

An e–talanoa of the comparative and international education research field: Relational vā–decoloniality in Oceania

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Research
sometimes winding
sometimes straight
at times the road vanishes
only to reappear in unlikely places
where is the way?
what is the destination?
sometimes
your only guide
is what for
Tepora Wright

Introduction

We align with Tuhiwai Smith’s (2012) critique of research as “one of the ways in which the underlying code of imperialism and colonialism is both regulated and realized” (p. 8). As emerging comparative and international education (CIE) researchers within Oceania, we recognize “the critical role that uneven power plays in the constitution of comparative knowledge” (Takayama et al., 2016, p. 3). In deliberately disrupting conventional academic formats, we adopted a dialogic and relational talanoa structure that foregrounds Indigenous Moana Oceania epistemologies and ontologies. This choice unsettles Western-centric norms of linearity, objectivity, and authorial detachment typically valorized in scholarly writing (Smith, 2012; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Rather than presenting knowledge as static and decontextualized, we adopt a flowing, reflexive structure that is responsive to contexts and centered around vā—the relational space—as an epistemic principle and a decolonial imperative (Johannson-Fua, 2016; Suaalii-Sauni et al., in press). This format resists the dominance and privileging of Western academic structures and unfolds through sequences of e-talanoa, grounded in our distinct positionalities and experiences across Moana Oceania.

This chapter utilizes talanoa, an iterative and relational conversational approach, to explore the decoloniality of CIE research from our contexts. We argue that the diverse composition of our authorship team aligns with Turner’s (2019) assertion that “openness” to different perspectives is part of the “overall spirit of the field” of CIE and that “one point of view may not capture the whole” (p. 25). We present Indigenous Pacific ideas and approaches relevant to understanding

the educational contexts of Oceania. The method employed for our online dialogue, e-talanoa, is as significant as how we utilize talanoa to (re)present our conversations in written form. Talanoa-vā and vā-decoloniality are concepts embedded in Oceania worldviews that honor the shared comparative space of diverse voices and experiences in Oceania. Talanoa-vā refers to a space of spatial as well as temporal engagement between people that acknowledges the importance of past, present, and future in relationships and conversations (Kalavite, 2017). Related terms tauhi vā and teu le vā refer to the care that must be taken to maintain harmony in that space of engagement with diverse voices and experiences (Anae, 2016; Ka’ili, 2005).

Through tauhi vā and teu le vā, which represent the relational care and ongoing nurturing of people and places, we appreciate and value the stories and dialogues shared, going beyond merely extracting data for research in the Euro-Western academy (Nxumalo et al., 2020). We set up this journey by situating ourselves relationally between ourselves, each other and our contexts, thereby honouring the ethics of tauhi vā and teu le va. We then engage in e-talanoa to collaboratively and individually conceptualise the intersections of relationality and decoloniality in the field of CIE. Through a series of interwoven reflections and theoretical provocations, we present a shared imagining of a Moana Oceania future for the field of CIE. This chapter format is not linear, as is preferred in dominant academic publications, but layered and reflective of the complexities and dynamism of Indigenous collaborative sensemaking.

Acknowledging people and place: unsettling spaces

The field of CIE represents a foreign and unsettling space for us as Indigenous and emerging researchers. Entering this field and sharing our critical intentions, the enactment of “tauhi vā” (Tongan phrase related to caring for the nurturing of relational connections) and “teu le va” (Samoan phrase related to nurturing and maintaining the relational space) was operationalized by the lead authors, who value Indigenous Pacific ethical practice. Our research positionalities are made evident as we navigate the spaces within this paper. Openness regarding the authors’ positionalities is necessary to acknowledge and unfold “tapu” (sacred space and sanctions, taboo spaces) from diverse worldviews in Oceania.

Our relational positionalities

Our collaboration is purposeful and a celebration of our relational connections as colleagues, fellow postgraduate students, educators, and higher education researchers across Oceania. Our grounded relational practice is based on generosity, governed by the ethical practices of tauhi vā and teu le va. We locate ourselves in relation to the whenua (land) and online space, where we share thinking and generate meaning-making with humans and the more-than-human world (Fa’avae, 2021; Johansson-Fua, 2016). Chin et al. (2022) suggest that “for scholars of CIE, this collaborative process offer[s] an insightful window into the challenges emerging researchers face as they navigate issues of power, representation, legitimacy, and voice in a way that seeks to offer a more ‘inclusive, collaborative, participatory, reflexive, and nuanced’ engagement in the research and writing process” (p. 23). We capitalize the term Indigenous/Indigeneity as a significant critical space in which we attempt to ground our diverse positionings with Aotearoa New Zealand’s whenua. The following section introduces our authorship team and our positionalities.

Grappling with the Eurocentrism of CIE

Turner (2019) notes that the first generation of comparative educationists, who occupied teaching positions in universities in Europe and North America during the early twentieth century, were primarily education historians. Their research and inquiry methods were of a historical nature. Michael Sadler, for example, collected extensive information in the late nineteenth century on countries' educational systems, local laws, and financial contributions (Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2014). Like Jullien's Plan for Comparative Education of 1816-17, such data was primarily descriptive and excluded contextual analysis. In the mid-twentieth century, CIE moved from history "toward a science of comparative education" (Turner, 2019, p. 13). During the 1960s, CIE scholars made competing claims as to "how the application of scientific method might tame the infinite field" (Turner, 2019, p. 13). Bereday (1964) set out his science-based approach in "Comparative Method in Education," and Noah and Eckstein (1969) in "Towards a Science in Comparative Education" (cited in Turner, 2019, p. 13). Theisan and Adams (1990) offer a classification system that describes comparative education research as analytical, descriptive, evaluative, or exploratory. Such classifications informed the approach to gathering large education data sets by organizations such as UNESCO, the OECD, the EU, SPC, and PacRef.

