enzymes, reaction rates and aerobic versus anaerobic processes. The lesson was further enriched by an industrial visit to a Melbourne-based kimchi-making company, where students observed the fermentation process in a commercial environment.

This hands-on experience allowed students to see the scientific principles they had learned in action. It provided a deeper understanding of fermentation's cultural and practical significance in Korean cuisine. The lesson plan combined in-class experiments with the industrial visit, reinforcing curriculum objectives by relating scientific content to real-world examples. This approach sparked student interest in food science and technology and deepened their understanding of how science applies in practical contexts. Combining classroom learning and real-world observation gave students a well-rounded educational experience, demonstrating how scientific concepts function in laboratory and everyday settings.

**Case Study 4: Humanities and Social Sciences (Economics and Business)**

Year Level: Year 9 or 10 Economics and Business

Lesson Plan Summary:

This lesson in the HASS curriculum focused on the 'Ethics in Labour' theme, using historical and contemporary examples to explore labour practices. The lesson drew on resources from the Sum Gum Sam Chinese Heritage Museum, where students learned about the experiences of Chinese labourers during the mid-1800s Gold Rush in Ararat. Key topics included the poor working conditions, discrimination and lack of labour rights faced by Chinese workers during this period.

To connect historical labour issues with contemporary challenges, the lesson incorporated a documentary titled 'The True Cost', which examines the global impact of modern labour practices. Students were encouraged to compare the historical conditions with present-day labour practices, fostering critical thinking about the ethical dimensions of labour. The lesson plan emphasised the role of economics in shaping labour conditions, prompting students to reflect on how consumer behaviour and economic policies influence modern labour ethics.

By examining historical and contemporary perspectives, students developed a deeper understanding of the social and ethical implications of labour practices across time. This lesson plan encouraged them to think critically about their role as ethical consumers and to engage meaningfully with the topic of labour rights in local and global contexts.

**Bringing it together: Comparative overview of case study findings**

The four case studies illustrate the diverse ways in which community resources can be leveraged across different learning areas to enrich educational experiences. Each case highlighted how community partnerships contribute to meaningful, real-world learning by aligning local resources with curriculum goals.

Table 1 provides a comparative analysis of these approaches, highlighting the key community resources used, engagement strategies employed, educational objectives addressed and the resulting impact on lesson planning considerations in each learning area.

**Table 1: Comparison of community engagement in lesson planning across four learning areas**

| Learning area | Types of community resources used | Community engagement strategies | Educational objectives addressed | Impact on lesson planning considerations |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Languages (Chinese)** | Chinese cultural organisations, Chinese-speaking communities, local businesses (e.g., Chinese restaurants) | Guest speakers, cultural exchanges, workshops | Enhance linguistic proficiency, deepen cultural understanding | Incorporation of real-world language use, cultural immersion activities |
| **The Arts (Visual Arts)** | Local art galleries (NGV), Chinese cultural centres (GSCHC), local artists | Visits to galleries, collaborations with artists, community art projects | Foster creative expression, enhance intercultural understanding | Integration of practical art experiences, connection to cultural context |
| **Sciences** | Local Korean communities, Industrial visit to a kimchi-making company | Industrial visit, hands-on learning opportunities | Understand chemical reactions, relate science to real-world processes | Alignment with curriculum objectives, inclusion of hands-on experiments |
| **Humanities and Social Sciences (Economics and Business)** | Sum Gum Sam Chinese Heritage Museum, historical documentaries, local businesses | School excursions, use of museum resources, multimedia content | Develop understanding of labour ethics, promote critical thinking | Inclusion of multimedia resources, emphasis on ethical and social awareness |

The comparisons demonstrate community-engaged pedagogy's flexibility in meeting different subjects' unique needs while fostering sustainable educational practices. By identifying shared strategies and challenges across learning areas, this analysis provides practical insights for educators seeking to incorporate community resources into diverse teaching contexts.

## DISCUSSION

The findings from the four case studies provide valuable insights into how community resources can be effectively integrated into lesson planning across different learning areas of the Australian Curriculum. This study's comparative approach identified shared themes, highlighting the opportunities and challenges of community-engaged pedagogy in different subject areas.

### Enhancing lesson contents and building community connections

One of the most significant outcomes observed across all case studies is enriching lesson content by integrating community resources (Timko et al., 2023). This approach deepens students' academic understanding and makes content knowledge more vivid, authentic and easier to relate to by embedding it within real-world experiences (McCarty & Lee, 2014).

Moreover, community-engaged pedagogy promotes two-way benefits: students build stronger connections with their community while local resources are revitalised through educational partnerships. Thus, it fosters a sense of belonging, pride, and mutual respect beyond the classroom (Epstein, 2018; Sleeter, 2012). By engaging with cultural organisations, community experts and local businesses, students connect their learning with lived experiences, gaining deeper insight and motivation.

For example, in the Languages case study, the involvement of the Chinese-speaking community and cultural organisations provided immersive learning experiences. Students could practice language skills in a real-world context by interacting with the Gum San Chinese Heritage Centre. This engagement enhances students' linguistic proficiency and develops a deeper understanding of the historical and cultural significance of the Chinese community in Australia. The students' abilities to connect their classroom learning to local heritage reinforced their sense of belonging by allowing them to see how their education reflects the experiences and contributions of people within their community (Gay, 2010). Moreover, the activities with community members fostered relationships with individuals who shared valuable cultural knowledge and experiences, further strengthening students' personal and cultural identities (Bernardes et al., 2024; Jiang & Tham, 2023).

Similarly, in The Arts, community-based projects and practical art experiences allowed students to explore cultural symbols and artistic traditions. Using resources from the National Gallery of Victoria and the Gum San Chinese Heritage Centre, students connected their creative expression to local cultural narratives, making the lesson content more tangible and allowing students to explore personal and collective identities through art (Garcia & Ouis). As students collaborated with local artists and participated in community art projects, they experienced a sense of pride and belonging, seeing their artistic work reflected in broader community narratives (Lum & Wagner, 2019). This deeper engagement with art fosters creative expression and intercultural understanding, helping students appreciate their community's diverse heritage.

The Sciences case study demonstrated how linking scientific concepts to real-world applications can make learning more relevant and accessible while fostering community ties (Bølling et al., 2019). The industrial visit to a kimchi-making company provided a practical example of chemical processes, offering insight into cultural practices valued by the local Korean community. This hands-on experience made abstract scientific concepts easier to understand and more engaging and helped students appreciate the scientific contributions of their community (Herman et al., 2019; Timko et al., 2023). By observing scientific practices in a real-world setting, students develop a greater appreciation for local expertise and the relevance of scientific knowledge in their daily lives. This tangible connection to science encourages students to see themselves as part of a broader scientific and cultural ecosystem, fostering curiosity and a sense of belonging.

In the HASS case study, integrating historical resources from the Sum Gum Sam Chinese Heritage Museum with contemporary discussions on labour ethics provides students with a comprehensive understanding of economic principles and social justice issues (Tunjungsari, 2015). The lesson used comparative examples to explore themes of economic justice and ethical labour practices, making the content relevant to students' present-day experiences. By comparing the working conditions faced by Chinese labourers during the Gold Rush with current global labour issues through the documentary 'The True Cost', students were 'encouraged to reflect on the ethical and social implications of economic decisions (Wittmer, 2004). Exploring labour practices helped students understand how economic policies shape

social conditions while fostering empathy and social responsibility. Students saw themselves as active participants in shaping their community's ongoing narrative, contributing to a deeper sense of social awareness and belonging (Guajardo et al., 2015).

## Strategies for community engagement

The strategies employed across the different learning areas were carefully designed to integrate community resources into the educational process, ensuring that the resources were relevant and aligned with curriculum objectives (Khalifa, 2018). As illustrated in Table 1, each learning area employed a unique combination of community resources and engagement strategies to achieve educational objectives effectively.

First, using community experts and guest speakers was a powerful strategy, particularly in the Languages case study. Inviting Chinese-speaking community members to share their experiences and knowledge enriched the lesson with authentic language use in real-world contexts. This direct engagement allowed students to practice their language skills in a practical, engaging environment while gaining valuable cultural insights that deepened their understanding of the language's relevance and significance (Wang & Chik, 2022; Zeng & Ehrich, 2024). Second, organising educational excursions and field visits proved essential for connecting classroom learning with real-world applications. In the Sciences case study, a visit to a kimchi-making company allowed students to observe the fermentation process firsthand, making abstract scientific concepts tangible, accessible and easier to grasp (Lopez et al., 2016). Similarly, the HASS case study utilised an excursion to the Sum Gum Sam Chinese Heritage Museum, where students explored historical artifacts and narratives related to Chinese labourers during the Gold Rush. These excursions enhanced students' understanding of the subject matter and made the learning experience dynamic, interactive and more engaging.

Third, integrating community resources into creative projects was particularly effective in The Arts (Visual Arts) case study. Students drew inspiration from local cultural symbols and artistic traditions encountered through visits to cultural centres and galleries, such as the National Gallery of Victoria and the Gum San Chinese Heritage Centre. By incorporating these community resources into their artwork, students were able to explore cultural themes in a hands-on manner, deepening their understanding of the artistic and cultural context while fostering a stronger connection to their community (Jiang & Tham, 2023). Fourth, using multimedia and digital resources enhanced the learning experience, as demonstrated in the HASS case study. Historical documentaries and contemporary films were integrated into the lesson to provide students with diverse perspectives on labour ethics and economic principles, making the content more relatable and engaging and preparing students for the increasingly digital nature of education and the workforce (Sudirjo et al., 2024; Tunjungsari, 2015).

Finally, facilitating cultural exchanges and interactive workshops was crucial in the Languages and The Arts (Visual Arts) case studies. Cultural exchanges allowed students to immerse themselves in Chinese culture, interacting with community members and participating in traditional activities that enriched their language learning experience (Wang & Chik, 2022). In Visual Arts, workshops led by local artists provided students with opportunities to develop creative skills while gaining insights into the cultural significance of their work. These interactive experiences helped build stronger connections between students and their community, reinforcing the mutual benefits of community-engaged pedagogy (Jiang & Tham, 2023). As detailed in Table 1, these approaches highlight the diverse ways in which community resources can be integrated into lesson planning to achieve various educational objectives

across different learning areas. By tailoring these strategies to the needs of each subject, educators create meaningful, relevant learning experiences that connect students with their communities, fostering engagement, belonging and deeper understanding.

## Challenges and considerations in lesson planning

While the benefits of community-engaged pedagogy are clear, its implementation presents several challenges that educators must carefully navigate to ensure meaningful and sustainable integration of community resources into lesson planning. Successful integration requires careful planning, flexibility and the development of strong partnerships between schools and community stakeholders.

One of the significant challenges is the logistical complexity of coordinating real-world experiences. For example, in the Sciences case study, organising an industrial visit to a kimchi-making company required meticulous planning to ensure the experience was educationally relevant and logistically feasible. Educators had to align the learning objectives with the activities provided by the community partner, ensuring that the visit complemented rather than distracted from classroom learning (Barili & Byram, 2020; Mattix Foster & Cunningham, 2015). This type of external engagement often depends on the strength of the partnership between the school and the community resource, as well as the ability of educators to adapt their lesson plans to accommodate these real-world learning opportunities. Similarly, the Visual Arts case study highlighted the logistical demands of organising visits to galleries and cultural centres, particularly for younger students. Such visits require careful coordination with external organisations and considerations of transportation, safety, and supervision. The logistical complexity increases when the visits involve large groups or require extensive travel, making planning essential to ensure these experiences align with curriculum objectives and enhance the learning experience (Bringle et al., 2011).

