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Weaving a collective future: Insights from Hawai'i and Aotearoa on decolonising and indigenising mainstream teacher education

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Abstract

Indigenous education movements in Hawai'i and Aotearoa New Zealand have achieved significant advances over the past half-century, yet mainstream teacher education remains grounded in Western-centric paradigms that continue to marginalise Indigenous knowledge systems and resist recognising Indigenous education as foundational for all educators. Rooted in shared cosmogony, language, cultural practices, and geography, Hawai'i and Aotearoa have experienced similar colonial histories, leading to interconnected Indigenous resurgence movements and the development of robust Indigenous education pipelines. Drawing on a PhD study involving Indigenous education leaders, this article proposes the Three-Whiri Wahakura Framework as an approach to decolonising and indigenising mainstream teacher education. Using semi-structured interviews, the study explores how teacher education can be reoriented toward Indigenous onto-epistemologies.

The three-whiri wahakura (flax bassinet) serves as a guiding metaphor, representing interconnected transformation across system, programme, and individual levels. Focusing on the programmatic strand, this article outlines eight themes that provide practical guidance for embedding Indigenous knowledge systems as foundational to university teaching and learning.

Practitioner Notes

1. Mainstream reforms often fail to disrupt settler-colonial education systems; meaningful change requires rebuilding teacher education in ways grounded in place and Indigenous knowledge systems.
2. "Ancient is modern": Indigenous knowledge systems offer living, adaptable pedagogies that can guide contemporary teaching and learning.
3. Teacher education programmes should critically review their structures to identify and dismantle colonial assumptions that perpetuate trauma and marginalise Indigenous knowledge.
4. All educators should develop foundational knowledge of Indigenous language, culture, and history, supported through structured pathways for ongoing learning.
5. Land- and culture-based learning must be embedded across programmes through sustained engagement with communities, particularly Indigenous knowledge holders and caretakers of place.

Keywords

Indigenous Education; Decolonizing Education; Indigenous Pacific Knowledge Systems; Teacher Education; Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

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Introduction

Education systems in Hawai'i and Aotearoa New Zealand (Aotearoa) continue to reproduce Eurocentric values, norms, and practices that marginalise and undermine Indigenous knowledge systems (Hutchings & Lee-Morgan, 2016; Wilson-Hokowhitu & Goodyear-Ka'ōpua, 2019). While often positioned as sites of transformation, education systems also function as mechanisms of colonial continuity, shaping dominant worldviews and limiting alternative ways of knowing and being (Biermann, 2011; Reiter, 2018). Reforms that claim to address inequity frequently fail to dismantle settler-colonial structures or rebuild education systems grounded in place and onto-epistemic pluralism (McIvor et al., 2018; Stewart et al., 2018). The urgency for transformation, highlighted by global crises, creates an opportunity to re-centre Indigenous knowledge systems as foundational to teacher education. Doing so can foster more equitable, relational, and sustainable educational environments.

This article draws on a PhD study, *Decolonizing the colonizer: Indigenous education as the foundation of mainstream education in Hawai'i and Aotearoa*, examining how Indigenous education can inform mainstream teacher education (Worchel, 2025). It asks:

- How might Indigenous education be embedded in teacher education programmes (TEPs)?
- What processes support grounding in Indigenous knowledge?
- What tools enable educators to confront colonial legacies?

Findings suggest that transformation requires change across system, programme, and individual levels. Using the metaphor of a three-whiri wahakura, a woven bassinet with three foundational braids, this article focuses on the programmatic level, proposing a framework for decolonising and indigenising teacher education.

Positionality

This research is informed by the author's position as a non-Indigenous scholar and lifetime educator of European and Jewish descent who has lived and worked within settler-colonial education systems in Hawai'i, Aotearoa, and the United States. Her work has involved collaboration with Indigenous educators and communities, including contributions to Hawaiian education initiatives and Māori and Pacific education contexts in Aotearoa. Her positionality is grounded in relational accountability as an ally committed to Indigenous sovereignty movements. These experiences shape her engagement with Indigenous knowledge systems and inform the ethical framing of this research.

Literature

Decolonising teacher education has emerged internationally as a response to the enduring epistemic, institutional, and relational harms produced by colonial schooling systems. As scholars argue, teacher education occupies a critical site within settler-colonial societies because it mediates how future teachers come to understand knowledge, learners, and their responsibilities within contested political and cultural landscapes (McIvor et al., 2018; Stewart et al., 2018; Smith, 2012). Recent work in decolonising teacher education highlights the need to move beyond additive or symbolic inclusion of Indigenous content toward deeper transformations that

interrogate the ontological, epistemological, and ethical foundations of teacher preparation programmes (Blair et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2024; Yip & Chakma, 2024). The *Decolonising Teacher Education* collection (2024) positions these efforts within broader decolonial, postcolonial, Indigenous, and critical race traditions, emphasising how teacher education both reproduces and has the potential to disrupt epistemic injustice amid increasing pressures for standardisation and accountability.

While Western education systems in Hawai'i and Aotearoa continue to struggle by their own measures (UNICEF, 2023; Wu, 2023), Indigenous education offers a pathway for transformation. It envisions futures grounded in diverse languages and worldviews sustained through reciprocal relationships with the environment, while addressing colonial legacies and fostering relational connections among people and the natural and spiritual worlds (McKinley & Smith, 2019; Alfred, 2005). Settler-colonial frameworks provide insight into the role of mainstream TEPs in shaping these systems, detailing how settler-colonialism establishes enduring governance structures that entrench Eurocentric institutions and undermine Indigenous sovereignty (Tuck & Yang, 2012; Veracini, 2017).