The Eurocentrism of CIE is acknowledged by Takayama et al. (2016), who explain that the roots of such Eurocentrism lie in the "field's deep entanglements with colonialism at the turn of the twentieth century and with neocolonialism during the Cold War" (p. S7). Spratt and Coxon (2020) also critiqued the inadequate theorizing of 'context' in Oceania by CIE scholars, attributed to the "continued and deeply entangled colonial legacy within CIE" (p. 520). In response, scholars within the Oceania Comparative and International Education Society (OCIES) have "undergone a continuing process of revitalization with the explicit aim of developing a more diverse and inclusive CIE space" (Spratt & Coxon, 2020, p. 520), a space that is more representative of the Oceania contexts for which the society is named (Coxon & McLaughlin, 2017; McCormick & Johansson-Fua, 2019).

To decolonize CIE research in a way that honors and upholds the sociocultural structures, ways of knowing, values, and practices in which education and research are embedded, OCIES scholars emphasized the conceptual framework of "the context behind the context" (see Sanga & Reynolds, 2018; Spratt & Coxon, 2020). As articulated by Spratt and Coxon (2020), "the context behind the context" emphasizes 'relationality' and they use Deleuze and Guattari's notion of 'assemblage' to describe the relational spaces within contexts where "entities are not unitary wholes...with coherent logic and fixed boundaries, but are continually being assembled, disassembled and reassembled as heterogeneous elements come together in emergent ways" (p. 523).

Understanding context as a dynamic, relational space is a valuable methodological consideration in CIE. As Spratt and Coxon (2020) advocate, "the theorisation of context should be an ongoing matter ... its theorising represents a generative and potentially rich trend in CIE" (p. 524). Researchers should regard 'context' as an ongoing "matter of concern" within which they are entangled (Sobe & Kowalczyk, 2018, p. 197). The concept of entanglement is significant for researchers because conducting research across contexts over time necessitates a critical consciousness that recognizes the nuanced contextual spaces within a context and a willingness to challenge existing assumptions in CIE research. McCormick and Johansson-Fua (2019) acknowledge that among the Pacific nation-states in Oceania, "there were and remain regional relationships that have survived for centuries and continue" (p. 231). Indigenous Pacific concepts

and approaches emphasize the historical and contemporary relationships between people, cultures, and knowledges. Wendt (1976) and Hau'ofa (1993) employed the idea of “Our Sea of [interconnected] Islands” to illustrate the connections between people, cultures, and knowledges across the region.

Nokise (2017) and other Indigenous scholars of Oceania prioritize relational *talatalanoa* (ongoing conversation), enabling critical analysis of the periphery–center efforts not only to decolonize but also indigenize the framings of the world often generated through dominant Euro-Western methods (Johansson-Fua, 2022; Koya-Vaka'uta, 2017; Smith, 2012; Suaalii–Sauni, 2017). Hoskins and Jones (2022) position indigenization within Aotearoa New Zealand universities and other state institutions in the higher education context as the “normalisation of indigenous ways of being and knowing...turning towards a more relational way of doing things based in *whakapapa* (history, place, and relationships) and social justice” (p. 2). With similar intent, we turn to Indigenous Moana ontologies and epistemologies to interrogate and unpack place–based decoloniality and its potential implications for social and racial justice within CIE research.

The following continues the *talanoa* narrative.

Katie Virtue

I am Māori on my maternal side, I *whakapapa* (make genealogical connections) to the tribe Te Arawa. My Māori heritage positions me as Indigenous to Aotearoa New Zealand; this lineage is the heart of my engagement with the world as I work to serve Māori *tamariki* (children). My chosen path is through the context of education. I have Tongan heritage on my Father's side, many of my Tongan *kāinga* (extended family) migrated to the Lau islands of Fiji many centuries ago. My grandfather moved from Fiji to Aotearoa when he was very young. My father's longing to connect to his Tongan roots was strong, though he lacked opportunities to do so. For many Indigenous peoples, spirituality is at the core of our beings and influences the way we relate to the world. I currently walk a path of reconnection to my Tongan heritage with my late father by my side. *Vā*, in this sense, can transcend our physical world. I have Pākehā (European) heritage on both my maternal and paternal sides.

Tepora Wright

I am Samoan, born into a family of chiefs and teachers, educated in post-colonial Samoa. I was socialized into educational debates from a young age and remember questioning my Year 13 geography teacher on the logic of having to learn British agriculture as part of the curriculum. Such was the beginning of my critical ‘decolonial’ journey. I acknowledge the privilege that comes with being born into Samoan chiefly families. I live and breathe the *vā*, as Samoans understand it. I understand the *vā* to be an invisible relational potentiality between all people and understand that harmonious relationships are achieved when the *vā* is acknowledged, respected, and developed. In the regional and global education space, I see myself as one who navigates the spaces and relational potentialities between multiple educational and research philosophies to achieve social justice and empowerment for the peoples of Oceania.

Emma Packham

I am a first-generation New Zealander; my mother is from Kiribati, and my father is from England. My father left England to offer his services in a Volunteer Service Abroad (VSA) program in Kiribati. My parents were part of the first wave of Kiribati families to immigrate to New Zealand in the 1970s. During my childhood, we also relocated to the Solomon Islands. In my decolonial journey, I am anchored in ‘Te katei ni Kiribati’ (‘The way of being iKiribati’) because of my mother’s teachings and my connectedness to our small Kiribati community family in New Zealand. We are collectivist people whose values are underpinned by the concept of ‘we.’ We have a strong oral history by which “te katei ni Kiribati” has been passed down generationally. The nearest term to the ‘Vā’ is “Bon tii imarenara” which translates to “the space between us” or “I marenau ma ngke” meaning “my relationship to you.” This is immediately established in every interaction to define the relational space between individuals, which then informs the interaction. In the field of education and research, I feel a responsibility to continue the legacy of our parents by collecting and sharing our stories to help future generations understand ‘The way of being iKiribati.’