Another challenge is the need for educators to align community resources with curriculum objectives to ensure the engagements contribute meaningfully to student learning. In the HASS case study, using historical and contemporary resources, such as multimedia and documentary films, careful selection was needed to ensure they effectively conveyed the intended ethical and economic concepts. Educators faced the task of ensuring students could draw connections between past labour practices and modern issues, making the lesson content relevant to their lives while meeting curriculum goals(Kelley et al., 2020).

The Languages case study also emphasised the importance of flexibility in lesson planning. Incorporating role-playing exercises and cultural immersion activities, while enriching, required additional time and resources. These adjustments posed challenges within a tightly scheduled curriculum, necessitating carefully considering how to fit these activities into the school timetable (Scrimgeour, 2020). Educators had to adapt their lesson plans to accommodate these activities without compromising other learning objectives. Ensuring these activities were accessible to students with different levels of prior knowledge and cultural backgrounds posed another challenge, underscoring the importance of inclusivity in community-engaged pedagogy.

Addressing these challenges requires collaborative planning, adaptive teaching strategies and sustained engagement between schools and community partners. Despite these difficulties, the benefits of community-engaged pedagogy—enriching lesson content, fostering student engagement and building community connections—outweigh the logistical and curricular challenges.

### Implications for educational practice

The insights gained from this study have several significant implications for educational practice. First and foremost, the findings suggest that community-engaged pedagogy has the potential to greatly enhance student engagement and learning outcomes by providing authentic, contextually relevant experiences. By integrating local resources into their lesson planning, educators can create a richer, more dynamic curriculum that resonates with students, making learning more engaging and relevant to their lives (Epstein, 2018).

The study also highlights the importance of professional development in equipping educators with the skills and knowledge needed to collaborate effectively with community partners. Teachers need to be equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to collaborate effectively with community partners, select appropriate resources and integrate these into their teaching in ways that align with curriculum objectives. Professional development focused on community engagement strategies, resource selection, and partnership-building will equip educators to overcome the challenges identified in this study and fully leverage the opportunities for community-engaged pedagogy. Additionally, the findings highlight the need for schools and educational institutions to foster strong partnerships with local communities (Aslam et al., 2019; Jiang & Tham, 2023). Schools should actively cultivate networks with local organisations, businesses, cultural centres, and community experts to ensure that educators have reliable access to these resources for lesson planning. These partnerships create sustainable networks that enrich lesson content and strengthen the relationship between schools and their communities.

Finally, the study suggests that community-engaged pedagogy can be adapted and scaled across different educational contexts. While the case studies focused on specific learning areas, the principles and strategies discussed could be applied more broadly, including in rural or under-resourced areas where access to community resources may be limited. Future research should explore how to implement these strategies effectively in such contexts, ensuring that all students—regardless of location—can benefit from community-engaged pedagogy.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study illustrates the value of community-engaged pedagogy to enhance educational quality and sustainability across diverse learning areas. By leveraging local resources and fostering partnerships between schools and communities, educators can create richer, more engaging learning experiences that meet curriculum objectives and contribute to the broader goals of fostering culturally responsive and contextually relevant education. These practices play a critical role in cultivating students' senses of belonging and connection to their communities, reinforcing social cohesion and fostering sustainable relationships. By engaging students with real-world challenges and local contexts, community-engaged pedagogy helps develop essential skills, such as critical thinking, adaptability and collaboration, preparing students to address future challenges. This approach aligns with the principles of sustainable development, positioning education as a key driver for promoting sustainability at the individual and community levels. The challenges identified in this study underscore the importance of sustained support and professional development for educators to effectively integrate community resources into lesson planning. Ongoing efforts are needed to equip teachers with the necessary tools and strategies for building strong community partnerships and aligning external resources with curriculum goals. Additionally, further research is essential to

explore the most effective strategies for scaling community-engaged pedagogy across different educational contexts, including rural and under-resourced areas.

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# Quality education, connection and wellbeing: Māori tertiary students' accounts

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*A sometimes-neglected aim of education in the context of Māori, the* tangata whenau *(indigenous peoples) of Aotearoa New Zealand, is to build Māori students (*tauira*) as Māori, a process that supports them to navigate the academic world as well as enhancing their* Māoritanga *(Māori practices, beliefs, way of life). Notions of educational quality, therefore, involve wellbeing—the extent to which Māori* tauira *flourish as individuals and as collectives. Talking with Māori* tauira *is a helpful way of inquiring into this area because of the power of dialogic engagement to enhance thought and action. In this article, we draw on video-based dialogic research to present two significant aspects of Māori tertiary* tauira *experiences that focus on wellbeing and* Māoritanga*. What might seem like mundane aspects of tertiary life––finding a friend and connecting with other Māori—emerge as significant in the development of four Māori university students. Lessons for tertiary providers include the value of paying attention to collective ways of creating wellbeing and the potential of formal support structures to moderate the isolating effect on Māori of enrolment in a tertiary institution.*

*Keywords: Māori tertiary education; relational connection; dialogic; wellbeing; everyday colonialism; racism*

## INTRODUCTION

### Māori aims for Māori education

For much of their time as the Indigenous peoples of Aotearoa New Zealand, Māori followed long traditions of education carried out by tribal groups that ensured survival and flourishing. Education included aspects such as navigation, *rongoa* (traditional medicine), cultivation, building and various arts such as oratory. More importantly, education was deeply rooted in *whakapapa*, serving as a means to understand Māori identities, connections to ancestors and the place of people within the broader Māori world. *Whakapapa* provided a framework for understanding the world through a uniquely Māori sensibility, weaving together knowledge, values and practices that affirmed our collective identity as tribes and extended families and guided our interactions with the environment and each other. However, the disruption of European arrivals supplanted this educational landscape and 'colonisation as an education policy became assimilation, which in turn became integration . . . [arguably maintaining] the underlying ideology of racial subjugation of Māori by Pākeha [settlers of European origin]' (Hetaraka, 2024, p. 2). Given this new educational landscape, developing appropriate purposes

for introduced forms of education alternatives became essential to the flourishing of Māori. These purposes developed over time to the point where Durie (2003) wrote of multiple educational aims for Māori: for Māori to live as Māori; to actively participate as citizens of the world; and enjoy good health and a high standard of living. He argued that since success for Māori involves a solid foundation in a Māori reality, '[e]ducation should be as much about that reality as it is about literacy and numeracy' (Durie, 2003, p. 200). This clarion call gained widespread agreement amongst Māori at the February 2001 first Hui Taumata Mātauranga, (Macfarlane, 2015), a significant Māori consultative event at which Māori education was central.

One consequence of Māori thought about education applied in the formal sector is the elevation of Māori culture as a significant element in ideas of educational success. Edwards et al. (2007) claim that many Māori:

> [W]ish to receive an education that prepares us and our children for the world, but supports our cultural imperatives where these have been interrupted, or ensures that our cultural roots are not severed as a price for this inclusion and aspiration. (p. 140)

At a microcosmic level, this means that success comes when 'children's search for ultimate purpose and meaning is supported in culturally congruent ways, as their values are evident in their day-to-day school life and reflected in classroom events' (Edwards et al., 2007, p. 140). For Māori, this means education that reflects and, therefore, does not undermine Māori norms and values; for instance, emphasising *whanaungatanga* in education—thinking that embodies values of inclusivity understood through family, rather than cut-throat competition—a process through which the successful are increasingly rewarded and through which others become excluded. Ideas of Māori educational success also need to be purpose-referenced because 'it is misleading to use crude comparisons with non-Māori as a type of shorthand for best outcomes or to assume that Māori-non-Māori comparisons always provide useful information about Māori progress' (Durie, 2003, p. 202).

## Māori views of wellbeing

A helpful literature review of Māori relational health that pays attention to wellbeing is by Wilson et al. (2021). The authors observed that across a wide range of Māori health-related texts, four overarching themes capture the essence of many Māori health models: '(1) Dimensions of health and wellbeing; (2) *Whanaungatanga* (connectedness); (3) *Whakawhanaugatanga* (building relationships); and (4) Socio-political health context' (p. 3544). Elaborating on the first category, health and wellbeing, Wilson et al. give four frequently cited elements: *wairua*, *whānau, hinengaro* and *tinana*. These will now be briefly unpacked.

*Wairua* (the spiritual dimension) 'refers to a person's spirit or soul that exists before the birth of a person and beyond their death' (Wilson et al., 2021, p. 3544). A person's *wairua* can act as a guide and be damaged or cared for according to circumstances, the actions of others or, indeed, the person themselves. *Whānau* (extended family network) embodies Māori collectivity and is particularly significant since Māori do not exist in isolation—without their family and other aspects of community. *Hinengaro* (the mental dimension) encompasses one's feelings, sense of self and levels of confidence and self-esteem. Central to this element is the *mauri* (the spark or essence of life), which the environment may influence in positive and negative ways. Finally, *tinana* (the physical or bodily dimension) provides shelter for a person's essence and is *tapu* (sacred) 'as the source of sustenance for the person's body and health' (p. 3546). While these elements do not provide a complete picture, they are useful here for their prevalence in

educational circles, such as in the work of the Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand (2024) and materials designed for schools (New Zealand Health Association, 2023).

Wilson et al. (2021) noted that health and wellbeing are holistic and relational for Māori, an understanding substantiated by the connectedness present in and between all four dimensions discussed above. Relatedness and connectedness in health and wellbeing differ from many Western views of health, which focus on the body (Durie, 1994), see a person as a disconnected, not a relational, self (Giddens, 1991) and separate mind, body and spirit (Poltorak, 2010). From this relational perspective, Durie's (2003) multiple aims of education should be seen as integrated. Good Māori health is dependent on being able to live well as Māori: elevating Māori culture; active participation in the world is a mark of confidence (an aspect of *hinengaro*) combined with opportunity; a high standard of living can support an environment in which caring for the *wairua, hinengaro* and *tinana* becomes increasingly possible as stressors like hunger, work-related time-poverty caused by low wages and exposure to oppression can be reduced. Poverty of any kind is not conducive to wellbeing.

## Māori in tertiary education

In Aotearoa New Zealand, two major streams of education exist for Māori. These are often termed 'mainstream', that is, education provided for all on a model developed in European contexts, and *Kaupapa* Māori education, an alternative system developed by Māori for Māori which adapts some elements of Western educational practice (schools, classrooms etc.) to Māori means and ends. Mainstream education has embraced some elements of Māori thought, such as the *Whare Tapa Whā* model of wellbeing, structured through *wairua, whānau, hinengaro* and *tinana* (New Zealand Health Association, 2023). However, *Kaupapa* Māori education began with the first *kōhanga reo* (pre-school language nest), *Pukeatua Kōkiri,* opened in 1982 in Wainuiomata, a suburb close to the capital, *Te Whanganui a Tara* (Wellington) (Walker, 1990). Since then, many Māori education facilities have developed in early childhood, primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors. Here, however, we focus on mainstream tertiary education, the area of our employ in which we seek to make change.

In 2023, there were 73,450 Māori students enrolled in tertiary education of one kind or another in Aotearoa New Zealand (Education Counts, 2024). Despite the existence of (Māori tertiary institutes), the majority of these students attended mainstream universities and polytechnics. A key feature of Māori students' experiences in mainstream tertiary education is everyday racism, a term that Essed (1991) unpacks as 'systematic, current, familiar practices' (p. 3). In the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, Mayeda et al. (2014) developed the more contextual term, 'everyday colonialism' (p. 63), to address both the past and present of these experiences. Colonialism extends beyond landgrabs and into other areas of life, such as ontology, the organisation of knowledge (Duarte & Belarde-Lewis, 2015), and 'how we do things' activities that carry assumptions based on beliefs and values that may not be shared by all. Everyday activities include behaviour that indicates negative attitudes toward Māori students and/or *te reo Māori* (Māori language) and ignorance of *tikanga* (Māori customs, attitudes and principles). For example, *tikanga* points to the significance of developing relationships at first meetings and of acknowledgements at partings; the aspects of life that experience suggests are seldom adequately marked in the tertiary normal.

