

The Oceanic Researcher and the Search for a Space in Comparative and International Education

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This paper argues that, despite the increasingly espoused centrality of culture and context to the field of comparative and international education, the voices from within the context remain silent and absent from the literature on comparative and international education. This paper explores the various spaces in which an Oceanic researcher may operate. It draws on Epeli Hau'ofa's Oceanic philosophy and Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity to begin shaping possible actionable and ethical spaces for Oceanic researchers to explore the future of comparative and international education research for the Pacific.

Key words: culture, context, Oceanic philosophy, theory of hybridity, actionable space, ethical space.

INTRODUCTION

What is the value of the comparative and international education field to the Pacific region? Despite over 100 years of comparative and international education discourse, there remains little contribution from the Pacific region to this field. This paper will draw from Epeli Hau'ofa's Oceanic philosophy as initially expounded in his seminal work, *Our Sea of Islands*, 1993, and Homi Bhabha's (Bhabha, 1995) theory of third space to suggest a hybrid space for Oceanic researchers in the field of comparative and international education. In this hybrid space, the appreciation for context sensitivity is explored to encourage context specific research approaches. It is proposed that perhaps in this hybrid space, there is located a purpose for the comparative and international education field for the Pacific. Further, by attempting to make comparative and international education relevant to the Pacific region, we can perhaps support Crossley's (2010) claim:

Indeed, through such forms of context-sensitive research collaboration, small and other developing states could play a more creative and innovative role in contributing to the generation of new knowledge, perspectives and understandings – and in doing so, help to shape future international agendas for the benefit of all (p.428).

Given the social, economic, political and geographical context of the Pacific region what value can the field of comparative and international education research contribute? The recent change of name of the Australia and New Zealand so-called regional society for comparative and international education to a more inclusive name recognising Oceania as the region in which not only Australia and New Zealand but also many Pacific states and territories are located, presents a new season for exploring not only the field itself, but also its relevancy to the region.

This paper argues that a good starting point in this exploration is to head towards 'the context'.

SENSITIVITY TO CULTURAL CONTEXT

The Pacific region, located within the largest ocean in the world, spans a number of time zones on both sides of the international dateline and between the tropics. Although the wider region consists of mainly sovereign states, it also includes territories in free association with former colonial powers and colonies. In this article, however, ‘Pacific region’ specifically refers to 15 Pacific states and territories of: Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Fiji, Kiribati, Niue, Nauru, Palau, PNG, and Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. These 15 countries are members of the University of the South Pacific, as well as active members of the Pacific Forum Secretariat. These countries are independent sovereign states and have the authority to determine their own educational goals and priorities for development. The region is home to an estimated 9.7 million people with the highest concentration of population in the larger Melanesian countries of Fiji, Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Solomon Islands. The region is also home to many of the micro states of the world, those with populations below 20,000 as in Cook Islands, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Tokelau and Tuvalu (UNESCO, 2015). The Pacific is also one of the most linguistically diverse regions in the world; for example, Vanuatu with a population of approximately 200,000, has three official languages (Bislama, French and English) and 113 indigenous languages; Cook Islands with a population of just over 10,000 includes two indigenous languages and several dialects (UNESCO, 2015). The region is vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and sea level rising with countries like Tuvalu and Kiribati at the forefront of this very real global problem. Economically, although the region is traditionally agriculture and fishery based it is now shifting to service industries such as tourism. Key donor agencies in the region include New Zealand, Australia, Japan and more recently China, amongst other aid agencies.

At the end of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and Education for All (EFA) timeframe in 2015, the Pacific region had seen some significant progress in advancing the global agenda on education. Some of the notable progress has included; more than 80 per cent increase in participation in pre-primary education between 2000 and 2010 (increase from 39 per cent to 72 per cent); the adjusted net enrolment rate (ANER) for primary education was at 89 per cent in 2012. Participation in lower secondary education has increased from 44 per cent in 2000 to 77 per cent in 2012 (UNESCO, 2015), there are more technical and vocational education opportunities for Pacific youths providing possible alternative pathways, and across the region efforts have been made to improve teacher quality.

