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## EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP & MANAGEMENT | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# We're going on a bear hunt: Reconciling neoliberalism and postcolonialism in Pacific early childhood

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**Abstract:** Indigenous peoples around the world are struggling to create their own, unique early childhood system that reflects their cultural values and supports their dream of raising their children to proudly wear their own cultural identity. In this research, we share the work being undertaken by Pacific early childhood professionals. The study is part of a larger study across several nations which aims to explore early childhood professionals' understanding of their path towards professionalisation. We suggest that there are numerous obstacles that impede this work, one of which is what appears to be limited awareness amongst those very professionals needing to lead the agenda, of the nature of the obstacles in their path. The values and practices arising from neoliberalism are hegemonic, and it is easy for those living under their influence to perceive this way of being as the only legitimate way of being. We used social constructionism and a narrative-based online survey to collect our information and present it using a narrative framework (focused around a popular children's song that emphasises how to face challenges in life).

**Subjects:** Development Studies; Education; Social Sciences

**Keywords:** early childhood; neoliberalism; southern theory; Pacific; professionalisation

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

It is now well understood that the experiences children have in their early years of life lay the foundations for lifelong health, wellbeing, development and achievement. The kinds of learning opportunities provided for young children are determined by adults who shape the world around children. Adults themselves are shaped by their own experiences and the world around them. This paper examines the tension between two major views of the world (neoliberalism and post colonialism) that are influencing how early childhood educators in the Pacific are attempting to craft a new profession: an Indigenous Pacific early childhood profession. The shape this profession takes will influence the learning opportunities offered to young Pacific children and thus impact on the way they will behave in the future and the ideas that will drive their adult behaviour.

### Children's Song

We're going on a bear hunt,  
We're going to catch a big one.  
What a beautiful day,  
I'm not scared.  
Uh-oh! Thick oozy mud!  
We can't go over it, we can't go under it,  
We've got to go through it.

#### 1. We're going on a bear hunt

Indigenous peoples around the world are struggling to catch the bear—their own, unique early childhood system that reflects their cultural values and supports their dream of raising their children to proudly wear their own cultural 'bearskin.' In this research, we share with you the bear hunt being undertaken by Pacific early childhood professionals. The study is part of a larger study across several nations which aims to explore early childhood professionals' understanding of their path towards professionalisation (Sims, 2014); see the following for further details: Sims and Pedey (2015).

Early childhood programmes across the Pacific are diverse and operating in contexts of different economic and social conditions (Chan & Choy, 2010). The Minister for Foreign Affairs in Australia identifies these nations as developing (as at February 2015—<https://dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/Documents/list-developing-countries.pdf>) which means that they have an average gross national income per capita of US\$ 11,905 and less (<http://www.iawp.org/joiniawp/countrylist.htm>). For most nations in the Pacific, colonisation has played a significant role in shaping service delivery in education and Eurocentric ideas have not only shaped services, but the daily lives of people, including the values and practices they use every day. For example Tausere-Tiko (2015) discusses the impact of colonisation on child rearing beliefs and practices in Fiji, and demonstrates how these have shifted significantly over the past 200 years. Early childhood services in these countries are only beginning to develop, and in many cases, development is piecemeal, and often led by private and/or religious or charitable organisations operating out of eurocentric ideologies. Regulations are often lacking and in most countries, whilst there may be an aspirational government policy addressing early childhood, implementation is limited. It is in this context that we carried out our research agenda aiming to investigate how those working in early childhood perceived their struggle to develop an early childhood profession.

We asked all the early childhood professionals we could access via both formal and informal networks in the Pacific (students of early childhood as well as academics and those working in early childhood services with young children) to participate in our study. One hundred and four (104) responded to our invitation and completed an online survey. Of that 104, 40% had only worked with young children for less than 2 years, whilst 17% had worked in early childhood for 5–10 years. The respondents were all women and 41% of them worked face to face with young children (childcare centres, kindergartens, etc.), 12% were academics, 5% policy-makers, 8% managers of organisations providing services for young children and 4% worked in a regulatory role. Eight percent of them had a university degree in early childhood and other qualifications included certificates (44%) and diplomas (11%) in early childhood (education, care and education, children's services), leadership or primary teaching qualifications. We do not claim our respondents are representative of those working in the early childhood profession in the Pacific: indeed our sample was limited by our ability to contact people by email and their ability to connect to an online questionnaire.

