Complex times and needs for locals: Strengthening (local) education systems through education research and development in Oceania

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Researching and theorizing the local in education is often a contested space linked to deficit views of indigenous people by "others". Certainly, the intention to research the local was a consistent concern linked to colonization in the Pacific. The use of the term "local" assumes the disempowering of the knowledge and worldviews of Indigenous people to the moana-Oceania. Indigenous academics have contributed to decolonization discourse linked to disrupting Western research ideals and practice and my fatongia *(obligation and responsibility) in this paper is to specifically share and highlight my experiences as a fellow for the University of the South Pacific (USP) Institute of Education (IOE), whose regional purpose is to support and strengthen the education systems within the region through education research and development.*

Within the postcolonial Pacific context, the complex roles and responsibilities of local educators and researchers continues to infiltrate one's views and assumptions of who education is for, and whose purpose it serves. In this paper, I highlight IOE's role as a regional institution focused on privileging Local and Indigenous knowledges as strengths and working together with regional and international agencies to support and strengthen local education systems in Oceania. Although Pacific professionals continue to perpetuate out-dated colonial systems, including education, I argue that there is an existing body of work and expertise by local people on the rise who are seeking to disrupt the out-dated colonial systems that have greater impetus on the mobilizing of indigenous knowledge and research in the moana.

Keywords: Local and Indigenous knowledge; Oceania; development; education research; Institute of Education; Strengthening

INTRODUCTION

The late 'Epeli Hau'ofa, a Tongan writer and scholar, defined the term *moana* as the ocean, affirming that our islands are intimately connected by the *moana* (Hau'ofa, 1998). *Moana-nui-a-kiwa* is a term associated with the great Ocean/Pacific Ocean (Ferris-Leary, 2013). According to Hau'ofa (1998), the concept of "Oceania" is one that encompasses "a more accommodating, inclusive, and flexible view of people as . . . human beings with a common heritage and commitment, rather than as members of diverse nationalities and races. Oceania refers to a world of people connected to each other" (pp. 401–402). Although Hau'ofa's use of Oceania may appear as a homogenizing tool, its real strength

lies in its political intention that favours inclusivity. Hau'ofa (1998) posits that "anyone who has lived in our region and is committed to Oceania is an Oceanian" (p. 402). Specifically, Oceania is:

> [A]n identity that is grounded in something as vast as the sea should exercise our minds and rekindle in us the spirit that sent our ancestors to explore the oceanic unknown and make it their home, our home. I would like to make it clear at the outset that I am not in any way suggesting cultural homogeneity for our region. Such a thing is neither possible nor desirable. Our diverse loyalties are much too strong for a regional identity ever to erase them. Besides, our diversity is necessary for the struggle against the homogenising forces (Hau'ofa, 1998, p. 393).

In this paper, I position myself as a *moana* (and local) researcher who engages in research practice within Oceania. I highlight and take an Oceanic perspective of the education of local people. As a fellow at the University of South Pacific (USP) Institute of Education (IOE), I not only serve Tonga, where my heritage roots are grounded, but also the other 11 Small Island Nations/Territories (SINs) that USP serves within the region. I utilize the term "Indigenous" as a descriptor; evidently used by many *moana* scholars to position themselves within the postcolonial era as a purposeful attempt to disrupt the misappropriation and imposition of "colonization" and "colonial power" on their lives, and systems within local societies (Smith, Maxwell, Puke, & Temara, 2016). Moreover, I use the term "Indigenous" as a descriptor for Oceanic people in the international context.

As a local *moana* researcher and educator within Oceania, I take on a dual positionality: that of an "insider" and "outsider". This critical two-fold lens provides understanding of what it means to be part of the local community and as a researcher in academia. Rather than the imposition of others' views exclusively from "outside" and making claims of how education should be for Oceanic people, this paper highlights the reflective experiences of one who is currently learning to serve, learn from, work together with, and search for ways to support and strengthen Oceanic people and their educational needs.

Despite the presence of regional aid programs and initiatives in the postcolonial Pacific, improving the education of local people continues to be a struggle for many small island nations (SINs). Many academics have attributed the struggle to inadequate education systems that are not always responsive to the needs of their local communities (Johansson Fua, 2007; Koya-Vaka'uta, 2016; Thaman, 2008). For decades, local educators and researchers have argued for appropriate and relevant programs and initiatives that highlight local knowledge and wisdoms as being central and appropriate to the education of Pacific people (Bishop & Glynn, 1999; Smith, 1999; Taufe'ulungaki, 2003; Thaman, 2007). However, for some small island territories in Micronesia and Polynesia, for instance that are administered by the US and France, many education programs and initiatives are dependent on the political and compact agreements with their colonial administrators.