In both Hawai'i and Aotearoa, this has involved land alienation through law and policy, eroding Indigenous authority and producing lasting harm (Kame'eleihiwa, 1992; Moewaka Barnes & McCreanor, 2019)¹. Education has been central to this process, supporting the suppression of Indigenous knowledge, language, and culture through policy and teacher education systems (Benham & Heck, 2013; Penetito, 2010). Settler-colonial schooling actively separated Kānaka Maoli (Indigenous people of Hawai'i) and Māori (Indigenous people of New Zealand) from their languages, cultural practices, and communities, reinforcing dispossession and cognitive imperialism (Battiste, 2000; Smith, 2012). Policies such as the Native Schools Act 1867 in Aotearoa and English-only mandates in Hawai'i formalised this exclusion, restricting access to Indigenous languages and contributing to their stigmatisation.

Mainstream TEPs continue to play a significant role in shaping educational practice by promoting dominant ideologies, languages, and expectations (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Pirbhai-Illich et al., 2017). However, they also hold potential to disrupt settler-colonial logics by embedding Indigenous knowledge systems as foundational and preparing educators capable of sustaining them. As Biermann (2011) argues,

Rather than understanding decolonisation solely as empowerment of Indigenous peoples, it also has to entail the deflation of white power as well as dominant society's responsibility to question its own advantage in light of how this position inhibits non-hierarchical engagements with others. (p. 394)

Indigenous education movements gained momentum in the 1960s and 1970s alongside global civil rights struggles, prompting renewed valuation of Indigenous knowledge systems and associated onto-epistemological frameworks and pedagogy (Battiste, 2011; Bishop & Glynn, 2003; Dei, 2011; Wilson & Kamanā, 2001). This period, described as one of "Regenerated

¹ Hawai'i's context has been shaped by American imperialism most noted by the illegal overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom in 1893 leading to Hawai'i becoming an American territory. Aotearoa New Zealand's context has been shaped by British colonisation with Māori experiencing severe oppression and dispossession during the New Zealand Wars (1845-1872) led by the Colonial Government.

Power”, saw Indigenous communities reclaim authority over education, language, and cultural practices (Kawai’ae’a et al., 2018). In Hawai’i and Aotearoa, these efforts led to the development of comprehensive Indigenous education pipelines, with language revitalisation at their core (Asensio, 2019; Hutchings & Lee-Morgan, 2016). These included immersion schooling, tertiary programmes, and supporting policies developed through sustained community activism.

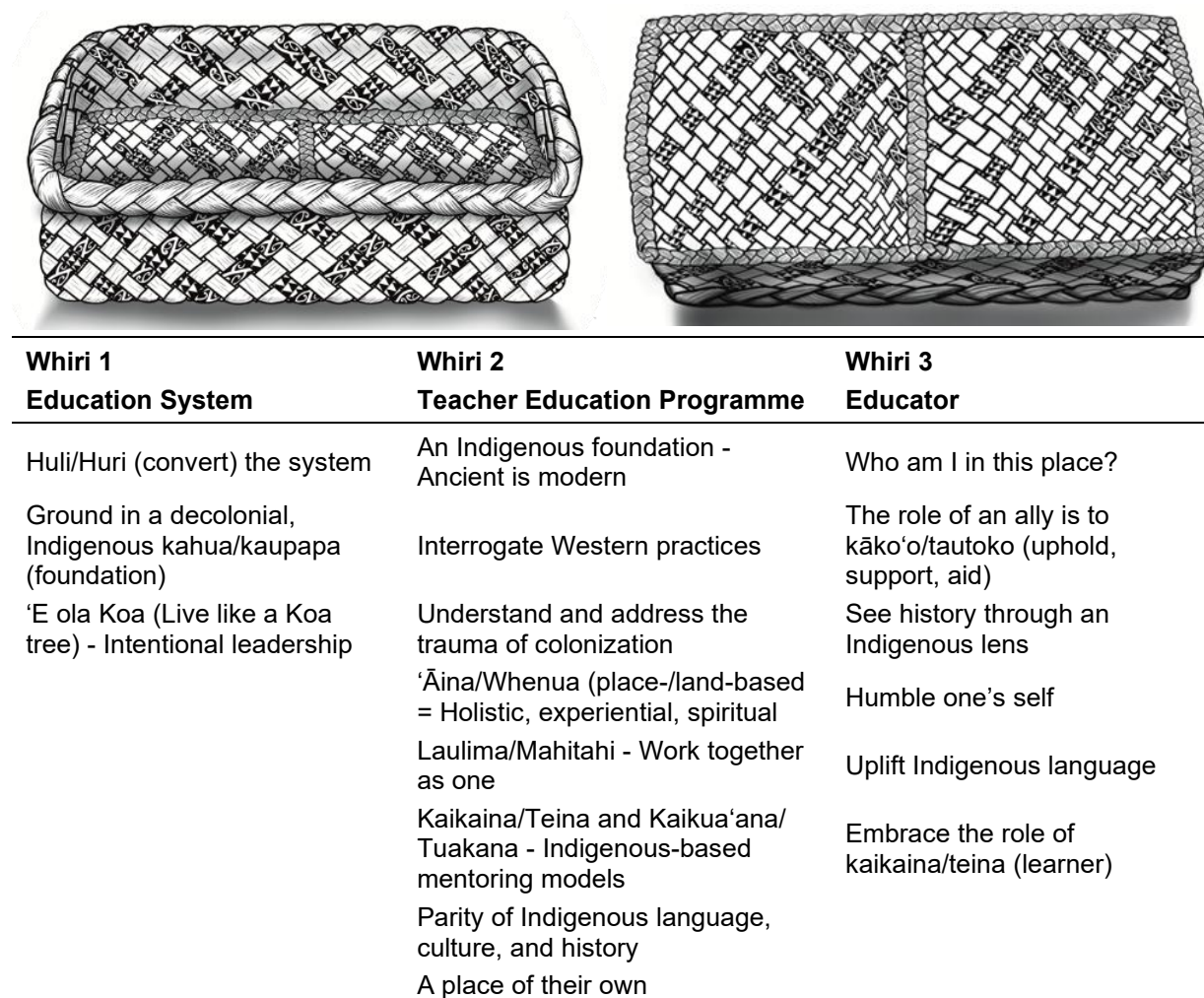
From this movement emerged Indigenous language immersion TEPs that have navigated ongoing structural barriers within settler-colonial systems (Alencastre & Kawai’ae’a, 2018; Stewart et al., 2018). While facing structural and social barriers, these programmes offer important models for mainstream teacher education. Although some mainstream programmes have incorporated elements of Indigenous language and culture, few have committed to decolonising transformation and the embedding of Indigenous knowledge as foundational. The following findings offer guidance for how TEPs may advance this work.