Strategies designed to counter negativity, stereotyping and everyday colonialism have developed in some tertiary contexts. For example, Airini et al. (2010) identified good practice when looking at non-lecture teaching as a tool to help Māori students succeed in degree-level studies. McClutchie (2020) described a short program aimed at helping Māori students to lead, assume power, and be transformed by the normalisation of Māori success in leadership and

learning. Research also suggests the benefits of specific support services such as *Āwhina*, a university-based initiative for Māori students (Richardson et al., 2018; Wilson et al., 2011). However, such attempts take place in a contested arena, indicating current debate regarding the justification, fairness or divisiveness attributed to designated Māori spaces in tertiary settings (NZ Herald, 2024). Arguments against such provision seem to rely on a view that default spaces in tertiary education are in some sense neutral, unshaped by histories of importing educational ideas from distant places and the ever-present consequences of Aotearoa New Zealand's colonial past. In this situation, research into the experience of Māori *tauira* from a strengths-based approach capable of educating tertiary providers in what matters to their Māori students has great value. That is an aim of our study.

## THE RESEARCH

### The researchers

This research, which seeks to honour Māori voices and viewpoints, has a relational core. Relationships are at the heart of our work with *tauiwa*, an endeavour in which we are partners who aim to act with care and passion. As a result, presenting ourselves as researchers and writers is integral to the discussion.

#### Adreanne

I am deeply rooted in my Rongomaiwahine heritage, having been raised on the ancestral homelands of Mahia. While my professional journey unfolds in the university's urban setting, my heart and soul stay intertwined with my home community, where my home remains and my family continue to reside. The collaborative work I have undertaken with young Māori since my doctorate (which explored their societal perspectives) has been a privilege and an ongoing journey of learning and sharing. My research is deeply embedded within a Māori worldview, which I refer to as *Kaupapa Māori*, and which continues to be a vessel through which I navigate my role in academia and community collaboration.

#### Martyn

I am Anglo-Welsh but have lived in Aotearoa New Zealand since the 1990s. In my time as a teacher in secondary education, I saw unnecessary issues faced by Māori students and their strengths in pursuing paths of credit to themselves and their *whānau*. I took the posture of a learner from the Māori communities of the schools where I worked and benefitted as a result. In the present endeavour, my major contribution is an orientation to catalytic research, which aims to change situations for the good of communities. In this, I understand research as a form of leadership and leadership as an act of service.

Together we are a partnership that works across the borders of *te ao Māori* and formal education, leveraging our diverse backgrounds and experiences as critical tools in the development of our relationship, in the design of our research engagements, and in curating and caring for the *mana* (inherited and endowed authority) of those *tauiwa* who have joined with us on our journey.

### Research approach

To garner and amplify the voices of *Māori tauiwa* as they reflect on their experiences in tertiary education, we set up a pilot study titled 'Telling it like it is: Māori student voice in tertiary education.' This was funded by Te Herenga Waka, Victoria University of Wellington, and was

conducted from 2022 to 2024. The project received ethical approval from the University Ethics Committee (Ethics approval number: 0000031043).

The primary objective was to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of young Māori students in their first undergraduate degree at Te Herenga Waka | Victoria University of Wellington. Our study introduced an innovative approach to data collection and dissemination, aiming to broaden the reach and impact of the research beyond traditional academic audiences. We employed semi-structured, dialogic interviews video-recorded via Zoom. Using Zoom as a medium of communication has become somewhat normalised in the tertiary sector as a consequence of COVID-19 lockdown responses, thus making the approach more naturalistic (Tossell et al., 2012) than might have otherwise been the case. The remote video-based approach was chosen to align with the preferences and communication styles of the younger generation and produce versatile media resources for multiple purposes.

Recruitment strategies included accessing the university's student email list to distribute information to self-identified Māori students in their final year of undergraduate study or first year of honours work. We also distributed hard copy information packs in areas frequently visited by Māori students, such as Āwhina (Māori academic support), the gym, student health services, and other relevant locations. Finally, we used our existing relationships to identify and potentially recruit *tauiwa*.

As a result of these recruitment strategies, six young Māori students became participants. Table 1 summarises the demographic details of the four whose stories form the backbone of this article, including their *iwi* (tribal) affiliations.

**Table 1: Demographic details of student participants**

| Participant alias | Gender | Age | Iwi | Region | Programme of study |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Daisy** | Female | 22 | Tuwharetoa, Te Arawa | Central North Island | Bachelor of Laws (LLB) and Bachelor of Arts (BA) in Psychology: Graduated from BA and in last trimester with 2 papers to complete |
| **Everest** | Female | 20 | Ngati Maru | Bay of Plenty | Bachelor of Media Studies. Graduated. Working in the media industry |
| **Uenuku** | Male | 20 | Ngati Kahungunu | East Coast of North Island | BA in Māori Studies<br>In final trimester of BA |
| **Wairoa** | Male | 20 | Ngati Kahungunu | East Coast of North Island | Bachelor of Architectural Studies (BAS). Graduated and taken Master of Arts (MA) scholarship to continue study |

During the dialogic interviews, participating *tauiwa* were encouraged to discuss the following:

- Their university experience as Māori students
- Highlights and challenges encountered
- Information they wished they had known at the beginning of their studies
- Advice they would give to their younger selves
- Anything else they deemed significant for research purposes.

Our innovative approach extended beyond data collection to encompass a multifaceted approach to analysis and dissemination. For scholarly outputs, we conducted a thematic analysis of the dialogic interview transcripts, identifying key patterns and insights from the participants' narratives. The video recordings were edited and curated to create engaging media resources for various purposes, including educational materials for schools and workshops, training resources for academic staff and short-form content for social media platforms. This multi-pronged engagement with the data was designed to widen our audience beyond traditional academic readerships, targeting younger generations who primarily consume information through social media and video resources. By doing so, we aimed to make the research findings more accessible, relatable and impactful for first-generation Māori university students as well as other stakeholders in the education sector. Research that aims to create positive change is supported by wide and varied dissemination of this nature.

## FINDINGS

In this section, we present some findings shaped by the thematic analysis of *tauiwa* responses in the dialogic videos. These are organised into two themes: Finding a Friend and Connection with *Māo*. Each theme reflects relatedness and connectedness as central to Māori ideas of wellbeing.

### Theme 1: Finding a friend

Although all new students can experience some dislocation on moving out of home, this may happen at a different intensity for Māori students because of the cultural value placed on being connected. Many Māori students travel to a university in a city location where previous layers of connection to *whanau* and community are muted and, consequently, wellbeing affected. Thus, finding a friend—forming new connections to mirror those muted by distance and separation—emerged from the data as significant for Māori *tauiwa.*

The theme of finding a friend holds profound significance for Māori university students like Daisey and Everest, and encompasses crucial cultural, social and emotional dimensions of their university experience. For Māori students transitioning from small, tight-knit communities to large urban universities, friendships serve as vital links to their cultural identity and sources of support in an environment that can feel unfamiliar or alienating.

The 2018 census showed that Māori have a higher proportion of their population living in rural areas and small urban areas compared with the total population of Aotearoa New Zealand (Environmental Health Intelligence New Zealand, n.d.). Both Daisey and Everest's experiences highlight the profound challenges Māori students face when transitioning. Daisey describes the move as a 'whole big shock', emphasising the stark contrast between her previous life and the new urban setting:

> Just when I moved here it was like a whole big shock, I think, for me like I just wasn't . . . I don't know what to expect, and I wasn't [ready], you know I lived with my mum my whole life.

Similarly, Everest expresses this shift as a culture shock: 'I come from a small town, so coming to a big city was like a culture shock. Everything was different; the people, the pace, even the air felt different'. These parallel experiences underscore the disorienting nature of the spatial and cultural transition for Māori students who have grown up in tight communities with strong cultural ties.

The unfamiliarity of the urban university environment can be further compounded by the lack of visible Māori representation, intensifying feelings of isolation and cultural disconnection. Daisey's experience in attending a law lecture highlights this isolation:

> I was the only one [meaning the only Māori] and the room, it's huge . . . um, and no one around me looked brown. I was so scared like honestly petrified.

Everest echoes the isolation of this sentiment:

> In my first few weeks, I felt so alone. I couldn't see anyone who looked like me or understood where I came from. It was like being on a different planet.

These experiences underscore the importance of finding friends who share similar backgrounds and experiences, especially in academic settings where Māori students may feel underrepresented and misunderstood and where they may face the kinds of negative experiences described by Mayeda et al. (2014).

Both Daisey and Everest's journeys illuminate the emotional toll of the transition, encompassing academic concerns and social anxieties, both erosions to their wellbeing. Daisey candidly expresses her fears:

> Yeah, it was a big shock. Um! But yeah, I think I think I was just scared. I was scared of everything. I was scared of failing. I was scared of not making friends. I was scared of not fitting in.

Similarly, Everest related:

> I was scared of everything - failing my classes, not making friends, losing touch with my culture. It felt like I was trying to balance two worlds, and I wasn't sure I could do it.

Living in two worlds for Māori is well documented. Hook (2007) noted that 'Māori must assimilate two world views to make their way in the Pākehā world as well as in the Māori world' (p. 3). The two-worlds experience is particularly pertinent in education (Matthews, 2016; Roberts & Stewart, 2014). Daisey and Everest's parallel experiences highlight the interconnected nature of academic success and social belonging for Māori students, emphasising friendships' crucial role in navigating the complex terrain shaped by transitioning from home to university and inhabiting two worlds at once.

However challenging situations may be, they can also produce strengths. Daisey and Everest's negative experiences led to significant friendships that became sources of comfort and cultural connection. Daisey recounts:

> I didn't even know but there was this Māori sitting behind me. I ended up meeting him 'cause he sat behind me . . . We've been friends now for years. He was like my . . . comfortable person, you know—in law, and he was Māori. He ended up being Māori and my colour.

Similarly, Everest describes a pivotal moment of connection:

> I remember the first time I met another Māori student in one of my classes. It was like finding a piece of home. We started talking, and suddenly, I didn't feel so alone anymore.

These experiences underscore the importance of cultural familiarity and kinship in creating a sense of belonging that supports wellbeing in an otherwise unfamiliar environment.

Friendships with other Māori students serve as more than just sources of emotional support; they become crucial conduits for understanding and navigating the complex university system.

For students like Daisey and Everest, who come from backgrounds where university culture and processes are unfamiliar, connections in the form of friendship provide invaluable insider knowledge and guidance. Daisey's experience illustrates this perfectly as she recounts a conversation with another Māori student who opened her eyes to academic possibilities she had not known existed:

> She told me that she studied Law and . . . well, you can do that like you can do it all in one degree. I had no idea, and she told me I could, so I said 'OK', and went and found out more myself.

Everest similarly describes how her Māori friends helped her access important information and resources:

> My Māori friends were like guides. They knew which professors[were] supportive and which courses were aligned with our cultural values, and how to access support services. It was knowledge I wouldn't have found in any university handbook.

The value of these friendships is amplified in a context where Daisey had been given deficit-orientated *wairua*-sapping advice by a person designated as a support person to Māori students:

> He was telling me that I couldn't do Law . . . trying to pull me off the idea saying how Māori students normally don't do too well.

In such circumstances, supportive friends who offer empowering advice become even more valuable.

Through significant friendships, both Daisey and Everest gained a support system and a deeper connection to their cultural identity within the university context. These connections helped them navigate the challenges of balancing their cultural background with the demands of university life. Everest reflected:

> Finding other Māori students helped me see that I didn't have to choose between my culture and my education. We could bring our whole selves to university, support each other, and succeed together.

