THE UNIVERSITY OF
WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

School of Education
Te Kura Toi Tangata

Waikato Journal of Education
Te Hautaka Mātauranga o Waikato

Volume 15, Issue 2: 2010

Special Edition:
Being a Researcher and Doing Research

WAIKATO JOURNAL OF EDUCATION
TE HAUTAKA MĀTAURANGA O WAIKATO

Waikato Journal of Education is a refereed journal, published annually, based in the Faculty of Education, The University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand. It publishes articles in the broad field of education. For further information visit the WJE website http:/www.soe.waikato.ac.nz/wje/

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Subscriptions: Within NZ $40; Overseas NZ $50

Publisher: Faculty of Education, The University of Waikato
Cover design: Donn Ratana
Printed by: Waikato Print

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ISSN 1173-6135

WAIKATO JOURNAL OF EDUCATION

TE HAUTAKA MĀTAURANGA O WAIKATO

VOLUME 15, Issue 2, 2010

Waikato Journal of Education 15, Issue 2:2010

RESEARCHING IN CROSS CULTURAL CONTEXTS: A SOCIALLY JUST PROCESS

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ABSTRACT *In this paper, we explore culture and its relationship to cross cultural research. The context for this research is Vanuatu, a small South Pacific Island nation. The action research process used was a collaboration between two New Zealand academics, two Ni Vanuatu women researchers and 13 participants over a two year period. The focus of the action research was the design and delivery of a culturally appropriate educational leadership development programme for women. The collaborative research process raised a number of ethical and methodological considerations, for example, the importance of mutually respectful relationships, working in partnership, collaboration, capacity building, transparent communication and consideration of the local context. Using stories from the Vanuatu context, we illustrate how we navigated culture to be able to research in socially just ways. Being involved in socially just, cross cultural research calls for a thoughtful, well-designed and culturally informed approach throughout all stages of the research process, from initial planning through to follow up and capacity building and finally, the sharing of research findings.*

KEYWORDS

Cross cultural research, social justice, women's leadership development, feminist research, action research

INTRODUCTION

> *The heat of the morning sun beat down unforgivingly on the corrugated iron roof, and it did the same to the conversation. We were struggling. Catching each other's eye, we searched for new ways to engage the women. It was hard work to get them to talk … our questions hung in the humid air, and we watched their eyes dart towards the windows and doors. Then suddenly it hit us … it wasn't that they would not talk … they could not talk.*
>
> *We met casually over lunch and spoke with the women about the open windows, the doors, and the men bursting into the room unannounced. With relief across their faces they appreciatively drew the curtains, and placed a sign on the door. It was like something had given them permission to unlock their voices. Within this new safe environment the words flowed like water, the laughter began and the hearts opened. How could we not have seen the surveillance by the men, as they pretended to sweep outside their offices so that they*

> *could hear the women speak, entering the room for imaginary glasses of water just to let the women know they were present.*

The focus of this article is researching in cross cultural contexts. We share how two, feminist, white, middle-class women came to be involved in undertaking cross cultural research and situate this article within the context of action researching a women's leadership programme in the Pacific Islands of Vanuatu. We explore why we undertook this research work and outline the underpinning core values that guide our research. We do not claim to be experts in this field but over an eight-year period we have learnt some lessons that may help guide others who are considering embarking on cross cultural research.

This article will begin by sharing with you our research project in Vanuatu. Secondly, we explore culture in relation to cross cultural research. Thirdly, we share how our social justice work is informed by our feminism and how that impacts on our research in cross cultural settings. Fourthly, we describe some critical aspects in planning and implementing a culturally appropriate research methodology, including the importance of partnership. Lastly, we share the ethical considerations and challenges we experienced when researching across cultures. Key aspects from our discussions are illustrated by using real examples from our women's educational leadership research in Vanuatu.

As we share our experiences we ask you to engage in some self-reflection and discuss some teaching points which relate to what we believe are essential conditions for researching in cross cultural contexts. We also draw your attention to areas of consideration for your own research through the use of focus questions.

BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

In Vanuatu women are poorly represented in leadership positions in education (Strachan, 2004). As a response to implementing part of the Gender Equity in Education Policy (Vanuatu Ministry of Education, 2005), we were invited by the Ministry of Education in Vanuatu to design and deliver a leadership programme for women in education.[1] Supported by our core value of social justice, we suggested that there be an associated action research process to help us to design a culturally appropriate leadership programme and also enable us to build the research capacity of local women researchers. The underpinning philosophy for the design and implementation of the leadership programme was that it had to be a collaborative process between the facilitators and participants (Saunders, 2005). Also, it was critical that the programme be culturally appropriate. An imported Western leadership programme was not likely to meet the needs of the women. So, the women participants acted as cultural advisers and were consulted on the design, content, implementation and evaluation of the programme.

In relation to the guiding research questions for the women's leadership project, one aim was to understand the cultural and contextual considerations when preparing Ni Vanuatu[2] women for educational leadership. A second area of investigation was to look at how cultural and contextual considerations impact on the design and delivery of a leadership programme. A third area of research was to explore how effective action research processes can be at building research

capacity. In order to explore these three areas, data was collected and analysed in relation to the specific context of women practising leadership in Vanuatu through focus groups and semi-structured interviews.

Two, three-day leadership workshops (August and December 2006) were run for 11 Ni Vanuatu women involved in education. They came from a variety of backgrounds, for example, administration and teaching (primary, secondary and tertiary). Suitable participants were selected based on the following criteria; they had worked in education for five or more years; they were able to attend both workshops; they were willing to be part of an action research process. The August workshop involved sessions addressing key themes that had been suggested by the Director General of Education and a group of women from the Ministry of Education in Port Vila, Vanuatu and The University of Waikato. During December, the leadership programme made use of a variety of topics and teaching and learning strategies identified and requested by the women. Local facilitators were invited to give keynote addresses and facilitate some of the workshops.

An action research process (Cardno, 2003) ran parallel to the running of the educational leadership programme. The action research cycle was used to research the programme content and structure, the leadership experiences of the women and the research capacity building process. Before sharing specific details about how we approached the research design and implementation let us first examine culture in relation to cross cultural research.

CULTURE AND CROSS CULTURAL RESEARCH

There are many different ways of thinking about culture, for example, youth, aged, gay, lesbian, religious, rural, urban, prison, poor, wealthy and differently abled. Culture is not just specific to ethnicity. We cannot be separated from these cultures as they surround us. Therefore, we must become culturally competent (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2005), especially if we choose to work specifically in a cultural context that is different from our own.

For this article, we focus on the aspect of culture that involves stepping across a cultural divide and working in an area within which you might not usually work. According to Hooker (2003), "… [culture] is the way that human beings learn to live with each other and their environment" (p. 5). Through belonging to a specific cultural group you reflect a "… certain set of shared values and norms, which are expressed in the way that you behave" (Huijser, 2006, p. 137). Cultures are therefore not static, they are dynamic arrangements that change and evolve over time.

As noted by Gibbs (2001), the term cross cultural can be used to describe a variety of situations. She believes cross cultural research is any research "… that takes place across, or between, cultures and includes research undertaken by non indigenous researchers into the lives of indigenous people" (p. 674). It is important to recognise that when we choose to work in another culture, or across cultures, we impact upon those cultures. We must therefore think carefully about what sort of impact we want to be associated with.

A question to consider

- On completing your research what sort of impact do you want to be associated with?

When researching within another cultural context we are not the expert. It is those from the culture with whom we work who are the cultural experts. It can therefore be very easy to misinterpret situations and information as we make judgements and assumptions from our own cultural perspective. This is why it is important to use local expertise. Using local people to assist can also help in communicating with local authorities and participants. During the research process there were many times when we asked advice. For example, during the first day of the programme, due to the location of the workshop, the women who were participating in the leadership programme were under the surveillance of men. The men peered into the room through the windows, into the kitchen and watched what was happening in the workshop and sometimes walked into the room uninvited. We asked the women if this made them feel uncomfortable and if so, what would they like to do about it. They commented that it silenced their contributions and would like the curtains drawn so that the men were unable to see in. Their advice guided our actions.

Many cross cultural researchers emphasise the importance of adopting a culturally appropriate research methodology, sometimes termed "culturally congruent" (Gibbs, 2001, p. 677). When planning and implementing this research we were guided by the five areas of initiation, benefit, representation, legitimisation and accountability (Bishop, 1998). These points are elaborated on in the body of this article. As mentioned previously, social justice is a core value of our research when we work across cultures. It is therefore important to explore social justice in relation to cross cultural research.