Method

This qualitative study engaged 21 Indigenous education leaders from Hawai’i and Aotearoa through semi-structured interviews grounded in storytelling and relational practice. The research drew on an Indigenous Research Paradigm (Wilson, 2003) alongside Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and reflexive Thematic Analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Analysis generated three interconnected levels of transformation (system, programme, and individual), which informed the development of the Three-Whiri Wahakura Framework (see Figure 1). The wahakura is made of flax native to Aotearoa and uses traditional Māori weaving techniques to promote values of whānau (family) and Māori approaches to intergenerational transmission of knowledge (White, 2017). Each whiri, or foundational braid of the bassinet, represents a level of transformation requiring a woven approach to decolonising and indigenising education².

² The three-whiri wahakura style was taught to the author by Master Weaver Shelley Bell with express permission to use and share for the research study.

Figure 1. *Three-Whiri Wahakura Framework for Decolonising and Indigenising Mainstream Teacher Education*



Note. Images created by Sarah Hikuroa and Jessica Worchel with permission to share.

Participant Selection

Purposive sampling identified 21 Indigenous education leaders from Hawai'i (n = 12) and Aotearoa (n = 9). Participants were selected because they had dedicated their personal and professional lives to Indigenous education and language revitalisation, were recognised by their communities as knowledge holders and leaders, and had an existing relationship with the researcher, consistent with Indigenous relational ethics.

Data collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews designed to support dialogue, storytelling, and relational engagement. Twenty-two interviews were conducted between November 2021 and June 2022. One was excluded due to technical issues, resulting in a final dataset of 21 interviews. Interviews were conducted in person where possible and online where required due to COVID-19 restrictions.

Two guiding questions shaped the interviews:

- How might mainstream TEPs be grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems?
- What roles can non-Indigenous educators play in supporting Indigenous resurgence?

Interviews were audio-recorded, had no fixed time limit, and concluded with opportunities for participants to ask questions or offer further reflections. Interviews incorporated English, ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i (Hawaiian language), and te reo Māori (Māori language). The researcher transcribed all interviews to support linguistic and cultural accuracy. Transcripts and draft findings were returned to participants for review and amendment, consistent with Indigenous ethical practice and relational accountability. One participant elected to remain anonymous; their data were included but not individually identified.

Data analysis

Analysis combined Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and reflexive Thematic Analysis. Transcripts were read and re-read to support immersion, followed by multiple rounds of coding and theme refinement. Coding moved across Word, Excel, NVivo, and manual processes using printed excerpts and sticky notes to support iterative engagement with the data.

Three high-level analytic categories emerged inductively: individual, programme, and system-level. These categories shaped the Three-Whiri Wahakura Framework, which served as a metaphor for the study; a methodological logic shaping research design, ethics, analysis, and representation; and an organising structure for the findings and the thesis construction. Sub-themes were refined through repeated engagement with the transcripts and cross-checking across manual, electronic, and software-assisted coding to ensure coherence and depth.

Results

Findings indicate that Indigenous education offers an onto-epistemic pluralistic approach to teaching and learning, enabling societies to engage both Indigenous and Western knowledge systems while supporting diversity, unity, and collective wellbeing (Worchel, 2025). This approach provides TEPs with an opportunity to move beyond settler-colonial frameworks and rebuild systems grounded in Indigenous knowledge of place. While there is no universal model for decolonising and indigenising teacher education, transformation requires a place-based approach rooted in reciprocity, care, and collective responsibility. Indigenous education is not a trend but a sustained, time-tested approach that supports what Dr. Wally Penetito identifies as the interconnected challenges of diversity (acknowledging the dignity of difference), survival (continuity of one’s society, culture, community), and unity (mutuality or learning to get on with each other) (Worchel, 2025).