Dassia Watkins-Matavalea

I am of Spanish, Welsh, Pākehā, and Indigenous Australian ancestries. I completed my secondary education in Indonesia, which is where my second language is spoken. My family is diverse, encompassing Korean, Thai, Indonesian, Tongan, and Pākehā heritages. My husband and youngest son are Tongan, and our extended family is Māori, while my two older children have Mongolian and German heritages. After decades as a tertiary educator, my experiences with learners led to my doctoral investigation – the application of Pacific pedagogies and cultural concepts of wellbeing in multicultural learning contexts. The notion of vā is present in my daily life, but my academic encounters with it arise from my engagement with Tongan research methodologies and pedagogical practices. From an Australian Indigenous perspective, the relational nature of vā resonates with the concept of ‘connections’ through all of time with the human, ecological, spiritual, and ancestral realms. In my everyday practice, I am committed to vā-decoloniality as an intentional response to, and critical re-examination of, colonial structures. For me, it is the deliberate endeavor towards relational spaces in both education and research that are characterized by expressions of Indigeneity, antiracism, and cultural democracy.

Ben Levy

With ancestors from present-day Ukraine, Belarus, and Ireland, I was raised in a globally diverse, working-class community near New York City, and I now live in Aotearoa, New Zealand. I am married to an Indigenous Argentine and maintain a bicultural, bilingual household. The immigrant and working-class realities are central to my worldview. Over twenty-three years of practicing and researching tertiary education internationalization have allowed me to witness the structural dominance and systemic privileging of Euro-Western knowledges. My understanding of the exploitative extraction of Indigenous knowledges and the importance of diligent reflexivity informs my engagement with context-driven research. As a non-Indigenous person participating in Indigenous spaces, it remains my responsibility to negotiate what it means to interpret, make sense of, and

honor relational positionality. I seek to de-center Euro-Western, settler-colonial approaches to tertiary education internationalization in Moana Oceania by navigating within, around, and outside of the research spaces, employing collaborative sense-making and relational ethics. My experiences working alongside others throughout the research journey have taught me to honor and care for the ways in which Indigenous peoples represent their narratives and how I approach academic scholarship.

David Taufui Mikato Fa'avae

From a diasporic Tongan perspective, living on land not Indigenous to my ancestors, *vā* represents my sense of balance and reconciliation. *Vā*'s relational condition has often guided my comparative talanoa research and my ethical responsibility to the communities I serve. Being part of this diverse authorship team and employing *vā* ethics is a way to navigate and negotiate power tensions without marginalizing voices and experiences, which is a common feature of extractive and dominant Euro-Western research practices. However, even the use of talanoa and *vā* does not resonate with the worldviews of the authors in this paper. My role is to provide an 'open space' for ongoing dialogue. I became a member of the Oceania Comparative and International Education Society (OCIES) in 2017 under the leadership of Seu'ula Johansson Fua, Mo'ale 'Otonuku, and Kabini Sanga. They have been instrumental in building my confidence in CIE research, decolonial work, and school leadership practices in the Republic of the Marshall Islands, Solomon Islands, Fiji, Samoa, and Tonga.

The Potential of Talanoa–*vā*

Talanoa–vā framework

Vā is described as a philosophy of living/life, and is used to describe relationships between people, and people with other entities in the world (Fa'avae, 2021; Nokise, 2017; Suaalii-Sauni, 2017). In Tonga, Samoa, Tuvalu, and Tokelau, *vā* is defined as the space in between, a space of relational meaning-making. Tongan scholar Ka'ili (2017) defines *vā* as a socio-relational space and its practice through *tauhi vā*, which involves the nurturing of socio-relational connections or relationships. Within Tongan and Samoan society, *vā* helps bring harmony and cohesion to social organization. Within broader cultural contexts in Tongan society, *vā* has many forms, evident in its derivatives such as *veitapui* (connections with God or deity), *vālelei* (good relations), *vātamaki* (disharmonious relations), *vāmāfana* (heart-warming relations), *vahanoa* (open sea space), or *vahaope* (online space) (Ka'ili, 2017; Tu'imana, 2022).

The coupling of talanoa (to talk, to story, to dialogue) and *vā* is intentional (Vaioleti, 2006). Through the practice of talanoa, we are inspired to interrogate notions of relationality through intersectional epistemological encounters. This means that our online dialogue (see e-talanoa) through the encounters each author experiences working-with ideas that are not Indigenous to them and their ways of being-knowing-seeing-feeling-doing (Suaalii-Sauni et al., in press). We also employ the lengthened hyphen (–) as a postcolonial frame, symbolizing a creatively critical space that requires negotiation and navigation (Fa'avae, 2021). Talanoa–*vā* provides CIE with comparative criticalities from intellectual and cultural spaces that are intentional, disruptive, and hopeful for Oceania-based diasporic scholars.

Talanoa and e–talanoa Methods: Gathering and (re)presentation

Our comparative dialogue within CIE has been made possible through digital tools and the online space. Fa’avae et al. (2022) conceptualized e–alanoa to meet Indigenous Pacific researchers’ post-COVID-19 research demands and engagements with their communities. Zoom and Google Docs made it possible for us to converse and exchange thinking and talanoa conversations asynchronously. For example, when capturing and analyzing the dialogue, the first author did this from Samoa, and Author 6 was in Tonga visiting family. Authors 3 and 5 live in Hamilton, a two-hour drive from Author 2, who lives in Auckland. Author 4 lives about an hour away from Authors 3 and 5. Although in-person, face-to-face talanoa would have been ideal, the reality is that the CIE researchers in this paper are scattered in the diaspora. Given our existing vā connections as a prerequisite for e–alanoa, the online space was an appropriate and relevant method to gather and capture our conversations and learn from each other. To (re)present our online conversations in written form, we transformed our oral communication into a publication by presenting our comparative dialogue as written talanoa. Our comparative talanoa in written form is unfolded throughout this paper.