An insistent concern, as expressed by Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, is evident in the claim that "local professionals are still attempting to preserve out-dated colonial structures and the logic of the system still supports the approaches favoured by old colonial powers" (Ma Rhea, 2013, p. 11). It is a concern because, despite the number of research studies that focus on decolonizing Western practices within schooling and in higher education in the Pacific, including Tonga (Koya-Vaka'uta, 2016; Sanga & Reynolds, 2017; Thaman, 1999; Thaman, 2014a), there are still leaders and educators who favour the colonial structures and systems of the old. There is also ambiguity in local

parents valuing their indigenous knowledge and language at home and in the community but at the same time wanting their children to acquire Western knowledge and language within schooling and in higher education. This paper seeks to unfold some of the ways that the (IOE) has addressed the complexities through its regional research projects.

Education research in the past has not always benefited people in Oceania. Through regional development projects, several initiatives developed in the past to improve education in the Pacific were framed from a predominantly Western view (Taufe'ulungaki, 2003; Thaman, 2007; Thaman, 2008). As such, the theoretical underpinnings from a Western lens of what constitutes education did not appropriately capture local strengths and learning experiences. In the past, the tendency to see deficits in local education was more prominent in educational research and interventions as opposed to highlighting the strengths that exist within those systems. When research is framed using Indigenous concepts and research frameworks, it is a grounded practice because its centre is from within Indigenous peoples' knowledges and lived realities, thus capturing the essence within and highlighting the strengths within the people and local communities.

Educational research that makes a difference to the lives of Oceanic peoples and the community is what defines the notion of research impact (Taufe'ulungaki, 2003; Taufe'ulungaki, 2014). In spite of the diverse institutional expectations of what constitutes research impact, for many institutions the idea of "research impact" is associated primarily as based on the journal ranking in which local research projects are published. Often, the local research studies are published in contexts whereby the readers are from outside of the region. As well, institutional understanding of "research impact" is linked to the number of times that a research journal article is cited, and this is usually by those in academia that are outside of the region. For the IOE, this means ensuring that educational research and its impact on local people and their communities are at the forefront of their efforts. As an emerging local researcher, I have chosen to share my experiences serving our local people within this particular journal because I believe there are people who are generally invested in the work and efforts to improve educational research, educational systems, and educational experiences and outcomes across SINs within the Oceania region.

FATONGIA NGĀUE 'I MOANA-NUI-A-KIWA: AN INSIDER/OUTSIDER VIEW

The idea of what constitutes researching and theorizing "the Local" can be understood in terms of one's positionality and his/her role and responsibility within education. *Fatongia* is a Tongan term associated with obligation and responsibility. In terms of my positionality, I am a Tongan who was born in Niue and raised in Aotearoa New Zealand (hereafter referred to as New Zealand) with heritage links to Samoa. For most of my schooling, I was educated in New Zealand. After years of service as a secondary school teacher and educational leader in South Auckland, a community that has a large proportion of Māori and Pasifika (a term used in New Zealand to refer to families with Pacific heritage) families, my wife, son, and I moved to Tonga in 2014. Despite our initial plan to broaden our sense of service and voluntary work in Tonga for three years, this is our fifth year. Since 2014, I have actively engaged in the training of teachers at a mission secondary school in Tonga. To date, I still continue my service to the mission school and to other educational training organizations in the small island kingdom.

The USP is a "microcosm of the region, and many aspects of its history, which began in 1968 in the era of decolonization of island territories, mirror the developments in the regional communities it serves" (Hau'ofa, 1998, p. 394). When IOE was established in 1976, its central purpose was to fulfil USP's educational obligations to the 12 SINs: Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Niue, Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tokelau, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. Currently, as an IOE fellow, serving the 12 SINs continues to be an expectation. I am both an insider and an outsider, and such a two-fold perspective provides the basis for supporting and strengthening IOE's education services through consultancy and advice, research, professional development and learning, and publication. Such a two-fold perspective "demonstrates the value of different prisms of perspective (Western theories [and research] and Pacific conceptualisations)" (Wendt Samu, 2010, p. 1).