In both Hawai‘i and Aotearoa, settler-colonial processes resulted in profound epistemicide, including the suppression of Indigenous identities, languages, and cultural systems. However, Indigenous communities and their allies have responded through sustained resistance and resurgence, developing education pipelines grounded in traditional knowledge systems. These movements demonstrate the potential for education systems that support collective flourishing. For this potential to be realised more broadly, teacher education must shift away from dominant Western paradigms, re-centre education in relation to ‘āina/whenua (land), and contribute to the development of positive Indigenous-settler relationships.

Analysis identified three interconnected levels necessary for transformation: macro (system), meso (programme), and micro (individual). These levels are represented through the metaphor of the three-whiri wahakura, symbolising relational strength, collective care, and knowledge transmission. Drawing on traditional Māori weaving practices adapted for contemporary contexts (Tipene-Leach & Abel, 2019; White, 2017), the wahakura serves as a model for reimagining teacher education grounded in Indigenous knowledge while responding to present challenges. The power of using the three-whiri wahakura as a metaphor to decolonise and indigenise education is that the wahakura and harakeke (native New Zealand flax) used to weave it are symbols of community, family, and environmental thriving; of innovation rooted in traditional practice; and of Indigenous knowledge transmission with the goal of supporting healthy and thriving children. As illustrated in Figure 1, each of the three whiri (foundational braids) represents a level of transformation: education system, teacher education programme, and individual educator. Together, they form an integrated framework for decolonising and indigenising teacher education while maintaining the integrity of Indigenous knowledge.

Within this framework, TEPs occupy a central role, acting as a bridge between system-level change and individual educator practice. TEPs have the capacity to advance Indigenous education through research, advocacy, and partnership, while also preparing educators to engage critically with colonial legacies and support Indigenous resurgence. This requires TEPs to function as sites of truth-telling that challenge dominant narratives and address the enduring impacts of settler-colonial education systems.

At the programme level, transformation involves embedding Indigenous knowledge systems as foundational rather than supplementary. This includes ensuring that all educators develop knowledge of local Indigenous histories and language from Indigenous perspectives, understand the impacts of colonisation, and engage with Indigenous pedagogies through holistic, experiential, and land-based learning. It also requires supporting educators to critically reflect on their positionality, including questions such as: *Who am I in this place?* and *What is my role?* so they may better engage with community and cultural knowledge holders in ways that enhance mana (authority, influence, self-efficacy, purpose, pride, belonging).

The following sections dive into the framework and unpack guidance to support TEPs in going through a process to decolonise and indigenise by rooting in an Indigenous foundation.

An Indigenous Foundation – Ancient is Modern

The wahakura provides a powerful example of adapting Indigenous practice to address contemporary challenges. Constructed using Indigenous materials and techniques yet applied in a modern context, it offers a model for TEPs to similarly move beyond Eurocentric foundations and rebuild from Indigenous knowledge systems, weaving in complementary approaches relevant to local communities.

Participants emphasised that Indigenous pedagogies are living, intergenerational systems refined through practice rather than abstract theory. As Dr. Keiki Kawai'ae'a explains,

Our cultures have living pedagogies that go from generation to generation and are constantly being honed to bring forth best practices. We can utilize those for training teachers. Our job is to go back and better understand that because nobody

trained teachers as a livelihood. It was not a livelihood; it was a part of living. (Worchel, 2025, p. 254)

In this sense, “Ancient is Modern” with enduring relevance for contemporary teacher education. This idea is reinforced through the ‘ōlelo no‘eau (Hawaiian proverb) *Ka li‘u o kūpa‘a kai*. Mahinapoepoe Paishon explains that this proverb refers to the idea that foods were preserved in salt to be ready to eat at a time when they were needed. She states,

Everything that we need for us to thrive has been codified, has been left for us, has been well preserved.

I think it is even more important that we are purposeful in creating new knowledge, expanding upon the knowledge that has been left for us; learning to partake of it and interpret it for today’s use, and then preserve it in the way our ancestors did and make sure that the next generations know how to access that. (Worchel, 2025, p. 254-255).

Participants highlighted the responsibility not only to draw from this knowledge but to extend and reinterpret it for present and future generations. This requires a shift away from deficit narratives that position Indigenous knowledge as outdated or inferior, toward recognising its value as a foundation for education.

Participants also stressed that the benefits of Indigenous education extend to all educators and learners. Indigenous approaches align with widely recognised best practices, including experiential, strengths-based, and relational learning. Despite this, settler-colonial narratives continue to position Indigenous education as secondary. Participants emphasised the need for TEPs to actively challenge these assumptions and create space for critical engagement with the historical and ongoing impacts of colonisation. This involves repositioning Indigenous knowledge systems as central to teaching and learning and supporting educators to engage in processes of reflection, re-learning, and transformation.

TEPs therefore have a critical role in advancing Indigenous knowledge resurgence by embedding these systems as foundational, rather than supplementary. This includes preparing educators with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to support culturally grounded, relational, and context-responsive teaching and learning environments.

Interrogate Western Practices

Participants emphasised that educators require grounding in both Western and Indigenous worldviews and pedagogies. TEPs can support this by creating opportunities to critically interrogate Western practices while building knowledge of Indigenous approaches. As Dr. Rachael Ka‘ai-Mahuta notes, understanding multiple worldviews begins with deep engagement with Indigenous perspectives, enabling educators to recognise and navigate differences in knowledge systems (Worchel, 2025).