What does vā mean to you?

In what follows, we employ a decolonial praxis to unpack the term vā as a conversation among our authorship group.

Katie

Part of my journey in discovering my Tongan roots has been the introduction to the concept of vā. This is often translated as relational space, though in conversations with Pacific scholars, this is a simplified translation. When trying to comprehend new concepts, I naturally defer to my Māori worldview, as it is most familiar to me. The similarities I find serve as an entry point to understand the differences. The need to care for relational space exists in Te Ao Māori (The Māori world) both in principle and practice, though I have yet to find a direct translation. The word vā in te reo Māori denotes both time and space, and ahi kā refers to the necessity of nurturing relationality in your homelands; ahi kā is often translated as “keeping the home fires burning” (Kana & Tamatea, 2016). My exploration of vā has led me to wonder if, perhaps, I have overlooked some of the cultural depth beneath the words in reclaiming our language. I often return home to Rotorua, as this knowledge resides with our elders. I have yet to set foot on ancestral soil in Tonga. I believe my understanding of vā will deepen when I spend time, sit, watch, and listen with kāinga. In many ways, vā calls me home. One way that vā has the potential to become decolonial is when Indigenous scholars work together to ensure our stories are told.

Emma

The vā values the relational and sacred spaces between people, and it is a concept I continue to explore. Although not a term used in Kiribati, I find similarities in the unspoken concept of “Bon tii imarenara,” which translates to “the space between us” or “i marenau ma ngke,” meaning “my relationship to you.” All interactions among iKiribati require that the relationship be defined, as it informs how individuals will interact with

one another. Age, status, and familial connections can influence this relational space. For example, I show respect for the relational space when addressing an elder by physically positioning myself lower or adopting a subordinate role in manner and speech. “I marenau ma ngke” can also impose responsibilities or obligations, mainly if familial links are present. In my teaching role at the university, I have been fortunate to discuss vā with my student teachers. I have observed that my students, who are not of Pacific heritage, develop an appreciation for vā and become intentional about cultivating respect and trust in that ‘relational space between’ or with their students. As an educator, vā is incredibly important for connecting with students, families, colleagues, and communities. Spratt and Coxon (2020) affirm that thinking of context as a relational space that is not fixed but continues to change is useful for researching methodological and method considerations in CIE. The consideration of the vā that exists between people, cultures, and knowledge when researching educational systems, policies, and practices is significant. Culturally responsive methodologies are an alternative way to achieve socially responsible research outcomes for diverse and minority groups. Decolonizing and revitalizing for scholars to become a more “diverse and inclusive CIE space” (Spratt & Coxon, 2020, p. 520) will better represent Oceania contexts.

Ben

Vā is ongoing and developmental. It cannot be immediately expected, as trust must be built through sustained and honest interactions. It requires nurturing, respect, humility, and clear communications. Assumptions may exist or become apparent that can neglect vā’s development and require interrogation and negotiation. Within vā, there exist incredible transformative opportunities.

Dassia

Vā concerns relational spaces. The main notion is that the space between is not empty but is governed by and composed of relationships. I recognize that vā is oversimplified when equated solely with the concept of relationships. From a Pacific perspective, I understand that vā encompasses more than just relationships. It is ecological; it involves connections with all living beings, nature, and fonua (land). Additionally, it is not confined to the physical dimension or present time. It engages with spirituality, ancestors, worldviews, and discourses that simultaneously resonate across the past, present, and future.

Decoloniality is undoing. Decoloniality “is not a static condition, an individual attribute, or a lineal point of arrival or enlightenment. Instead, decoloniality seeks to make visible, open up, and advance radically distinct perspectives and positionalities that displace Western rationality as the only framework and possibility of existence, analysis, and thought” (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 17). Decolonial work centered on Pacific oralities, ontologies, and epistemologies is evident in the efforts of the 2001–2002 Rethinking Pacific Education Initiative for–by–with Pacific People (RPEIPP) collective (see Pene, Taufe’ulungaki, & Benson, 2002). We aim to contribute and articulate how vā–decoloniality as a conceptual framework can focus on de–constructing place–based historical, colonial, and future relationships and connections that can be used to flip CIE research-related discourses and pedagogy on its head, an action in which we argue McDowall and Ramos (2017) refers to as *epistemic disobedience*. The following continues the

talanoa on decoloniality and the potential for fusing our understandings of *vā* and decoloniality as a lens for critiquing power relations in CIE research.

What does decoloniality mean to you?

Tepora

Dorpenyo (2020, p. 57) wrote of decoloniality as “a recovery process.” When discussing decoloniality, there is often acknowledgment of important things that have been lost or subjugated. I agree that decoloniality is the process of recognizing what is missing from contemporary narratives and philosophies when such is used to describe and ‘analyze’ the lives and contexts of Indigenous peoples. A decolonial approach that centers the views and knowledges of people usually regarded as being at the margin of Eurocentric knowledge is necessary if research is to benefit the researched, as well as the researcher.

Ben

Decoloniality involves directly confronting structural and ideological legacies as well as current realities. It recognizes the asymmetrical power dynamics and actively works to de-center them. These disruptions create space for a critical examination of their constructions and processes for potential reassembly. In the words of Jackson (2020), “the right to decolonise was restricted to Indigenous peoples whose lands were governed from afar by colonisers back in the ‘home country.’” The countries where the colonizers stayed, established a government, and became the majority were redefined as “settler colonies.” Indigenous peoples were excluded from any possibility of decolonization. The decolonizing narrative constructed by [settler colonial] governments demonstrates that an inherent injustice remains in limiting the basic human right of self-determination to only certain people. It is undoubtedly timely and just to reframe the decolonization narrative so that Māori and other Indigenous peoples in the “‘settler states’ might also be self-determining ... the potential exists to develop a different and unique decolonisation discourse” (pp. 135-136).