Adopting Tagaloatele Peggy Fairbairn-Dunlop's (2015) notion of "intentionality", the deliberate planning, establishing, and tracking of culturally affirming spaces that will inspire and empower local students, educators and researchers—my intention is to highlight the cultural spaces that not only privilege local and indigenous knowledge, but the ways in which Western theories and research can be contextualized to suit our local educational needs as well as the expectations of the outside donors who continue to provide aid to the region. When Pacific people themselves are encouraged and equipped with the necessary knowledge and understanding to empower, there is a level of ownership which allows for rethinking and transformation of their learning and practices within cultural spaces that are conducive to learning and success. I elaborate on the "Rethinking Pacific Education Initiative for and by Pacific People" (RPEIPP) as a culturally affirming space in a later section of this paper.

LOCAL AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

In light of the central aim in this paper, that is, to highlight IOE's role as a regional institution focused on privileging Local and Indigenous knowledges as strengths and working together with regional and international agencies to support and strengthen local education systems in Oceania, this section reviews Local and Indigenous sources that IOE utilizes as cultural reference for research projects, particularly in the design and implementation of research specific to the diverse small island nation contexts in the region.

The former Samoan Head of State, his excellency Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Ta'isi Efi [Tui Atua] (2005) raised the concern that, when thinking about Indigenous language and knowledge, it does not directly relate to the existence and use (or overuse) of Pacific concepts, methodologies, and competencies in academia. However, the concern is in how we as local/Oceanic researchers specifically use such Indigenous language and knowledge and for what purpose (Thaman, 2014b). Tui Atua (2005) argues that the main concern for local people is not in the "protecting of indigenous languages from change, rather, it is about protecting indigenous languages from loss" (p. 66).

In a recent article, Kabini Sanga and Martyn Reynolds (2017) claim that: "Pacific understandings of reality, knowledge generation, and values stand on their own as the bases of a research paradigm to serve the local Pacific interests without justificatory reference to the West" (p. 198). On the basis of Sanga and Reynolds' (2017) claim and the RPEIPP movement, this paper emphasizes Local and Indigenous knowledges as being central to the understanding and transformation of educational systems and research in

Oceania. As described by Unaisi Nabobo-Baba (2008), a Fijian scholar and educator, the region "needs more research to be done by indigenous researchers using culturally appropriate framings and methodologies that recognise Pacific . . . world views, cultural knowledges and epistemologies, grounds the research and provides it with methodological integrity" (p. 143). Such indigenous framings and theories are similar to other counter-hegemonic struggles by marginalized communities who have made critical discoveries on the role of research on their lives (Smith, 2004, cited in Nabobo-Baba, 2008). Research by and for local people and communities highlights Indigenous epistemologies (ways of knowing, doing, and behaving) and ontologies (ways of being) that are grounded in local and indigenous knowledge and world views. A fundamental role of Local and Indigenous research therefore, is to decolonize Western underpinnings and knowledge and to achieve self-determination for local people (Koya-Vaka'uta, 2016; Nabobo-Baba, 2008).

Pacific researchers in the postcolonial Pacific often seek to foreground Indigenous language and knowledge in their studies. Perhaps the earliest noted and used Indigenous research methodology, the *Kakala* Research Framework (KRF), was developed by Konai Helu Thaman (1988), a prominent Tongan poet and academic. She first developed *kakala* as a metaphor and philosophy for teaching, learning, and research. *Toli* (collection and selection of flowers, fruit, leaves, and other fragrant and decorative elements), *tui* (making and weaving of the *kakala*), and *luva* (giving away or presentation of the *kakala* to someone special as a symbol of love and respect) were Thaman's contribution to research associated with the teaching and learning process. Through conference presentations and workshops with postgraduate students across the region, Thaman continued to promote *kakala* as a research framework. In 2005, Thaman's colleagues 'Ana Maui Taufe'ulungaki and Seu'ula Johansson Fua (2009) critiqued the KRF and added two more phases to the research process. These women also utilized Linitā Manu'atu's (2000) concepts (*mālie* and *māfana*). *Teu* (conceptualization of the study) was adopted as a phase before *toli,* and the last phase *mālie* (relevance of worthiness of the research) and *māfana* (application and transformation) were also added to the KRF. To date, KRF continues to provide emerging academics within the region with an Indigenous approach that is relevant to understanding the educational concerns of families within schooling.