This capacity to work across worldviews is grounded in a strong sense of identity. Rather than requiring educators to shed who they are, Indigenous approaches encourage them to bring their identities, histories, and connections to place into teaching. Kanani Māka‘imoku highlights the importance stating, “Mainstream Western education is about shedding who you are, your identity. But what we are saying is bring your identity with you. Be true to who you are and share it with

others because that is part of the whole group's learning" (Worchel, 2025, p. 264). Through this process, educators can better evaluate teaching approaches within their contexts. Mahinapoepoe Paishon suggests that TEPs should support educators to critically examine whether their practices reinforce extractive, individualistic models or instead foster collective, generative, and relational approaches aligned with Indigenous values (Worchel, 2025).

Dr. Keiki Kawai'ae'a and Dr. Rachael Ka'ai-Mahuta highlighted key differences in pedagogical approaches where Indigenous practices emphasise grounding in observing, listening, and doing, which contrast Western emphasis on verbal participation (Worchel, 2025). These approaches are not oppositional but require careful interpretation and contextual application.

The role of TEPs, therefore, is not to privilege one system over another, but to expose educators to diverse approaches and support them to critically engage with both. This enables the development of flexible, strengths-based pedagogies grounded in context. As Dr. Makalapua Alencastre notes, culturally sustaining and 'āina-based approaches offer experiential and relational learning opportunities that enhance teaching and learning environments (Worchel, 2025).

Understanding and Addressing the Trauma of Colonization

Participants emphasised that developing understanding across Western and Indigenous worldviews must include confronting the ongoing impacts of colonisation and settler-colonialism. TEPs therefore need to explicitly address colonisation, decolonisation, and indigenisation as critical historical and contemporary forces shaping education systems. Without acknowledging the trauma embedded within these systems, meaningful transformation is unlikely.

Dr. Kalehua Krug highlights that education systems often fail to recognise both the existence of trauma and their role in perpetuating it, including the loss of language, culture, and spirituality (Worchel, 2025). This absence of acknowledgement contributes to ongoing harm and limits opportunities for healing within educational spaces.

Similarly, Kari Moana Te Rongopatahi stresses the importance of educators understanding the historical and lived experiences of Indigenous communities, including intergenerational trauma. She shares,

My opinion has always been that Māori are a people of manaakitanga [hospitality, generosity]. He aha te mea nui; he tangata, he tangata, he tangata [What is the most important thing; the people, the people, the people]. We are very much people that are hosts, that welcome anybody in, but we also need to recognise colonisation and the trauma we've experienced.

You need to be able to understand when you are engaging with a people who have almost lost everything why they would fight so fiercely for the few remaining things they have left. (Worchel, 2025, p. 269)

Such understanding is essential for meaningful engagement and helps explain the urgency with which Indigenous communities protect remaining cultural knowledge and practices.

Participants also emphasised that recognising Indigenous rights is insufficient without understanding how systems have historically undermined those rights. Alapaki Nahale-a notes that these impacts remain ever-present, requiring educators to engage with their implications in

contemporary contexts (Worchel, 2025). Dr. Manuwai Peters further highlights the importance of confronting the historical development of education systems and their role in shaping current inequities, reinforcing the need for exposure to alternative models grounded in Indigenous knowledge (Worchel, 2025).

For TEPs, this requires creating space for critical reflection on how education systems reproduce harm, alongside developing approaches that support transformation and healing. This includes engaging deeply with Indigenous knowledge systems, interrogating dominant Western assumptions, and reorienting teaching practices toward relational, restorative, and context-responsive approaches. Without access to alternative frameworks and ways of being, educators are limited in their ability to challenge harmful practices. Engaging critically with colonisation and its impacts provides a pathway for integrating healing practices into teaching and learning, while strengthening educators' understanding of their own histories and positionalities.

‘Āina/Whenua-Based = Holistic, Experiential, Spiritual

Participants identified the siloing of education as a key contributor to ongoing disconnection and harm. In contrast, Indigenous worldviews emphasise holistic, relational approaches to teaching and learning. As Dr. Kalehua Krug states, “when we silo, it is wrong” (Worchel, 2025, p. 270).

An ‘āina/whenua (land) based approach offers an alternative grounded in interconnectedness between knowledge, identity, and place³. Ku‘ulei Makua emphasises that effective teaching must integrate content and context, including knowledge of local history, language, and community connections, so that learning reflects and responds to place. She shares, “‘Āina heals; ‘āina is our kupuna [ancestor]; ‘āina is our teacher. Go find a place and explore the ‘āina in your community. That is holistic, and you are going to get the rigor, the relationships, and the relevance there” (Worchel, 2025, p. 271). This approach shifts education from isolated content delivery toward relational, context-driven practice.

Participants also highlighted the holistic nature of Indigenous education, which attends to intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and relational dimensions of learning. Kanani Māka‘imoku describes spirituality not as a separate domain, but as encompassing relationships with people, environment, and ancestors, emphasising the importance of centring educator identity and wellbeing from the outset of teacher education (Worchel, 2025).

Connection to land is central to this approach. ‘Āina and whenua are not simply physical spaces but living entities that sustain knowledge, identity, and relationships. As Dr. Wally Penetito notes, “Whenua is a critical cultural component. It’s Papatūānuku [Earth Mother]. It’s your lifeblood” (Worchel, 2025, p. 273). Engaging with land-based learning enables educators to see themselves as part of, rather than separate from, the environment.