However, as the global agenda moves from the MDG and EFA to the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), unfinished business for the region remains. The core areas of unfinished businesses that remain include: improving quality education at all levels; improving the relevancy of education and learning; improving governance, management and financing of the education sector; improving monitoring and data management capacity; strengthening of partnerships in areas such as education research across the region (UNESCO 2015).

Sustainable Development Goal 4 which seeks to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” is promoted through 10 related targets to be achieved by 2030. At a glance, the unfinished business of the EFA combined with SDG Goal 4 provides a generous context for comparative and international education research in the Pacific. It is worth noting that at least two of the SDG Goal 4 targets draw attention to small island developing states.

The Pacific region is a diverse context, in cultures, in geography, economics and in politics. The diversity of the region is compounded by the tensions between local contexts and the global agenda of the past MDGs and now the SDGs. How Pacific people, development partners and researchers engage with the SDG programme within the diversity of the regional context presents plentiful opportunity for research from a comparative and international education perspective.

In the field of comparative and international education there has always been recognition of a socio-cultural dimension to the discourse. Early works of Sadler (1900), Kandel (1933) and Hans (1959) highlighted the socio-political context within which education and schools are located. In theory, just as the field is recognised for its multi-disciplinary and applied approach, and the importance of analysis and methodology that lies in working across jurisdictions, it also recognises the centrality of culture and context (Crossley and Jarvis, 2000).

For example, the work of Cowen (2006) amongst others has argued for the role of context within the comparative and international education field. As Cowen (2006) maintains, comparative and international education “always deals with the intellectual problems produced by the concept of context (the local, social embeddedness of educational phenomena) and transfer (the movement of educational ideas, policies and practices from one place to another, normally across a national boundary); and their relation” (Cowen, 2006:561).

Crossley (1990, 1999, 2008a, 2008b, 2009a, 2009) and Bray (2007, 2011) are two prominent comparative educationists who have over decades drawn attention not only to the cultural dimension of the field but, more specifically for the purpose of this paper, to the small island state context. Since the 1980s and 1990s there has been a growing literature on small island states recognising their particular ‘ecology’ rather than seeing them as scaled down versions of larger states. Crossley, through his works (1990, 1999, 2010), has been repeatedly calling for the voices of small states to be recognised in research:

If more effective cross-cultural partnerships are to develop, and increasingly powerful international agendas are to not perpetuate dependency, then the strengthening of local and regional education research and evaluation capacity could do much to inform and strengthen the voice of small states
(Crossley, 1999, p. 60).

However, the international literature on comparative and international education research to date seems to not move beyond the rhetoric of arguing for the importance of culture and sensitivity to the contexts researched. Similarly, while there is attention drawn to small island states in the works of Mark Bray, Michaela Martin, Michael Crossley and others, there has been minimal practical changes to bring the voice of the ‘context’ to the international conversation. The current conversation regarding the centrality of culture and context to the field remains generally for ‘outsiders’, for researchers, academics and development partners who are external to the context. The question asked here is, if the voice of insiders are included in the conversations about comparative and international educational research, what inferences would this have on research approaches, on methodology and on the knowledge generated? The work of Hau’ofa on Oceanic philosophy provides a foundation for problematizing the historical reliance on ‘outsiders’ perspectives on the Pacific, and an entry point for Pacific ‘insiders’ perspectives/voices within the field of comparative and international education.

