Culturally Responsive Inclusive Education: The Value of the Local Context

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ABSTRACT
This study investigates the effectiveness of a professional development initiative in inclusive education for teachers who support students with disabilities at the Creative Centre. The Creative Centre is a private school providing educational services for post-secondary school young people and adults with disabilities. Staff ($N=5$) at the Centre were interviewed before and after the proposed professional development program, reporting on their reflective practices. The results indicated that staff shifted towards a more positive attitude towards students and reported stronger support for the advocacy for disability and community connectedness. Additionally, staff described the significance of embedding life skills into programs for students with disabilities. The article provides a juxtaposing narrative of the journey of the project. The outcomes of the project illustrate how the local culture and context is required to realise the success of effective culturally responsive inclusive education.

KEYWORDS
Cook Islands; culturally responsive; disability; inclusive education

Introduction
Over the course of the last 50 years, inclusive education has come to be accepted as a fundamental practice bringing together all people who are marginalised and excluded as a result of their disability. Despite this, considerable disparity in the attitudes towards people with disabilities throughout the world still remains. These attitudinal variations exist between nations, between regions and within communities, not as a result of economic or technical challenges but rather a composite of tradition and past and current philosophies (Munyi, 2012). In the Pacific region, negative cultural attitudes towards people with disabilities have been reported as prevalent (Sharma, Loreman, & Macanawai, 2015). The Cook Islands government has worked steadily towards challenging negative attitudes towards people with disabilities with the vision to develop a robust inclusive cultural context (Government of Cook Islands, 2005).

Cook Islands: Inclusive Culture and Educational Developments
The Cook Islands is made up of 15 islands covering a total land area of 240 square kilometres. The resident population is estimated at around 12,000 with the majority living...
on the island of Rarotonga. There are 30 co-educational schools across the 12 populated islands, and the education system follows the New Zealand education system in its structure and content, and both Cook Islands Māori and English are used as languages of instruction (Government of Cook Islands, 2005).

Championed by the disability community, the inclusion movement has supported the position that regards and treats all people as equally valued and accepted members of society (Bevan-Brown, 2013). Education for students with disability is legislated by the UN Convention of Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), ratified by the Cook Islands in 2009, and the Cook Islands Disability Act (2008) that was introduced to act alongside the CRPD (Mourie, 2012). These policies legislate for access to education for all. Further, the Pacific Education Development Framework (PIFS) ratified by the Cook Islands in 2009 provided the vision for quality education in all Pacific countries with a mission to enable, each Pacific learner to develop all his/her talents and creativities to the full and thereby enabling each person to take responsibility for his/her own life and make a meaningful contribution to the social, cultural and economic development of Pacific society. (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS), 2009, p. 5)

Contemporary global philosophy towards disability is reflected in government practices of inclusive education. By way of illustration, the Cook Islands Ministry of Education developed the Inclusive Education Policy (Merumeru, 2011) from earlier iterations in the special education field (Court, 2002) which in turn arose in part from the work of McDonald (2001). The policy focuses on the rights of all children to an education and on generating inclusive practices within classrooms and schools to ensure the rights of all children are met. The policy also ensures that all students will be educated in mainstream settings, although there is an allowance for alternative educational provisions for students who find participation in regular classrooms difficult (Townsend, Page, & McCawe, 2014). In practice, nearly all students are mainstreamed in the Cook Islands, although a small special education unit attached to one school offers support for students with disabilities at a secondary level, and the Cook Islands offers an educational program for students aged 16 years and above. Individual Education Plans are used in all schools for students requiring additional education support and teacher aides as well as specialist services such as physiotherapists, psychologists and occupational therapists are accessed depending upon the level of impairment (Townsend et al., 2014).

Despite the range of inclusive policies and practices that exist in the Cook Islands, Mourie (2012) states that the relevant legislation has not necessarily translated into transformative change, reporting a general lack of awareness in society about people with disabilities. In part, this may be the result of borrowed foreign policy that may not reflect the values of the context (Duke et al., 2016). It appears likely, therefore, that this different perception of disability will negatively impact community, school and family attitudes.