SOCIAL JUSTICE AND CROSS CULTURAL RESEARCH

Our cross cultural research work is research for social justice and is firmly embedded in our feminism. This is the core value of our work. Defining social justice is not easy or straightforward and is "… a contested and contentious concept" (Sandretto, 2004, p. 31). Sometimes social justice is associated with equity. However, both social justice and equity include the notion of fairness. So, for the purpose of this article we associate social justice with fairness. Working for social justice, which includes researching in socially just ways, means that we work to transform practice that exploits research participants and practice that is unfair. It also means that we are researching to help change oppressive practices in the wider sociocultural context. It is not enough to research in socially just ways; the research must help those being researched to lead, identify and achieve positive change. For example, the hoped for outcome from this action research was that more women would be able access leadership positions.

There are also many different ways of defining and practising feminism, but suffice to say here that the practice of feminism is about working for social justice, and not just for women and girls but for other groups of oppressed people. Undertaking research can be part of that social justice agenda as it provides

information that helps us to understand oppression, gives vital information which can be used to make oppression visible, and informs action for change.

In recent years, we have worked extensively in Vanuatu. Our work has mainly been focused on working alongside the indigenous peoples (Ni Vanuatu) to support them in the directions they choose to take and the decisions they choose to make. We have had important questions asked of us by colleagues, from the Pacific, tangata whenua and palagi alike. Why do you work there (in Vanuatu)? What are your motives? Aren't you just perpetuating colonisation? These questions made us think about what we were doing and our motives for engaging in this work. It is research not to be undertaken lightly and there has been a great deal of debate as to whether or not we should undertake cross cultural research at all. It is contested ground.

Questions to consider

- What are your reasons for doing the research?
- What is the purpose of the research?
- Who will benefit?
- Who initiated the research?

CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY IS ABOUT PARTNERSHIP

We believe that creating partnerships is essential to researching effectively in cross cultural contexts. As Carpenter and McMurchy-Pilkington (2008) explain, "what was more important than ethnicity or gender was our model of working" (p. 189). Essential to the process of partnership is an invitation to be involved. This means that the research is initiated by stakeholders other than the researcher. With regard to the research completed in Vanuatu, we were invited by the Ministry of Education to be involved. This invitation stemmed from Jane's previous work in Vanuatu.

As part of our research design we chose *participant action research* (PAR), as our vehicle to help us achieve collaborative partnerships with all stakeholders involved in the research process. Participant action research provided a clear framework for the processes involved in negotiating appropriate content, co-constructing and evaluating the leadership programme for women. It is not the purpose of this article to provide an in-depth exploration into the action research process. We have instead chosen to illustrate participant action research as a suitable method for use within cross cultural contexts and look at the possibilities of using such an approach within a social justice research agenda. Stringer (2008) believes that using this balanced approach to inquiry can provide

> research procedures that are conducive of democratic and humane social processes … The intent is to provide a rigorous approach to inquiry that legitimises the perspectives and experiences of all people involved … and encompasses the means for accomplishing sustainable and effective educational practices that really make a difference in people's lives. (p. 29)

It is therefore no coincidence that when considering our research approach, the views of Reason and Bradbury (2006) align closely with our core value of using a socially just research process. PAR is often seen as a form of research done by people to help them improve what they do and the situation they are in. We believe this research approach sits comfortably within a social justice research agenda as it "… treats people as autonomous, responsible agents who participate actively in making their own histories and conditions of life … it does not treat people as objects for research, but encourages people to work together as knowing subjects and agents of change and improvement" (McTaggart, 1997, p. 39). Bishop and Glynn (1999) believe that this kind of learning environment can be created through providing contexts where learning can take place actively and reflectively.

A question to consider

- What other things do you think you need to consider in creating effective partnerships?

