Contemporary calls from the Pacific to decolonise and disrupt western systems or practice in the Pacific mirror similar efforts in Aotearoa New Zealand, highlighting the need for Indigenous peoples to engage in “active theorising” (Koya-Vaka’uta, 2016, p. 20) and for “interrogation from and based on each of our own knowledge systems” (Fa’avae, 2019, p. 5).

As a non-Indigenous woman, I respond to these calls by actively considering my positionality with respect to Pasifika/Pacific students. Savvides et al. (2014) suggest that researchers use ‘critical reflexivity’ to negotiate space across the dichotomy of insider/outsider. For me, this critical reflection has encouraged serious consideration of how I continuously negotiate my positionality as a Pāpālangi, mother of Tongan children and member of a Tongan family, and how my experiences of power and representation vary in different contexts, such as my teaching and my research in the area of science education.

As western modern science is the foundation of most formal science curriculums globally, a ‘learning gap’ is created by the conflict of western and Indigenous value systems (Little, 1990). This can contribute to the underachievement of Indigenous students in science, particularly if Indigenous knowledge is not included in the formal science curriculum (Howlett et al., 2008). In Aotearoa New Zealand, at the same Māori and Pacific students are not achieving in science on par with other ethnic groups, there is limited engagement with their traditional ways of knowing and being, particularly by non-Māori and non-Pacific science educators in higher education.

A recent fellowship project, ‘Lalanga ha kaha’u monu’ia - Embedding Indigenous knowledge, values, and culture for Māori and Pacific science student success’, explored how university science-focused courses could embed or influence their teaching and learning with Māori and Pacific values, culture and knowledge.
This project explicitly focused on building science educators’ culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012) and their competency to transform their own teaching and learning practices. As part of the research project team He Vaka Moana, it uses the ‘pikipiki hama kae vaevae manava’ methodology to demonstrate deliberate and purposeful ways of creating connections, sharing information and knowledge and the ability to work collectively but with individual responsibility. The project also adapted Fua’s (2016) conceptualisation of Motutapu as safe spaces for reflection, where data was collected using talanoa (open, unstructured discussion).

In this presentation I will share different examples of how my own practice has changed. I will also discuss three areas of tension indicated by my fellowship project and subsequent work in this area. This presentation is intended to demonstrate the importance of non-Indigenous science educators continually reflecting, and in this particular instance, how by considering a university learning space from a different viewpoint, perspective, or understanding, Māori and Pacific students feel included, acknowledged, and valued.

Biography of Sonia M. Fonua

Sonia M. Fonua

Sonia M. Fonua is Papālangi (New Zealand European) and was born and raised in Aotearoa New Zealand. She is married to her Tongan husband and their sons are her inspiration to improve the education system for all Pacific peoples. She has been working in higher education for twenty years, recently completing her PhD, Ha'otā: Transforming science education in Aotearoa New Zealand for Tongan students, in Critical Studies in Education within the Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Auckland. Her research interests focus on ethnic disparities in education and embedding Pacific knowledge and ways of being in science teaching and learning spaces.