We chose an online survey as our data collection tool for pragmatic reasons. The study is unfunded and resources were limited. We acknowledge this is not the ideal tool to gain a rich understanding of participants' reflective thinking. However, we attempted to structure open-ended questions that would prompt reflection and participants were able to enter and exit the survey at will. We believe that through language, participants can share their understanding of the world

developed through their own experiences and interactions in the world. This is a position defined as social constructionism (Adams, 2006; Keaton & Bodie, 2011). The social world inhabited by our participants impacts on the way they interpret their experiences and thus on their understanding of the professionalisation of the world of early childhood in which they work. The survey was developed specifically for this project and further details in relation to its nature are available in previous publications from this project (Sims, 2014; Sims & Pedey, 2015). This paper utilises data from questions in the survey related to participants' background and experience, and their perceptions of the benefits and risks of professionalisation. This latter was gained through both rating scales (as reported in Tables 1 and 2) and their open-ended reflections on the issues addressed in the tables. The items in the rating scales related to benefits and risks of professionalisation are taken from the literature and this is explained in more detail in Sims (2014).

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the host university under the NHMRC national ethics guidelines for Australia (National Health & Medical Research Council, Australian Research Council, &

**Table 1. Average rank of the reasons we need early childhood services**

Reason	Average rank
Children have the right to learn through play	3.18
Children need to be prepared for school	4.00
Children need a range of experiences	4.45
Children who have quality early childhood services are better prepared for employment in the future	4.59
Children who are disadvantaged need learning opportunities outside the home	4.75
Children have the right to participate in group contexts	4.84
Children need a range of interactions with adults and peers	5.27
Children need to be well cared for when their parents work	5.45

**Table 2. Average rank of the risks perceived in pursuing professionalism in a neoliberal climate**

Risk	Average rank
The risk of having curriculum developed and then imposed on EC professionals in a way that constrains their ability to respond flexibly to the unique needs of every child, family and community. This is the idea that a curriculum framework undermines professional ability to make decisions	2.93
The risk of handing over control of professional decisions to external people who may not be EC people	3.73
The risk of having to demonstrate your professionalism through documenting what you do, which potentially takes your time away from spending time with children	4.07
The risk that comes with needing to separate what EC professionals do from the work that mothers do, which results in the exclusion of childminders and nannies from the EC profession	4.15
The risk that we create a narrow definition of EC and exclude other groups who work with young children and their families	4.54
Less valued components of EC work, such as relationship building, nurturing and caring, are excluded from the profession	4.98
The risk that the professional need to keep children safe restricts their experiences	5.45
The risk that professional demands and input do not match the low salary which may lead to demotivated, dispassionate and less caring people working in the sector	6.39
The risk that a profession defines what should be done in a way that limits the flexibility needed to work multiculturally	6.54

Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, 2007/2015). The aim of this paper is to share the voices of these participants as they reflected on their own experiences of their 'bear hunt'. Having set the scene for our bear hunt, we now need to share our end goal: what do participants and ourselves aim to achieve by our engagement in this directed reflection?

## 2. We're going to catch a big one

Raewyn Connell argues the academic community needs to create a new social theory that challenges the dominant paradigms shaping the way social scientists undertake and interpret research (Connell, 2007). Connell developed southern theory through her work in sociology. She argues that sociological theory has gone through several evolutionary stages from the classic (developed by "men of the metropolitan liberal bourgeoisie" [p. 14]) through to the influence of modernity (Marx, Parsons, Durkheim, Weber). This evolution occurred through the late 19th and early 20th centuries in a context where imperialism and the spread of "capitalist industrialisation" (p. 6) were the key elements of interest for the emerging discipline. Connell calls this form of sociology northern theory. Since that time, imperialism has been challenged and there have been shifts in where global power is located. Challenges to colonialism have resulted in challenges to sociological theories. Part of this is a challenge to the concept of universal relevance: the idea that theory, if it is to be worthy, needs to be applicable universally, a concept deemed important in the increasingly globalised world. In contrast, local knowledges, and the conflict between local knowledges and northern knowledge (as defined in Connell, 2007) can be considered of equal value in the creation of a new way of researching and understanding the world (de Sousa Santos, Nunes, & Meneses, 2007). Research presented from these alternative positions is often perceived by the hegemony as less legitimate (Massey & Kirk, 2015), but that does not mean it should not be undertaken. Rather, the challenge is to actively explore the issues and engage in reflective debate (as suggested by Parker, 2015): a challenge this paper attempts to address.