Decolonization within Moana Oceania contexts is crucial. We must be intentional about the language we use rather than relying on what Hūfanga-He-Ako-Moe-Lotu Professor Ōkusitino Māhina calls *imposed terminologies* (Lagi Maama Academic Consultancy, 2019). For instance, ‘Pacific’ was a term imposed on the region by colonial powers, whereas “Moana Oceania” is seen as more representative of the region’s cultural diversity (Chitham et al., 2019). Through *vā*-decoloniality, we actively work to unsettle these spaces while simultaneously striving to resettle them through careful language selection. Jackson (2020) offers the term “restoration” as an alternative to decoloniality, and Te Punga Somerville (2022) outlines a process to de-centre coloniality as well as the use of italics that otherize anything outside what is privileged. I concur that there must be a removal of colonial structures that suppress and confine non-colonial ways. *Vā*-decoloniality offers a pathway; combined with the concept of motutapu (see Johansson-Fua, 2016), it leads us to a more ‘neutral’ place for dialogue and negotiation of equity.

Katie

Walsh and Mignolo (2018) use the term “matrix of power” to describe the accumulation of colonial atrocities and assertions of power. They suggest that “decoloniality undoes, disobeys, and delinks from this matrix, constructing paths and praxis to an otherwise thinking” (p. 4). Decoloniality is identifying parts of my identity that have been colonized and working towards reclamation. For example, through Western assimilation practices, the Māori language stopped being a part of intergenerational knowledge transmission in my family. While I am not yet fluent, I work to reclaim this part of my identity. My father grew up without knowledge of Tongan cultural ways, and his education in Aotearoa society took place through Eurocentric forms of knowledge transmission. Decoloniality is the process of delinking from this dominance and reclaiming my Tongan cultural knowledge. I intend to teach this to my two children, thus disrupting the cyclic nature of coloniality.

Emma

Decoloniality entails an “ongoing undoing of colonisation” (Hundle, 2019, pp. 298-299). The ‘undoing’ is a process, a commitment and movement towards removing the influences and subjugation that Indigenous peoples, such as the Māori and Pacific Island nations, have experienced because of colonization. This includes the ‘undoing’ of damaging ways in how we perceive, interact with, and perpetuate cultural, social, political, economic, and educational constructs. The ‘undoing’ is about letting the voices of the silenced be heard. The ‘undoing’ is about allowing the faces of the Indigenous to be seen and our stories to be known. The ‘undoing’ is about reassigning who holds the power.

Dassia

Decoloniality is a worldview in action, both individual and collective, which intentionally addresses colonial hegemonies by making them explicit (by considering historical contexts) and intentionally engaging in Indigenous ways of knowing, doing, and being.

Vā–decoloniality: place–based Indigenizing practice within CIE

Ongoing space for negotiation – the hyphen (–)

Similar to the purposeful blowing of the conch shell in Oceania during traditional ceremonies that unite people, our aim is to illustrate what ‘decoloniality, indigeneity, and indigenizing’ looks, sounds, and feels like for us. This exploration is fundamental to the sense–making relational connections at the core of our mission in Oceania, including within higher education contexts (Johansson-Fua, 2022; Pene et al., 2002).

Our linking of vā, and its various forms/derivatives, with decoloniality, expressed as vā-decoloniality, is an interrogation and unpacking of the tensions associated with vā-relational practices and our responsibilities to Indigenous communities and the CIE research community in Oceania. Through the doing of indigenization through vā–decoloniality as an analytical

framework, we are also able to explore indigeneity and how “sovereignty on the ground allows outsiders to be pushed back or welcomed in alliances” (Gagné & Salaün, 2012, p. 383).

Decolonizing methodology is described by Smith (2012) as being “inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism” (p.1). Through their work in decolonizing research using Culturally Responsive Methodologies (CRM), Berryman et al. (2013) push back against traditional research paradigms, where the power to decide who is (and who isn’t) researched has been held by outsiders. Through CRM, Berryman et al. (2013) centre relationships with participants and a deep respect for the autonomy they possess over their own stories and the ways in which these are told. Decolonizing methodology is a process of conducting research that allows the worldviews of those who have endured legacies of oppression and marginalization to be communicated from their own frames of reference (Chilisa, 2020). Decolonization requires researchers to (un)learn and critically analyze the dominant theories, methodologies, and norms surrounding research. Tuck and Yang (2012) caution against the ease with which the term “decolonization” can be co-opted into education discourse in superficial ways, thus creating a metaphorical usage of the term. The metaphorical use of the word 'decolonization' allows for silencing as well as evasion, serving as a reminder to be careful and deliberate in how this term is used (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

What happens when vā is coupled with decoloniality in the form of vā–decoloniality?

Katie

I think of my own positionality as a person of Māori and Tongan heritage. This mixed heritage seems less “separate” when I consider Hawaiki, the ancestral lands in the Pacific from whence many Māori believe we commenced our journey to Aotearoa. Hawaiki is the place “before” but is also the place that many Māori believe we will one day return when we pass away. Hawaiki contributes to decoloniality by disrupting dominant concepts of time and place and unsettles well-entrenched Western binaries. It does this by simultaneously being both our past and our future, and by existing as a place both physical and metaphysical.

Hawaiki also opens the floor to discussions about vā between Māori and Pacific peoples by casting our minds back to a time when colonial forces were yet to touch our lands and divide us. Vā–decoloniality is about considering the colonial disruption of vā between peoples of the Moana and the possibilities of unraveling this by working together.