The importance of family and the responsibility to care for relatives with disabilities has been recognised as a fundamental cultural characteristic (Government of Cook Islands, 2005; Mourie, 2012). In a comprehensive study on disability within the greater Pacific region, Tavoli and Whippy (2010) found that while people with disabilities are cared for not only by their families but also by the wider community, they still experience significant stigma and discrimination in society. The authors reflect that their findings show that, ‘there are also contradictions within cultural attitudes as well as changing attitudes...
in a constantly changing world’ (p. 12). This is the case in the Cook Islands, where conflicting attitudes and likewise support towards disability are evident. To have a disability is seen by some as a curse from Satan, associated with punishment, shame and stigma (Page, Boyle, Mckay, & Mavropoulou, 2018). Akama, a central Cook Islands concept of a personal state of shame and shyness of others as a result of a perceived wrongdoing by the person, is relevant to this disability discourse (McDonald, 2004). As such, akama has remained, in many ways, an enduring theme in community thinking. The stigma of disability meant that some people with disabilities did not leave the house and did not become participatory members of society. Another challenge that those with a disability face is a common belief that generally people with disabilities do not have much potential for learning and, therefore, do not require remedial programs (McDonald, 2001; Smith, 2008).

Recent research, however, has indicated significant shifts in Cook Islands’ perceptions towards disability, showing more positive attitudes towards people with disability. Page et al., (2018) and Page and Ferrett 2018, for example, reported that teachers and teaching support staff have expressed a range of inclusive beliefs towards people with disabilities, related to their strong Christian faith, epitomising love and acceptance of all people. Likewise, Mourie (2012) reported that societal attitudes and awareness surrounding disabilities were seen to change to be more accepting of difference in recent years. Of note, in contrast to akama, the other significant Cook Islands’ concept of aroha is observed, which refers to love and a way of life and, additionally, a concern for the welfare of others through kindness and respect (McDonald, 2004).

**Inclusive Education Professional Development in the Cook Islands**

There exists a regional focus to strengthen professional development to plan and deliver quality education to support students with disabilities (Forlin, Sharma, Loreman, & Sprunt, 2015). While changes in perception towards people with disability and inclusive educational approaches are evident, sustainability of staff training opportunities has proven to be one of the Cook Islands’ greatest challenges. Teacher in-service training in inclusive education existed between 1995 and 2002 (McDonald, 2004) and was designed for sustainability. Teacher pre-service training, which had an inclusive education component as part of its delivery, was in place before the Teachers’ College closed in 2006 and is no longer offered (Fua & Sanga, 2007).

The in-service teacher training program was subject to rigorous research by McDonald (2001) that identified the effectiveness and strategies needed to support future initiatives in professional development delivery. A key finding concerned the function of social support, outlining how support was needed both from and to others to build personal growth and build beliefs.

Only in recent years have teacher aides received ongoing specialist training (Townsend et al., 2014), and in the past few years, classroom teachers have been required to upskill their qualifications to a degree standard through the University of the South Pacific (Cook Islands Ministry of Education, 2014). The degree involves the completion of papers in inclusive education (A. Armstrong, personal communication, 25 August 2017). While this is a significant step forward for school staff in the Cook Islands, the provision of ongoing professional development in inclusive education can be sporadic. Kraska and Boyle (2014)
reported that completion of a course on inclusive education is a particularly important factor in the development of positive pre-service teacher attitudes towards inclusion. Their findings echo local research (Page et al., 2018; Page & Ferrett, 2018) investigating school staff perceptions of special and inclusive education where teachers and teacher aides reported the necessity of regular and compulsory training for inclusion to be effective. The results from local and international studies, therefore, provided impetus for the delivery of training at the Creative Centre to both upskill and maintain essential skills for special and inclusive education to teachers.

**The Creative Centre**

The Creative Centre is a private school under the Ministry of Education but also a non-government organisation catering to the educational needs of young people and adults aged 16 years and over (Harkness, 2016). The mission statement of the Creative Centre is ‘to support and encourage members to develop their skills and personality as part of achieving their full potential’ (para.1), by prioritising (a) greater community participation, (b) realistic employment opportunities and (c) links to educational qualifications.

