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Fijian mentors' experiences of an international teaching practicum for Australian pre-service teachers: Perceptions of a decolonising agenda

Graham Parr [a,*], Kay Tinney [a], Rosiana Lagi [b]

[a] School of Curriculum, Teaching and Inclusive Education, Faculty of Education, Monash University, 19 Ancora Imparo Way, Clayton, VIC 3800, Australia
[b] School of Pacific Arts, Communication and Education, The University of the South Pacific, Laucala Campus, Suva, Fiji

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ABSTRACT

Initial teacher education programs across the world continue to support short-term international teaching practicums (ITPs) to build pre-service teachers' (PSTs') intercultural knowledge and skills. While much research has endorsed the value of such ITPs, studies have raised questions about ethical issues, including the elitism of programs and the danger of reinforcing PSTs' colonial prejudices. This qualitative study investigates an innovative ITP for Australian PSTs in Suva, Fiji, showing how Pasifika (*talanoa*) concepts and decolonising methodologies were used in the design and research of the program. The authors, from partner institutions in Australia and Fiji, surveyed and interviewed 27 Fijian mentor teachers in schools who had supervised Australian PSTs, to investigate how these mentors experienced the decolonising character of the program. Findings affirm the value of embedding decolonising strategies and concepts into the program design and research of ITPs, to facilitate mutual understanding, respect and knowledge exchange across cultures.

Talanoa provides a space (*va*) for changing cultural practices and participant involvement through *veiwekani* (relationship building), *vakarokoroko* (respect) and *veitokoni* (reciprocity). (Cammock et al., 2019, p. 123)

1. Introduction

Before COVID-19 in 2020–2021, universities across the world were offering international mobility experiences to improve their students' intercultural knowledge and skills (De Wit & Altbach, 2021). In the field of initial teacher education (ITE), a proliferation of short-term programs had evolved, in the form of international teaching practicums (ITPs) or short-term international study experiences for pre-service teachers (PSTs) (Fitzgerald et al., 2024 in press). Research had endorsed the value of such programs (Cantalini-Williams et al., 2014; Fitzgerald et al., 2017a, 2017b), although some studies had raised questions about a range of ethical issues, including the danger of these experiences reinforcing colonial views in the travelling PSTs (e.g., Parr et al., 2017a, 2017b; Santoro & Major, 2012).

COVID-enforced travel bans disrupted many established ITPs, prompting a re-think of existing and future programs for diverse reasons. In Australia, the cessation of ITPs reinforced Australian educators' feelings of distance from the northern hemisphere, but also

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: graham.parr@monash.edu (G. Parr).

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reminded them of their geographical and cultural closeness to their Pacific neighbours. At this time, along with increasing geopolitical tensions in the region, there were calls for Australia to "develop and strengthen its relationships with Pacific island countries and with the Pacific islands region more generally" (Newton Cain & Morgan, 2022, p. 1). As travel bans eased, ITP programs for Australian PSTs resumed in different international locations. It was at this time that the authors of the current article proposed an ITP for Australian PSTs in Suva, Fiji. It was intended that this Fiji ITP could contribute to improved understanding between Australia and the Pacific, and it could address previous concerns about the ethics of traditional ITPs. In the early planning stages of the Fiji ITP, concerns about the potentially elitist nature of the practicum (see Bamberger & Yemini, 2022; Netz et al., 2020) were eased a little when funding was secured for eligible students from the Australian Government's New Colombo Plan (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade DFAT, 2024). This funding enabled PSTs from a wider diversity of socio-economic backgrounds to apply for selection in the IPT, some of whom would not otherwise have been able to afford the airfares, accommodation costs and everyday expenses required to participate. In addition, the proposed new Fiji ITP aimed to reduce the potential, reported in some studies, for ITPs in developing countries to reinforce participating PSTs' colonial prejudices (Castiello-Gutiérrez & Gozik, 2023; Klein & Wikan, 2019; Santoro & Major, 2012). As Bamberger and Yemini (2022) have written: Attitudes of "'doing good' for a 'deficit other' are common in [ITPs], which raises the question of global justice and hegemonic structures of power relations" (p. 2).

Mindful of such ethical concerns in traditional ITPs, this case study takes a decolonising approach to investigate the pilot of the Fiji ITP, involving 27 PSTs from Monash University in Australia, and 27 mentor teachers from five primary schools, five secondary schools, and one early-childhood education centre in Suva, Fiji. Most of the visiting Australian PSTs were enrolled in an undergraduate initial teacher education course (the majority being in the third or fourth year of a double degree course), and they had previously completed 3-4 teaching placements in Australian schools. Three of the PSTs were enrolled in the second year of a graduate Master of Teaching course, through which they had already previously completed at least one three-week placement in an Australian school. The 'case' for this study is the group of local mentor teachers in Suva who mentored the Australian PSTs on their ITP placement and agreed to participate in this study. They had all completed three- or four-year teacher education degrees, and a small number (2 of the 27 mentors, or 7 %) or had pursued some further study, but had not completed a full master's degree or PhD.

The case study investigates the mentors' perceptions of the challenges and benefits of this Fiji IPE for themselves as mentors, for the students in their classes, and for the Australian PSTs. The decolonising agenda of this study gives central attention to the Pasifika concept of *talanoa,* both in the design of the ITP program and in the theoretical framework for the research. This aligns with Feetham et al.'s (2023) advocacy that "*talanoa* is a crucial component for qualitative research [in Pasifika settings] as it can help facilitate knowledge exchange and understanding among Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities" (p. 1441).

Through employing *talanoa* concepts, practices and discourses, the authors (two white Australians and one Indigenous Fijian) seek to identify, engage with and disturb some of the colonialist potential of the Fiji ITP. We also aim to identify the ways in which programs such as the Fiji ITP can facilitate mutual respect, understanding and knowledge exchange as part of a broader international agenda for social justice and global citizenship in initial teacher education (Fitzgerald et al., 2024 in press).