This understanding resolves some tensions between the two worlds since the company of other Māori means that Everest's Māori self and her academic work can comfortably co-exist.

In summary, the experiences of Daisey and Everest illustrate how the theme of 'finding a friend' for Māori university students goes beyond mere social connection. It encompasses cultural affirmation, emotional support and practical guidance for navigating an unfamiliar academic landscape. These friendships become lifelines, helping students bridge the space between their cultural background and the demands of university life, ultimately contributing to their wellbeing, academic success and personal growth. Their stories highlight the critical importance of fostering environments within universities that facilitate these connections and support the distinct needs of Māori students.

### Theme 2: Connection with Māori

For Māori university students like Wairoa and Uenuku, the concept of 'connection with Māori' is not merely a social preference but a profound cultural, social and emotional necessity. This connection serves as a crucial lifeline and wellbeing support, helping these students navigate the often-challenging transition from their close-knit, culturally rich communities to the predominantly non-Māori urban university environment.

The significance of Māori connection for university students like Wairoa and Uenuku stems from the deep-rooted cultural values and collective identity inherent in Māori culture. For Māori, identity is intrinsically linked to *whakapapa* (genealogy), *whānau* (family) and community. As discussed above, connection is a key aspect of Māori wellbeing. When Māori students leave their familiar surroundings to pursue higher education, they often find themselves in an environment emphasising individualism and Western academic norms—a stark contrast to the collectivist, culturally-grounded Māori worldview.

The experiences of Wairoa and Uenuku vividly illustrate the challenges Māori students face when transitioning to university life and the critical need for connection with other Māori. Both students moved from small, predominantly Māori communities to urban university environments, a shift that brought significant cultural and social adjustments. Wairoa's experience highlights the profound sense of dislocation that can occur. He reflects on his struggle to form meaningful connections, even within the Māori student community:

> Maybe not isolated, but yeah, I did feel like even though this group [of Māori students] was isolated . . . I couldn't really . . . [get] any meaningful, meaningful connections with the other[s].

This reveals the complexity of Wairoa's situation. Even when surrounded by other Māori students, Wairoa found it challenging to forge deep, consequential connections. This suggests that mere proximity to other Māori is not enough; there is a need for structured opportunities and spaces that facilitate genuine connection and cultural expression.

Similarly, Uenuku experienced a significant culture shock when transitioning to the city university environment. He describes being 'quite shocked by the urban environments' after coming from 'a green environment to a man-made environment'. The drastic change in physical surroundings compounded the sense of disconnection from his cultural roots with disconnection from nature. Coming to university meant coping with these factors in addition to the academic workload.

Both Wairoa and Uenuku's experiences demonstrate the profound impact that connection (or lack of connection) with other Māori can have on a student's university experience. Without strong Māori connections, students often report feelings of isolation, disconnection from their cultural identity and a sense of being adrift in an unfamiliar environment. Uenuku's reflection captures this sentiment. Speaking of the gym, he says:

> [After considerable time] I finally found a space for myself where I can feel more and more . . . You know, open to express my own identity.

This admission underscores the long and often challenging journey many Māori students face in finding a sense of belonging and cultural affirmation within the university setting. Conversely, when Māori students do find meaningful connections with other Māori, the impact can be transformative. Wairoa's experience illustrates this. He recalls:

> I think, you know, this was also the time when I started to become more and more and more in my own cultural identity.

Experiences of disconnection and finding oneself through connection highlight the value of engaging with Māori-centred spaces and finding a supportive Māori community at the university level. In Wairoa's case, the strength he found in connection helped him express his cultural identity. Connection enhanced his sense of belonging and facilitated a deeper exploration and embracing of his Māori identity, a factor in his wellbeing. For Uenuku, in

addition to the gym, Āwhina, a Māori academic support unit, provided cultural and academic reassurance.

> I mean, it's familiar. You don't feel excluded. And that's because they're playing with the same rules that I play with. Especially if you grew up in a Māori centric environment, you already understand the rules and in order to have won in the game, everybody needs to know the rules. So, you don't feel left behind . . . It's familiar.

This experience suggests the indivisibility of *hinengaro* and *wairua* as factors that, when cared for, support academic progress through connection and the value of Māori-framed activities and spaces.

The experiences of Wairoa and Uenuku underscore the critical importance of 'connection with Māori' for Māori university students. Like finding a fried, this connection is a fundamental need that supports cultural identity, emotional wellbeing and academic success. The difference is one of scale. Finding a friend is deeply interpersonal, whereas connection with Māori is broader and more societal. As universities continue to strive for equity and inclusion, recognising and facilitating wider kinds of connections should be a priority. Experiences of cultural dissonance can lead to feelings of isolation, disconnection and even identity crisis.

## DISCUSSION

Māori students who participated in this study revealed negative experiences balanced by strengths found in relationships with others. The challenges in the needs for Māori connection are multifaceted. First, the university environment, with its emphasis on individual achievement and Western academic traditions, can feel at odds with Māori cultural values and ways of learning and lead to a sense of cultural disconnect, a disorientating experience of two worlds. This mirrors Māori experiences in education elsewhere (Matthews, 2016; Roberts & Stewart, 2014). Secondly, many universities may not have dedicated spaces or programmes that facilitate Māori cultural practices and connections and those that do are forced to defend them against claims of discrimination. Third, the Māori student population itself is diverse, with varying levels of cultural knowledge and connection. This can sometimes create barriers to connection for students who feel less confident in their cultural identity—although connection itself can act to (re)build a sense of identity as Māori. Next, the demands of academic life can make it challenging for students to prioritise cultural connections and activities, especially in environments where the value of connection is not appreciated as central to an individualised ethos. Finally, in many university courses, Māori students may find themselves as one of few, if not the only, Māori in their classes, limiting opportunities for casual cultural connection.

However, such issues are balanced by the power of connection exercised through friendship or at a wider scale. In both cases, links with other Māori are important to tertiary *tauiwa* for several reasons. First, connections with other Māori can provide a sense of cultural continuity, allowing students to maintain their cultural practices, speak *te reo Māori*, and engage in *tikanga* even while away from their home communities. In addition, shared experiences and understanding among Māori students also create a support network that can help navigate the challenges of university life, combating feelings of loneliness and alienation. Next, regular interaction with other Māori can reinforce and celebrate Māori identity, countering the potential erosion of cultural identity in the predominantly non-Māori academic environment and providing a balance between the two worlds (NZ Herald, 2024). Further, studies have shown that strong cultural connections can positively impact academic performance for indigenous students, providing motivation and a sense of purpose tied to cultural values and community expectations (Webber & Macfarlane, 2020). Finally, given that for Māori, wellbeing is holistic,

encompassing physical, mental, emotional and spiritual aspects, connection with other Māori supports wellbeing by addressing cultural and spiritual needs that may be overlooked in mainstream university support systems.

Tertiary providers can learn to do better by their Māori students (and themselves) by listening attentively to *tauiwa* voices, such as the four featured in this study, and taking appropriate actions. This means understanding the need for connection among Māori students operates on multiple levels. These include the cultural sharing and practising cultural traditions, speaking *te reo Māori* and engaging in *tikanga*; social forming friendships and support networks with other Māori students who understand shared experiences and challenges; spiritual—engaging in *wairuatanga* (spirituality) and maintaining connection to ancestral lands and traditions; academic—collaborating on studies, sharing indigenous knowledge and supporting each other's academic journeys; and the emotional—providing a safe space for expressing feelings, fears and aspirations unique to the Māori university experience. These levels are interwoven, and all contribute to the related nature of Māori wellbeing, widely discussed as embracing *wairua* (spirit), *whānau* (family network), *hinengaro* (mind) and *tinana* (body) (Durie, 1994; Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand, 2024) within a holistic entirety.

Listening to Māori *tauiwa* voices also means tertiary providers taking seriously the burden of balancing the two worlds experienced by those in this study, recognising these as representative of a wider issue of power and representation from which providers have much to learn about their environments and practices. Environments where Māori students feel isolated and/or experience racial discrimination, do not offer promise as learning spaces capable of transforming the world—a frequent university ambition.

In these circumstances, acting to build on prior or existing provisions (Wilson et al., 2011) or developing new spaces, programmes and opportunities for Māori students to connect with each other and their culture is a positive move. Such developments are a way universities can help bridge the space between the familiar, culturally rich environments these students come from and the often-unfamiliar terrain of higher education. In doing so, they not only support the individual success of Māori students—including to live as Māori, experience wellbeing and health, contribute as valued members of a global society and gain qualifications likely to lead to a high standard of living (Durie, 2004)—but also enrich the entire university community with the vibrant presence of Māori culture and perspectives. This, perhaps, is a contextually valid understanding of quality education.

## CONCLUSION

This article has offered a window into Māori student experiences in tertiary education by listening to the voices of *tauira* using a dialogic video approach. Key findings include the significance of finding an understanding friend, often a fellow Māori and wider connections with other Māori in the context of the tertiary world. Relational resources of this nature take on special significance where *rangatira* must navigate the opportunities and burdens of living in two worlds and where 'everyday colonialism' (Mayeda, 2014, p. 63), a contextual understanding of racism, is often to be endured. In these circumstances, tertiary providers are not helpless but can find steerage by listening to their Māori students, protecting the provisions they have made for developing connections amongst Māori and seeking opportunities to expand and sharpen positive provision that responds to circumstance and Māori aspirations. In so doing, it is likely that university goals of successfully graduating students and those elucidated by Māori to live as Māori, experience wellbeing and health, contribute as valued members of a global society and gain qualifications likely to lead to a high standard of living (Durie, 2004), will coincide in reinforcing rather than conflicting ways.

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# COMMUNITY VOCIES:

# Scholarly responses to *UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report 2024 Pacific Technology in Education*: *A tool on whose terms?*

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## AUSTRALIA

The *UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report 2024 Pacific Technology in Education*, newly released in late October 2024 in Samoa, discusses 17 countries: Australia, Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, New Zealand, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Tokelau and Vanuatu. To respond to the UNESCO Report from an Australian perspective, we considered the four pillars of the Pacific Regional Education Framework (PacREF): Quality and Relevance, Learning Pathways, Student Outcomes and Well-being and the Teaching Profession. These vary nationally, and continued work in each domain remains.

### Quality and relevance

The PacREF emphasises integrating local cultural values and knowledge into curriculum and programming. In Australia, there is a strong commitment to embedding culturally relevant education, particularly for Indigenous students. For instance, initiatives like **Digital Creative Storytelling document Indigenous stories** in collaboration with Aboriginal elders promotes engagement and cultural preservation. Research conducted with **270 primary and secondary students in Queensland** revealed that educational games make learning more engaging, encourage socialisation and enhance peer interactions among students. Furthermore, Australia's emphasis on foundational literacy and numeracy underlines that traditional and digital literacy skills must go hand-in-hand, recognising these as crucial for students' readiness for a technology-oriented future.

### Learning pathways

The PacREF encourages adaptable education pathways, allowing flexibility in policy and school-level decisions. Australia's approach to distance learning, especially for remote students, demonstrates flexibility and commitment to expanding access. Policies across Australian states endorse distance education. Australia's support for open and distance learning (ODL) through technology could serve as a model for Pacific nations addressing accessibility issues. Additionally, the Australian Government funded **18 million dollars (AUD) for a Cable Connectivity and Resilience Centre** in 2024, aiming to strengthen telecommunications infrastructure in the Pacific, which is crucial for expanding educational reach.