The Centre has, in the past, offered art classes such as painting and music, cultural lessons in Māori, history and dance and also literacy and mathematics programs. The organisation of the classes was designed to facilitate students’ abilities to contribute to the wider community and to develop independence and confidence of those in the class. There was also a focus on relevant practical life skills. The Creative Centre also offered vocational training in pareu (Cook Islands printed sarong) making, pottery and other craft making that were sold in a shop on-site. The skills learnt with these activities assisted potential employment.

In 2016, there were 17 students with a range of mild-to-complex disabilities attending the Creative Centre. All students had in place an individual learning plan outlining academic and life skills and employment goals. The school employed five full-time staff members. Two were male and three were female and had between 2 and 20 years’ experience of working with people with disability. One staff member was a qualified teacher with training in inclusive education, and the other staff had received teacher aide training. At various times during the year, volunteers and specialist staff, such as occupational therapists, would provide additional support. While capable of providing specialist education provision for students with disabilities, the principal recognised the need for ongoing professional development in a desire to create excellence in its field (Harkness, personal communication, 20 September, Harkness, 2016). In practice, the program relied heavily on direct staff participation. Additionally, work-based opportunities for people with disabilities are scarce, and community attitudes towards disability, although improving in the Cook Islands, were limited (Page et al., 2018; Mourie, 2012). The current study, therefore, aimed to investigate the effectiveness of a professional development initiative for staff at the Centre to meet inclusive educational needs within the complexity of the Cook Islands context by ascertaining shifts in views and experiences towards inclusive education through staff reports of their reflective practices. The project aimed to monitor the effectiveness of the planning and delivery of an educational program designed to meet students’ needs (Smith & Ory, 2014). Additionally, because the research evolved beyond the original intention, the implementation of the project results was also reported.
Method

The Research Design

The researchers’ intention was to design and deliver a professional development program for the Creative Centre staff based on the results of a needs analysis (Davis, Davis, & Bloch, 2008). The needs assessment employed methods of analysing subjective and objective sources of information related to the context: individual interviews followed existing policy reviews, experiences of the staff and local and regional literature. Individual interviews were to form a pre- and post-evaluation assessment indicating shifts in views and experiences towards inclusive education through staff reports of their reflective practices.

Interviews were conducted with all five staff members in English, as this is the language of instruction in schools, lasting approximately 45 min to an hour in length and took place in the Creative Centre. The interviews were recorded and later fully transcribed. Consent for the study was obtained from the university and the governmental body of the Cook Islands Research Committee. Informed consent was obtained from staff, and an information sheet was read and then a copy was given to each participant that addressed the confidentiality issues. Consent was also obtained for the authorisation to report participant responses in a published report and stated that anonymity would be ensured. The Cook Islands Research Committee will receive a copy of the published article as a condition of the research permit.

Practices consistent with the Cook Islands values were observed in an attempt to follow the protocols of culturally responsive practices (Te Ava, Rubie-Davies, & Ovens, 2013). Any research conducted in the region will only make sense if it can speak to the commonalities of local perspectives and experiences, in contrast to the expectation to speak from theory (Moreton-Robinson & Walter, 2010). The approach must also intertwine social, cultural, personal and moral milieus and sensitivities (Sharma, Forlin, Sprunt, & Merumeru, 2016). In order to provide effective professional development for the Creative Centre staff, the importance of relationships within the context of a cultural perspective needs to be considered (Te Ava et al., 2013). The lead researcher had worked closely with Cook Islanders in the capacity of a residential Learning and Teaching Advisor in the Cook Islands. Cook Islands cultural practices such as offering kaikai (providing food after a meeting or event) and korero (Cook Islands conversational practices within an interview) were observed. Korero does not occur by asking questions in a linear manner but instead is a conversation or ‘chat’ that weaves in and out of a number of issues in an informal way. Korero often embeds the content of cultural practices such as the importance of face-to-face meetings and relationship building. It is a sharing of knowledge, threading family as well as other wider relationships into the discussion (Te Ava, personal communication, 31 July 2017). Korero is considered important to maintain respectful relationships (Levine, 2016).