Participants emphasised that these connections are developed through direct, sustained engagement. Experiential learning, such as working on the land, participating in cultural practices,

³ Blaisdell (2005) defines the Hawaiian term ‘āina as more than soil or land, but “that which feeds... ‘āina is Papa, our Earth Mother, including wai (all waters), kai (all seas), Ka Moananui (Oceania), and beyond. ‘Āina is also Wakea, our Sky Father, ea (air), lani (all heavens, all suns, all moons and all stars), and beyond” (p. 10). In the Māori context, Marsden (2003) refers to whenua as the natural earth explaining, “It is also the term for ‘after-birth’ – placenta. This use of the term ‘whenua’ served as a constant reminder that we are born out of the womb of the primeval mother” (p. 45).

and learning alongside community members, can create transformative “turning point” experiences that shift perspectives and deepen relational understanding. These experiences support the development of collective, rather than individualistic, orientations to teaching and learning.

Importantly, participants stressed that ‘āina/whenua-based learning cannot be reduced to isolated activities or short-term experiences. Instead, it must be embedded across TEPs and grounded in ongoing relationships with communities, particularly with Indigenous knowledge holders and caretakers of place. As Dr. Rachael Ka'ai-Mahuta notes,

Weaving something through is way more valuable than having a module on it because whenever you compartmentalise something, you are othering it, and you are centring everything else that happens in the rest of the programme.

You can't have the experience be standalone. It has to be something that you constantly come back to, and there's a scaffolding that supports that. (Worchel, 2025, p. 278).

Similarly, Tina Olsen-Ratana highlights that meaningful engagement requires sustained participation in community life, rather than brief or symbolic experiences. She states,

The ones I've seen done meaningfully are those where they've spent just as much time with the people out in the communities as they have learning about them inside a classroom, turning up every day being a nuisance in the back of the kitchen and the marae or offering their time to the point where they are walking in and saying, “I'm here to scrub the toilet.” That is when they are let into our world. Then they get to know it, get to feel it. (Worchel, 2025, p. 227).

This depth of engagement enables educators to develop genuine understanding and relational accountability. Ultimately, ‘āina/whenua-based education requires a shift toward community-based approaches and an expanded understanding of who is considered an educator.

Laulima/Mahitahi - Working Together as One

Laulima and mahitahi both describe collective action – many people working together for shared benefit. Participants emphasised that this principle requires a fundamental shift in how education systems define teaching and learning. Rather than positioning teachers as individual experts, Indigenous approaches recognise education as a collective responsibility involving communities, cultural practitioners, and knowledge holders. This reinforces the role of TEPs in advocating for systemic change that supports these approaches.

Participants highlighted the importance of repositioning cultural practitioners and community members as educators and mentors. Kari Moana Te Rongopatahi noted that it is often more effective to support cultural practitioners to teach than to expect teachers to become practitioners. She emphasises,

It's harder to teach a teacher to be a practitioner than to give the practitioner the ability and space to be educators because they are educators. Certification from the Ministry or not doesn't determine whether a practitioner can teach. They can. We just need to get out of their way. (Worchel, 2025, p. 280)

This shift requires TEPs to establish meaningful pathways for community involvement while also preparing educators to engage respectfully and effectively with local knowledge systems. Ku'ulei Makua emphasised that integrating community into education reduces isolation and allows educators to draw on collective expertise rather than attempting to “know everything” themselves (Worchel, 2025).

Participants also stressed the importance of genuine partnership. Dr. Hazel Abraham highlighted the need for programme design to involve community members alongside academics, ensuring that local knowledge and relationships shape teacher education (Worchel, 2025). Dr. Dean Mahuta further emphasises,

From a Māori perspective, you are engaged with a community from the outset. If something is on at school; the community engages. If there's something on in the community; the school engages with the community, always, no matter what it is. That is part of that “cultural way” of teaching. (Worchel, 2025, p. 281)

Developing these relationships requires sustained engagement with place and community. Alapaki Nahale-a emphasised the importance of building pilina (relationships) and being part of the community, rather than remaining external to it (Worchel, 2025). Dr. Makalapua Alencastre further highlighted the value of connecting schools with ongoing community initiatives, where educators learn alongside community members and draw on local expertise. She states,

There is a strong movement for sustainability, food sovereignty, and other community-based efforts that work well with our schools and our universities and colleges as well. It is about bridging in what is happening in the community. I see real hope there, but that means that the teachers that are leading these initiatives do so with that intent, and they are learning too. They don't come in with all of this 'ike [knowledge], but they see these as great opportunities. We are continuously learning and making connections to the loea [expertise, skills] of the community. We bring that into our schools, and we go to them. That is the synergy that our schools really need. (Worchel, 2025, p. 281)

Participants also noted that effective education cannot occur in isolation from community. Nikki Spring stressed that understanding local history, people, and place is essential to meaningful teaching and learning, and that community engagement is critical to achieving holistic educational outcomes. She says, “As a teacher, do you know the school that you teach in? Do you know who the Indigenous people of that land are? And as you learn, take your own personal lessons and put them in your lesson plans” (Worchel, 2025, p. 282).

These insights challenge current systems that treat educators as interchangeable and place them in communities without requiring connection or contextual knowledge. Participants described this as a colonial approach that undermines relationships and limits the potential for meaningful, sustained learning. TEPs therefore have a critical role in modelling laulima/mahitahi by embedding community-based approaches throughout their programmes. This includes creating opportunities for sustained engagement with communities, supporting relational learning, and advocating for systemic changes that recognise and legitimise community knowledge holders as educators.