### Student outcomes and well-being

Improving student outcomes and well-being is central to the PacREF, and Australia's experience offers insights into technology's benefits and potential educational downsides. Studies show that **42% of approximately 600 Australian adolescents aged 17 to 19** spend more than four hours per day on social media, highlighting potential mental health risks linked to excessive screen time. Australia's balanced approach to technology use in schools includes policies like banning mobile phones in public schools in New South Wales, where primary students can bring phones only with teachers' approval. Furthermore, a study of **164 primary school students** using the ABRACADABRA reading tool found reduced disparities in reading outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, underscoring technology's potential to improve equity and outcomes.

### Teaching Profession

Supporting educators through professional development is a priority under the PacREF. Australia strongly emphasises equipping teachers with ICT skills, with **65% of educators** receiving formal training in technology integration, according to 2018 TALIS data. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's **Pacific Regional Development Program** supports Pacific educators, offering scholarships and training programs to empower them. Australia's initiatives align with PacREF's goals by fostering a skilled, tech-enabled teaching workforce that promotes accountability and shared understanding. For instance, the **2023–2026 Digital Strategy in South Australia, Queensland's Data Literature Framework, and Victoria Social Media Uses** provide specific guidelines for integrating technology into classrooms, supporting teachers in developing digital literacy and adaptable teaching skills across diverse contexts.

In summary, Australia's experience, as highlighted in the UNESCO Pacific Report, provides insights that support the PacREF pillars. By focusing on culturally relevant education, flexible learning pathways, balanced use of technology, and robust teacher support, Australia is working towards equitable approaches, and such educational strategies can serve as examples of regional exchange and sharing.

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## FIJI

Fiji and other Pacific nations have made significant strides in incorporating digital skills into their national education policies. The country has focused on equipping students with computer-related skills within the broader context of responsible citizenship. This approach ensures that students develop technical proficiency and understand the ethical responsibilities of using digital tools. This foundational framework helps students navigate the digital world responsibly. In contrast, neighbouring countries like Australia and New Zealand have expanded their scope to include digital literacy for employability and citizenship skills, preparing students for societal participation and the workforce. To enhance digital education further, Fiji and other Pacific nations could broaden their frameworks to address emerging technologies, such as cybersecurity, data privacy and artificial intelligence. As digital transformation accelerates globally, integrating these areas into the curriculum would better prepare students for a rapidly evolving job market and equip them with the necessary skills to navigate potential risks in a connected world. Expanding digital skills education would also help bridge the gap between technology access and usage, empowering students to use digital tools effectively for personal and professional growth.

### Technology in learning and online platforms in Fiji

The University of the South Pacific (USP) and Fiji National University (FNU) have adopted multimodal teaching methods that combine online, blended and print-based learning. This approach was especially vital during the COVID-19 pandemic when the Ministry of Education (MoE) distributed offline content packages to ensure students in remote areas with limited internet access could still access educational materials. Offline resources have been essential in Fiji, where the country's rugged terrain and dispersed population make establishing reliable internet infrastructure difficult, especially in rural and remote areas. To fully realise the potential of digital learning, Fiji needs increased investment in internet infrastructure, particularly in underserved regions. Additionally, providing affordable devices to students will help ensure that access to digital learning is not limited by cost or availability. Addressing these connectivity and device accessibility issues will create a more equitable learning environment where all students have the opportunity to benefit from digital education.

### Teacher ICT standards and professional development in Fiji

Like other Pacific nations, Fiji has implemented ICT competency standards for teachers to enhance teaching quality by equipping educators with the necessary skills to integrate digital tools into their classrooms. These frameworks guide professional development, ensuring teachers stay updated with evolving technologies and teaching methods. Fiji could implement ongoing teacher training programs focusing on digital tools and pedagogical strategies to strengthen technology integration. This professional development should be structured to help teachers adapt to new technologies while maintaining the quality and relevance of their teaching. Continuous updates on emerging digital trends and training on culturally relevant

content would also help teachers engage students meaningfully, fostering digital skills development.

### Sustainability and scalability in Fiji

Sustainability is a significant challenge for education technology in Fiji because many initiatives rely on donor funding, which may not be sustainable in the long term. To address this, Fiji must develop strategies to make self-sustaining technology investments. This could include local government initiatives, community involvement and partnerships with the private sector. As educators, policymakers and stakeholders, it is crucial to actively participate in making these strategies a reality and ensuring the future success of digital education in Fiji. Fiji has adopted hybrid learning models that combine print-based materials, online learning and face-to-face teaching. These adaptable models cater to varying levels of infrastructure and connectivity, ensuring that education remains accessible to all students, regardless of location. This flexibility is vital for making education technology scalable and sustainable across Fiji's diverse educational landscape.

### General information on education technology in Fiji

Fiji's geographical isolation and limited infrastructure present unique challenges for ICT integration in education. While ICT has significant potential to enhance educational outcomes, the costs and limited connectivity remain persistent barriers. However, mobile technology and social media have emerged as effective tools for improving communication between institutions, teachers, students and parents. Platforms like Moodle, Zoom, Google Chat, Seesaw and Teams are widely used for online learning and collaboration, even in areas with limited access to traditional infrastructure. The Fiji Education Management Information System (FEMIS) is another critical tool supporting educational data management, enabling the MoE to make informed decisions about policy development, resource allocation and monitoring progress. These technological innovations underscore the potential of ICT to improve Fiji's education system.

In conclusion, while Fiji has made significant progress in digital education, continued investment in infrastructure, teacher training and sustainable funding strategies are essential to ensure all students benefit from digital learning. By addressing these challenges, Fiji can create a more inclusive and adaptable education system that meets the evolving needs of its society. Aligning with the four priority themes of the Pacific Regional Education Framework—quality, learning pathways, student outcomes and the teaching profession—Fiji can build a resilient, sustainable education system for the future.

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## PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Technology in education holds transformative potential for Papua New Guinea (PNG), offering valuable opportunities for personalised, engaging and accessible learning to bridge educational gaps and prepare students for a digital future. While PNG faces notable challenges in technology implementation, especially in rural areas, the right investments and initiatives could leverage technology to enhance educational quality and accessibility nationwide.

A significant contributor of technology to education is through mobile phone access, which is increasingly common even in remote areas. Mobile technology allows for personalised, self-paced learning, much like the Accelerated Christian Education (ACE) curriculum, which adapts to students' individual learning paces and styles. Mobile applications also enable gamified learning experiences where students earn rewards and badges and progress through levels, which enhances engagement and motivates students to participate actively. These tools also provide students with opportunities to gain confidence in using technology. Students build digital literacy and cultivate skills essential for future learning and work environments by accessing mobile-friendly tools and learning to navigate the internet safely. Through technology, students can connect with peers or educational resources worldwide, gaining new perspectives and global awareness. Features like magnification, closed captions and speech-to-text applications make digital content more accessible, offering individualised support for students with disabilities. Additionally, technology can support home-school connections by allowing teachers to share classroom updates with parents, encouraging more active family involvement. Teachers, too, benefit from mobile apps that simplify assessment, grading, attendance tracking and behaviour management.

While the benefits of educational technology are clear, PNG's infrastructure limitations, particularly in rural areas, pose challenges to widespread technology adoption. Schools in urban areas often have better access to resources, such as computers, tablets and internet services, whereas rural schools lack reliable electricity and internet, limiting technology integration. The PNG government has acknowledged these disparities in its National Education Plan (NEP) 2020–2029 and introduced initiatives like the ICT in Schools Program to address them. However, uneven implementation and limited resources have resulted in slow progress. Furthermore, the availability of educational technology resources, such as e-learning platforms and digital learning materials, is minimal, and many teachers are not adequately trained in technology integration. Consequently, many educators continue to rely on traditional methods.

Community and NGO involvement has played a positive role, with some organisations launching localised technology programs, including mobile learning initiatives, to improve educational access. However, these efforts remain limited in reach. Acceptance of technology varies among communities, with some recognising its benefits and others preferring traditional methods, highlighting the need for a gradual and sensitive approach to technology adoption in diverse regions. Economic constraints further limit community and family investment in educational technology because basic needs often precede digital resources. As noted, internet

connectivity remains a significant barrier, particularly in rural areas, where reliable and affordable access is lacking.

The PNG government has committed to integrating technology into education through programs promoting ICT use, primarily concentrated in urban schools. The NEP 2020–2029 includes goals for using technology to improve educational access and quality, but resource constraints lead to slow and uneven progress across provinces. Some urban schools have partnered with NGOs or private sector groups to pilot e-learning initiatives, testing the use of digital resources in classrooms. Training teachers in ICT remains a focus, though many educators lack sufficient support, particularly in rural areas. While the Coral Sea Cable system has improved overall internet connectivity in PNG, infrastructure issues still hinder reliable internet access in many rural schools. Furthermore, financial limitations mean that essential technology, such as computers or tablets, is scarce, especially in remote areas where traditional teaching resources are still prevalent. Nevertheless, the government has expressed a commitment to further integrate technology, with plans to expand ICT infrastructure for education, though exact timelines remain uncertain.

In summary, technology in education offers PNG the potential to create a more inclusive, engaging and future-ready educational environment. However, significant efforts are needed to overcome infrastructure, training, and economic challenges, ensuring that all students, regardless of their location, have equitable access to the benefits that educational technology can provide.

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## MARSHALL ISLANDS

The *UNESCO General Education Monitoring Report Pacific Report 2024* highlights the critical educational challenges and advancements across 17 Pacific nations, including the Marshall Islands. The Marshall Islands, a remote yet increasingly connected nation, aligns its educational strategies with the Pacific Regional Education Framework (PacREF), focusing on four core pillars: Quality and Relevance, Learning Pathways, Student Outcomes and Well-being, and the Teaching Profession. This response examines the role of technology in advancing these pillars within the Marshall Islands, exploring its potential to enrich learning experiences, improve academic achievement and empower teachers to create dynamic and inclusive classrooms. The nation’s commitment to educational progress is evident in efforts to incorporate digital tools, promote continuous learning and address infrastructure limitations, aiming to build a resilient education system for future generations.

### Quality and relevance

Technology is vital for improving the quality of education in the Marshall Islands. By consolidating technological skills into the curriculum, students can develop knowledge that meets universal standards. These abilities encompass media literacy, digital content creation, and problem-solving, essential qualities for succeeding in today’s world. Implementing

standards like those from the International Society for Technology in Education guarantees that education stays pertinent and equips students for upcoming challenges.

## Learning pathways

Advanced technologies can create a flexible learning course. Digital devices and online programs can improve personalised learning experiences, empowering students to master the course at their own speed and based on their specific needs. For instance, Kiribati's online professional growth development programs suggest how innovation can offer continuous learning opportunities for students and teachers. Discussions with stakeholders ensure collaboration and commitment to make digital instruction accessible to each student regardless of location constraints. A recent development in the Marshall Islands Secondary Public Schools is the launch of pilot tutorial programs for students struggling academically (Math and English. These programs are part of the Education and Skills Strengthening Project (ESSP) financed by the World Bank. They use online resources, such as Khan Academy, and offline sources to offer lessons in Mathematics and English. The teachers receive training through workshops conducted by the STEM department of the College of the Marshall Islands. The project provided all public Secondary schools with laptops and connectivity options to enhance these tutorials. To overcome the problem of frequent power outages prevalent on the island, the ESSP supplied Starlink satellite dishes to guarantee reliable internet access for the schools. The ESSP has employed the expertise of the College of the Marshall Islands to manage the project.

## Student outcomes and well-being

There is no doubt that technology can enhance student academic performance. However, it also has challenges relating to the students' well-being, including excessive screen time, which can lead to physical problems and increased possibility of online harassment. Equipping students with digital competencies, such as communication, collaboration and secure online habits, can improve their academic results and foster personal development. It is crucial, however, to establish regulations to manage the use of technology to prevent future mental and physical problems.