2. Literature review

The literature investigating short-term ITPs for PSTs mostly comprises qualitative studies, but sometimes mixed methods have been employed. There is not sufficient space here to include a comprehensive review of this literature, but it is worth mentioning the diverse approaches taken by researchers. They include: systematic reviews of multiple programs (Cantalini-Williams et al., 2014; Di Pietro, 2022; Smolcic & Katunich, 2017); critical evaluations of ITPs located in multiple countries, but managed by the one university (Fitzgerald et al., 2017a, 2017b); and investigations of single programs managed by single universities (Doungphummes & Cacciattolo, 2015; Jones et al., 2022; Fitzgerald, 2019). While most of the data from these studies has been generated during and immediately after the completion of programs, some recent studies have investigated the longer-term impacts on practice and identity of PSTs undertaking an ITP (Fitzgerald & Cooper, 2022; Fitzgerald et al., 2024 in press).

By far the largest number of studies focus on experiences and learning outcomes of the participating PSTs (e.g., Kabilan, 2013; Jones et al., 2022; Parr & Chan, 2015). These studies affirm the value of such programs for the professional learning of the PSTs, showing how they can build intercultural knowledge, identity, leadership skills and confidence. The perspective of accompanying academic leaders has been a frequent source of interest to researchers from Australia (Fitzgerald et al., 2017a, 2017b; Jones et al., 2022; Lang et al., 2017; Parr et al., 2018; Williams, 2019). The benefits for accompanying leaders on these ITPs are largely aligned with the benefits identified for PSTs, although a major focus has been on the development of leaders' capacity to manage people and vulnerability in uncertain and unfamiliar contexts. Increasing numbers of studies have sought to inquire into the experience of host-country participants (Jin et al., 2020a, 2020b; Jones et al., 2024; Wong & Oh, 2023). Such studies report positive outcomes overall for the ITPs, but they also show the potential for confusion and tension in PSTs and mentors caused by differences in culture, values and curriculum.

A large body of literature examining teaching placements in *local* settings has shown that mentoring is a powerful factor in PSTs' learning (Ambrosetti, 2014). Indeed, most of these studies argue that quality relationships between PSTs and mentors are crucial to the success of any placement (Hudson, 2013; Talbot et al., 2018). And yet the literature shows not all mentoring is inevitably positive for PSTs, with several studies revealing how mentoring can be either richly supportive of PSTs or it can hinder the confidence or capacity of PSTs to grapple with unfamiliar or unexpected scenarios (Nguyen & Parr, 2018; Riesky, 2013). Although studies have affirmed the importance of strong relationships between mentors and PSTs in ITPs (Parr et al., 2018), until recently (e.g., Jin et al., 2020a; Jones et al., 2024) there has been little research delving deeply into the mentoring experiences of teachers on an ITP. This study speaks into this under-researched space in the literature.

3. Methodology

In employing *talanoa* concepts, practices and discourses in the design of the Fiji ITP and in the methodology for this case study, the researchers were responding to international calls to decolonise research into international education initiatives – that is, to identify and disturb dominant colonial practices in education and research that continue to privilege white, middle-class, male and western research practices and knowledges (Sultana, 2019). We were also mindful of compelling literature in the Pacific dating back decades, which calls on higher educators and researchers "to challenge the dominance of western philosophy, content, and pedagogy in the lives and the education of Pacific peoples" (Thaman, 2003, p. 3). For example, 20 years ago Thaman (2003) had urged educators and researchers in the Pacific to "value alternative ways of thinking about the world, particularly those rooted in the Indigenous cultures of Oceanic peoples", and to develop a philosophy of education in the Pacific that is "culturally inclusive" (p. 3; see also Thaman et al., 2016).

As researchers, we chose to work with *talanoa* concepts, because these had been central to the design of the Fiji ITP from the earliest stages, and these concepts continued to shape our research focus on potential hegemonies in ITP policy and practice. In this study, we found it helpful to build on the Bakhtinian dialogic theory and methodologies that had underpinned Monash University's co-design and co-research of ITP programs with international partners for more than a decade (Fitzgerald et al., 2017a, 2017b; Parr, 2012; Parr et Chan, 2015). These theories have shaped the ways Monash University has sought to develop mutually respectful relationships with universities and schools in different parts of the world, rather than (as some western institutions have done) to position international placement settings as "resources of the world" to be "utilized … in preparing teachers for the future" (Kissock, 2007, p. ix).

One way to avoid such positioning is to decolonise the ways in which international programs are designed (Netz et al., 2020). The decolonising design and pedagogical work began well before the Australian PSTs flew out of Australia. In the months preceding their departure, Graham and Kay led a series of four 90-minute workshops with the PSTs in Australia, which (in addition to addressing administrative and OHS requirements) focused on developing PSTs' knowledge and understanding of Fijian educational cultures and practices, especially as they related to schools in Suva where the students would be placed. During this period, Graham (Author 1) and

Table 1
Contrasts between the decolonising Fiji ITP design and traditional ITP designs