OCEANIC PHILOSOPHICAL CONTEXT

Epeli Hau'ofa's Oceanic philosophy has inspired and influenced the work of many scholars, artists and students since its conception in the 1980s. Hau'ofa described his 'sea of islands' as follows:

Oceania is vast, Oceania is expanding, Oceania is hospitable and generous, Oceania is humanity rising from the depths of brine and regions of fire deeper still, Oceania is us. We are the sea, we are the ocean, we must wake up to this ancient truth and together use it to overturn all hegemonic views that aim ultimately to confine us again, physically and psychologically, in the tiny spaces which we have resisted accepting as our sole appointed place, and from which we have recently liberated ourselves. We must not allow anyone to belittle us again, and take away our freedom (1993, p. 16).

Hau'ofa's call for an alternative perspective on the Pacific was a bold statement intended to recapture the identity of Pacific people as ocean people. Hau'ofa argued for a more holistic perspective of the Pacific region. Further he argues for a grander view of the world's largest ocean, recognising its rich resources and the presence of ocean people in these waters over millennia. Hau'ofa's alternative perspective is in contrast to the notion of 'islands in the sea', that refers to the tiny specks of land space that are spread across this region. The notion of 'islands in the sea' is based on views of people from large continents with land based cultures and ways of viewing the world. Such a notion defines space as confined to land. It is within such a view that the Pacific Ocean, was carved, defined and mapped into blocks and pieces of space, effectively reducing vast oceanic views to small island views. This land based view—not only of Pacific peoples but also their relation to the rest of the world—was introduced in the last approximately 200 years.

The developments of formal education, religion and formal governance have been based on this notion of 'islands in the sea'. Consequently, views of 'development' for the Pacific nations in recent times also have been based on this definition. Issues of remoteness, geographical isolation, small economies of scale, vulnerability to climate change, and lack of human capacity are only a few of the common descriptors of Pacific island states. Along the same line, are descriptions of aid dependency, low economic performance and political instability. On the other hand, there are the descriptions of the 'tropical paradise' with an equally simplistic view of the region and its people. It seems that the descriptions of the Pacific Islands are either from a development deficit perspective or from a romanticised view.

When Hau'ofa offered his view on the 'sea of islands' over 20 years ago, it was criticised for many reasons including from those who saw it as a romanticised view of the region. However, in today's world, with the advancement of technology, the increasing availability of internet access, the increased frequency of flights with larger carriers travelling in, out and around the region, the very notion of space and time offered through Hau'ofa's Oceanic philosophy is clearly a reality for many. Pacific lecturers at the University of the South Pacific typically teach from their desks in Fiji through satellite connection to students in locations spreading as far north as Marshall Islands and as far east as Cook Islands and Niue. Tongans from Alaska, Beijing, London, San Francisco, Tokyo, through social media and live stream radio, can and

do keep in touch with events and news in Tonga just as easily as Tongans who live in Nuku'alofa and the 'remote' northern islands of Niuafo'ou. In fact Tongans, Tuvaluans and Samoans are some of the most well-travelled populations in Oceania. Moreover, traditional artefacts such as mats, tapa, wood carving and kava have seen a significant increase in production and in selling price driven by demand from the global Pacific diaspora. The world described by Hau'ofa of Oceanic peoples and their sprawling world, is truly here.

Hau'ofa's reclaiming of Oceania has over the decades since given the needed encouragement for other Pacific scholars to reclaim Indigenous knowledge systems and philosophies and to offer alternative views to the region. His Oceanic philosophy influenced the Rethinking Pacific Education Initiative (RPEI) initially funded by the New Zealand government in 2000. RPEI gave space for Pacific educators, researchers and academics to challenge approaches to education development and offer alternative perspective to the prevailing deficit approach to development in the region. One of the champions of the RPEI, Taufe'ulungaki, reflecting on being a Pacific researcher, stated:

The reasons for the failures of development strategies are, I believe, neither due to the inefficiency, nor to a lack of human capacity and strong commitment to good governance, nor to uncondusive economic environments, poor resource bases, political instability or combinations thereof, which are often cited by research and study documents. To me, these are symptoms of fundamental flaws in the paradigms themselves and are not due to ineffectiveness in their implementation or imperfect understanding of their rationale and guiding principles. It is my contention that we need to look for the causes in the core values underpinning western development paradigms in order to understand the inherent contradictions between avowed developmental goals and outcomes (Taufe'ulungaki, 2001, p.1)