A range of different approaches arise out of the call to develop Connell's (2007) southern theory. Post-colonialism is one of these approaches that focuses on the study of cultural changes that occur in previously colonised societies once the colonisers leave (Childs & Williams, 2013). The tendrils of white supremacy are strong and intertwined in many aspects of peoples' lives (Ledesma & Calderon, 2015). Reflecting on these issues can be a powerful strategy through which previously colonised people can begin to attain agency (Duenkel, Pratt, & Sullivan, 2014). Baszile (2015, p. 249) presents Critical Race Theory (CRT) which "has fundamentally been about "talking back" through the production of counternarratives that are, above all else, intended to interrogate and subvert the logic of multiple rationalities—legal, neoliberal, and scientific among others—and their role in reinforcing racism under the guise of integration, assimilation, colorblindness, and more recently post-racialism". Counternarratives come from those who have previously been subjugated and ensuring these counternarratives are heard is a key responsibility of those working within southern theory.

The counternarrative shared by our participants is one in which the importance of children growing strong in their culture is articulated:

To be life-long learners, have pride in their culture and country (participant 4)

I want them to have a strong sense of identity, appreciate their own as well as others' cultures, have respect for the environment and become life-long learners who will contribute to the peace and prosperity of our nation, Fiji (participant 7)

The counternarrative is also strongly positioned in the work of Tausere-Tiko (2014, 2015) who provides an Indigenous Fijian framework (Fijian Indigenous Vuli Ni Lalai Hybrid Child Development Model) that could be the starting point of a new Indigenous Fijian early childhood focus which can then inform the development of other Pacific nation frameworks. This model proposes extensive engagement with communities (parents, families, elders) around what they see as important

elements in their children's development, along with ways in which community can be more involved in early childhood service delivery.

### 3. I'm not scared

For children to grow strong and confident in their cultural identity, education experiences need to be culturally appropriate, demonstrating that their culture is valued and respected and that they themselves are important as members of their community and culture (Gallegos, Murray, & Evans, 2010; United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2002). In undertaking their bear hunt to achieve this outcome, Pacific early childhood professionals are supported by their knowledge of other nations where the dream of an Indigenous pedagogy and curriculum have been fought for, and established. Ball and Pence (2001a) challenged the learning community a number of years ago when they published their Canadian work on the generative curriculum. This aimed to use the "space between First Nations and Euro-Western cultures as a place to meet, hear, debate and engage in constructivist practitioner training in child care and development" (Ball & Pence, 2001b, p. 9). Using a "both/and" (p. 9) approach, the guiding principles informing the project aimed to (p. 9):

- Support community initiative in a community-based setting
- Promote respect "all ways" (multicultural inputs)
- Draw upon community and individual strengths
- Ensure a broad ecological perspective (awareness of the child in the context of family and community)
- Provide education and career laddering for students, such that credit for this coursework will be fully applicable to future study and practice
- Engage in co-construction of a bicultural curriculum, in which Elders and other community resource people figure prominently.

The concept of co-constructing a bicultural curriculum was one which has been actioned in other contexts. In New Zealand, Māori have, since pakeha settlement, attempted to resist the assimilation policies of successive governments (and continue to do so). The establishment of Te Kōhanga Reo (Māori Language Nests—the first of which was established in Wainuiomata in 1982—<http://www.kohanga.ac.nz/>) were "focused on mokopuna/tamariki as the future speakers of te reo Māori. Immersion in te reo and tikanga Māori (Māori customary conduct) would empower these children, along with their whānau, hapū and iwi, to maintain the language and thus ensure its survival" (Te One, 2013, p. 11). When New Zealand developed its national early childhood curriculum - Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 1996) it was necessary to incorporate Māori pedagogical and philosophical approaches, particularly as evidenced in Te Kōhanga Reo. Te Whāriki, is recognised internationally (Taguma, Litjens, & Makowiecki, 2012) and its durability "lies in a conceptual framework that interweaves educational theory, political standpoints and a profound acknowledgement of the importance of culture" (Te One, 2013, p. 30).