Aue Te Ava (2011), an academic of Cook Island descent, building on the idea of culturally responsive pedagogy, argued that successful teachers of Cook Island students tap into knowledge related to students' cultural values, beliefs, and knowledge. The successful education of Cook Island students supports the "whole person" (Te Ava, Airini & Rubie-Davies, 2011, p. 125), in terms of the individual's social, cultural, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing. Te Ava (2011) developed a culturally responsive framework for the teaching and learning of Cook Island secondary school students in physical education. To support culturally responsive teaching practices in the classroom, the Cook Island concept of *tivaevae* was used as a model for teaching that was based on *te reo Māori Kuki Airani* (Cook Islands Maori language), *peu ui tupuna* (cultural traditions), *peu inangaro* (cultural beliefs), *tu inangaro* (relationships), *peu puapinga* (cultural values), *akaputuputu taokotai* (collaboration), *peu angaanga* (cultural activity) and *peu oire tangata* (cultural community). Despite the *tivaevae* framework having the capability to capture and understand the value and essence of Cook Island culture in the learning and teaching of Cook Island students, more needs to be known about how to enable teachers to make meaning and understanding of curriculum in the classroom (Te Ava et al., 2011, p. 125).

Fuaialii Tagataese Tupu Tuia (2013), a Samoan academic and advocate for gender rights, claims that Local and Indigenous Samoan knowledges is valid and appropriate for teacher education practices in the Samoan education system. Her study utilized the *Talanoa* and *Nofo* methodologies that are linked to the "oral tradition of Samoan culture in relation to *talanoa* (conversation) and *nofo* (sitting)" (Tuia, 2013, p. 88). Tuia's study (2013) concluded that, "while there are no easy answers, an attempt to incorporate traditional values alongside global values would warrant a change in teacher education programs" (p. iv). The implication of using a Samoan cultural framework to theorize Samoan values associated with teacher education practices, and to research local teacher educators, by a local researcher and teacher educator herself, has validated the significant role that local and indigenous academics have on the "conservation and sustainability of Samoan values in education" (Tuia, 2013, p. 88).

To understand the educational experiences of Tongan students within schooling, Timote Vaioleti's (2011) *Talanoa* framework was used as an approach to capture and articulate students' lived experiences. Many local researchers have drawn from Vaioleti's (2006, 2011, 2013) *Talanoa* approach to research as a way of understanding the lived realities of Oceanic people within the region. Nabobo-Baba (2008) established the *Vanua Research Methodology (VRM)*, a Fijian approach grounded in indigenous "languages, knowledge protocols, philosophies and principles" (p. 141). The philosophy behind *Vanua* framing, as described by Nabobo-Baba (2008), is related to the "interconnectedness of [Fijian] people to their land, environment, cultures, relationships, spirit world, beliefs, knowledge systems, values, and God(s)" (p. 143). The *Vanua* is pivotal to the Fijian's identity and is the heart of his/her existence, central to the essence of being Fijian (Nabobo-Baba, 2008, p. 143).

Vā/va is a Local and Indigenous concept and theory associated with space in-between. *Vā/va* is a "valued concept in Tongan and other Polynesian ethnic groups which are often diverse based on language, heritage, and cultural norms and traditions" (Fa'avae, 2018, p. 60). Although Western notions of "space" are sometimes framed in relation to the space between physical objects, for Indigenous scholars the use of *vā/va* denotes space that is sometimes unseen—that exists in the mind and heart (Iosefo, 2016; Ka'ili, 2005). Tamasailau Suali'i-Sauni (2017), a Samoan scholar and educator, posits the *va* as a central organising principle in many Pasifika/Pacific cultures. *Va* is also recommended in the same way by other writers from Oceania (Ka'ili, 2005; Lilomaiava-Doktor, 2009; Sanga & Reynolds, 2017). According to Misatauveve Melani Anae (2016), who is of Samoa descent, the practice of *teu le va* "focuses on secular and sacred commitments, guiding reciprocal acting in and respect for relational spaces" (p. 117). In terms of relational space, the concept *vā* relates to the maintaining of relational connections/relationships with other people. As part of my role as a fellow at IOE, whose primary purpose is to provide educational service and support through research and development to the 12 PINs that USP serves, the *vā* and the enactment of *tauhi vā* is encompassing of a deep sense of duty and responsibility. IOE's presence in educational research projects in Oceania is largely due to the philosophy associated with maintaining strong *vā* (relational connections) with colleagues from other SINs. The organization's previous directors as well as the current director take pride in strengthening its collaboration with educational leaders and ministries in the 12 SINs.