## The teaching profession

Technology is reshaping the field of instruction within the Marshall Islands. Every educator should improve their digital literacy through professional development. Integration of technology into their instructional methods can be achieved by online training programs and adapted in class independently, depending on the availability of resources. The 2010 Comprehensive Technology Plan sets up standards for advanced competencies, ensuring teachers can utilise innovation to aid student education. However, the absence of advanced infrastructure and assets remains an issue. Handling these issues is vital to totally open the possibilities of technology in education.

## Final thoughts

In summary, technology has the potential to significantly enhance the education system in the Marshall Islands by elevating quality and applicability, offering varied learning opportunities, improving student performance, promoting communication and teamwork, and revolutionising the teaching profession. Tackling issues concerning digital safety, data security, and infrastructure will be essential for optimising the advantages of technology in education.

Through the efficient use of digital resources and tools, the Marshall Islands has the potential to develop a fairer and more efficient education system that equips students for the future.

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## SAMOA

### Ia to'a le va'ai i suiga: Staying vigilant in transformations

In global education today, there is advancement with the integration of technology and the rapid changes in tools for teaching and learning. Teacher competency is paramount for the effective implementation and monitoring of technology use for all learners regardless of their abilities and social inclusion. Whether we think ICT supports or distracts learning, the learners' interests should always be at the centre and educators must be vigilant of transformational changes to ensure equity and inclusivity in education for all regardless of their abilities.

The government of Samoa has invested in supporting the education of teachers at all levels through financial sponsorship to upgrade their skills and improve teacher quality. Digital education requires ongoing training and professional development as technology evolves faster and by the time we learn about a certain tool, another program has replaced it. Within the Faculty of Education (FOE) at the National University of Samoa (NUS), all teacher trainees when entering must enrol in a computing paper This is designed to equip teachers with the knowledge on how to navigate the rapidly growing era of technology we are experiencing today. Teachers being the guardians of knowledge in the classrooms for our young people are to keep abreast with pedagogical knowledge to manage the effective use of technology in teaching and learning.

In over 20 years of being an educator at tertiary institutions, I have witnessed the steady improvement in teacher competency and achievements in their use of technology. Reflecting on my years of being a university student, I can recall submitting written hard copies of assignments into boxes where lecturers collect and mark them before returning to students. Today at NUS, we have established well equipped computer labs with internet connection for all students to access. Additionally, about 40% of students have their own devices like laptops, tablets and smartphones which assist them in their pursuit of knowledge and have extended their smart, innovative thinking skills in using technology.

During the Covid 19 pandemic, NUS was quite successful in its response as staff and students were able to use the NUS television for information sharing and teaching. Other platforms like the use of Moodle for lecture notes, course readings, class activities, assignment submission and marking as well as general communications between staff and students was quite effective.

Since then, a lot of our courses offered within our faculty for teacher trainees from Early Childhood Education (ECE), primary to secondary level have moved from face-to-face mode to becoming fully online using platforms like zoom, teams and Moodle. Our students are

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finding these very convenient and have also encouraged their use of technology to access online resources like peer reviewed journal articles and more. At the same time, NUS has also increased the number of courses available on Open Distance Learning (ODL). It has opened doors for teachers out in the village community and the outer island of Savaii to enrol and be taught using this alternative way of learning. The teachers studying part time do not have to travel into town after school for their classes but could join online, therefore less stress and helps teachers' mental health and wellbeing.

The university also established partnerships with telephones and internet companies in sponsoring and providing credits for our students and staff during pandemic. Although there are positive impacts of technology in transforming teaching and learning, we must stay vigilant of the challenges associated with changes. For instance, teaching online should adhere to professional standards, safe links for students and cultural consideration for teachers. The use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and tools like ChatGPT, detecting plagiarism using the Turnitin software means teachers need to up their ICT game all the time. National ICT in Education Policies must also be updated to guide and facilitate the integration of ICT tools relevant to an enabling education environment whilst protecting all parties from cyberbullying, cybersecurity from hackers or any other form of abuse. Technology can also be unreliable at times with electricity costs associated with use of technology, and these are some of the challenges faced by teachers. Control on how to handle technology use in relation to students' mental health and wellbeing is also pertinent.

For a small island developing state like Samoa, we are quite remote from the outside world hence the need for a well-developed infrastructure in place to support the use of technology in education. Our national and education leaders need to be mindful in the drive for change ensuring there are legal frameworks in place and to develop a Masterplan for the use of ICT in Education, at the same time recognising the significant of ICT as an enabler and transformer of socioeconomic development. For example, in Samoa one digital provider company has recently launched its 5G network with the hope to enhance connectivity. This also requires proper monitoring of filtered internet use. The support of organisations like UNESCO, UNICEF and UNFPA could assist in this as one of the priorities for educational development in the Pacific including Samoa.

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## SAMOA

### Quality and relevance

Quality and relevance are reflected through adopting digital technology that offers accessible and flexible approaches to teaching and learning in Samoa. For instance, the National University of Samoa offers blended and distance learning that facilitate student interaction and knowledge acquisition in TVET and higher education programmes. The significance of Indigenous and culturally responsive strategies, such as storytelling, *talanoa* and participation in cultural activities, promote cultural awareness and preservation. Many school textbooks have been digitised and made publicly available, with relevant content contextualised and available in a familiar and understandable language. Such a strategy enhances the parents' role as second teachers in facilitating remote learning and student engagement.

### Learning pathways

The report states that the Samoa Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture has operated an education radio broadcasting unit as part of its ICT and Media Services since the 1940s. The continuous development and extension of open and distance learning provide opportunities for flexible learning pathways within Samoa, especially in higher education. Similar to the University of the South Pacific (USP), the National University of Samoa (NUS) is starting to offer online delivery of courses in various faculties. This initiative provides everyone access to quality education and training opportunities (Ministry of Finance Economic Policy and Planning Division, 2016).

### Student outcomes and well-being

Integrating content creation skills programmes in the Samoa schools' curriculum aims to engage students to develop skills essential for lifelong learning. The significance of enhancing student outcomes and well-being encourages the inclusion of digital skills into curricula and initiatives outside of formal education. Peer-to-peer learning and collaboration (Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture, 2018a) is promoted as well as awareness of the safety and well-being of individual members within the society. However, the government of Samoa recognises that current regulations do not adequately address threats from the use of technology to privacy, safety and well-being.

### Teaching profession

The report identifies that one of the five priorities of the Samoa Education Sector Plan 2019-24 is to increase the use of ICT in teaching strategy to make education and training more inclusive and accessible (Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture, 2018b). Although ICT training varies significantly across the region and the limited digital infrastructure hinders technology integration into classrooms and teacher training, SES is committed to improving ICT connectivity and network infrastructure; managing funds to assist schools and education

providers in meeting MSS and PSET QA standards; and ensuring education and training facilities comply with occupational health and safety laws.

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## SOLOMON ISLANDS

In the Solomon Islands, the education system can be improved by thoughtfully integrating technology by aligning with the four key policy areas of the Pacific Regional Education Framework (PacREF): Quality and Relevance, Learning Pathways, Student Outcomes and Well-being, and the Teaching Profession.

Technology has the potential to improve the quality of education by making learning more engaging and accessible. For instance, iResource is the Solomon Islands Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development (MEHRD) platform that supports teachers accessing curriculum resources and using technology to enhance classroom teaching. Platforms such as this can be used to ensure teachers have access to resources relevant to their context. Technology such as generative AI has the potential to make it easier to contextualise quality global open-source content to ensure examples and case studies build on local and Indigenous knowledge and transform curricula into interactive teaching resources, such as lesson plans, activities, slides and assessments.

Studies have found that student learning can be enhanced when teachers use structured pedagogy, which can be easily shared through platforms like iResource. However, more digital devices and affordable internet are needed to ensure all teachers, particularly those in remote areas, can access online learning platforms. Innovative approaches, such as mobile-first learning and satellite internet, are game changers for the Solomon Islands, where the dispersed island geography drives up the costs for traditional internet infrastructure and bulky digital hardware. Core to quality content for teachers and students is the availability of instructional designer staff who can develop interactive and engaging learning content and ICT staff who

can update and manage learning websites. These skills need to be developed and nurtured to provide sustainable support and extend the possible impacts of technology-enabled learning from within MEHRD. MEHRD staff can gain these skills through online training while also learning how to use generative AI and other tools to make their processes for developing learning content more efficient and impactful. Down the track, MEHRD can train teachers to use the curriculum and technology to generate their own customised classroom resources.

Beyond enhancing quality and relevance through access to structured pedagogy, technology can also help teachers connect with mentors and each other. When teachers connect, it improves knowledge sharing, prevents professional isolation, and improves teacher wellbeing. There is also huge potential for teachers to use technology to access professional learning, including short courses on content knowledge, pedagogy, behaviour management and beyond.

The iResource platform was mostly used during the COVID-19 pandemic to provide students with direct resources and enhance family and community engagement in learning. As with teachers, equity challenges persist; not all students and families have access to affordable internet and devices for learning. Technology has the potential to make it easier for students to access quality online learning, but an equity lens must be used to make sure no one is left behind. At the same time, assistive technologies can ensure more students with disabilities have the tools to participate in learning. Online learning resources could also be tailored to develop non-formal pathways for 'second-chance' learners to re-engage with education and training. The economic, societal and democratic imperative for more citizens to have foundational skills is evident. Online and blended pathways pose significant and novel opportunities for reaching the most marginalised Solomon Islanders if lessons from the past around sustainability and engagement are considered.

Finally, an analysis of the current policies and frameworks for learning in the Solomon Islands shows a gap and a need for a more comprehensive approach to developing online safety measures and defining and measuring digital skills within the national curriculum and teaching standards.

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## SOLOMON ISLANDS

"As we bring technology into our schools, we must ask: *On whose terms is this transformation happening?* Is it truly for our children, teachers, and future?"

Integrating technology in education is not straightforward in the Solomon Islands, where more than 84% of the population lives in rural villages and communities spread across remote islands. When the One Laptop per Child (OLPC) trial began over a decade ago, it aimed to provide affordable laptops for students to promote independent, quality learning (ACER, 2010). With no electricity access, charging devices became an obstacle and equipment failures were

common. Internet connectivity was also an issue. Despite the challenges, the children's use of the devices was enhanced. However, without continuous support, the program eventually folded, highlighting the major flaw that globally designed solutions introduced without considering local realities often fail.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Solomon Islands National University transitioned its Teacher in Training (TiT) program to an online and offline learning format. Tablets were issued to students, providing a lifeline for education, yet rural students still struggled. Many had to travel long distances to charge devices or find internet access. The tablets had limited storage capacity and were prone to technical problems. As a result, the TiT program almost failed because assignments could not be submitted, Zoom sessions were interrupted, and there were communication and storage space issues. Students highlighted the preference for face-to-face learning and using printed materials during the end-of-semester unit evaluation exercise conducted with full-time students. Lecturers indicated an experience of reduced workload with the blended mode of learning.

While technology promises to close educational gaps, it often overlooks the unique challenges faced in the Pacific. In the Solomon Islands, many schools lack computer labs, and those with labs cannot maintain them. Teachers need training to use digital tools to support their students. For families struggling to make ends meet, buying additional devices isn't feasible, deepening the divide for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The cultural implication of a digital future also raises concerns. The Elders worry about its impact on cultural values, language and traditions. For example, some church-run schools allow computer labs but prohibit mobile phones because of concerns about outside influences and disturbance to study. There are fears that digital learning could erode traditional knowledge and language.

With technology unlocking new possibilities, we must ensure it aligns with our children's and teacher's needs. To create a future where digital tools truly serve Solomon Islanders, we must prioritise the development of infrastructure and support, train our teachers and maintain a dialogue between communities, schools and cultural groups.