The interviews were guided using a semi-structured schedule. Using semi-structured questions to steer korero is considered a rigorous and legitimate indigenous research method (Bessarab & Ng’andu, 2010). The schedule consisted of 17 questions exploring three thematic areas that pinpointed the strengths and gaps in the delivery of inclusive education. These were (a) Personal experiences with teaching students with disabilities, (b) Personal views about the educational placement of students with disabilities and (c) Personal views about
inclusive education and inclusive settings. The schedule was developed by Blizzard (2015) and the questions modified to facilitate local language and context. Inductive reasoning using a thematic analysis approach considered the themes based on the literature and data. The interviews were analysed and responses grouped into themes using the thematic analysis approach of Braun and Clarke (2006) and Guest, MacQueen, and Namey (2012).

Staff identified four key concepts from the needs assessment that informed the content of a professional development program. These were,

*Planning and structure*. Staff reported difficulty understanding and implementing the educational process of planning, teaching and recording. They stated that literacy and numeracy lessons could be redesigned to better link with planning, lesson delivery and recording, and they were at times reluctant to complete educational administration paperwork,

*Life skills*. Staff identified that the teaching of life skills is critical and needs to be maximised,

*Learning from each other*. Staff recognised that students are skilled in many areas and could contribute in a more meaningful way, and

*In the community*. All staff were strong advocates for people with disabilities and were interested in strengthening community involvement.

Each of these concepts underpinned the design of the forthcoming professional development sessions. An eight-week professional development powerpoint program was produced by members of the research team and a Creative Centre employee was mentored to deliver the program on site.

**Researchers’ Intentions and Local Changes**

Instead of delivering the program designed as the researchers had envisioned however, the Creative Centre made use of the key areas of need reported by staff and an alternative strategy was developed over the same 8 weeks that the program was scheduled to be implemented. Therefore, no professional development program was implemented, as staff agreed amongst themselves on the change in direction that resulted from researcher–staff discussions. The change in thinking was made possible from a community grant to establish local business initiatives that ‘allowed resources for an in-depth project to be put into place’ (Harkness, personal communication, 20 September, 2016). In essence, the Creative Centre staff were given an opportunity to put in place strategies that were considered more relevant than the plan that was presented by the researchers.

**The Creative Centre Project**

The project funding met an immediate need for teaching resources that were able to be purchased that had been desired for several years. The resources also provided the impetus for alternative planning to meet the educational needs of the students. While the project was not guided by a particular plan, it unravelled according to ‘what we thought was needed for some time but we had no way of getting these things’ (Harkness, personal communication, 20 September, 2016). The opportunity to purchase resources allowed the changes to take place in the daily curriculum, as appropriate activities replaced ‘traditional’ classroom learning. Existing connections with the community were
then extended. The development of the project was not linear but grew from one change building upon another. The project, however, can be mapped onto the staff’s initial needs in all of the four concepts identified from the interviews:

Planning and structure. A restructure of the curriculum enabled the delivery of an alternative life skill program. Instead of formal classroom lessons, students made local products to sell to tourists. Literacy and numeracy were embedded in these activities,

Life skills. Students continued to learn life skills during formal lessons; however, students also provided lessons in sarong-making for tourists. They sold their products at the local market, and students were given the proceeds of their sales to buy items for their family,

Learning from each other. Lessons in jewellery making, pottery, culture lessons, dance and the making of head garlands were delivered by staff as well as students to staff and other students, and

In the community. Students chose which community activities they wished to participate in. A permanent market hut to sell their products was built to ensure continuity and sustainability of community involvement. An existing gym program was strengthened, and a traditional canoe was purchased for use.

Results

After the project had been in effect for six months, the lead researcher conducted follow-up interviews using the same semi-structured questions from the initial schedule. The interviews explored reports of reflective practices of inclusive education after participation in the professional development, investigating once again (a) personal experiences with teaching students with disabilities, (b) personal views about the educational placement of students with disabilities and (c) personal views about inclusive education and inclusive settings. Given that the intended professional development program was never implemented, the revised objective of the interviews was to establish possible improvements in views and experiences of the staff towards inclusive education that were made as a result of the Creative Centre staff reports of reflective practice.

The post-project interviews revealed significant and exciting outcomes. The word ‘exciting’ conveyed the enthusiasm that the staff expressed in the interview recordings that cannot be captured in text. Themes were grouped using a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Guest et al., 2012). Three themes were emerged.