Although "collaboration" is a key intention expected in funded project and development work in the region, it is often driven from the understanding of the funding organization. This is mainly to ensure they meet their outcomes and project outputs within a particular

timeframe. Very few funders think beyond the research project; for instance, what happens when the project ends? and, how can they help support local education ministries and communities once the project funding ends? With these questions in mind, the idea and practice of collaboration is more than just establishing and maintaining a professional and efficient working relationship. When using *vā* to understand collaboration, the practice of relational connection becomes sacred and ongoing. For IOE, this means that when a particular project is completed within a SIN, communication continues with the local ministries as well as the communities to ensure that they are supported appropriately. As an organization developed to serve SINs, maintaining *vā* is a sacred obligation for IOE.

IOE'S ROLE: TO PRIVILEGE LOCAL AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AND STRENGTHEN EDUCATION SYSTEMS

One of the culturally affirming spaces recognized within Oceania's local academics and researchers is linked to the RPEIPP movement. RPEIPP was established in the early 21st Century based on the need to "ensure indigenous and Pacific peoples increased ownership of the processes of education as well as to re-examine curriculum processes" (Nabobo-Baba, 2012, p. 83). It was developed by Indigenous and Local scholars as a deliberate move away from the deficit framing of education by global donor organizations, and to "rethink education from Pacific perspectives and world views to complement those promoted by formal education", which are often "irrelevant and inappropriate for Pacific contexts and peoples" (Taufe'ulungaki, 2014, p. 2).

IOE's responsibilities are driven by the RPEIPP movement; for instance, all regional research partnerships that involve IOE and other organizations, such as international donor agencies or universities/institutions from abroad, are governed by the RPEIPP linked to "increased achievement of self-sufficiency in terms of human development capacity, funding and the successful indigenising of education in the [region]" (Sanga, 2011, p. 18, cited in Nabobo-Baba, 2012, p. 83). In my view, as the newest recruit to the institution, one of IOE's roles is based on highlighting the strengths of local education systems. Taking on an appreciative inquiry approach that focuses on strengths within local contexts as opposed to adopting a deficit view of education systems, IOE has utilized its services, which includes education research tools that have been contextualized.

Any academic or researcher involved in research with Oceanic people is required to have full understanding of Pacific knowledge and an awareness of Pacific cultures (Taufe'ulungaki, 2003; Thaman, 2008). When I first started at IOE in 2016, the first research assignment given to me as a research fellow was a United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) funded project which sought to understand school-related gender-based violence in Tongan schooling. As a well-known and respected global organisation, UNESCO is present in all major regions around the world. In the past, not all research partnerships/collaboration with donor organisations were beneficial for IOE (Taufe'ulungaki, 2014). In fact, most were driven by the donor organization's own agenda that often undermined and undervalued Local and Indigenous knowledges. Although the UNESCO project officer had proposed a focus group interview that was based on Western principles of conduct and engagement as one method of data collection, we opted to use focus group *talanoa* instead. Focus group *talanoa* was developed by Mo'ale 'Otunuku (2011) as a method underpinned by Tongan cultural

protocols, conduct, and engagement. IOE's adoption of a local and contextualized research approach through "focus group *talanoa*" was our way of strengthening methods that were underpinned by cultural values and knowledge.

As articulated by 'Otunuku (2011), focus group *talanoa* was both a relevant and appropriate method of gathering spoken data from three groups: Tongan parents, teachers of Tongan students, and Tongan students linked to their perceptions of educational success and achievement. Two aspects of the focus group *talanoa* that 'Otunuku (2011) highlighted as being significant in the implementation were linked to the "absence of a time-frame, and deviation from the focus" (p. 46). Despite the allocated time prescribed by focus group literature, 'Otunuku (2011) found that it was not always appropriate to have a fixed time attached to the discussions. He spent a lot of the time earlier on during the group session to make *talanoa* and make connections with the participants via their "family . . . school mates, acquaintances" ('Otunuku, 2011, p. 46). Unlike the traditional focus group method underpinned by Western principles and language, focus group *talanoa* is governed by Tongan language and Tongan cultural ways of engagement ('Otunuku, 2010). Establishing and maintaining the *vā/va* through strong relational ties and connections is a necessary engagement and should take place prior to asking participants the semi-structured questions.

