

Research Summary

An Indigenous Fijian Perspective: Prioritising Indigenous Fijian knowledge, values and aspirations in decolonising early childhood education

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As an Indigenous Fijian scholar and PhD candidate from the Faculty of Culture and Society at Auckland University of Technology, my doctoral research study underscores the crucial role of Indigenous Fijian values and aspirations in decolonising Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Fiji. My research explores how prioritising these values in educating Indigenous Fijian children can contribute to the broader decolonisation of education. The formalisation of ECE in Fiji from 1990 to the late 2000s, while a positive step, has primarily been influenced by Western education systems and ways of thinking. My research stresses the urgency and necessity of understanding Indigenous Fijian viewpoints in early childhood development, care, well-being, and education. The Indigenous Fijian methodology, known as '*veiwasei yaga*', that incorporates *Talanoa* and the Fijian Vanua Research framework underpins my study. Shared are some personal reflections on what decolonising the mind looked like and what Indigenous wisdom meant in the early stage of this research.

“Indigenous decolonisation of education intervenes the assimilative frameworks of western education to work toward Indigenous sovereignty of the minds, lands, peoples, and nations” (Kulango and Jaime, 2022, p. 1). This doctoral study will allow me to engage and prioritise Indigenous Fijian values and collective aspirations versus the universalised Western education methodologies. As an i-Taukei researcher I join other i-Taukei scholars in prioritising Indigenous Fijian knowledge systems and values as highlighted in the four aspects of knowledge: *vanua* (land and space), *tovo vakavanua* (customs) *veiwekani* (relationship) and *lotu* (spirituality) (Nabobo-Baba, 2006).

Lotu (spirituality) as important knowledge, is fundamental to the life of an indigenous Fijian and is perceived to be a belief underpinning their lives (Tiko, 2021). I used prayer to begin the fieldwork as a process to decolonise my mind, heart and soul. Similarly, Tiko, 2021 argued that spirituality connects the mind and the spirit in decolonisation. Through the methodology

of *veiwasei yaga* (sharing of experiences and useful themes), I observed and listened meticulously to the wealth of expert knowledge, traditional knowledge described succinctly as:

“Knowledge reminds us that we have responsibilities to the spirit of that knowledge. We must pass it on. Knowledge is not a tool, but rather a spirit. It transforms the holder.”
(Marshal et al., 2010, p. 1149).

My abode – my identity

My vanua (land & people) – where is my place?

I was born in Tonia, a rural village in the interior of Fiji.

You covered me in my mother’s womb (Psalms 139: 13).

God knew me and placed me on earth.

My identity: a Child of God first, a creation of our creator.

My totems

My fish is the vai (stingray),

My bird is the lulu (owl),

My tree is the vutu (hazelnut).

My village is Dromuna.

My yavusa (tribe) is Naitodua

My mataqali (sub-clan) is Muaikaba.

My yavu (family name) is Navirilala

My spirituality (lotu) is what grounds me.

My values and beliefs are what shape me.

My customs and traditional practices define me.

It connects me to my blood relatives (insiders), outsiders, and others.

My veiwekani (kinship relationship) is centred on the vuvale (family)

My veiwekani (relationship extends to all boundaries.

My veiwekani (extends to the vanua (land and people)

Shared understanding and meaningful connections between my body, mind and spirit.

I have been transformed as a knowledge keeper.

Catch the knowledge, embrace it, immerse in it, renew knowledge and *wasea yani* (share) it

References

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