Decolonising ITP Program/Curriculum Design	Traditional ITP Program/Curriculum Design
Program is co-designed in dialogue with ITP partners	**Program is largely designed by managing (or home) institution**
• Programs is collaboratively designed by Monash, its Pacific partners (drawing on strong relationships with these partners) and a third-party study aboard agency • Program includes: a 15-day teaching placement in schools; accommodation in USP; collaboration with community-based organisation; a range of cultural activities within and beyond the schools and USP.	• Program is largely or solely designed by the managing or 'home' ITE institution, often in association with a third-party study abroad agency (Di Pietro, 2022). • A program of extra-curricular cultural activities can be pre-planned for visiting PSTs, but these are rarely connected with host schools.
Co-designed ITP curriculum – a dialogue between ITE standards of the home institution and curriculum in host schools	**ITP curriculum largely determined by ITE standards of the 'home' institution**
• ITP curriculum is an ongoing dialogue between Monash (interpreting Australian ITE standards) and the host institution/s in Suva (the partner university and host schools). • That dialogue is sustained through respectful relationships and regular meetings between Monash PSTs and local mentors and school leaders.	• Host schools are requested to fulfil the curriculum requirements of the standards governing ITE of the 'home' institution. • Few opportunities for negotiation of or dialogue about pedagogy or curriculum before or during the ITP (cf. Riesky, 2013).
PSTs' pedagogy remains responsive to needs and interests of host schools, their mentors and the local students	**PSTs' pedagogy tends to be interpreted by visiting PSTs (and mentors) as a 'choice' between western practices and local mentors' practices**
• Monash explicitly expresses a preference for dialogic and student-centred teaching and learning in a *Placement Guide*, but it is the professional relationships and on-the-ground reciprocal dialogue between mentor and PST, that ultimately shapes the PSTs' pedagogy and practicum. • Changes to teaching commitments in placement schools are considered part of the ITP. PSTs seek ways to respect, support, contribute to and learn from educational and cultural events hosted by the host school.	• Visiting PSTs often find themselves needing to 'choose' between familiar teaching pedagogies and the teaching approaches favoured by their mentors. There is little preparation for or engagement in dialogue about classroom practice. (Jin et al., 2020b) • Whole school events, cultural celebrations or pd days in host schools tend to be interpreted as 'interruptions' to the real teaching placement, which is focused mostly on classroom teaching practices.
Fiji ITP program seeks **to value and learn from multiple cultures and voices**	**ITP programs hope to enhance intercultural learning in visiting PSTs**
• Multiple workshops led by accompanying teacher educators from the home institution (or USP) are held for PSTs and the leaders of the ITP. These are focused on learning about and being responsive to the cultures, languages and identities of peoples in Suva schools, classrooms and communities. • Intercultural community events are organised, in collaboration with the partner university in Suva and within host schools. These provide further opportunities for the Australian PSTs to engage with and better appreciate difference and connection in regard to Pasifika cultures, voices and identities. • Cultural difference is framed as a resource for reciprocal learning and growth, not a barrier. (Most PSTs and mentors on the Fiji ITP reported appreciation of cultural difference as a positive ITP outcome.)	• Traditional ITP programs hope to enhance intercultural learning in the travelling PSTs, but this is with a minimum (or no) workshops before or during the ITP (cf. Jin et al., 2020b). • PSTs are often left to learn, without input from accompanying teacher educators from their home institution (or from a partner institution in the host country), about local culture and cultural difference in and around education, and how they shape educational practices. • PSTs sometimes return from an ITP feeling that cultural difference is a complication that needs to be overcome, rather than a resource for reciprocal learning and growth (see Santoro & Major, 2012).

Kay (Author 2) collaborated with Rosi (Author 3) and her colleagues at The University of the South Pacific (USP) to co-design and refine the ITP program, so that all participating groups could contribute to and learn from the collaboration. The ITP was able to build on USP's rich history of liaising with mentor teachers in local schools and centres, drawing on their local wisdom and practices from early in the process. In that respect Fijian institutions were not positioned as mere 'resources' for the Australian PSTs' learning.

The level of collaboration between Monash University and USP in Fiji that we are describing above was only possible because of a historically strong partnership between the two universities. This partnership enabled us to dialogue across institutions to select appropriate local schools in Suva in the months leading up to the arrival of the Australian PSTs. It also allowed Graham and Kay to collaborate closely with Rosi and colleagues from USP, who drew on local wisdom and guidance as they, in turn, liaised with local mentors and school leaders in the Suva institutions. A key moment in this liaising was a workshop for leaders and mentors of ITP host schools in Suva, co-hosted by USP and Monash university, just prior to the arrival in Fiji of the Australian PSTs. At this workshop, Graham and Kay provided relevant information about the Fiji ITP program, led a discussion about the expected outcomes of the placement, and they created a *talanoa* space for local education leaders and mentors to share their expectations and questions about the placement. This was followed up by Graham and Kay meeting with mentors and school leaders in their separate institutions in Suva, during the first week of the placement.

The left column of Table 1 (below) identifies some key decolonising features of the ITP design for this pilot of the Fiji ITP, integrating *talanoa* principles of *veiwekani* (relationship building), *vakarokoroko* (respect) and *veitokoni* (reciprocity), as expressed in the opening epigraph of this article. We contrast these, in the right column of Table 1, with a list of typical design features of an ITP that is not underpinned by a decolonising agenda, although we acknowledge that the list is not definitive, and many ITPs that do not necessarily self-identify as being driven by a decolonising agenda sometimes draw on features from the left column of this table.

When the time came for inviting local Fiji mentors to participate in *talanoa* research conversations for this study, and to complete online surveys, we hoped that these conversations would feel as if they were 'naturally' emerging from the dialogue with mentors that had been developing before and during the placement. This was another of the ways in which *talanoa* concepts were used to enhance inclusivity and to challenge the hegemony of western research practices (Prescott & Johansson Fua, 2016). Ethics approval for the study was obtained from Monash University's Human Research Ethics Committee.

3.1. Data generation methods

There were two stages of data generation for the study. Stage 1 involved *talanoa* research conversations with small groups of teachers in Suva schools (and one early learning centre) who had been mentoring the Australian PSTs. The *talanoa* conversations were conducted during the last days of the three-week placement and later transcribed. A list of topics for these *talanoa* conversations was shared with mentors beforehand. The topics included: previous experiences of mentoring; experiences of mentoring Australian PSTs; challenges and benefits for all stakeholders of this ITP; and recommendations for improving the program. And yet, consistent with

Table 2
Participating Fijian mentors (n = 27) and Australian PSTs (n = 27) at placement schools.