The Improve Quality Basic Education (IQBE) project, a funded project by the Asia Development Bank (ADB), is a result of the strong network established and maintained by former IOE directors with key educational leaders in the RMI. The education system in the RMI very much reflects the system in the US. The IQBE project requested IOE's delivery of our Graduate Certificate in School Leadership (GCSL) program, which is also an accredited USP qualification. Prior to the delivery of the courses within the GCSL program, and utilizing the Design-Based Research (DBR) approach (Reimann, 2011), the IOE team was permitted to gather some initial pre-profiling data about education and the education system in the RMI that would be used to contextualize the GCSL courses. An initial scoping of the context required the team to speak with officials from the RMI public school system, elementary school principals and teachers, as well as community leaders. Key questions asked in the gathering of data were: "What are the Marshallese concepts of school leadership?", and "What does school leadership in the RMI look like?" Although there are outcomes that IOE is required to complete at certain stages of the project, my responsibility, like that of IOE, is to ensure that Local and Indigenous knowledges in the RMI is conceptualized and utilized in the delivery of our GCSL courses. For instance, a scan for RMI context-specific literature associated with school leadership and general education was carried out and incorporated in the re-design of the courses. One evidence of this was the use of the Marshallese concept *bwebwenato* which is a "well-known form of orality" (Jetnil-Kijiner, 2014, p. 38), or oral tradition, in the initial GCSL course to provide opportunities for school principals to "talk, [have a] conversation, [and engage in] story[telling]" (Jetnil-Kijiner, 2014, p. 38).

Despite the claim that Local researchers often have specific contextual understanding of the educational challenges and are, therefore, able to appropriately serve our local people and communities, this does not necessarily imply that those of us at IOE are the most appropriate to serve the people in SINs such as Kiribati, Samoa, or RMI. The limitation of this paper is that the reflections and views presented are specific to one person who is predominantly of Tongan descent and was educated in New Zealand. I highly recommend that other local researchers from other Pacific groups who position themselves with the

dual binary as an "insider/outsider" share their experiences within their own contexts so that others—within and outside of the region—can learn from them.

An outcome of the RPEIPP movement is the development of the *Vaka Pasifiki* Education Conference (VPEC), a space where Local and Indigenous knowledges and research practices are privileged and strengthened. IOE's role is to coordinate VPEC. The early years of the RPEIPP were focused primarily on rethinking Pacific education by and for local people. Over time, the focus of the RPEIPP movement shifted towards implementation of the rethinking activities through research projects. VPEC is the space where Local and Indigenous educators, academics, and researchers are encouraged to share and implement the Local and Indigenous concepts, frameworks, and methodologies within research. Through *tauhi vā/ teu le va*, the relational connections and sacred commitments by key elders and academics to each other and their respective SINs continues to fuel the RPEIPP movement.

For IOE, strengthening its collaboration with other institutions in the SINs is prioritized. This year, to support national institutions, a "terms of reference" was established between IOE and the National University of Samoa (NUS) Faculty of Education as a way to strengthen research technical skills and analysis. Post VPEC 2018, the collaborative networking with Pacific and non-Pacific researchers and academics from New Zealand universities has increased. Under the broad umbrella of RPEIPP, the sharing, reflection, and critical discussion of Indigenous research methodologies and methods to capture cross-cultural understandings have heightened networking activities between institutions and this has resulted in groups visiting IOE at the USP Tonga campus for further collaboration.

CONCLUSION

Researching and theorizing the Local has been a past imposition as a result of colonial rule and colonization in Oceania. Specifically, such research tasks carried out on local people have predominantly been carried out by those outside of the local context, thus often perpetuating deficit views of local people (Smith, 1999). In the postcolonial era, local and indigenous educators and researchers have taken up the responsibility of researching and theorizing the Local from a strengths-based view linked to privileging Local and Indigenous knowledges and research. There is a growing number of local researchers who use Indigenous research methodologies and frameworks to capture and understand the lived realities of people in Oceania. When uniquely positioned in an organization like USP and IOE, whose primary role is to support and strengthen local education systems, the criticality lies in our engagement with global/international organizations. Re-orienting engagement with donor organizations, such as UNESCO and ADB, to centre Indigenous epistemologies, knowledge, and ways of being through the collaborative projects have been challenging yet useful at the same time. Our responsibility is to not only engage with donor organisations but to mediate their expectations and the community's expectations. The complex needs and complex times for locals in relation to improving education systems is exacerbated when what is brought in by external agencies do not always fit with what local people need. As an insider/outsider researcher, my role as a fellow at IOE is to support and strengthen existing practices that privilege Local and Indigenous knowledges and research.

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