Emma

Anae (2010) suggests that vā “views all reciprocal relationships with others as sacred, then the relationship will be more valued and nurtured more closely” (p.13). When vā is coupled with decoloniality, the process of decoloniality is done with respect, reciprocity, and trust so that everyone involved benefits. Anae (2021) also discusses the vā between Pacific peoples and Māori and the tuakana/teina relationship we have due to our ancestral links. Vā–decoloniality between Pacific peoples and Māori allows decolonizing how our relationship has been departmentalized – we ‘return to’ enacting our ancestral bonds.

Thaman (2008) notes the “importance of vā as the basis for Tongan social interaction” and that this “is reflected in the high regard people place on rules governing different

kinds of interpersonal relationships and social interaction” (p. 464). She explains that “vā is used to denote interpersonal relationships” (Johansson-Fua et al., 2020, p. 45) and that within these relationships, there are behavioral expectations and social norms that are expected to be played out. I found this quote useful when understanding relationality and vā–decoloniality. To decolonize the process of knowledge production in CIE, enacting the vā disrupts and challenges existing spaces of CIE research.

Ben

The actions required to decolonize can vary, but it is essential that attention is given to processing the legacies of trauma and sensitivity to positionalities. It is through the vā that we can confront those legacies and negotiate a path forward together, whereby we elevate the voices of all within the vā. Coupling vā with decoloniality provides a ‘safe space’ where relationality can facilitate and allow for vulnerability, confront systemic colonial trauma, and collectively redress reality through mutuality and connectedness.

Dassia

Vā–decoloniality is the relational space where the deliberate undoing of colonial, Eurocentric, and neoliberal hegemonies occurs. In educational contexts, this means acknowledging colonial histories and embracing culturally democratic education so that diverse knowledge and practices are utilized. This is represented in the notion of the pluriversity in which knowledge is not universal but pluralistic and valued and utilized as such.

Tepora

If coloniality is applying the universality of knowledge and worldview to a single hegemonic worldview (Stein & Andreotti, 2016) and the ‘Othering’ of the research subject (Takayama et al., 2016), then vā–decoloniality is the active and ongoing removal of universality status from such self-centrism.

Is the CIE field too white? Are its theories and methodologies still too Eurocentric?

Tepora

The field of comparative education in Oceania is undergoing transformation. It is essential to recognize that CIE emerged as an area of research that compared Western education systems to develop best practices and policy models. Additionally, we acknowledge that comparative researchers have sought to critically examine the assumed universality of CIE theories in the context of industrialized nations. Isaac Kandel argued that education systems and their development must be understood within their unique contexts (Batra, 2017), while Spratt and Coxon (2020) suggested that CIE researchers engage more critically with colonial framings of context by incorporating Indigenous Oceania understandings of relational spaces.

However, I believe that focusing on the color quantum, or the ‘whiteness,’ of CIE detracts from efforts to decolonize CIE. Hegemonic knowledge practices are not limited to ‘white’ individuals, as Indigenous knowledges and worldviews also possess their own

forms of power. We advocate for the de-linking of the Eurocentric knowledge system from concepts of universality, epistemic, and ontological superiority.

Katie

The fact that the original CIE scholars were regarded as historians of education (Turner, 2019) raises the question: Whose history was told? Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) discusses the lack of Indigenous voices throughout the history of research. Was there consideration of other forms of knowledge beyond the European and North American contexts in which this work was situated? Were Indigenous ways of knowing, learning, and transmitting knowledge acknowledged, esteemed, and given voice? Turner (2019) notes a reliance on references external to the original work to shape the concepts and methods employed within the CIE field, thereby perpetuating more Western theories based on European and North American foundations. Spratt and Coxon (2020) reinforce this notion of colonialism within CIE by describing it as having a “continued and deeply entangled colonial legacy” (p. 520).

Ben

With shifting global politics leaning towards greater conservatism and xenophobia, it is critical that we address and rectify colonial legacies and continuities. We need to create an enabling environment, rather than one that demands conformity, if we are to critically investigate and decenter coloniality in the CIE field. The CIE field is based on the effort to identify ‘best practices’ when comparing educational structures.

Dassia

When I encountered OCIES, I felt great hope for the future. There was a diverse tribe of people whose values, commitments, and scholarly endeavors are powerful and visionary in transformative ways. The multicultural group is amazing, as is listening to the stories of the founders, their challenges, relationships, and wisdom. We could lament the elements of CIE; however, it would be unwise to categorize people by color and assign them particular motivations and impacts. Instead, we need to find allies. We need to build on the transformative aspects of research and teaching arising from culturally diverse practitioners’ shared goals and commitments. The more multicultural groups there are, the greater the capacity to have global impacts.

Comparativist concern: How do we treat others as we study them?

Tepora

Viewing research through a vā–decolonial lens raises further questions: What gives us the right to study another? What gives us the right to ‘represent’ another? The entire concept of ‘research’ is based on the assumption that one person has the right to ‘study’ another and ‘represent’ their lives in the researcher’s words. This right is generally accepted in academia once an ethics committee approves it. As decolonial researchers, should we also accept this assumption? Reflecting on this question challenges the ethical responsibilities of the ‘Indigenous researcher.’ To some extent, we, too, have accepted

that we have the right to study others and present them in our writing, framed according to our own epistemological and ontological preferences.

Katie

It is a constant reflection on who the research is for and why I am doing it. Māori Professor and scholar Mere Berryman was careful and deliberate in guiding me through the following considerations on my master's journey. We must question who benefits from the research and consider whether the benefits are reciprocal. Humility is of utmost importance. As researchers, we learn from participants' expertise, not the other way around. When I interview elders, I become aware that my university qualifications and countless books read will never match their cultural knowledge gained through life experiences.

The work belongs to the participants; we are merely story collectors and presenters. Participants' words must be treated with respect and never altered to fit a preconceived agenda. Anonymity grants a level of invisibility to participants, whose roles and the significance of these roles must always be acknowledged and honored. Additionally, the power inherent in our terminology must be examined. I believe it should be referred to as "the" research, not "my" research; "the" participants, not "my" participants.