We must continue asking: Can we shape a digital education future that honours our unique context and strengthens our communities without compromising who we are? The technological transformation must be on our terms.

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## SOLOMON ISLANDS

The University of the South Pacific Solomon Islands Campus was established in 1971 as the USP Solomon Islands Centre. The establishment intended to service and support local extension (distance) courses; provide satellite communication through USP-Net; provide Community and Continuing Education courses suited to local needs; and act as the University's Main Presence in Solomon Islands (SI Campus Academic Plan, 2015). These continued to be the main activities of the Centre when it changed its name to a Campus. The intention remained, but the pedagogical approaches have changed. Previously, courses and textbooks were sent to those from remote areas in the Pacific region. The pedagogy used now is online learning, and resources are developed for curriculum delivery that fits the current context of the Solomon Islands and the region.

### Quality and relevance

The USP has taken the lead on online deliveries for Pacific Island countries, which has influenced Pacific Island nations and, in particular, the Solomon Islands Government and its people to utilise USP to help provide a strong comparative advantage in specialist and important areas of expertise, such as ICT; an area much in need of development in the Solomon Islands. It was believed that ICT may provide the resources to contribute to knowledge-based industries and the development and success of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the Solomon Islands. Consistent with this, the Government has stated that USP can assist the Solomon Islands by providing policy advice and research to support future efforts to develop new resource-based industries. With this understanding, the Solomon Islands as a country recognised the use of ICT in its education system and, in particular, to support school leaders in their use of ICT devices to support school curriculum delivery (Irosaki, 2024 unpublished). This support is common throughout the Pacific Island countries regarding teaching for effective learning using ICT devices.

The National Education Action Plan 2022–2026 has highlighted the need to use ICT for effective learning. The Action plan encourages the provision of quality curriculum and teaching materials through digital technology to fit the needs of populations during events like the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies supported the opportunities for new strategies to ensure ICT teachers are provided with quality educational materials, including accessible online resources that meet the needs of learners (Irosaki, 2024, unpublished).

### Pathway forward for the Solomon Islands

A study conducted among Solomon Islands USP students has highlighted strong support for using online learning as a pedagogical approach for effective learning and teaching. The experience of COVID-19 changed people's perspective on online learning and teaching. Online learning positively impacts students, their parents, families and communities (Dorovolomo et al., 2021). The shift to the online mode meant that assessments could continue to be conducted, classes ran, and students, who were restricted from movements by the pandemic, could continue their studies. This ensured the sustainability of students' academic work and support.

The study also found that ICT and online learning and teaching provided by USP enabled more accessible communication with students all over the region, not just in Fiji. The Solomon Islands Campus benefited from the pedagogical change despite initial adjustments to courses to bring them fully online. Solomon Islands students participating in the Dorovolomo et al. study agreed that the shift was necessary and timely.

The study also supported the intention to continue offering online learning at USP in the post-pandemic period. One significant supporting factor was the increased retention of students. It was evident from participants that university communication was crucial in students' perseverance with their studies during the pandemic. USP should, therefore, continue to systematically promote technology-based learning so that it reaches even the remote areas of the Solomon Islands, where the majority of the population is located.

While there were drawbacks from the absence of face-to-face opportunities with lecturers and hands-on activities for practical activities and lack of satisfaction and motivation compared to the traditional face-to-face mode of educational delivery, students find it easier to persevere and complete their studies online. Online learning may not be perfect because staff might not reply to emails, and their Moodle set-up and contents might be confusing and ambiguous. Additionally, internet access is costly, particularly for students at the Solomon Islands Campus. However, students get to learn to work independently online and learn new technologies as part of being on Zoom regularly or sitting an online exam (Dorovolomo et al., 2021)

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## A COMPREHENSIVE RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

This comprehensive UNESCO report on the Pacific shows numerous encouraging initiatives in the use of technology in education while implying challenges, which may serve as valuable insights for other countries.

The digitalisation of resources in the Pacific has grown, highlighting the importance of content accessibility and the application of technology. Nevertheless, challenges persist in internet connectivity, the availability of devices, costs and skilled manpower. The discontinuation of the School Net initiative in Samoa, which developed 33,000 learning resources for its e-library, is an example of the challenge (UNESCO, 2024). Similarly, it parallels the One Laptop per Child initiative, where Tuvalu is the sole example of success in eight Pacific nations where it was implemented (UNESCO, 2024).

While initiatives focus on local languages in the region, the Solomon Islands, Tokelau, and Fiji have also prioritised cultural relevance (UNESCO, 2024). However, cultural relevance in education remains ambiguous in the Pacific context. Personal critical consciousness is integral to culturally relevant education, fostering critical reflection and cultural aptitude through teachers' attitudes and the curriculum (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995a as cited in Aronson & Laughter, 2016). Thus, defining cultural relevance within each context may be advantageous.

Collaborative efforts and contextual approaches appear to be effective strategies for enhancing open and distance learning for all learners. The Archipels Connect initiative enables students to access distance learning without needing to relocate, which is a commendable example (UNESCO, 2024). Samoa is another notable case that effectively employed radio and television to support learners during a crisis (UNESCO, 2024). These examples reaffirm the need for well-designed technology or approaches encouraging disadvantaged learners to access education.

Most countries have policies that pertain to learners with disabilities. 11 out of 15 Pacific Island nations have policies identifying technology to support them (UNESCO, 2024). Evidence indicates that assistive technologies (AT) facilitate daily activities and enhance the overall well-being of learners with disability (Kamran & Bano, 2024). However, when AT is inadequate, countries pursue alternative options. For instance, Papua New Guinea employed sign language, subtitles for video content and adaptations of materials to effectively reach their learners (UNESCO, 2024). These initiatives highlight the imperative requirement for inclusive and adaptable technologies for all learners.

Variations in definitions of digital skill, applicability, integration into pedagogy and policies concerning digital privacy are evident. Integrating digital privacy and cybersecurity into the curriculum in Australia, Samoa and Kiribati is noteworthy (UNESCO, 2024). Similarly, inconsistencies are apparent in privacy policy. For instance, the Marshall Islands' children's privacy rights do not address technology use in education. Papua New Guinea indirectly

* Note: The views and opinions expressed are solely those of the author and do not reflect the official position of the World Bank.

promotes data privacy by illegalising unauthorised data access (UNESCO, 2024). Thus, a shared regional understanding of digital privacy and clear regulations is necessary.

Teacher training in the Pacific has undergone a significant transformation. Nonetheless, challenges persist. A survey across 15 Pacific Island countries revealed that 77% of teachers report a lack of basic devices for their use (UNESCO, 2024). However, there have been initiatives in New Zealand and Australia where teachers can lease laptops or tablets and borrow kits that include lesson plans at no cost through a national lending library (UNESCO, 2024). As stated in the report, teachers in many Pacific countries indicate not having received ICT training, thereby exhibiting a lack of confidence. Critical, overlooked areas are online safety and teachers' capacity building

In conclusion, to enhance technology integration in education, it is imperative to establish contextualised technology, adequate resources and a robust infrastructure to improve access. Additionally, it is critical to develop both long- and short-term implementation plans to ensure sustainability.

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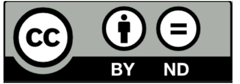


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# BOOK REVIEW:

# Critical perspectives on equity and social mobility in study abroad: Interrogating issues of unequal access and outcomes

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**BOOK REVIEW:** C. Glass & P. Gesing (Eds.). (2021). *Critical perspectives on equity and social mobility in study abroad: Interrogating issues of unequal access and outcomes.* Routledge. ISBN:978 036 770 3509. 196 pages.

International student mobility has often been conceived as an avenue for upward social mobility and, if paired with appropriate training, developing intercultural competence and other skills to professionally succeed in the global village. However, multiple contextual factors may stratify access to student mobility or hinder its potential. *Critical perspectives on equity and social mobility in study abroad: Interrogating issues of unequal access and outcomes* interrogates aspects related to cultural and socioeconomic dynamics that affect students' access, outcomes and experiences. This edited volume (11 contributions by 23 authors) calls for bringing equity and wider accessibility to international education and offers suggestions for addressing inequalities and promoting social justice within the field.

In the introduction, the editors historically contextualise international student travel to the U.S. from the 1950s up to post-COVID-19, offering political and economic factors that affect cross-border student mobility. They then outline the future of student mobility against the backdrop of the fading hegemony of the U.S. as an international study destination and the pandemic's impact on low-income and minority students' study abroad experiences.

Part I (Chapters 2–4) addresses the challenges faced by students from different countries and backgrounds regarding accessibility, such as economic and language barriers, strenuous visa application processes, or lack of institutional support. Chapter 2 presents the case of two partner higher education institutions in the UK and Thailand to discuss power imbalances in bilateral exchange programs concerning the development of the agreement, language of instruction and funding. It suggests strategies for more equal and meaningful internationalisation partnerships between institutions, particularly Western and Global South institutions. Chapter 3, on Muslim international students, draws on the experiences of Iraqi and Ugandan Muslim international students in Western countries, revealing that despite challenges, this group of students remains positive about studying abroad being an opportunity to get better jobs or escape politically unstable environments.

Chapter 4 identifies key factors influencing the sustainability of study abroad programs in rural community colleges. These include: study abroad directors' leadership skills and their ability to forge relationships with students, families and other stakeholders; and institutional support (e.g., funding and public encouragement). The chapter underscores the need to overcome barriers to participation and access and advocates for the need to bring about structural changes that enhance opportunities for rural community college students.

Part II (Chapters 5–8) focuses on variances in the outcomes of study abroad programs in the careers of international students. Chapter 5 discusses inter- and intra-regional differences between employers' perceptions of the value of studying abroad and makes a case for how study abroad programs contribute to or subvert labour market inequalities. Based on a comparative case study between three different geographical areas (East Asia, Europe and North America), the chapter foregrounds that its value 'varies depending on industry, characteristics of programs, professional position, applicants' background, the home country of the employer as organization, and the country and region in which they are located' (p. 67). For instance, while most employers in East Asia (except Japan) view study abroad as a prospective candidate's valuable asset, mainly because it likely indicates higher foreign language skills, many North American employers do not place such value in these experiences *per se*. Chapter 6 describes the push and pull factors (Altbach, 2004) that intervene in the decision-making process of international students to stay in the host country (in this case, the U.S.) upon completion of their study abroad program. The chapter outlines a complex interplay of political (e.g., visa policies or general attitudes towards women), economic (e.g., career and job opportunities) and social factors (e.g., cultural challenges throughout the adaptation process and racial discrimination) in the host and home country that affect students' decisions. The authors also advocate for the implementation of policies that redress these factors. Chapter 7 addresses a research gap in the field of employability for international students by offering an account of the experiences of Chinese international doctoral students and their views on study abroad experiences, employability and career-related opportunities. The authors recommend strategies to assist international students in their job searches. Chapter 8 discusses the impact of study abroad experiences on students' careers after graduation. Based on a survey of graduates who majored in social sciences and humanities at a Japanese university, the authors suggest that study abroad experiences allow for the acquisition of subject-specific and intercultural competencies, which lead to the formation of human capital and, subsequently, to career development.