The first theme expressed shifts in staff positive regard towards their students, the second theme articulated the project’s impact on community advocacy of disability and interconnectedness and the final theme reported improvements in the methods staff used when teaching of life skills to students.

Shifts in Regard for Students

All staff reported that as a result of the project, students were perceived with a greater level of staff respect. This positive shift in how they viewed their students resulted in adjustments in their roles. Staff had to become facilitators rather than caretakers.
I’m just here to help facilitate these guys on what they want to do. (Staff 1)

Other staff described their role was to now ‘guide’ (Staff 4) and ‘support’ (Staff 2).

This facilitation role enabled students to teach and learn from each other.

They help each other. They help me out too. Student 1 was doing it step-by-step demonstrating it to another, and Student 2 was enjoying it too – and she was sitting there, and she was she goes ‘Yeah, I know how to do that one, Student 3 taught me. Yeah, that’s it. I know how to do the next one, you know’, and Student 1 was going ‘Yeah, this is how you go demonstrating that’. (Staff 3)

Four staff had observed that students appeared happier as a result of the project, as they were more motivated to engage in the curriculum, especially that they now received payment for their work. According to staff, this allowed their social status to improve.

They go home feeling a sense of belonging now, a sense of feeling good. [The new curriculum] says look at what I’m doing, meaningful stuff, come and join me and learn from me. (Staff 5)

[The project] makes them feel appreciated, you know, it makes them feel – you just look at their faces when they get paid and so, they just – they will just – oh I love it, I love it. (Staff 2)

It is important to note that staff from the Creative Centre nearly always described the students in terms of their strengths, rather than from a deficit perspective.

To me since, you know, it’s improved things for all my students, they [are] out there and now the community they can look inside [the shop] and recognise there’s no more disability. They were looking at them like business people. (Staff 4)

Another shift in staff attitude occurred as a result of students being given a choice to participate in the program. Providing a choice required a rethinking of students from dependent to independent decision makers who ‘have a right if they say that they don’t want to go’ (Staff 1). As the choice was now an integral part of the planning for the day’s program, staff were required to discuss and negotiate daily activities, which at times ‘could be challenging’ (Staff 5). The skill of self-determination was regarded as significant as it enabled the ability to ‘be able to organise your day and negotiate with others, and follow the same social skills and norms that keep the world running’ (Staff 5).

Community Advocacy and Interconnectedness

Staff expressed the view that the Creative Centre was a necessary safe and nurturing environment for students to develop their skills before connecting with the community. Four staff commented that it was ‘the best place to be’ (Staff 3). Staff were honoured to be part of the Creative Centre, and three reported that the community could ‘see we’re doing a good job’ (Staff 2).

Staff stated that they have always been strong advocates for people with disabilities and that the project has given them a platform to further campaign for disability rights. Both the shop at the local market and advertising for tourists to come into the Creative
Centre enabled this. The importance of educating the community about disability by showcasing the students’ talents was reported:

Yeah, talking about getting other people to understand, you know, because there’s a lot of getting [students] out into the [shop] and doing things for themselves. It, you know, it shows the other people, the public, community like you know these guys are just normal. They’re normal like us. They can sell products, they can make things and sell it and, you know, just because one is blind, and the blind person can still do work and do this do that. I don’t look at their, what they have. I’ll try and focus on the potential that they have that will be able to help, help out and also make the public feel comfortable, you know. (Staff 3)

Community outings to the café, gym and canoe paddling were also regarded as important societal connections and supported students to interact with everyday events. Positive community connections were further developed within the wider tourist community. Visiting tourists were a frequent occurrence at the Centre, and students were encouraged to greet visitors and lead craft-making, which the student would receive the proceeds from.

So, when the people come in, the tourists come in to make their own sarongs so we already have like one of the students to do it, like Student 4. Student 4 now is, she’s very good and she’s able to do, demonstrate on how to making sarongs and then the colour, so she knows that. So, whenever people come we have to let her come deal with them. So, instead of me coming in – I trust her so, to carry on instead of me doing it all the time. So, you can see Student 4 just confidently do it herself. (Staff 3)

**Facilitation of Life Skills**

Staff reported that life skills are important to embed into all learning programs for students with disability. There was also a stronger emphasis on planning for life skill development.