Emma

Two ways to position our research when managing power and ethics are through participatory and imposition methods. Participatory research enables participants to engage in the research, whereas imposition research imposes the research on the participants. Within a culturally responsive framework, knowledge is co-constructed by researchers and participants, using vā and talanoa as conceptual methods. Traditional qualitative and quantitative methods lack a commitment to inclusiveness and cultural diversity. Relational methods reflect a more responsible approach to research, taking power into account sharing.

Ben

In conducting CIE research, contexts are crucial and cannot be overlooked. It is nearly impossible, nor should it be the aim, to make parallel comparisons. We must honor and elevate authentic narratives within these contexts. For instance, ethics is a prerequisite for university-based research. However, it is frequently constructed through a Western-privileged lens and seldom offers adaptability to other epistemologies or the necessary relationality (or vā). While requiring free, prior, and informed consent for research is essential, this process can be transactional and disrupt the development of vā. Adopting affirmative, relational ethics could support and enhance the relationality between researchers and participants.

Dassia

There is value in how Pacific research approaches participants. First, participants' stories are told. Their identities and subjectivities are valued rather than reduced to numbers or selective reportage. I think of Vaiolēti's (2006) quote: "Why hound me with a question

when you don't care for an answer, why play for a pair when there is only one dancer ...?". I interpret this to mean that there is little point in research if the researcher already has the answers to their questions in mind and seeks to fit participant responses into those preconceptions. Second, research must benefit the participants; this includes how the research is used and that researcher-participant relationships are reciprocal. Vairoletti (2016) highlights how Pacific and Indigenous peoples can be harmed by deficit investigative approaches from researchers outside their cultures. He points out that this is why many Pacific research participants inquire about the purposes of the research before agreeing to participate. Johannson-Fua (2014) draws on Thaman's use of the kakala garland-making metaphor to represent a Pacific-oriented research process. Beyond the considerations of the research purpose and nuances of how to gather data, there is the concept of 'luva,' which concerns the gifting of the research findings to participants and their communities.

How do we accommodate differences, and how is inclusion dealt with?

Ben

Cultural humility is an essential characteristic of a CIE researcher. Cultural humility is "the ability to maintain an interpersonal stance that is other-oriented (or open to the other) in relation to aspects of cultural identity that are most important to the [person]" (Hook et al., 2013, p. 354) and "requires practitioners to engage in self-reflection and self-critique as lifelong learners" (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998 cited in Hook et al., 2013, p. 354).

With consideration to *vā* in Moana Oceania, a researcher must understand the positionality of the participants, including the nuanced. At times, it may be beneficial to call on colleagues to whom you have existing *vā*, to introduce you. This creates a network within the broader relational *vā* space, where some trust can be assumed as the relationship commences. This can also provide more significant opportunities to validate, and make sense in the *vā* collaborative space, which is beneficial in the often-expedited time allotted to research.

Within Indigenous spaces, CIE research should contextualize ethics, collaborative decision-making, sense-making, and transparent, patient, and honest communications. Differences should be celebrated, honored, and represented authentically. It is vital to resist placing values on differences (e.g., strengths and weaknesses). For example, metrics of success may be contextually based and, therefore, cannot necessarily be utilized to analyze out-of-context comparisons.

Dassia

The concept of pluriverse accommodates differences. Querejazu (2016) captures the notion of the pluriverse by stating that:

Taking the pluriverse as an ontological starting point, implies not simply tolerating difference, but actually understanding that reality is constituted not only by many worlds, but by many kinds of worlds, many ontologies, many ways of being in the world, many ways of knowing reality, and experiencing those many worlds. (Querejazu, 2016, p. 3).

However, there is still a long way to go before achieving the pluriverse. A necessary starting point is to revisit and refine concepts such as inclusion to ensure they are as robust as possible. Efforts to co-opt, dilute, and diminish their effectiveness (as neoliberalism often does) must be addressed. Once addressed, there will be an opportunity to disseminate these concepts and hold institutional practices accountable based on these revised definitions.

Tepora

I like Ben's use of the term 'cultural humility'. No philosophy or worldview has a monopoly on knowledge. Accepting differences helps us see differences not as a barrier but as richness in the woven patterns of life and existence. We should plan for difference, not homogeneity. Differences describe our world better than sameness.

Envisioning an Ocean-centric CIE

Increased access to higher education globally, along with a rise in scholars and scholarships from Indigenous, colonial, and settler-colonial states, is strengthening the inclusion of epistemological and ontological diversity and critiques of the prevailing, privileged Western knowledge. Southern theory critiques Western dominance in academia and allows theorizing from Indigenous and/or decolonial positions. Spratt and Coxon (2020) argue that we remain in active colonial spaces and must shift the structures and conditions within our institutions and research environments. This "interepistemic project for CIE," as they call it (Spratt & Coxon, 2020, p. 524), "is a matter of decolonising 'knowledge and relationships'" (Takayama et al., 2017, p. 19).

How might new epistemologies, ontologies, axiologies help us decolonize CIE?

Emma

Burnett (2001) highlights how colonial influences persist in Kiribati's education system through the prioritization of English and Western curricula, giving it a "distinct colonial flavour" (p.14) despite independence in 1979 and localized policy-making. These influences marginalize Indigenous learning and negatively impact cultural identity. Burnett argues that decolonizing epistemologies requires valuing Indigenous knowledges and addressing how privilege reinforces dominant voices. Decolonizing ontology challenges views that position I-Kiribati as the 'other,' recognizing them as active participants in education. Decolonizing axiologies involves rejecting colonial values and discourses. Supporting this, I-Kiribati artist and lecturer Teweiariki Teairo claims "the epic quest for development has been largely characterized by deliberate suppression and pigeon-holing of our own I-Kiribati indigenous philosophies and processes of education" (Teairo, 2001, as cited in Quanchi, 2004).