Name of school (Pseudonyms)	Number, gender and teaching experience of Fijian mentors	Number of Australian PSTs
Testament High School (THS)	**2 mentors:** 1 female (mid-career); 1 male (mid-career)	**2 PSTs:** 1 female, 1 male
Ishwar Secondary College (ISC)	**2 mentors:** both female (very experienced)	**4 PSTs:** 3 female, 1 male
Meadow Primary School (MPS)	**2 mentors:** both female (mid-career)	**2 PSTs:** both female
Meadow Secondary College (MSC)	**5 mentors:** 2 females (early career) 3 females (mid-career)	**2 PSTs:** 1 female, 1 male
Catholic High School (CHS)	**3 mentors:** 2 females (very experienced); 1 female (early career)	**3 PSTs:** 2 females, 1 male
Catholic Primary School (CPS)	**3 mentors:** 1 male (very experienced) 1 male (mid-career) 1 female (early career)	**3 PSTs:** 2 females, 1 male
Indo-Fijian High School (IFHS)	**3 mentors:** all female (very experienced)	**4 PSTs:** 3 males, 1 male
Indo-Fijian Primary School (IFPS)	**3 mentors:** 1 female (very experienced) 2 females (mid-career)	**3 PSTs:** all female
Suva Early Childhood Centre (SECC)	**2 mentors:** 1 female (very experienced) 1 female (early career)	**1 PST:** 1 female
Zhong Shan Secondary College (ZSSC)	**2 mentors:** both female (very experienced)	**3 PSTs:** all female

talanoa practices, some of these topics were set aside if the participating mentors wished to discuss other issues that were not on the list. That is, in the *talanoa* conversations Graham or Kay negotiated the selection of topics with their local mentor interlocutors, yet another key decolonising approach.

Twenty-seven (93 %) of the Fijian 30 mentors accepted our invitation to participate in these conversations. They brought to their mentoring a range of teaching experiences. Twelve were very experienced (with greater than 10 years' experience), nine were mid-career teachers (with 5–10 years' experience) and six were early-career teachers (with fewer than 5 years' experience) (see Table 2 below). Twenty-four (89 %) of the 27 participating teachers had previous mentoring experience, with four of the 27 (15 %) having mentored international pre-service teachers previously.

Stage 2 of data generation involved the completion of online surveys by the teacher mentors. These were constructed with Qualtrics. An online link to the surveys was emailed to the mentors after the Australian PSTs had departed Fiji at the end of the practicum. The surveys included a combination of likert-scale and open-ended items, which were completed by 16 of the mentors (53 % of the total number of 30 teachers who mentored the Australian PSTs on the ITP) (see Table 3).

3.2. *Talanoa concepts in the research design*

When undertaking qualitative research into education experiences in western contexts, Creswell and Creswell (2017) recommend using focus groups to tease out the complexity of the experiences. Previous studies in the Pacific have shown how *talanoa* can help to facilitate a more respectful dialogue between western researchers and Pasifika participants than western focus groups (Vaka et al., 2016), wherein decisions about what constitutes valid knowledge or experience are almost invariably dominated by western researchers' preconceptions (Feetham et al., 2023; Sanga et al., 2020).

Analysis of the *talanoa* transcript data and survey responses was conducted using a combination of Braun and Clarke's (2019) thematic analysis and Feetham's (2023) interpretation of *talanoa* research methods. This combination of approaches was deemed an appropriate way of weaving Pasifika research traditions together with dialogic western methods (Prescott & Johannson, 2016). It enabled the researchers to emphasise the importance of culturally situated storytelling, while allowing for flexible methods of analysing data.

The team of three researchers flexibly engaged with Braun and Clarke's (2019) stages of critically analysing the research data. The stages included: (1) multiple readings by separate researchers to become familiar with the data; (2) dialogue amongst the researchers to generate initial codes; (3) condensing themes from these initial codes; (4) reviewing, naming, refining, and confirming themes; and (5) completing the writing process. We use the term "flexibly engaged" with Braun and Clarke because we believe with Byrne (2022) that reflexive thematic analysis encourages an iterative and recursive approach to the 'stages' of thematic analysis. Also, with regard to Braun and Clarke's final stage, we believe that writing is an ongoing dimension of *all* stages of inquiry, and so in our study, writing was not restricted to the final stage of the research. As Mitchell and Clarke (2021) put it: "Writing not just of research but as research" (p. 1).

When enacting the early stages (1–3) of Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis, we found that the codes we created from the data of both the survey responses and the transcripts of the *talanoa* conversations (see Fig. 1) were shared across the two data generation methods. (Fig. 1 lists these initial codes.)

From these initial codes, five themes were identified, and these are used in the forthcoming section to structure the presentation of findings from the *talanoa* conversations. The following Findings section begins with some broad-brush findings from the survey data, and then we move on to report key insights from the *talanoa* conversations using the five themes.

4. Findings

4.1. *Survey data*

The survey responses provided a rich range of qualitative and quantitative perspectives on the Fijian mentors' experiences of the ITP. Overwhelmingly, the mentors believed that their communication with the Australian PSTs was easy (44 %) or very easy (50 %), and most said they personally benefited from the collaboration with their PST (94 %). Further, 100 % of the survey responses suggested that the placement provided a very valuable or valuable experience for the local Suva students. The mentors noted improvements in their own Fijian students' motivation, enjoyment, energy, and excitement for learning while the Australian PSTs were in their classrooms. There was almost unanimous appreciation, too, of the 'new' pedagogical and assessment ideas introduced by the Australian teachers. The generosity of the local mentors' comments in the survey was typified by their highlighting the "mutual learning and growth" and a "mutually beneficial experience" for mentors, mentees and local students. For example, one mentor wrote that the experience "deepened my own pedagogical knowledge and reinforced my confidence as an educator".

However, the surveys also revealed a number of challenges for the mentors. In acknowledging the differences in cultures and

Table 3
Participating Fijian mentors who completed the online surveys (n = 16).