### 4. What a beautiful day

As identified above, early childhood services across the Pacific are only beginning to develop, and are doing so in political, social and economic contexts that are challenging. Colonisation has been responsible for the development of Eurocentric education systems, often where English is the only language allowed, and success is defined in Eurocentric terms (getting a well-paid job and living in a town or city rather than being self-sufficient in a remote village community). However, Pacific peoples, in common with the people of other nations, are influenced by a growing international trend towards what Connell (2007) calls cultural renaissance. The development of southern theory itself is a sign of such renaissance which identifies how different ways of seeing the world do have relevance in our understanding of the world we live in. It is in this context that participants in this study articulated how they saw that their work in early childhood was going to catch the bear (remembering

that the bear, for them, is children who are raised strong in their culture and identity). Participant 28 thought the early childhood profession in the Pacific would:

import knowledge to the young ones and pay its role as one of the nation builders that leads and inspires others by example

In summing up, Participant 7 said:

I see my vision of early childhood as a profession is not different from the gardener whose main focus is to ensure that his plants have enough water, have enough sunlight, have enough space to grow and mature, he creates balance amongst the different plants within his garden. Each plant is different however they have one common link and that is to be nurtured and cared for.

### 5. Uh-oh! Thick oozy mud!

There are obstacles impeding the bear hunt, the most influential of which is the hegemonic impact of neoliberalism. Nations in the Pacific, as with many other nations, both colonised and colonisers, are strongly influenced by the neoliberal ideology that arose in the 1940s as a fear response to socialism (Leitner, Peck, & Sheppard, 2007). In Fiji, for example, in the new strategic plan for education the Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts proposes a key neoliberal position as the underpinning ideology in the plan:

In the economics literature of Human Capital theory, expenditure on education is treated as an investment and not as a consumer item as some tend to think when asking “how will we pay”. An individual acquires this human capital in schooling and post-school investment and on the job training. Those countries who have increasingly emphasized this have also noted that highly trained and skilled manpower is the pivotal element for real and balanced development (Ministry of Education Heritage & Arts, 2015, p. 2)

Similar ideas are found in other nations of the Pacific. For example, the vision for education in Samoa also reflects the neoliberal agenda of education in service of national economics and individual responsibility (Ministry of Education Sport & Culture, 2007, p. 17):

Basic education as the fundamental building block for society should engender the broader life skills that lead to social cohesion and provide the foundations for vocational callings, higher education and life long learning. These when combined with enhanced employment opportunities create a higher level of personal and societal security and development.

In neoliberalism, the welfare state, a key element in previous Fordian politics, is perceived as a drain on the state and is replaced by the freedom of the market. Neoliberalism “... casts all dimensions of life in terms of market rationality, constructs profit-making as the arbiter and essence of democracy, consuming as the only operable form of citizenship, and upholds the irrational belief that the market can both solve all problems and serve as a model for structuring all social relations” (Giroux, 2015, p. 170).

Neoliberalism has a significant impact on the way education is positioned. In the past, the main purpose of education around the western world was to prepare all children to participate effectively in a democracy. Under neoliberalism, education’s key role has become that of preparing students for employment (Baltodana, 2012): schools no longer educate, rather they train students for future employment. Education has thus become an “adjunct of corporate control” (Giroux, 2015, p. 123). The needs of the employment market define what students should learn, and what they should know when they have completed their courses. Employable citizens are not required to be articulate nor capable of critical thinking (Baltodana, 2012). In a nutshell, “education becomes a means to encourage children to reach the level of responsabilisation and proper development, and to be economically competitive in a globalised world” (Macfarlane & Lakhani, 2015, p. 186).