Taufe'ulungaki and her colleagues in the RPEI movement, in their effort to bring the subject of context to the discourse on educational development for the region, argue strongly for greater understanding of values and philosophies and beliefs systems of Pacific people. Through the work of the RPEI, the Oceanic philosophy of Hau'ofa has been expanded and deepens for Pacific people to reveal underpinning values of their knowledge systems as well as to interrogate the values that underpin western development paradigms.

Hau'ofa's Oceanic philosophy has been further elaborated by the writings of Thaman (1998) who argues that the "continued dominance of a western educational model of teaching and learning [that] both directly and indirectly lead many Pacific Island people to think that the wisdom of their own cultures is worthless or at least irrelevant to modern educational development", p.3). An example of this can be seen in responses to the introduction of a recent policy change by the Tonga Ministry of Education. The new language policy directed the language of instruction for the early grades to be solely in Tongan with transition to English at Year 3 to Year 4 and progressively more English to be used by secondary school level. Despite over five years of implementation of this language policy, there remain teachers and parents who still complain about the policy and blame the language policy for poor student performance. While there may be valid criticism regarding the implementation processes for

the language policy change, what is worth noting here is the insistent belief about the value of the English language over the Tongan language and the extent it is shared amongst teachers and parents. As such it is not just about examining foreign paradigms of development, but it is also about examining Pacific peoples' values, beliefs and aspirations. The works of Thaman and Taufe'ulungaki draw attention to the complexities of Pacific voices; just as the 'insider' can be supportive, it can also be its own worst critic. Similarly, not all 'outsider' voices are negative and superficial.

The beginning of a new global agenda, the SDG era, combined with the activation of the Oceania society for comparative and international education, makes it timely to consider Sanga's (2005) call for 'better understanding of relationships' between Pacific and non-Pacific. Sanga (2005) argues that there is a:

...pressing need for a new type of scrutinisers, those who are fundamentally committed to making relationships in educational aid energising and positive for all partners. The need is for scrutinisers who are leaders. Many of these must be Pacific Islanders who are familiar with the worlds of education, aid, politics, and Pacific societies. Some of these new scrutinisers are non-Pacific Islanders, who have lived in Pacific societies, worked with Pacific Islanders, and who have demonstrated deep understanding of Pacific peoples...These two categories of people form the new scrutinisers. As a group they understand both worlds; the metropolitan and the Pacific; the city and the village. They appreciate the tensions, complexities, and dilemmas of both worlds. As leaders, they see the need for change and aspire to develop a vision for the change (Sanga, 2005, p.16).

In Hau'ofa's Oceania, there is sufficient space for Pacific people and non-Pacific people, the very group of scrutinisers identified by Sanga to take the leadership needed in educational development. The works of Taufe'ulungaki, Thaman, Sanga, Coxon and others through the Rethinking movement (Kabini Sanga, 2005), have deepened the notion of 'sea of islands' and the Oceanic philosophy of Hau'ofa. Hau'ofa's open invitation to an Oceanic space not only encourages the voices of Pacific people in all their complexity and diversity, but also more recent 'travellers' who have come to call this region their home. In today's Pacific, the voices are diverse, complex and multi-faceted with an increasing blurring of the lines between 'insider' and 'outsider' as we continue to see growing diaspora of Pacific peoples spread across Oceania.

How and what can the field of comparative and international education do in an ever changing context of the Pacific? How can the field of comparative and international education provide a framework to ascertain whose voice counts, whose voice represents the 'pacific reality' and who's voice offers the most constructive way into the future? How can we create an open space to allow dialogue, creation and building to happen amongst all Pacific researchers in full recognition of its multiplicity of voices?