Number and gender of Fijian mentors	Mentors' teaching experience	Level of School where mentors taught
Female: 13 Male: 3	Very experienced (> 10 years): 13 Mid-career (5–10 years): 3	Early Childhood Education: 1 Primary School: 7 Secondary School: 8

Benefits	Cultural difference	Independence / Agency	Mentoring Approaches
Challenges	Curriculum		
Collaboration	Demographics	Initiative	PST practices
Confidence	Local students	Language	PST qualities
Control	Difference	Mentor self-descriptions	Teams
Culture	Engagement		

Fig. 1. Initial codes for survey data and talanoa conversation transcripts (in alphabetical order).

backgrounds of the Australian PSTs, a small number of mentors felt that the PSTs brought different (19 %) or very different (6 %) philosophical perspectives to their teaching and learning in Fiji. For example, some mentors espoused a philosophy that emphasised the need for full adult control and authority, not just in schools but in Fijian society more generally, whereas they perceived that their allocated Australian PST sought to prioritise student decision making and agency (cf. Biesta, 2006). This was experienced by those mentors as a significant challenge. On that point, though, the mentors did not speak with one voice. Other mentors believed that the philosophies of the Australian PSTs were very similar (56 %) or similar (19 %) to their own. Indeed, many mentors also sought to enhance student agency in their own teaching, and actively encouraged the efforts by the Australian PSTs to teach in this way too.

Another challenge was the lack of time for mentoring. Many mentors (94%) regretted their own lack of capacity, due to competing professional commitments, to spend as much time as they wished in collaborating with or providing feedback to the Australian PSTs. One survey response aligned with literature about international teaching placements, which emphasises the importance of strong professional relationships between mentor and mentee (cf. Parr et al., 2018):

Building a strong mentor-mentee relationship takes time and effort from both parties…. Balancing the responsibilities of being a mentor while managing my own teaching workload presented time constraints. Providing guidance, observing lessons, and engaging in reflective discussions required additional time and effort.

Partly as a consequence of such concerns, 38 % of the mentors believed a future ITP placement in Fiji should continue at least one week longer, and 19 % felt it could be up to one month longer.

A commonly experienced challenge was mentors deciding how they should advise and guide Australian PSTs. Most mentors felt the Australian PSTs needed to develop a stronger teacher voice and a "firmer" teacherly manner in order to be an effective teacher in Fiji (e.g., "being firm is very important as children tend to play up if [the teacher] is not going to be firm"). This challenge is more fully explained in the *talanoa* conversation data below.

Despite these challenges, 100 % of the mentors said that they enjoyed or highly enjoyed teaching the Australian PSTs about Pasifika and Fijian culture and its influence on local students' educational experiences. We next present the findings from transcripts of the *talanoa* conversations with local mentors, structured around five themes relating to mentors' perceptions of the following:

- Local Fijian students.
- Mentoring challenges.
- Mentoring practices.
- Australian PSTs' practices.
- Benefits for mentors and local Fijian students.

4.2. *Transcripts of Talanoa conversations*

4.2.1. *Local Fijian students*

We have already noted that the mentors did not speak with one voice in the surveys. One significant difference in mentor voices during the *talanoa* research conversations concerned perceptions of their own students. Some mentors focused with pride on the diversity of students in their classrooms – "we have all kinds of students of different learning capabilities. We have passionate blind students, non-hearing students. And some are very high achievers…" (Mentor 1, THS). Several mentors emphasised the respect that Fijian students at all levels have for their teachers – e.g., "most of the schools actually respect teachers" (Mentor 1, ISC) – and this was characterised by one mentor as "the culture in Fiji".

And yet other mentors presented a contrasting sense of what they believed was a challenge of teaching in "the Fijian culture". In the *talanoa* research conversations, two mentors characterised their students as "toxic" or "very violent". One observed that "the kids are not so friendly to each other" (Mentor 2, IFPS), and another described students in her school as "aggressive and a culture thing" (Mentor 1, IFPS). In the survey data, as previously indicated, several mentors were keen to point out the need for "firm" teaching in Fijian classrooms. These views were also evident in the *talanoa* conversations. For example, Mentor 2 from CPS stated that firm teaching was essential to preserve order in his school and in Fijian culture overall: "They [students] keep on doing the wrong things

until you give them respect, then they know it's wrong" (Mentor 2, CPS). A follow up question suggested that the phrase "give them respect" referred to the use of corporal punishment. One mentor explained that this was still routinely meted out in some Fijian families – and that the students "get it from home" (Mentor 1, MSC).

4.2.2. Mentoring challenges

When asked about the challenges for the Australian PSTs in Fijian schools, most mentors internalised these as challenges for themselves as mentors. For example, Mentor 3 in CPS found it "challenging how I could make my very humble mentee [from Australia] feel confident … as a female in a male dominated school where… everything is aggressive". Most mentors noted in the *talanoa* conversations, as they had in the surveys, that the PSTs were challenged by large class sizes (of 40–60 students). For some mentors, this raised concerns about the PSTs' abilities to be firm enough in their teaching manner to ensure students followed their instructions – "You have to be confident when speaking with [Fijian students]. Stand firm. Yeah, once you make a decision, the children have to know that you are making a decision" (Mentor 1, CHS). Some mentors felt challenged to help the PSTs respond to the needs of *all* students in the classroom: Mentor 2 (ZSSC) was concerned that because of large class sizes it was "very difficult for her mentee to attend to the weaker ones, the small learners".

More than one mentor characterised Fijian classrooms as sites needing strong teacherly control: "When you are generous with these kids, they take advantage, so in that way, you won't get things done. They will step all over you, …. They will do whatever they want" (Mentor 3, CPS). There were frequent references to differences between Australian and Fijian curriculums; some believed the Fijian curriculum was "a bit" or "completely" different" from what the Australia PSTs were used to. One mentor was concerned that the Australian PSTs were challenged not just by "a different curriculum" but also by "different rules, different behaviours and attitudes" (Mentor 3, CPS). Others noted that their PSTs were sometimes challenged by having to teach unfamiliar content, although usually when this was mentioned it was associated with the mentor's respect for the "professional" and "conscientious" ways in which the Australian PST did meet this challenge. Mentors frequently observed that their PSTs undertook intensive "research", made comprehensive notes, studiously planned lessons, regularly checked in with their mentor, and managed to teach even unfamiliar topics using innovative teaching approaches (such as 'think-pair-share' and 'waterfall').