Efforts for planning and monitoring of the curriculum were directed towards the development of the shop and its subsequent revenue, although planning was evident also in community activities, where records were being kept of students’ progress towards becoming more independent.

You know, I’m not going to be here all the time to help you do this, do that, all I want to do is take you to weigh what you feel like doing and then I can help or assist you and monitor you on what you want to do until you feel comfortable. Once you are comfortable then I’ll let you. So, if I’m not here on like on gym days and you call whoever brings you to the gym you know what to do. (Staff 4)

Additionally, the project facilitated more effective means to develop the overall level of life skills for students. The change in the curriculum delivery of literacy and numeracy lessons was perceived as important, as staff considered money-handling and writing skills in context as more relevant for students.

Student 5 is learning how to operate a calculator. Then at the shop she does the wrapping and she takes the money and gives some change. (Staff 3)

Improving students’ achievement of life skills’ goals enabled their independence as they were assisted by staff to make spending and programme planning decisions. These goals were considered ‘achievable but challenging at the same time’. (Staff 5)
The importance of cleaning at home was mentioned as significant in the life skill program for female students by all female staff. Contributing to the household chores had been a focus of the life skill program for many years at the Creative Centre and was still regarded by the female staff as fundamental.

Discussion

Evaluation of the Creative Centre Project

This article began by exploring the tensions that existed within the local agenda of inclusive education and the unique blend of colonial, traditional and Western concepts. Attempts to make sense of the various standpoints responded to respecting the rights of people with disability, while at the same time acknowledging the diversity of local perspectives. McDonald and Tufue-Dolgoy (2013) and Miles, Lene, and Merumeru (2014) have stated that inclusive education had the greatest potential to be adapted to fit the pre-existing inclusive culture and values. Le Fanu (2014) suggested that this aim could be accomplished by adopting a discourse-praxis that was person-centred and context-sensitive. The Creative Centre project met many of these ideals.

Guskey (2000) reports on the critical levels of evaluating professional learning. These involve evaluating the participants’ reactions, their learning, their use of new knowledge and skills, the organisational support and change that occurred and student learning outcomes. Because of the modification in the delivery of professional development that was indeed one of the significant outcomes of the research, evaluation measurements shifted accordingly. From the outcomes of the final project, it appeared anecdotally that staff were not satisfied with the initial presentation of the professional development proposal, which provoked an alternative pathway. Organisational support and change were apparent and significant and can be observed by curriculum redesign and staff positive reactions of the subsequent project. Staff put to use skills and knowledge inherent in the local context, evident in the delivery of the new activities. Most importantly, student learning outcomes, particularly in terms of effect, were recognised and reported by staff. Ultimately, as Guskey (2000) states, the demonstration of any program effect is the impact on student success.

A Culturally Responsive Practice

The success of the Creative Centre project can be explained from within indigenous methodological practices. The outcomes of the project spoke to the transformation of individual and collective behaviour of the Creative Centre staff in providing support for young people and adults. Staff now approached educational planning for their students no longer from a medical paradigm but from a social paradigm. The outcomes also spoke to the rights of people with disability and to live a good life (James, Mitaera, & Rongo-Raea, 2012). All people have the right to expect a good life that is to live in good circumstances. An individual or collective has the potential to live a good life and achieve their potential possible when all physical needs are met and upheld by Cook Islands spiritual and emotional wellness. This is acknowledged with the blessing ‘may you live on’
These Cook Islands values underpinned the Creative Centre project and drove the subsequent program planning.

The project’s program also reinforced other significant and often-cited Cook Islands values and practices such as those detailed by Maua-Hodges (2001). These values included the following: integrated learning is enabled within the community group, mutual respect is revealed through identifying learning as a form of valuing the knowledge of others, reciprocity achieved in the socially involved practice in which both the teacher and the learner contribute, the relationship that initially starts in the family then grows out into the community and the shared vision based on incrementally constructed knowledge.

The Creative Centre project connected students with family and then the students as contributors and participating members. Strong staff advocacy in the community, whether it be in the gym program, at café outings or at the stall, supported this outcome. The project capitalised on making pareu which is considered a highly regarded cultural endeavour by Cook Islanders and also of value in the strong tourism industry.