Kaikaina/Teina and Kaikua'ana/Tuakana – Mentoring

Indigenous, community-based education models are inherently relational and collaborative, often grounded in the kaikua'ana/tuakana (older sibling, mentor) and kaikaina/teina (younger sibling, learner) construct. This reciprocal model, reflected in the whakataukī (Māori proverb) *Mā te tuakana te teina e tōtika ai, mā te teina anō te tuakana e tōtika ai* (From the older sibling, the younger one learns the right way to do things, and from the younger sibling the older one learns to be tolerant), emphasises that teaching and learning are shared responsibilities, with both mentors and learners contributing to one another's growth.

Participants highlighted the need to make these mentoring relationships explicit within TEPs. As Dr. Hazel Abraham notes, "We have to flourish that tuakana/teina model. I think that needs to be explicit and not covert or undercover" (Worchel, 2025, p. 283). Ku'ulei Makua acknowledges that many of our educators do not come from the places where they are teaching, so it is imperative to be explicit in providing mentoring supports. "Even if we do fix our local teacher education programs, we are still going to have teachers that apply from out-of-state and come here. That is where I think induction and mentoring is critical" (Worchel, 2025, p. 283).

Mentoring was also identified as a critical response to the isolation often experienced in teaching. Dr. Manuwai Peters emphasised that educators may avoid seeking support due to stigma, reinforcing the need for collaborative, relational structures that normalise shared learning (Worchel, 2025). Participants described how these models can extend beyond mentoring into programme design. Kanani Māka'imoku highlighted cohort-based approaches where relationships continue beyond graduation, creating ongoing responsibilities to support future educators and sustain community connections. She refers to this as (Worchel, 2025).

The kaikaina/teina and kaikua'ana/tuakana model can also inform assessment practices. One participant described redesigning assessment frameworks in Hawai'i to recognise learners' ability to teach others as a marker of advanced proficiency, reinforcing collective responsibility and knowledge sharing.

We're using that model to direct assessment pieces that look at what one would consider as exceeding proficiency. On the typical rubric, you have the normal 4 pattern rubric design – below proficiency, approaching proficiency, meeting proficiency, and exceeding proficiency. What we did was remodel it around kaikua'ana/kaikaina. The last category talks about kids who are able to teach other kids. That's what it means to exceed proficiency. (Worchel, 2025, p. 284).

These approaches support a strengths-based, relational model of education aligned with laulima/mahitahi principles. By embedding reciprocal mentoring, TEPs can create pathways for knowledge to be shared across generations and communities, while also enabling the meaningful inclusion of elders, cultural practitioners, and community members in teaching and learning.

Parity of Indigenous Language, Culture, and History

Participants consistently emphasised that Indigenous language, culture, and history must be treated as foundational within teacher education, rather than optional additions. Achieving parity requires that all educators develop baseline knowledge and skills in these areas, supported through TEPs.

Dr. Makalapua Alencastre highlights the limitations of current provisions, noting that minimal engagement with Indigenous language and history restricts critical understanding of colonisation and its ongoing impacts. She states,

How do we re-ignite that passion to save our language and that everyone is going to start learning and speaking? Well, our schools can do that. Our schools have a very important role from early on that all children are going to have exposure and opportunities to learn, and that increases as they get older and includes the histories. (Worchel, 2025, p. 284)

Participants stressed that deeper, more sustained engagement is necessary to enable educators to critically examine historical narratives and their implications for contemporary education. Hēmi Dale emphasised,

In terms of te reo Māori, the way I look at it, everybody's got a contribution to make in terms of the revitalisation of the language. We all have to buy into this. Not everyone is going to be a proficient speaker, but at the very least, understanding and supporting the importance of the language is all part of what it's about. The vision is creating opportunities for people, wherever they are at, to be able to slot in. (Worchel, 2025, p. 285).

Participants further highlighted that language carries worldview. Dr. Kalehua Krug explains that Indigenous languages encode relational ways of understanding the world, shaping connections between people, land, and all living things. He states,

In understanding language, you understand what the wise sayings teach. If you don't understand the language, how can you accept the potential truths of the thousand-year action research that has been done by kūpuna [ancestors] engaging in participatory research. I try to explain to people that I believe our ancestors are research experts of survivability as a collective. (Worchel, 2025, pp. 285-286)

Similarly, Kamalei Krug notes that learning Indigenous languages fosters a deeper ethic of care for land and community, influencing how individuals understand and act within the world. She shares,

Through teaching the language comes a perspective of caring about land and water. That is the foundation of, not just Hawaiian language, but Indigenous worldview – care for the land; everything that we come from. It is the foundation of our culture. The worldview that comes with the language is going to save everybody. It changes how everybody acts. It is how they see the world, and that affects their actions. (Worchel, 2025, p. 286)

Access to Indigenous knowledge is supported by both historical and contemporary sources, including archival materials and community-based knowledge holders. Dr. Wally Penetito points to resources such as the Waitangi Tribunal reports while other participants noted that Hawaiian and Māori language newspapers from the 1800s offer place-based repositories of knowledge that can inform teaching and learning (Worchel, 2025). Participants emphasised that TEPs have a responsibility to actively engage with these knowledge sources and build pathways for educators to access and deepen their understanding over time.