Part III (Chapters 9–11) covers other strategies to expand opportunities for different groups to participate in study abroad programs. Chapter 9 critically examines the role of language, particularly English-centrism, in creating and perpetuating inequities and stratification in U.S. study-abroad programs. The authors draw attention to how students of colour and non-English language minorities have often been sidelined in international higher education research and suggest some strategies that may promote equity and inclusion in studying abroad. With the same commitment to advancing social justice, Chapter 10 devises the framework Global Citizenship 1-2-3 (Putman & Byker, 2020) as a conceptual basis for study abroad programs and foregrounds its importance as an action-oriented model. Based on a three-step approach (learn, think, act), this model aims to develop learners' global competencies by combining (1) acquiring culturally responsive

knowledge, (2) developing intercultural awareness, and (3) engaging in experiential opportunities (p. 154). The authors examine three case studies of international programs for teacher candidates grounded on this approach. They also advocate for designing study abroad programs that apply the Global Citizenship 1-2-3 model in all the facets of student mobility. Chapter 11 offers a compendium of classroom activities for undergraduate students to provide intercultural exchange and diversity awareness opportunities for students from non-diverse backgrounds studying in ethnically homogeneous contexts.

This edited volume is a timely and necessary contribution to the fields of higher education, internationalisation and intercultural communication. It critically examines internationalisation strategies and study-abroad initiatives in universities and community colleges. While a significant body of scholarly work foregrounds the benefits of study abroad initiatives—such as the development of communicative competence in foreign languages (Kinginger, 2008), intercultural sensitivity (Anderson et al., 2006) and functional knowledge (Sutton & Rubin, 2004), as well as improved career opportunities and wages (Kratz & Netz, 2016)—other scholars have problematised these initiatives and pointed out the limitations of their outcomes (e.g., Dessoff, 2006; Knight, 2009; Penn & Tanner, 2009; Salisbury et al., 2013). In line with this previous critical body of work, the authors of this volume explore issues related to access and offer a nuanced overview of the impacts of these initiatives. Furthermore, they make a case for how social justice and equity issues ought to be central to international educational efforts and successfully outline strategies to this end.

With a cross-national approach and a holistic perspective that brings together first-hand accounts of international students, case studies of study abroad programs in different countries, critical literature reviews and educators' experiences, this edited volume adds to the literature on study abroad by focusing on inequities that are at play throughout and after study-abroad programs as well as career-related outcomes, such as employability and employers' perceptions. Perhaps additional reflections on the outcomes of study abroad for secondary school students or the dynamics of study abroad programs between universities in the Global South could be added to future editions of the book. Furthermore, despite being briefly commented on in the introduction, the scope of the volume could also benefit from a chapter devoted to discussing past and ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on study-abroad programs.

Overall, *Critical perspectives on equity and social mobility in study abroad* pushes the field of the internationalisation of education forward. It is a valuable read for administrators, study abroad leaders, faculty, students, DEI officers and intercultural trainers. Additionally, this book could serve as a reliable guide to policymakers since contributors also provide many possible strategies to address inequities and power imbalances and offer opportunities to students to think critically about issues related to interculturality and diversity in a domestic setting. While acknowledging the numerous positive outcomes of study abroad experiences, this edited volume advocates for structural changes that address uneven access and power dynamics in the field, aiming to create more socially just societies.

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# BOOK REVIEW:

# Social governance and educational reform in contemporary China

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Shizheng Feng (2023). *Social governance and political order in contemporary China*. London: Routledge. ISBN: 978-1032416960. 238 pages.

Philip Wing Keung Chan (2020). *Public education reform and network governance: Lessons from Chinese state-owned enterprise schools.* London: Routledge. ISBN: 9781138625082. 192 pages

The landscape of social governance and education in China offers a rich field for academic inquiry, having achieved significant milestones such as implementing nine-year compulsory education, expanding higher education and promoting vocational training programs. These initiatives have substantially contributed to poverty reduction and economic prosperity over recent decades. However, this progress has also brought forth numerous challenges and issues, such as disparities in education quality, regional inequities and the complexities of balancing state and market governance (Guo et al., 2019). These issues have been widely researched, highlighting the ongoing difficulties in achieving equitable and effective educational reform in China.

This review examines two significant works on Chinese governance and educational reform: Shizheng Feng's *Social governance and political order in contemporary China* (2023) and Philip Wing Keung Chan's *Public education reform and network governance: Lessons from Chinese state-owned enterprise schools* (2020). These books illuminate the intricate relationships between governance, policy implementation and social order, offering valuable insights and perspectives on modern Chinese governance and educational reform.

Feng's book offers an in-depth exploration of the Chinese state's strategies to maintain social and political order, delving into the historical evolution of governance and analysing the relationship between law and politics. The book examines how legal reforms, driven by political imperatives, contribute to the state's legitimacy and ability to manage social conflicts. A significant portion of Feng's book is dedicated to the petitioning system, which allows citizens to present grievances directly to the authorities and serves as a mechanism for addressing social discontent. Feng includes a detailed analysis of the system's evolution, its role in social governance and its impact on state-citizen relations. Feng also explores the broader issue of social conflicts, analysing the

state's strategies for managing and mitigating these conflicts. The book examines various forms of social unrest, such as labour disputes, land conflicts and environmental protests, and how the state's responded to these challenges. Feng argues that the state's approach often involves a delicate balance between coercion and co-optation. He concludes with a discussion of the paradoxes inherent in China's transformation. They are the contradictions between economic liberalisation and political control, the challenges of balancing development with stability and the tensions between central and local governance. Feng's final reflections consider the prospects of China's social governance and political order, acknowledging both achievements and ongoing challenges.

Chan's book provides an in-depth analysis of the transformation of State-Owned Enterprise (SOE) schools in China, which were initially established by government-owned businesses to provide education to the children of their employees. These schools played a crucial role in the public education system, especially when the government lacked sufficient resources to fund education nationwide. The book examines the transition from state-controlled to more autonomous, market-oriented educational institutions, drawing on network governance theories to this reform process. Chan highlights the historical context where SOEs were established to serve enterprise employees' children while being tightly controlled by the state. With the economic reforms and introduction of market mechanisms, the government sought to separate educational institutions from direct enterprise control to improve efficiency, accountability and educational outcomes. A network governance approach is a decentralised governance where various stakeholders (including government agencies, schools, parents and the community) collaborate to manage and improve educational services. This approach, seen as more adaptable to modern educational needs by policymakers and education practitioners, contrasts with the traditional hierarchical model. Through detailed case studies, Chan illustrates how SOE schools have navigated this transition. The case studies of the Railway SOE schools in Harbin and Shenzhen reveal improvements in school management and educational quality, as well as issues such as disparities in resource allocation and the need for capacity-building among administrators and teachers. The book also discusses the Modern Enterprise System (MES) implemented in the reform process to transform SOEs into profit-oriented entities with greater autonomy, necessitating the separation of their social functions, including education.

The two books, although focused on different explorations, share interests in several related topics. I discuss three of them here: (1) governance models, (2) the role of the state, and (3) centralisation versus decentralisation. First, governance models in China offer a unique blend of authoritarian control and modernisation efforts. Both Feng and Chan explore the complexities of these models, with Feng examining them through the lens of social and political order and Chan focusing on their impact on public education reform.

Feng examines the broader social governance mechanisms, including the roles of law and politics in maintaining order, and focuses on two universal issues in contemporary Chinese social governance and political order: the entanglement of law and politics, and the mode of 'movement governance'. He argues that 'movement governance' (Feng, 2023, p. 14) is one of the most distinctive features of China's social governance model. Feng's 'national movement' refers to a wide range of movements; he examines their

formation, status and historical development. Feng's analysis enhances our understanding of how these governance structures address complex social issues in China. He argues that national movements are pivotal in mobilising societal resources and aligning local efforts with national goals. They are often initiated by the state and serve to address urgent social issues and implement significant policy changes efficiently.

In contrast, Chan focuses on the governance model in SOE schools under the central planning system. Examining the transition from hierarchical to network governance in SOE schools, Chan argues that the governance model was still characterised by a highly centralised structure since these schools were directly controlled by the state and managed by the SOEs. This centralisation ensured uniform policies and guaranteed funding but often led to inefficiencies and limited autonomy for the schools. Chan's analysis provides insight into the challenges and potential benefits of shifting towards a more decentralised, network-based governance model.

Second, the role of the state in China is central to both works. Feng depicts the state as playing a central and dominant role in governance and social transformation and characterises the state's power in terms of its ability to mobilise resources and enforce its will to achieve modernisation and political goals. Feng (2023) states: 'The modernisation of China requires a "strong start" because only a strong state can defend the political and economic independence of the nation' (p. 23). When analysing the petitioning system, Feng states:

> The state is not a simple counterpart of social ideas, structures, and processes, but a relatively autonomous subject of action with its own relatively independent preferences, interests, and operational mechanisms. (p. 116)

On the other hand, Chan's book discusses the state's role in educational governance and the transition from a hierarchical to a network governance model. The state's influence remains significant, particularly in policymaking and governance reform. Chan (2020) discusses the relationship between state and network governance as:

> The key members in a Chinese policy community are the state as actor and government departments at the central level but not local governments and their agencies, nor non-state actors. (p. 36)

These summaries and quotes illustrate the pivotal role the state plays in governance and policy implementation in China, emphasising its centralised control and its adaptive strategies in response to changing governance needs.

Third, both books are interested in 'centralisation versus decentralisation' debates, discussing China's transition from a centralised system to a more networked or decentralised form of governance. This transition reflects broader shifts in governance models and the state's approach to managing society and public institutions. Feng's book highlights that China's modernisation has traditionally relied on a strong, centralised state. The central government has historically wielded considerable power to mobilise resources and implement policies nationwide. He proposes the concept of despotic power as central to understanding this control. 'Despotic power refers to the range of actions which the (state) elite is empowered to undertake without routine, institutionalised negotiation with civil groups' (Feng, 2023, p. 51), underscoring the top-down nature of decision-making. The decentralisation shift involves the state facilitating more localised

decision-making processes and incorporating a broader range of stakeholders into governance mechanisms.

In comparison, Chan describes a highly centralised governance model under the central planning system in the context of SOE schools. Such a model stresses direct state control over educational institutions, with SOEs managing schools on behalf of the state. The governance structure is characterised by strict hierarchical control and centralised decision-making processes. These schools were directly controlled by the state and managed by the SOEs. Chan's book examines the transition from this centralised model to one that incorporates network governance. This new governance model allows for more decentralised and participatory decision-making processes that involve various stakeholders, such as local governments, schools and non-state actors. Network governance represents a shift towards a more collaborative and flexible approach, enabling better coordination and problem-solving. 'Network governance provides an innovative way for states to guide their societies, largely in response to the inadequacy of the hierarchical governance model' (Chan, 2020, p. 33).

In a comparative analysis of similarities, both books highlight the inherent tension between centralisation and decentralisation in China's governance. They underscore the necessity of a strong central state to maintain national unity and implement large-scale policies, while also recognising the benefits of decentralising certain functions to improve efficiency and responsiveness. Regarding differences, while Feng's book focuses on the broader implications of centralisation and decentralisation across various aspects of governance, Chan's book provides a more focused analysis of the education sector, particularly the transition within SOE schools.

Both authors offer compelling arguments. Feng's strength lies in his detailed examination of the petitioning system and its role in maintaining social order, providing a unique perspective on state-citizen interactions. His historical analysis effectively highlights the evolution of governance mechanisms, though his approach occasionally lacks a deeper exploration of grassroots movements and their impact on governance. Conversely, Chan's work excels in its practical application of network governance theories to the educational sector, with robust case studies from SOE schools that illustrate the challenges and successes of governance reform. However, Chan's analysis might have benefited from a broader scope, incorporating a variety of educational institutions to strengthen the generalisability of his findings. Both authors adeptly utilise their chosen methodologies, yet their works would be enriched by addressing these respective gaps, offering a more holistic view of Chinese governance and educational reform.

In conclusion, Feng's and Chan's works provide valuable frameworks for understanding China's governance evolution. Their analyses highlight the importance of balancing centralisation with decentralisation, offering lessons pertinent to China's governance systems and governance systems worldwide.

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