The neoliberal focus on accountability forces educators to demonstrate that students have attained the required knowledge and skills. National measures are imposed to assess and report on student performance. Fiji, for example has the LANA (Literacy And Numeracy Assessment) used in primary schools in classes 4, 6 and 8 (<https://www.facebook.com/FijianGovernment/posts/442834452416162>). Good teachers are no longer those who challenge students to think, to critique and to challenge; rather they are those who ensure their students score highly on these standardised tests (Hursh & Henderson, 2011). Hursh and Henderson (2011, p. 181) see this as aiming to create “productive, rather than critical employees.” Such an approach functions to “... homogenize all knowledge and meaning” (Giroux, 2015, p. 43) resulting in the reproduction of a “... culture of ignorance and instrumental rationality ...” (p. 44) risks increasing “transition into authoritarianism” (p. 47). This is highlighted in the work of Brown (2015, pp. 238–239), who, in researching the work of pre-kindergarten teachers in a mid-western state in the US found that they were required to teach students across the state “the same knowledge and skills through a similar set of practices for an appropriate amount of time to ready them for the state’s high-stakes tests that begin in grade 3.” As a consequence of this pressure, they “prioritised policymakers’ neoliberal reforms over the histories, experiences, and expectations of their students and families” (p. 246).

Pacini-Ketchabaw and Pence (2011, p. 4) talk about the postmodern curriculum and the need to move away from “standardised testing, acknowledge cultural and linguistic diversity (typically through the inclusion of indigenous issues).” However, such approaches are not easy as they require challenging the dominant neoliberal discourse. This is extremely difficult for those who are, themselves, educated in a neoliberal world and who are functioning as neoliberal citizens. For a long time now, we have followed the work of Freire (1973) who argued that oppression by a dominant group results in those who are oppressed taking on the world view of the oppressors, and accepting the positions in which they are placed. In attempting to catch the bear, our early childhood professionals in the Pacific are constrained by their own experiences of neoliberalism and the world in which they live.

## **6. We can’t go over it, we can’t go under it**

For the bear hunt to succeed, it is important that our hunters understand the obstacles in their way and the impact these obstacles have on their thinking and their subsequent actions. Sometimes the biggest hurdles hunters have to face are the very hurdles that they do not see in their way until it is too late. In this section, we explore some of the data that helps us understand how our participants perceive the obstacles they are facing.

We asked our early childhood professionals what they thought were the main reasons we need early childhood professionals. They were asked to rank a range of options as presented in Table 1: with 1 being the most important reason and 8 being the least important.

Table 1 demonstrates that Pacific early childhood professionals were particularly focused on their role in preparing children (using a play-based pedagogy) for school and ultimately employment: a classic neoliberal understanding. This suggests to us that our participants are somewhat influenced by neoliberal ideology. Is this influence sufficient, we wonder, for them to grapple with the obstacles to their bear hunt that this agenda provides? To find out we asked participants to rank some of the risks associated with pursuing professionalism in a neoliberal context. Again, the closer the average ranking is to 1, the more highly the participants ranked the risk.

The two highest risks identified by participants are indeed risks that accompany the neoliberal agenda and we have seen from research overseas such risks turned into reality in the paths taken towards professionalisation in different countries (Oberhuemer, 2005; O’Connell, 2008; Taggart, 2011). However, other significant risks were not highly prioritised by our participants. As discussed above, neoliberalism prioritises standardised knowledge (Giroux, 2015) whereas postcolonialism (Childs & Williams, 2013), critical race theory (Baszile, 2015) and southern theory (Connell, 2007) all call for a diversification of knowledge; a recognition that there is not one set of universal knowledge, and that different understandings provide richness and depth to our operation in the world. These

approaches provide the space in which different cultural groups can pursue curriculum and pedagogy that is culturally relevant, in a way that neoliberalism does not. However, participants rated the risk of standardising knowledge as the least of their concerns even though they are attempting to create their own Indigenous Pacific early childhood profession. Neither did they rate the risk of separating care and education as a particular concern, despite an abundance of evidence that this dichotomy has the potential to greatly reshape the way that the early childhood profession develops in the future (Rockel, 2013; Sims, 2014; Sims & Pedey, 2015).

The qualitative data reflected this tension. Participant 34 argued that the key role for the early childhood sector is to:

Develop young children so they can be useful and responsible adults in the future thus produce a productive nation.

The focus on employability as the desired outcome of education (a key element in the neoliberal agenda) is also addressed by participant 20. She argued that the purpose of education is:

For them to achieve a better qualification and be able to adequately participate in various fields.