4.2.3. Mentoring practices

While mentors expressed diverse perceptions of their own local Fijian students and the challenges of an Australian PST teaching unfamiliar curriculum, they also revealed a wide range of mentoring practices. In some cases, a mentor's approach to mentoring was shaped by their anxiety in relation to what they perceived as substantial cultural differences – and how the Australian PST needed to *overcome* these. On the other hand, other mentors who believed the cultural differences were "not so great" after all were keen to collaborate with their PSTs and "work through [these differences] together" (Mentor 2, THS). The disposition amongst these latter mentors was to see cultural differences as opportunities to promote collaboration and problem solving. Typically, this resulted in a seamless ongoing dialogue between mentor and mentee about culture and difference throughout the placement.

There were some commonalities in how Fijian mentors interacted with their Australian PSTs. Almost all agreed they played a key role in explaining the required outcomes of each lesson to be taught, and in sharing curriculum resources. Beyond this, interactions were varied in frequency and nature. One or two mentors admitted they met infrequently with their PST, but others described their interactions as ongoing "informal discussions …. We would pick up from where we left off the previous lesson and then she'll come back and she'll clarify things that she feels she's unsure [about], then she continues on with her preparation for teaching" (Mentor 3, IFHS). For some, their mentoring style periodically shifted from providing explicit advice to stepping back and giving their PST "more freedom… more exposure… so that she can gain that confidence" (Mentor 1, ISC).

Mentors who were anxious about the impact of cultural difference tended to see difference as confusing rather than an opportunity for learning, as some studies in other international contexts have noted (Jin et al., 2020a, 2020b). This usually manifested in a style of mentoring that was very hands-on, and controlling, to the point that the Australian PST was not afforded much agency to make their own decisions or develop practices. The following story from a mentor in Catholic Primary School illustrates this:

> I gave [my PST] all the rules the first day. So she was sitting at the back [of my classroom] – it was like I was giving a master lesson there – and she was there with her notebook, writing notes ... all during the day. Then after school, we sat down again and we talked. I told her how it's gonna work in my classroom. I told her, 'In Fiji, it is a strict learning environment. You have to be strict. Don't smile. Everybody has to listen when you teach. And the next thing, don't give them any freedom to move around.' (Mentor 1, CPS)

Another mentor acknowledged she didn't ever give her mentee "a chance to really control [her Grade 1] class" even though she believed her PST's teaching was "very good" (Mentor 2, IFPS).

4.2.4. Australian PSTs' practices

After early concerns about the need for a firmer presence in the classroom, most mentors were very positive in describing the teaching practices of the Australian PSTs. And yet one mentor in the *talanoa* conversations kept returning to the challenge of her PST teaching in Fiji because she believed "the classroom scenario is totally different [from Australian classrooms]". The most positive feedback she offered was that her PST was "trying" and "blending in well". In contrast, the language used by other mentors to characterise the teaching of their PSTs throughout the placement included words like "excellent", "impressive", "amazing", "well disciplined", "shining", "mature" and "so good". One mentor said she was "in awe" of the quality of her mentee's teaching, and two others felt "blessed" to be able to work with their PST. Such differences in mentors' evaluations of the PSTs' teachers suggested

variations in the way power, authority and agency were experienced by the local mentors.

According to the mentors, the Australian PSTs appeared keen to sustain a respectful dialogue with their mentor, even those who were not afforded much agency in their day to day teaching. This was apparent in several descriptions of the PSTs' willingness to listen, take notes and heed their mentors' advice: e.g., She has this small notebook, where she records every everything that I do, how I settle the boys down, how I talk to the boys, how to do this ice breaker in the class, and how to control the class and all of this in a day…which enables her to, like, just be prepared when she teaches. (Mentor 3, CPS) and yet for all of the stories about the Australian PSTs' cooperation and compliance, many mentors also affirmed the PSTs' independence, creativity and confidence. The following is broadly representative of this kind of affirmation: He was just so inquisitive to teach. And he asked me if he could teach this and do that and do that. And I told him, 'Yes, you can.' And I saw his confidence, very confident… When he got to the classroom he drew on the whiteboard, he wrote things, he played videos on his laptop, introduced activities and everything. … And he went up to every student, following up, even to the point where he would just squat down by the side of students and just give them feedback. (Mentor 2, THS).

4.2.5. Benefits for mentors and local Fijian students

The mentors identified many benefits of an Australian PST teaching their students, which are commonly noted in the literature. These included: improved fluency in the use of the English language (Jones et al., 2022); improved levels of engagement and enjoyment of learning (Lang et al., 2017); greater willingness to respond to questions and contribute to classroom discussions; and improved confidence (Parr & Chan, 2015).

In noting these benefits, it occurred to the researchers that Fijian classrooms are, in some respects, still shaped by colonial attitudes and practices. This was evident in the mandating of English as the medium of instruction despite the fact that, as many mentors pointed out, English is not the home language for most students in Fiji (cf. Lagi, 2016). The presence of English-speaking PSTs from Australia, whose knowledge of the local vernacular was largely limited to a few phrases they learned from a workshop offered by Rosi (Author 3), might be interpreted as both improving local students' English language competence and reinforcing these colonial values. Nevertheless, for some mentors, one of the most significant benefits of having an English-speaking PST in their classroom was their students' improved competence and confidence in speaking English. They reported students' enjoyment in imitating the Australian accents, and they believed this had contributed to them not just "using English a lot" (Mentor 2, MPS) but "learning to speak good English" (Mentor 3, CPS).