The project provided students opportunities to become motivated decision makers. A shift in staff thinking towards students in the Creative Centre from passive to mutually respected active participants also occurred. To be active participants necessitated changes in how, what and where students interacted with others. The project stimulated the sharing of teaching and learning, such as students teaching tourists, staff and other students their skills.

The shared vision of the project between staff and students was facilitated by increased student willingness to participate. Students were reported to be highly motivated in the production of items as they kept the profit of their craft making, which also added to their standing in the community as contributors. The integration of learning literacy and numeracy skills became more meaningful for staff and students as they were embedded in community activities.

The Creative Centre’s use of local knowledge systems was driven by ethical protocols including treating others with respect and care with the understanding that it is shared to benefit others. Cook Islands identity is shaped from practices such as dance, sarong making activities and canoe paddling and, for women, to contribute to the family’s domestic chores. It is crucial to connect with these key characteristics to develop a sense of belonging and to transform one’s status as a contributing member of the community (Alexeyeff, 2009).

Most importantly, the project provided opportunities for staff and the community to reposition traditional definitions of ‘inclusive education’ in the Cook Islands. Such definitions come from prescribed frameworks of institutionalised-based education. Krakouer (2015) refers to the ‘environmental mismatch’ (p. 3) that results from a cultural divide between the community and an imposed colonial education system. The Creative Centre, instead, provided a transformative program for students that went beyond customary educational delivery and sought to challenge the relationship of people with disability within the community.

**Conclusion**

This study began by exploring the needs of the Creative Centre staff in order to address training provision gaps in inclusive education teacher delivery. The researchers’ proposal
to deliver a professional development plan for staff shifted significantly and resulted in successful unexpected and unintended outcomes. In summary, the Creative Centre staff took advantage of a funding opportunity that enabled them to implement strategies they considered more relevant than the plan that was presented by the researchers. The change from the researchers’ initial plan may have been the result of differences between Western and Indigenous goals (Flicker et al., 2015) and imposed training from ‘outsiders’ (p.1151). It is not an uncommon phenomenon in other countries in the region for little action to occur after foreign agency planning (Levine, 2013). Correspondingly, Sanga (2005) argued that the assimilation of Western ideas is problematic because of the different values of international agencies that do not match the participants’ values and systems. Beliefs and culture have been shown to clearly matter in inclusive education (McDonald, 2004), and the implementation of any program that attempts to build upon a borrowed inclusive education framework is fraught with a variety of tensions (McDonald & Tufue-Dolgoy, 2013).

The Creative Centre, instead, made its own sense of the professional development initiative. The modifications made from the intended research gave voice to the Cook Islands own knowledge system, allowed them to direct their own agenda (Louis, 2007) and challenged both Western and traditional thinking. Consistent with Connells’ Southern Theory, Western (and the effect of the missionaries influencing what became new traditional) views becomes central and ‘data from the periphery are framed by concepts, debates and research strategies from the metropole’ (Connell, 2007, p. 64). Inclusive education in the Cook Islands is defined and implemented according to the parameters of Western academia and theory. The Creative Centre shifted the relationship between the metropole and recognised the possibilities inherent in their geopolitical position. In essence, the Creative Centre’s peripheral knowledge and understanding placed the experiences of local Cook Islanders at the centre of power.

Several limitations in the study are noted. First, social desirability in the responses may have been an issue, particularly given that prosocial behaviours are highly valued in the Cook Islands. A further consideration is that the limited number of participants who were involved in the study. There also may have been a bias in the interview sample, given that the staff were selected from the main island and other similar centres exist on the outer islands of the Cook Islands.

Despite these limitations, this study highlights an emerging indigenous methodology for Cook Islands inclusive education. The implication of the localised methodology is that a framework for working with all students in inclusive education settings in the Cook Islands and regionally can be built into educational policies and strategies. In doing so, a different future for people with disability in the region may be realised that better meets students’ needs. Furthermore, by addressing inclusive education within a local framework, community attitudes are also more likely to be challenged in a culturally respectful and appropriate means. Overall, the proposition of the current findings indicates that building policy that is constructed on local knowledge production will serve to grow and sustain the development of inclusive education in the region.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.
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