In the following section, I argue for a relational, hybrid and dialogic approach to creating a third space for the Oceanic researcher to work within.

A POSSIBLE FUTURE CONTEXT

In an attempt to create a space for the Oceanic researcher (Pacific researchers as well as non-Pacific researchers who call this region their home), there are two possible sources of guidance and inspiration. True to Pacific heritage, the source of guidance combines both local and global forms of knowledge.

The first source is from oral history and the geography of Pacific voyages and settlement. Throughout Polynesia, there are small islands named *Motutapu* (sacred island). *Motutapu* stands at the entrances to great harbours and they were places of sanctuary where travellers would rest until it is safe to continue their journey. *Motutapu* stands at the entrance to Tongatapu, at Te Avaniu in Borabora, between Ra'iatea and Taha'a in Tahiti and at the entrance to Rarotonga. There is also a *Motutapu* at the entrance to the Wai-te-mata Harbour in New Zealand (Taonui, 2008). *Motutapu* is a gateway between the inner islands and the far ocean. In all locations, *Motutapu* has been used as a place of sanctuary from internal wars or as a place for negotiations, a middle ground, a place for rejuvenation as well as a place to launch new journeys.

The second source is from Homi Bhabha's (Bhabha, 1994) theory of hybridity. Bhabha argues that a starting point is recognising cultural differences, that people hold different values, philosophies, beliefs, traditional knowledge systems and languages. People come to this ocean with different perspectives, experiences and views of the world. In order to better understand the cultural differences that exist, Oceanic researchers are encouraged by Taufe'ulungaki (2001), "...to dig deeper to understand cultural values, belief systems and philosophies that underpin Pacific systems and structures. At the same time interrogate assumptions and structures and processes that have been inherited with limited questioning. As Oceanic researchers, there is the need to always ask questions such as: 'whose knowledge? Whose cognitive and philosophical theories? Whose research paradigms, whose methodologies, techniques and procedures?'" (Taufe'ulungaki, 2001, p. 8).

From an understanding of cultural differences, Oceanic researchers can better translate the indigenous knowledge systems and realities of Pacific people and make sense of global agendas, such as the SDG. In the act of translation, Bhabha highlights processes of cultural representation and reproduction. For Pacific educators working in New Zealand and Australia who try to use the time honoured traditions of Talanoa and Fono, there is recognition that despite all attempts to explain the values and philosophies that underpin these two concepts, words cannot fully capture the holistic knowledge system that surrounds them. It can be argued that Pacific educators also re-produce the Talanoa and Fono in another form.

It is in the very act of re-production and cultural translation that Pacific educators and researchers create new structures and new initiatives. Bhabha (1994) highlights that while the act of translation and re-production may not be fully understood within the wisdoms of the original, it has traces of feelings and practices that inform it; we can view the Talanoa and Fono concepts in use by Pacific educators in this way. The act of cultural translation gives birth to cultural hybridity where there is space to explore something different, something new and perhaps unrecognisable, but in that process find new areas of negotiation, drawing new meanings and representation.

In this state of hybridity, there is a possible space for Oceanic researchers. In theory, Bhabha (1994) points out that the third space enables other positions to emerge, it displaces, unsettles the histories that constitute it and at the same time it settles the 'unsettled'. The third space sets up new structures of authority and new political initiatives; it is an ambiguous area that

develops when two or more individuals/cultures interact. The third space is a place of continuous tension and negotiation. But if the third space is in *Motutapu*, then it can also be a place of rejuvenation, a sanctuary, a place to launch new journeys. This article puts forward the idea that *Motutapu* is a space of opportunity for Oceanic researchers to ponder, to critique, to build new methods in and approaches to the field of comparative and international education for this region.