Teaching point: We believe that cross cultural research should involve building mutually respectful relationships

Like Carpenter and McMurchy-Pilkington (2008), we cannot emphasise enough the importance of strong, mutually respectful relationship building when researching in cross cultural contexts. It cannot be taken for granted that because we are male/female/older/qualified/knowledgeable/respected in our own context this will stand us in good stead when we work in a new cultural setting. When we are not "of" the culture we have to earn acceptance and respect. However, relationship building takes time and cannot be rushed. Respecting local rituals such as prayers before workshops or greeting everyone with a handshake or wearing appropriate clothing sends messages that we have been observant, paid attention and respect the protocols. This can be difficult when bound by research timelines and deadlines. Because relationship building is foundational to cross cultural research, it is imperative that time is planned for this to happen. Another essential aspect of relationship building is connecting with local networks. It is important that these local networks are acknowledged and utilised. For example, we used expertise from the local community to help deliver aspects of the programme and representatives from local Non-Government Organisations spoke of their work and how they might be able to support the women. This helps to build support networks, which is particularly important when women challenge and try to change aspects of their own culture.

Teaching point: We believe that cross cultural research should be collaborative

A truly collaborative approach to research encourages partnerships within the research process. From the initial stages of research, collaborative partnerships can ensure that the research approach is appropriate and that the "… research is asking relevant questions and gaining meaningful answers" (Gibbs, 2001, p. 676). We resonate with the idea of Bishop and Glynn (1999), when they emphasise the importance of changing power relations and creating a learning environment where

the learners' sense-making processes are used and developed so they can successfully participate in gaining and constructing knowledge. Bruner (1996) also supports the concept of restructuring power relations and states that we need to

> … characterize the new ideas as creating communities of learners. Indeed, on the basis of what we have learned in recent years about human learning – that it is best when it is participatory, proactive, communal, collaborative and given over to constructing meanings rather than receiving them. (p. 84)

Reciprocity in research is firmly located in a feminist research agenda (Lather, 1992). This helps equalise the power relations and assists in making the research process socially just. Reciprocity is simply described by Harrison, MacGibbon and Morton (2001) as the give and take of social interactions. Lather (1986) believes that "[r]eciprocity implies give and take, a mutual negotiation of meaning and power" (p. 263), and it is argued that in return for the opportunity to study and disrupt the lives of others, all fieldwork should encompass some form of reciprocity such as the offering of services or materials in return (Golde, 1986).

In the case of this research project, the reciprocity was present in many forms. Firstly, by using the collaborative process of co-construction, there was a sharing of power through the negotiation of content to be included in the programme. Further reciprocity lay in the giving back to the group through the delivery of the leadership programme. In another area, it was evident in the building of research capacity of two local Ni Vanuatu women (Pearl and Rose). It is also essential that in planning research that the input of all people involved is valued. People's efforts must be recognised and celebrated to illustrate positive contributions. This can happen in many forms, for example, providing funds to pay people for their time, making community announcements to acknowledge supporting partnerships, or writing letters of support and recommendation for future work or study.

A question to consider

- In your research context how might you show that you value people's input?

Teaching point: We believe that cross cultural research should involve capacity building

It is difficult to break the traditional expectations that some people have of research and of being researched. This was an issue when it came to attempting to build research capacity. It is not uncommon to be viewed as a "white expert" (Fitzgerald, 2003, 2006; Strachan, 2005) and such a perception can be destructive when trying to create a collaborative partnership. Building the research capacity of those we work with is an important aspect of researching in socially just ways. It is important for us to ask ourselves how we might contribute to the research capacity building process. There are many ways that this might be accomplished. However, we emphasise that this is specific to the Vanuatu context. It may not be the same in other contexts. What is important is that researchers must reflect upon their research practice and establish strategies that are empowering and build research capacity.

We met with Pearl and Rose on a number of occasions to explain and discuss the action research, including its purposes and processes, and how they might be involved.

We worked closely alongside them in the early stages. As they gained skills and confidence we gradually stepped back and gave them room to undertake the tasks on their own. For example, in the early interviews Jane and Rachel carried out the individual interviews with Pearl and Rose observing. Next, Pearl and Rose carried out the interviews with Jane and Rachel observing. In the final interviews, Pearl and Rose carried out the interviews on their own. After each set of interviews we discussed how things went and how we might change and improve the interview process.

Pearl and Rose were included in the analysis, writing and publication process. They were co-authors of the article submitted for publication[3]. By the end of the project, the balance of power (knowledge, skills and decision-making) was more equal than it had been at the beginning of the process, but equality had not been achieved. It takes more than one research project for that to happen. However, it is important that the research capacity building process spans the research from conception to completion. The planned strategies we have mentioned sent the message to Pearl and Rose that their contribution to the research was valued. It also raised their profile as indigenous researchers.

