

Tauhivā Ako: Engaging Indigenous relationality in school leadership

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Abstract:

My article privilege Indigenous relationality within the context of school leadership in Aotearoa. The Pacific concepts of vā, tauhivā and vātamaki are engaged as cultural alternatives to shifting the school system in Aotearoa. School leaders who engage cultural relational approaches in their practice are responsive to raising student outcomes for all students. In order to shift systems of domination and oppression, we must look within the source of Indigenous knowledge systems for solutions and strength to advance Indigenous concerns. My article is a personal and tauhivā reflection of a Tongan school leader who constantly navigates harmonious and disharmonious relations in their practice. It may be useful in thinking about how a cultural approach to leadership through relationality can enhance the theoretical and practical application of leadership practice in schools.

Fakatapu

Tapu kihe ‘Otua ‘i hotau lotolotonga

Acknowledgment of God in our midst

Tapu ki he fonua mo e tangata ‘i fonua ‘o Aotearoa

Acknowledgement of the whenua and tangata whenua o Aotearoa

Tapu ki he kau kaivai kuo nau tā ‘uluafi ‘i he mala ‘é ni

Acknowledgement of navigators who paved the way

Tapu ki hoku kaungā ako ‘i he hala fonongá

Acknowledgement of life-long learners in your journey

Talateu: A starting point

I am Tongan, and being Tongan, requires the privileging of Indigenous Pacific knowledge systems centred on relationality. I am shaped by my relational worldviews as a school leader in Aotearoa. I was born and raised with multiple relations where I am one person, yet I represent many. For instance, I represent my children, family, ancestors, faith, community, country, and culture. They are me and I am them. I am collective, I am communal. These are the “essence of my belonging” (Tamasese et al., 1998, cited in Efi, 2003, p. 51), woven by sacred connections from my past, present, and yet-to-occur future. I enter this space with a *fakatapu* (privileging) to acknowledge my eternal ties to the land, people, environment, and the cosmos. I also extend an invitation in *fakatapu* to you, the reader who is a life-long learner in your own journey. In my journey as a school leader, I look back and draw strengths from a life source of relations while I constantly negotiate my identity. I am located in a predominantly Māori and Pacific school with a community that thrives in relationality. I acknowledge that the term *Pacific* is a contested term (Matapo & Allen, 2020), yet I embrace its familiarity and openness in my article. I use the term Pacific throughout the article to refer to “people born or with heritage from Pacific Island countries other than New Zealand” (Ministry of Education (MoE), 2019, p. 6). This is a personal reflection as an ethnic minority in the school system of Aotearoa, located in the vastness of Moana-Nui-a-Kiwa.

What shift? What system?

Shifting the system is a complex concept. Before I address the potential of shifting the system, clarity on what it actually means is important. I am forefronting my particular interpretation as a Tongan school leader in Aotearoa who views shifting the system through a Tongan relational lens. Shifting the system privileges Indigenous Pacific relationality where a multitude of relations are constantly negotiated in harmony and disharmony. Tongan scholar, Hūfanga ‘Okusitino Māhina (2004) asserted that it is necessary to define the reality of shifting the system in order to make real changes in Pacific education. From this point onward, I will specify shifting the system to a school system where alternative cultural approaches are nurtured and sustained.

Shifting the system involves a paradigm shift of simultaneous changes at all levels of the school system. Charles M. Reigeluth (1992), an expert on systemic transformation in education, describes shifting the system as replacing the old with the new. Replacing the dominant system requires a long and complex process. However, it paves the way for the advancement and emergence of new cultural paradigms. In Aotearoa, a cultural paradigm shift in schools is emerging, and is responsive and accountable to

minority groups of students. In a 2019 report by the Ministry of Education (MoE, 2019) it was found that Pacific students responded well when cultural approaches that reflected their Pacific world views were embraced. This primarily resulted in a positive result in educational outcomes. School leaders have a vital role in creating opportunities for all students to achieve their educational aspirations.

Which school leader?

The concept of a *school leader* has various interpretations that demand attention. The title of school leader is often used interchangeably as either a formal title or an informal concept linked to leadership practices within the schooling context. Yet, both have slight differences that impact efforts to shift the system. School leaders are inclusive of formal and informal roles such as the school principal, deputy principal, dean, syndicate leader, and teachers. Robinson (2011) specified the principal as *the* school leader, someone who leads a school and is responsible for student outcomes. Similarly, in a Tongan context, *pule ako* refers to the principal as the school leader who drives school change (Johansson-Fua, 2003). I am not a school principal, but I am a school leader. In this way, I am positioned by Bishop (2019) as a school leader who is a *leader of learning*. According to Bishop, a school leader leads learning and is agentic in taking responsibility for student outcomes. Bishop's inclusive reference to school leaders aligns with Pacific values of shared responsibility and collective effort. Teachers and school leaders are encouraged to utilise their inherent leadership qualities and become agentic in their practice. However, there are also challenges to this loose interpretation of school leadership when it comes to formal decision-making and unequal power dynamics. An Indigenous lens can cast further enlightenment.