While institutional capacity is often cited as a barrier, Dr. Makalapua Alencastre argues that this should prompt transformation of programme structures and requirements, rather than inaction.

A lot of the pushback by teacher education programs has been, “We don’t have the capacity. We don’t have the knowledge to do that.” So, what does that mean? Does it mean that nothing is there? Somehow you start to transform your own practices, your own requirements, your own prerequisites. What can you do to ensure that new teachers will have something? Those are the kind of questions and thinking needed to grow TEPs capacity. (Worchel, 2025, p. 253)

Ultimately, achieving parity requires a systemic commitment to embedding Indigenous language, culture, and history across teacher education. This includes establishing clear expectations for all educators, while creating opportunities for ongoing learning and deeper engagement. Through this approach, TEPs can contribute to the revitalisation and normalisation of Indigenous knowledge systems within education.

A Place of Their Own

While much of this work speaks to inclusivity, and that is fundamentally important and an embedded value in Indigenous contexts, the reality is that TEPs, education systems, and non-Indigenous educators must also be comfortable with spaces designed and implemented by and for Indigenous people where they can grow and heal on their own terms. Dr. Makalapua Alencastre explains, “You need to have your core of natives doing their own work, and then others supporting that work” (Worchel, 2025, p. 287). And sometimes that work needs to be done in an exclusive environment. Not all knowledge is meant to be shared with everyone; not all conversations are meant to be all inclusive; not all experiences are open invitations.

Dr. Keiki Kawai’ae’a shares, “There is a place, I think, where an ally needs to be an ally, and a place where an Indigenous person needs to step into a place that an ally can’t go, and vice versa” (Worchel, 2025, p. 288). This underscores the importance of creating safe and supportive environments for all educators, especially those tasked with pioneering decolonised and indigenised practices. Achieving this demands continuous dialogue, adaptability, and regular assessments to address the evolving needs of the educational communities TEPs aim to serve, as well as training for non-Indigenous educators on why this space is critical. Ultimately, it is about rebuilding trust through establishing new protocols that support safe and reciprocal relationships.

Discussion

This study examined how Indigenous education can be embedded in mainstream TEPs, what processes support grounding in Indigenous knowledge systems, and what tools enable educators to confront colonial legacies. The findings are interpreted through the Three-Whiri Wahakura Framework, which identifies three interconnected dimensions of transformation: system (macro), programme (meso), and individual (micro). These dimensions are interdependent rather than hierarchical, reflecting Indigenous understandings of knowledge as relational and place-based. Within this framework, TEPs emerge as a critical site of transformation, shaping programme philosophy, curriculum, and pedagogical practice. Participants emphasised that TEPs can either reproduce or disrupt settler-colonial logics depending on how they are structured and enacted.

A central finding is that Indigenous knowledge systems must be positioned as foundational rather than supplementary. The principle of “Ancient is Modern” underscores that these systems are not remnants of the past but living, adaptive frameworks capable of addressing contemporary educational challenges. When TEPs are grounded in Indigenous knowledge, they support more coherent, ethical, and contextually responsive teacher preparation.

These findings align with international research highlighting the persistence of Eurocentric knowledge hierarchies and the marginalisation of Indigenous epistemologies in teacher education. This study extends that work by foregrounding the specific contexts of Hawai‘i and Aotearoa, where Indigenous language revitalisation and sovereignty movements are closely connected to teacher education policy and practice. In these contexts, decolonisation is enacted within ongoing settler-colonial systems rather than postcolonial settings.

The findings challenge the positioning of Indigenous education as a culturally responsive approach for Indigenous learners alone. Instead, Indigenous education is framed as foundational to mainstream education, supporting relational, ‘āina/whenua-based, and culturally sustaining approaches that benefit all educators and learners. Participants also highlighted the need for critical reviews of TEP structures to identify and dismantle colonial assumptions that perpetuate trauma and epistemicide. This work requires both institutional change and individual transformation, including sustained partnerships with Indigenous communities grounded in reciprocity, humility, justice, and trust. Several participants framed these relationships through the *kaikua‘ana/tuakana* and *kaikaina/teina* model, raising important questions about whether mainstream institutions are prepared to adopt learner roles and support Indigenous leadership.

Conclusion

Decolonising teacher education requires more than dismantling colonial structures; it also demands the active embedding of Indigenous knowledge systems. Participants emphasised that decolonisation must be accompanied by indigenisation so that what is removed is replaced with living, place-based practices grounded in *ea* and *tino rangatiratanga* – Indigenous practices of self-determination and sovereignty.

The insights shared by Indigenous education leaders highlight both the challenges and possibilities of this work. Transformation requires critical reflection on existing practices, a willingness to unsettle entrenched assumptions, and a commitment to grounding education in place and community. As Dr. Keiki Kawai‘ae‘a suggests, “We needed to re-think all of it. Perhaps that is where the progress is in re-imposing your own thinking that is grounded in your own place. And that, to me, is revolutionary” (Worchel, 2025, p. 288).

The Three-Whiri Wahakura Framework provides a way for TEPs to engage this work across system, programme, and individual levels. By attending to these interconnected dimensions, teacher education can address epistemic injustice while fostering relational accountability, cultural renewal, and collective wellbeing. While this work is complex and often unsettling, participants emphasised its potential to support long-term healing and the development of more just and sustainable education systems. For TEPs, this represents both a responsibility and an opportunity to contribute to generational transformation.

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