It is a delicate balance between not being there long enough to ensure the capacity building process has been successful and being there too long, thus creating dependency and maintaining control (continuing the process of colonisation). Overstaying our welcome involves holding on to the power and signals that we distrust the ability of Ni Vanuatu to manage the research process competently. Knowing when to withdraw is difficult to judge. The strongest indicator that you are welcome to stay on or return is that you will be invited back. So, you have to be prepared to be there for the long haul yet aim to eventually do yourself out of a job!

A question to consider

- How might you build capacity when undertaking research?

Teaching point: We believe that cross cultural research should involve clearly articulated and transparent communication

Although qualitative research, and action research in particular, can be organic and fluid in nature, it is important that processes, responsibilities and tasks are clearly articulated and transparent. Communication can be viewed at many different levels, starting from the initial contact through to the interaction and follow up with research participants. When researching across cultures, the language used needs to be clarified from the beginning. This is not just the case when working in a culture that has a different language, but also within same language situations. Meanings attributed to words can vary between cultures and misunderstandings or different understandings of words and phrases can occur, especially when academic jargon is used. It is therefore essential that communication choices and methods are

considered when interacting with others, so that a shared meaning can be developed. Asking for assistance and clarification also helped us to break down the previously mentioned notion of the outside researcher being the "white expert" (Fitzgerald, 2003, 2006; Strachan, 2005).

Many English speaking researchers make the assumption that English is a language spoken and understood by many and leap into research speaking their own language. However, this can sometimes be seen as disrespectful to those who do not use that language and this can create barriers to forming effective communicative relationships. In the case of our research in Vanuatu, there are a multitude of local languages spoken. At the women's leadership programme both Francophone (French speakers) and Anglophone (English speakers) were present. However, Bislama is the lingua franca. Rose, Pearl and Jane spoke Bislama. However, Rachel did not. In order to address this, she asked for permission to speak in English.

When working across languages, translation of information is important. In terms of our research, semi-structured interviews were conducted in Bislama by Rose and Pearl. This ensured that the women felt comfortable using their own language in the interview situation, but also a shared meaning was developed between the interviewer and the interviewee. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and translated into English by Rose and Pearl. This ensured a level of consistency in interpretation and meaning; as Shah (2004) commented, "… shared social and cultural knowledge contributes to give meaning to responses" (p. 561).

In some cultural contexts, access to fast and instant communication may not be present. For example, there may not be the Internet, the email, the phone or even the reliable post that we experience at home in our own cultural context. It is therefore essential that other means of communication and the sharing of information be explored and trialled. This may mean that less traditional ways of contacting people may be used, which may not necessarily align with traditional Western ethical considerations. For example, messages may need to be sent via other people, or participants visited in their homes or workplaces (the person-to-person approach was often preferred by many of the group involved in this research). This can be very time consuming and needs to be planned for. This also is a time when the researcher may need to measure the impact of such actions and use professional judgment to ensure no harm can come to the participants.

Questions to consider

- How will you communicate with the research participants and ensure that a shared meaning can be established in this process?
- How will you come to understand the local networks within the community?

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In all qualitative research there are many important considerations that must be addressed throughout the research process.

Teaching point: We believe that the local context must be taken into consideration when designing and implementing ethically sound research across cultures.

All good research design should include ethical considerations that protect the well-being and interests of the research participants (Stringer, 2004). In the broad sense, feminists involved in cross cultural research are involved in two sets of ethics–the respect for women and the respect for culture (Reinharz, 1992). As mentioned earlier researchers often use the word culture to mean both the general culture of a particular group of people (e.g. Ni Vanuatu), and also the culture of a particular organization. According to Arsenault and Anderson (1998), no single law exists to regulate research ethics. The responsibility for ethical research lies ultimately with the individual researcher and most people who are involved in qualitative research design address the importance of ethical considerations (Merriam, 1998). It is up to the researcher to decide where they stand in relation to these sets of ethics and this will ultimately influence the research process (Robson & Robson, 2002). It is our belief that traditional Western ethical considerations may not necessarily meet the needs of working within a cross cultural context. Therefore, we have drawn on the work of Allan Hall (2001), which we feel aligns more closely with our core values. He proposes the concept of *beneficence* where the focus is not so much the prevention of doing harm, but actually moving beyond this and moving towards the action of doing good. Some areas in this research that we consider demonstrated aspects of beneficence include the research capacity building of Rose and Pearl, the delivery of the women's leadership programme and the building of the partnership throughout the research process.