The mentors also identified that their students were more often responding to questions and participating in classroom discussions (using a combination of English and vernacular). Several mentors were surprised to see their students eager to answer questions, "including the cheeky ones", those who "are normally quiet", and "even the very slow learners". In one *talanoa*, two mentors from MPS endorsed each other's view that with their children's improved confidence had come happiness to participate and learn: "I see them smiling and wanting to do stuff, wanting to learn" – and not just the most able students. Mentor 2 at ZSSC drew attention to "some of my struggling students who are usually in their shell, not participating"; "I saw them come out [of their shell]. I saw them come out."

Perhaps the strongest endorsement of the impact of the Australian PSTs on the local students' learning was the student feedback conveyed to the mentors, such as "Ma'am, we loved his teaching" (Mentor 2, ISC), and "Can [name of PST] be our normal English teacher?" (Mentor 2, IFHS). Mentors used very similar language to enthuse over the impact of the Australian PSTs on their class's engagement: "They're really really happy when [name of PST] is teaching them" (Mentor 3, CHS); "They love her teaching" (Mentor 1, ISC); and "There's no other way of explaining it. They really really enjoyed [PST's] teaching" (Mentor 1, CHS).

While at least one mentor remained sceptical (he felt "sorry" for the Australian PST in his classroom because of cultural differences), most mentors were as enthusiastic about the professional learning benefits for themselves as they were about the learning benefits for the young people in their classrooms. There were frequent observations of the reciprocal learning between mentor and mentee: e.g., "I was mentoring her, but I was also learning from her…. I tried to take from her as much as I could" (Mentor 3, MHS). Some identified the broader potential of the whole ITP program, and the reciprocal partnership between the Australian university, the local Fijian university and the school. And others expressed their endorsement of the program in very personal ways, such as: "I'm proud to have been a part of this inaugural practicum" (Mentor 2, MPS); and "This has been one of the best professional memories for me" (Mentor 1, CHS).

5. Discussion

5.1. Foundational inclusive work

We began this article by acknowledging our awareness of concerns about the potentially elitist nature of ITP programs, and that they may end up reinforcing colonialist prejudices in participating PSTs (Parr et al., 2017b; Santoro & Major, 2012). This was one of the reasons why we took care to detail the ways in which the decolonising design work for the Fiji ITP began from long before the Australian PSTs arrived in their placements in Suva. To summarise this work, we present here a list of what we call 'foundational inclusive work':

- Drawing on funding from the New Colombo Plan in Australia – enabling a more socio-economically diverse cohort of PSTs to participate in the ITP, not just the economically 'elite' (cf. Bamberger & Yemin, 2022).
- Building on the existing partnership between [name of university] in Australia and [name of university] in Fiji – enabling deeper intercultural cross-institutional relationships to develop between them (cf. Kahn-Horwitz et al., 2017).

- Building on existing partnerships between [name of Fijian university] and the local schools/centre where the Australian PSTs were placed – enabling western and non-western stakeholders to co-design the ITP program (Parr et al., 2017b).
- Delivering a culturally diverse program of professional learning workshops for Australian PSTs (in Australia and Fiji) and one for leaders and mentors (in Fiji) before and during the placement; and
- Drawing on traditions of dialogic ITPs (Parr & Chan, 2015), where accompanying academic leaders would remain present in Fiji with the PSTs for the whole placement – enabling them to sustain a closer dialogue with local school leaders and mentors.

This foundational inclusive work should never be considered a prophylactic against colonialist attitudes developing in the travelling PSTs (Bamberger & Yemin, 2022), but it was an important part of the concerted effort in designing the Fiji ITP program to maximise participation by Pasifika partners (Feetham et al., 2023) and to build inclusive dialogic practices into all dimensions of the program (Thaman, 2003). As researchers reporting participants' experiences, we have drawn on and learnt from the *talanoa* concepts that were outlined in the epigraph for this article (Cammock et al., 2019). The following discussion elucidates where and how these concepts were present in the mentors' stories and experiences.

5.2. Va (spaces for talanoa)

The inclusive foundations and dialogic design of the ITP helped to construct diverse spaces for *talanoa* (*va*) between mentors and PSTs. While the frequency of *talanoa* interactions between mentors and mentees was not consistent across sites, the emphasis in most mentor-mentee relationships appeared to be on creating the conditions for respectful dialogue. And yet the nature of this 'respectful dialogue' was not consistent amongst all mentors. Some mentors described a "seamless dialogue" with their mentee, a dialogue that allowed them to work together to better understand cultural differences and to plan practical classroom approaches with an awareness of these differences. Other mentors, however, outlined a more constrained dialogue, where the Fijian mentor provided directive guidance and their Australian mentee 'respectfully' responded. One example featured a directive for the PST to follow the mentor's teacher-centred practice because that is "how it's gonna work in my classroom", and the PST subsequently learned how to comply with this directive.

5.3. Vakarokoroko (respect for those around us)

The findings show that respect for difference (a particular form of *vakarokoroko*) was evident in the mentors' attitudes and experiences. Our research approach was to seek to understand rather than to evaluate this respect. For example, whereas all mentors recognised 'cultural differences' between Fijian and Australian education, we argue using Galleotti (2010) that this recognition involved different forms of respect. They ranged from recognition as *awareness*, to a richer form of recognition aligned with Galleotti's notion of *esteem respect*. Whatever the form of respect, the mentors' recognition of cultural difference invariably *complicated* the mentor and mentee dialogue about teaching in Fiji classrooms.

A small number of mentors 'recognised' cultural differences between Australian and Fijian schools as 'extensive', and for some this recognition appeared to prompt elevated anxiety about the Australian PSTs' ability to assert the control that these mentors felt was required in the classroom. Significantly, this anxiety was usually associated with deficit characterisations, rightly or wrongly, of the Fijian students' tendency to do "the wrong things". In such cases, the mentors' respect for difference prompted them to model and 'require' teaching approaches that would ensure the Australian PSTs could *overcome* cultural differences. This form of respect as *awareness* was felt by these mentors to bring successful outcomes for the PSTs and the students they were teaching. For other mentors, their 'esteem respect' involved recognition of the other, and this recognition was not necessarily associated with anxiety. Rather than seeing cultural difference as a problem to be overcome, they esteemed it as a prompt for valuable professional learning, with both mentor and mentee learning from each other's perspectives and "work[ing] through [them] together". According to these mentors, the approach of negotiating and working through differences together enabled mutual understanding, and this in turn allowed the PSTs a level of agency and independence to shape and develop their teaching practice to suit Fijian classrooms.