Katie

Hau'ofa (1993) posits a need to create knowledge that is not influenced by imperialism but is instead shaped by our own understandings. Spratt and Coxon (2020) describe

Hau'ofa's writings as Ocean-Centric. These epistemologies decolonize as we cultivate awareness of our often "Othered" modes of thinking. Ocean-centric writing has the potential to disrupt the status quo through collaborations, which encompass our collective voices and a refusal to acquiesce. McCormick and Johansson-Fua (2019) discuss how Oceania is portrayed in ways that do not reflect lived realities. This brings to mind Jackson's (2019) concept of "myth-takes," where myths or mistaken truths become "knowledge" based on how our histories have been narrated. Ocean-centric contributions can help reframe these myth-takes

Ben

There is significant risk to colonial continuity if research continues to be predominantly framed within a Western, colonial-settler lens. This must be confronted and disrupted. I would not say we need 'new' epistemologies, ontologies, and axiologies, but there needs to be recognition that others exist beyond the dominant within CIE research. By elevating non-Western epistemologies, ontologies, and axiologies, there is a greater potential to transform discourses and actively decolonize the institutions and structures that confine and restrict CIE research. To support this, increased mentorship is extremely valuable for emerging scholars, particularly those from underrepresented communities, where there is greater precarity in engaging in disruption.

Dassia

I draw on Aikenhead's (1997) differentiation of Indigenous and Western epistemologies in the domain of education as follows:

- Social goals: survival of a people versus the luxury of gaining knowledge for the sake of knowledge and for power over nature and other people;
- Intellectual goals: to co-exist with mystery in nature by celebrating mystery versus to eradicate mystery by explaining it away;
- Association with human action: intimately and subjectively interrelated versus formally and objectively decontextualized;
- Holistically: First Nations perspectives with their gentle, accommodating, intuitive, and spiritual wisdom, versus reductionist Western science with its aggressive, manipulative, mechanistic, and analytical explanations;
- Concepts of time: circular for Aboriginals, rectilinear for scientists. (p. 220)

Disseminating Indigenous knowledge and highlighting differences from the Western paradigm are means of Indigenizing, democratizing, and decolonizing education and research.

Tepora

Oceania is diverse, encompassing multiple ways of knowing, as well as various epistemologies, axiologies, and ontologies. The same criticality that we advocate for Eurocentric knowledge generation must also apply to our own research practices, especially in multi-contextual spaces. The epistemologies, axiologies, and ontologies of

Oceania are not ‘new’ but largely undocumented. The acknowledgment of multiple ‘ies’ within Oceania spaces would enrich and add rigour to CIE research.

Oceania’s Indigenous knowledge and practice

“... all those things of value that are being sought [after] are always found in the depths...the secret of the human personality lies deep within the psyche; and the culture of a people is buried in the meanings embedded in the happenings of their entire history. In other words, nothing worth knowing, nothing worth having, reveals its secrets easily. (Nokise, 2017, p. xiii)

The Indigenous theologian and scholar of Samoan ancestry, Nokise, emphasizes the significance of spirituality, sacred connections, and relationships for the Moana people. For him and other Indigenous scholars, spirituality reflects an appreciation of the intimate connections and interrelations between human beings and other entities (Kovach, 2015; Mika, 2017). Such understandings were tainted and compromised by European missionaries and their “deliberate campaign [through Christianity] to eliminate all forms and practices associated with our traditional religious life” (Nokise, 2017, p. xiii).

Embedded within traditions is a deep appreciation of people's co-existence and co-interdependence with place and environment, as deliberately shared with kinfolk through traditional stories, practices, and artifacts. This relational way of understanding the intimacies and intricacies of self and selves in relation to, or through, others and entities in the world raises a critical consciousness inspired and infused by Indigenous periphery-center critiques of society (Fa’avae, 2021; Johannsson-Fua 2022).

Tongan scholar Johannsson-Fua (2016) describes Motutapu as a “relational space ... to co-explore new and authentic dialogue and conscious action” (p.1). Motutapu is a sacred island found across many island nations of Polynesia and serves purposefully as “places of safety for travellers to rest before they continue to journey beyond the reefs, or where outsiders come to negotiate entry to the safe lagoons” (p. 1). For education researchers, the concept of motutapu can provide a space where the negotiation of relationality can begin and contexts can be acknowledged, as they collaboratively journey towards a sustained, nurtured, and connected partnership (Johannsson-Fua, 2020)

Towards a Conclusion

In response to the call to decolonize CIE research, this chapter explores how Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies from Oceania can be utilized to rethink and engage with CIE research, particularly in Oceania contexts. We make our positionality explicit as a diverse group of emerging CIE researchers in Oceania, recognizing Indigenous protocols regarding the acknowledgment of self in relation to place. We employ talanoa and e-talanoa as heuristic and methodological tools to engage vā for meaning-making relationships and relationality in Oceania, merging this with decoloniality to propose vā-decoloniality as a transformative approach within CIE research. Written as a talanoa or dialogue, the authorship team critically reflects on the decoloniality of CIE research and proposes vā-decoloniality as a potential framework within Oceania CIE research contexts. We acknowledge the challenges of disentangling from CIE’s colonial legacies, questioning the Eurocentric nature of CIE, the

‘othering’ of research participants, and existing differences. We propose the metaphor of motutapu as a safe, vā space for envisioning an Ocean-centric, decolonial CIE, acknowledging the diverse contexts of Oceania.

Research 2

sometimes transparent
sometimes opaque
sometimes a mirror
the lens of research turns towards
me as often as it turns away
from me, toward others
does what is real matter
what is ‘why’
why is ‘what’
the more I learn the less I know
all that remains is what for

Tepora Wright

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