A question to consider

- What are some aspects of the local context that might impact on researching in an ethical way?

CHALLENGES AND ISSUES

When researching in cross cultural contexts there will be challenges. We struggled, and continue to struggle, with whether it is appropriate to situate ourselves within Pacific education. Indeed, do we have a place at all? Some indigenous critique has alerted us to the colonising effects of white, middle-class feminism on indigenous women (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). We share some experiences as women marginalised in the education system, and as New Zealanders, marginalised to the world. But, our white, middle-class experiences and culture are different to those of our Pacific colleagues. As feminists we are committed to challenging oppressive systems and practices**,** to speak out against the many "isms" (for example, racism and sexism). However, it is essential that this is done in a safe way so that people involved are not put at risk of harm.

Teaching point: We believe that researching in cross cultural contexts involves challenges to the researcher's values

Working cross culturally can involve discomfort as competing values systems become entwined within the research process. For example, in Vanuatu the payment of bride price is still a very common practice. This is when on marriage the man pays to his wife's family an appropriate amount that has been negotiated between the two families. As feminists we do not support this practice as it treats women as chattels and also contributes to violence against women (Kilavanwa, 2004). We experienced discomfort when women talked of this practice and it raised for us issues such as when to challenge and when to remain silent.

Questions to consider

- When have your values been challenged?
- How did you manage?

We found that researching across cultures greatly impacted on us in both positive and negative ways. Firstly, there was increased emotional labour (Strachan, 2005) as relationships were formed, maintained and new cultural terrain navigated. Entering a new work environment meant that new protocols, processes and systems had to be learnt and hierarchies acknowledged. These may have been different to those experienced back in New Zealand and, at times, may not have aligned with our feminist beliefs and values. There was the awareness of offending someone through our actions–actions that may have been acceptable in New Zealand, but are viewed very differently in other cultural contexts. For example, we were constantly checking our own behaviour to ensure that we did not offend. So, we needed to ask advice, which we did often. Another challenge for us was around the differing concepts of time. At times, we experienced frustration. We had come from a context that was bound by due dates, meeting times and fast paced university life. We had entered an environment where there were different processes and priorities and the rituals of Vanuatu life and work had to now become part of our new way of living and working. We needed to be more flexible and go with the local pace. The challenges illustrated are not an exhaustive list of those we met during our research journey. The need to be constantly reflective, with the ability to think on our feet was very important.

CONCLUSION

This article has explored how two researchers were involved in cross cultural research. It has been our aim to illustrate our core position that research must be a socially just process that includes building research capacity. It is important to realise, however, that research design and approaches are dependent on the research context and the people involved in the research process and will be different from context to context. We believe researchers must be cognisant of the current issues related to researching across, within and alongside cultures other than their own. It is therefore essential to ask questions that will help frame the research into a

culturally appropriate methodology, questioning the purpose and the reasons for the research occurring. These questions can arise from examining the values held by the researchers, as it is these core values that provide a firm foundation for aligning a culturally appropriate research methodology and research approach to the research context.

It is our hope that this article has invoked a sense of the challenges and rewards (many of which are intangible) that can be experienced through researching across cultures. By sharing our experiences, processes and considerations, we hope that you begin to question your underlying reasons and motivations for your research, the processes you will use and the possible influence your research may have on the community involved. We encourage you to consider your core values as a researcher as this will ultimately influence your research methodology. Being involved in socially just cross cultural research calls for a thoughtful, well designed and culturally informed approach at all stages of the research process – from initial considerations through to follow up and capacity building processes and the sharing of research findings.

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[1] For a more detailed description of the leadership programme, the research and the Vanuatu context, see Strachan and Saunders (2007).
[2] Ni Vanuatu are the indigenous peoples of Vanuatu
[3] See Strachan, J., & Saunders, R. (2007). Ni Vanuatu women and educational leadership development. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Leadership, 22*(2), 37–48.