## 7. We've got to go through it

At this point in our bear hunt, there is a clear idea of where to go to catch the bear. The destination is articulated by Tausere-Tiko (2014, 2015); the bear represents a vision of Pacific early childhood systems that value and promulgate Indigenous Pacific languages and cultures and produces children who are culturally strong and resilient. However, we suggest that there are numerous obstacles that impede the bear hunt, one of which is what appears to be limited awareness amongst those very professionals needing to lead the bear hunt, of the nature of the obstacles in their path. The values and practices arising from neoliberalism are hegemonic, and it is easy for those living under their influence to perceive this way of being as the only legitimate way of being. As Freire (1973) explained many years ago, it's perceived as the way things are. Neoliberal citizens have been educated to develop internalised "social norms" (Blum & Ullman, 2012, p. 370) that drive the way they understand and act in the world. However, it does not have to be the way things are. Neoliberalism offers one way of looking at the world; a way we argue is the opposite of southern theory. Without challenging neoliberalism, we posit that it will not be possible for Pacific early childhood professionals to catch the bear; instead they will continue to flounder in the thick, oozy mud, working hard with passion but making little headway.

It is necessary to push through the thick, oozy mud. This is not easy. Challenging the hegemony of neoliberalism is difficult (Brown, 2015): even international experts are not able to agree on an alternative (Harris, 2003). Whilst simply coping can be positioned as a form of resistance (Springer, 2010), coping on its own is not going to catch the bear. Strong leadership is needed to provide early childhood professionals with space and permission to talk. Regional networks of early childhood professionals provide one forum through which leaders can communicate, share ideas and support each other (e.g. the Pacific Early Childhood Research Association (<http://www.pecera.org/>) and the Pacific Regional Council for Early Childhood Care and Education (PRC4ECCE—<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/partnership/?p=7447>). However, operationalising ideas within each nation involves balancing the need for government support and action, with strategies to hear diverse voices of leaders, communities and professionals. Tausere-Tiko (2015) suggests, for example, nationwide consultations, following appropriate indigenous protocol to ensure communities are heard.

Critical dialogue around core values, what is important, what is valued and around different understandings of the world and of early childhood practice is needed. Workshops, conversations in staff rooms, professional development sessions, learning circles, communities of practice and conferences all offer opportunities to participate in critical dialogue. There is an increasing recognition

of the value of professional conversations in supporting practitioners to engage in critical dialogue which helps them address challenging issues in education (Artz, 2012; Leonard, 2012; Timperley, 2015). As (Artz, 2012, p. 146) explains:

New turns of phrase, new ways of employing words that for many of us have had fixed meanings, now force us to meet these words again in different guises, and so create the need for a re-acquaintance, for hearing and seeing again in a different way, what we thought we knew.

Sometimes, humour can be used to help share ideas and thoughts. The aim of carnivalesque is to make the ordinary seem strange, to distort and deform so that the normal, taken-for-granted perceptions can be looked at in a different way (van den Oever, 2013). Visual artists such as Fernando Botero (<http://www.biography.com/people/fernando-botero-241190>) do this when they create images of people that are grotesque and distorted. Carnavalesque (White, 2014), offers what could be perceived as an underground approach: where early childhood practitioners can laugh and joke about the realities of their everyday practice, and through their humour, add to the critical dialogue being shared amongst them.

Developing and operating early childhood services that reflect indigenous core values is an important strategy in what Tesar (2014) calls disturbing the balance of power. Demonstrating, even in a small way, how things can be done differently provides a space other early childhood professionals can use to reflect on their own practice. Early childhood professionals can work with sponsoring agencies to create centres of excellence, model services (or programmes within a service) that others can learn from. Centres of Excellence can function to enhance capacity (Hellström, n.d.) as they offer practical strategies that assist in the successful operationalisation of theory.

In the end, the successful capture of the bear depends on the strength of community will. Early childhood professionals need to engage proactively with community members to create a shared vision: a shared understanding of the importance of their bear hunt. Together we are strong and together we can succeed in our bear hunt through *solesolevaki* (doing things together) holding high the Fijian proverb *meda dui mate ga ena nona dui ucu ni vatu* (sacrifice or never give up).

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