In this hybrid *Motutapu* there is the opportunity to explore a common actionable space (Sharma-Brymer, 2007). In such a space, Sharma-Brymer argues, there lies the opportunity to raise awareness of self-efficacy and awareness of social conformity, which may lead to tensions and conflicts but there is also opportunity for hope and new directions. In this actionable space, there is the chance to question the purpose and value of the comparative and international education field to the Pacific region.

From a Pacific people's perspective, an actionable space may be what Taufe'ulungaki argues for in the role of a researcher. Taufe'ulungaki argues that the "primary role of research in the region is to develop a uniquely Pacific world view, that is underpinned by Pacific values, beliefs systems and ways of structuring knowledge which will become the core values and ideologies driving the development process in the region as well as the education system, the key instrument in its promotion" (Taufe'ulungaki, 2001, p. 5).

For Pacific people, research must be worthwhile, useful and applicable to transforming the lives of Pacific people. As such, operating in praxis makes sense in the Pacific context, that theory and practice are intertwined in Pacific people's world view. The Oceanic researcher is one who is actively involved in Pacific societies, working to change mind sets and expand power and control for the benefit of Pacific communities.

Further to 'actionable space' Oceanic researchers could also explore 'ethical space'. Ermine (2007) argues that "the 'ethical space' is formed when two societies, with disparate worldviews, are posed to engage each other [where there is the potential for] ... a new partnership model of the ethical space, in a cooperative spirit between Indigenous peoples and Western institutions [that] will create new currents of thought" (Ermine, 2007, p. 194). The cooperative spirit called for by Ermine is critical for understanding the various ethical systems that are present in Oceania, both indigenous and introduced.

Sanga (2006) has repeatedly called for the study of Pacific ethics and has explored the Mala'ita ethical system. Thaman, Taufe'ulungaki and I have explored Tongan ethical protocol for research under the Kakala Research framework (Fua, 2014). Likewise, Nabobo-Baba (Nabobo-Baba, 2006) and others around the region have clarified and been exploring this ethical space for their contexts.

Determining the ethical space for Oceanic research is a question for further research, scrutiny and collective dialogue. For now, in this space of hybridity, this article suggests a '*Motutapu*' for Oceanic researchers to explore a collective actionable space, an ethical space for Oceanic researchers in the field of comparative and international education. Suffice it to say here that in this space, relationships will be critical to opening the doors towards greater co-ordination, collaboration and co-operation.

CONCLUSION

In the early 1990s, the Oceanic philosophy of Epeli Hau'ofa cut a path for Pacific scholars to follow in calling for the rethinking of Pacific education, to reclaim Pacific world views, values,

and philosophies, and to restore Pacific dignity. These efforts built on the earlier work over previous decades in which Pacific educators had been expanding their world view, sometimes quite independently of New Zealand and Australian academics, but with few opportunities to truly collaborate.

The hybrid *Motutapu* suggested in this paper for the Oceanic researcher can uphold actionable and ethical spaces to allow for rich dialogical, hybrid and relational based approaches as espoused by the Oceanic philosophy of Hau'ofa. Further, the hybrid *Motutapu* has the potential to explore the dialogical and relational aspects of comparative and international education in the context of the Pacific region. As Lee, Napier and Manzon (Lee, 2014) argue, "Comparative education always works in dialectics, considering views that seem to be in opposition, but at the same time generating richer meanings in the process of considering such opposing views" (p.146).

BRAINS AND PADDLE, (Thaman K. H., 1993)

Thinking is tiring

like paddling against the waves

until feeling comes lightly

late into the pacific night

when these islands calm me

stroking my sorrows

I ask for silence

And they give it

I ask for forgiveness

And they raise my face

I carried with me scars

from loving and knowing

many planets

*but when I fell asleep
the ocean sounds gathered
my dreams into its depths
and for the first time
I did not feel responsible
for the pain of the earth
or the darkness of night*

*today I wonder
what the difference
is between one sea and another
or how to recover morning
and conquer doubt
the pulse of our separate brains
has the answer
it is in our becoming
that we are one*

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