5.4. Veiwakani (deep relationships)

In documenting the concepts of *va* and *vakarokoroko,* we have alluded to ways in which forms of dialogue promoted *veiwakani* (relationships) in most mentors' experiences and practices. The data showed those mentors were keen to explain how they and the Australian PSTs used dialogue to form and maintain professional relationships with each other.

One purpose of dialogue was to identify and work through cultural differences together. The survey data repeatedly attests to the time that the mentors committed to planning with, observing and meeting their PSTs. A quote from the surveys spoke for many others in emphasising what was required by mentor and mentee to build a "strong mentor-mentee relationship". In a slightly different, but perhaps restricted dialogic dynamic, one mentor described his attempt to empathise with his "humble" mentee in the hope he could equip her to develop confidence as a young female teacher in a male-dominated single sex school, where "everything is aggressive".

5.5. Veitokoni (reciprocity)

The final element of this *talanoa* framework, *veitokoni*, extends on the above discussion of *veiwakani,* but here the focus is on how mentors and mentees mutually benefitted and grew together in reciprocal ways through their joint participation in the ITP.

All mentors acknowledged they had certainly *contributed* to the learning and growth of the PSTs. This included: sharing cultural and institutional knowledge that helped the PSTs understand the context and history of the students they were teaching; and making direct recommendations that guided the PSTs to meet the local syllabi and learning outcomes. Some of the mentors' guiding appeared less dialogic than others, with 2-3 mentors maintaining a more authoritative stance. These mentors were gratified when their PST succeeded in emulating the teaching they were modelling. Other mentors felt vindicated by the PSTs' responses to their more flexible approach. This involved periodically 'stepping back' from more directive mentoring, and observing their mentors' increased confidence and competence as a consequence.

We have mentioned the generosity of many mentors in their evaluation of the Australian PSTs' practice, which suggested a degree of reciprocity. This reciprocity was evident in the mentors recognising the PSTs' contribution to the learning and development of the young students in their classrooms. Most mentors reported that their students improved in cognitive areas (such as English language competence or understanding of maths or ecological concepts), in social areas (students' willingness and ability to contribute to collaborative learning activities or discussions), and in affective areas (such as their happiness and enjoyment of learning in the classroom). And they were keen to emphasise the reciprocity of their own engagement with the Australian PSTs. One survey response suggested the ITP was "a mutually beneficial experience", and the *talanoa* conversations included several references to "mutual learning and growth".

6. Conclusion

Our study of the first iteration of this Fiji ITP, co-designed by Australian and Fijian partner institutions, has focused on the experiences of the Fijian mentor teachers. As a transpacific team of researchers, we have utilised *talanoa*-based concepts, discourses and practices to help decolonise this transpacific educational project, and to trouble the historical dominance of western approaches to researching such projects (Sultana, 2019). We acknowledge that a decolonising agenda is necessarily ongoing and this project should be seen as a small step, a 'chipping away' as it were, at this dominance. Nevertheless, in this article we have proposed a way forward by identifying approaches that anticipate, engage with and disturb some of the colonialist potentials that have long existed in transpacific educational programs.

We argue that a commitment to what we have called 'foundational inclusive work' was crucial in anticipating and reducing the potential colonising impact of an Australian ITP program in Fiji. Such foundational inclusive work in the preparatory stages of the program actually facilitated the next steps in the program, which was to engage with the Fijian mentor teachers through building intercultural dialogue, inclusive relationships and mutual respect. (The mentors in turn facilitated forms of dialogue, relationships and respect with the PSTs they were mentoring.) It has been an important part of our decolonising agenda to highlight how the mentors did not all share the same experience or speak with one voice. Nevertheless, the evidence of a degree of reciprocity between most mentors and mentees suggests this ITP was effective in disrupting some of the colonial hegemonies of the past.

We acknowledge a potential limitation of the study in that some of the colonial hegemonies of the past may have continued to shape aspects of the current study. For example, the perceived power relations between white researchers from Australia interviewing groups of indigenous Fijian mentors about their experiences may have shaped the mentors' responses in these interviews (cf. Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). These responses may have been susceptible to the Hawthorne effect, such that the mentors may have sometimes provided embellished responses which they hoped would impress, or be welcomed by, the Australian interviewers (McAmbridge et al., 2014). However, our enactment of decolonising strategies, such as respectfully positioning mentor teachers as agentic participants in the *talanoa* research conversations, and our use of critical reflexivity when analysing transcripts of these conversations and the survey results, have resulted in demonstrably diverse and nuanced data, that conveys a strong sense of the voices and identities of the participants. We recommend that teacher educators and researchers who are organising and researching ITPs in the future consider implementing some or all of these design strategies and research methods as part of a decolonising approach.

Taking account of the above-mentioned potential limitations, the findings of this study still encourage us to envisage a future where transpacific ITPs can be pursued with mutual respect between amongst Pasifika and non-Pasifika stakeholders. Employing *talanoa*-based concepts, discourses and practices can help to disturb a history of colonial hegemonies and instead facilitate genuine knowledge exchange and mutual understanding as part of a broader agenda for global citizenship in initial teacher education. It is important, though, to recognise a decolonising agenda is ongoing and long-term. In this, the first year of the Fiji ITP, some hegemonies were not substantially troubled, despite the foundational inclusive work and the dialogic strategies employed. However, we believe there is enough positive evidence here to warrant further iterations of this ITP and further research that explores whether the encouraging signs can be sustained to achieve lasting cultural change.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Graham Parr: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Kay Tinney:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Investigation, Data curation. **Rosiana Lagi:** Writing – review & editing, Project administration, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

None

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