Through Indigeneity and from an Indigenous perspective, the term school leader is viewed and enacted differently. Alfred and Corntassel (2005) define Indigeneity as a place-based existence, shaped by the “struggle against the dispossessing and demeaning fact of colonization by foreign peoples, that fundamentally distinguishes Indigenous peoples from other peoples of the world” (p. 597). They further articulate that being Indigenous means “thinking, speaking and acting with the conscious intent of regenerating one’s indigeneity” (p. 614). I am mindful of my position as a settler on Aotearoa whenua, despite the ancient ancestral ties tangata whenua have with other communities in Polynesia which includes Tonga. Taking this into consideration, my implementation of Indigeneity and Indigenous in this paper brings to mind and action a critical consciousness centred on *tauhivā*, in ways that seek to make meaning of my appropriate responsibilities to honour Māori as tangata whenua (people of the land). Indigenous school leadership is a critical consciousness that imbues meaningful practices and responsibilities within the schooling context.

While Indigenous school leadership is underpinned by values of the collective and collective efforts, notions of power and authority impact the reality of shifting the school system. The school principal, as a school leader, is in a highly influential position of power and authority to enable or disable attempts to shift the school system. Torrance and Humes (2015) called for a clear definition of the term *school leader* when they reviewed the international trends in educational leadership. They suggested that, while disrupting leadership hierarchies through shared leadership models has merit as a means of sharing power and authority, it can also create confusion within the school community. What a school leader *is* needs to be clearly defined in terms of role boundaries and accountabilities. For instance, teachers in a school are recognised as leaders of learning; however, conditions are placed on the extent of their leadership. The impact can be harmful when teachers lose trust in their leaders. Samu (2006) highlights the unequal power relationships between the dominant school culture and cultures of minority groups such as Pacific. Shifting the school system requires clear structures in place as well as clear expectations on the roles and responsibilities of each school leader. At the same time, navigating this terrain requires cultural sensibility. One way to achieve this goal is to co-construct clear guidelines on job descriptions for a leadership role and align them with the school vision with the purpose to improve student outcomes.

Only the brave

Changing the school system through a cultural approach requires courageous and brave leadership. In privileging Indigenous worldviews, leading with a Pacific perspective is courageous in disrupting normative thinking and practices. School leadership that utilises Indigenous knowledge systems has much to offer in the ongoing debates on systemic change and school reform (Reigeluth, 1992). Leaders and teachers from minority groups, such as Pacific peoples, are already enacting quality practices that are responsive to the cultures of their students. By advocating alternative methods, these leaders challenge the dominant system. According to Samu (2006), Pacific students operate in two different worlds, the school world and the world of the students. Unequal power relations in schools marginalise students with different cultural capital (Jones, 1991). Schools need a school leader who is courageous and confident in leading change that makes a difference for everyone. Purposeful and effective professional development is the most effective factor through which the school principal can affect student outcomes (Robinson, 2011). According to Samu (2006), providing teachers with in-depth professional development and mentoring on alternative cultural approaches can help them lead change for all students.

Alternative cultural paradigm shift

A paradigm shift offers alternative approaches to teaching and learning that meet the needs of diverse learners. To ensure that all students have a successful education, school leaders are at the forefront of making this shift. According to Reigeluth (1992), a paradigm shift occurs as a gradual replacement of old systems by new ones. First, the new system is introduced in parallel to the old system and they co-exist before the new system takes over. Cultural pedagogies based on relationships have a significant impact on Pacific success (MoE, 2019). An alternative cultural and relational approach validates the worldviews of Indigenous students such as Māori and Pacific. Minority groups suffocated in a system that no longer served their needs; these needs are being met by this alternative paradigm. Aotearoa has a growing population of young Pacific people, and a Pacific cultural lens is explored in my article that is conducive to their needs. An alternative paradigm in Pacific leadership is not meant to be a prescriptive list but offers a set of Pacific principles for guidance (Samu, 2006). Cultural-based paradigms offer alternatives to shifting the school system, but in-depth inquiry and risk-taking must be sustained in the process.

Is it worth the risk?

There is an urgency to respond to this question. Changing the school system is a risky step, but one that is necessary if we are to ensure the success of all students. Alternative cultural paradigms require a comprehensive approach to be introduced and sustained (MoE, 2019). It takes time and considerable resources, and the lives and futures of our students are at risk. School systems cannot be changed all at once, and change takes time (Reigeluth, 1992). While reviewing the literature on Pacific engagement in education, Gronski and Fraser (2006) noted that Pacific and Māori, as ethnic minorities, are already marginalised in our current school system. Yet, Pacific and Māori students are blamed for underachieving in a system that already disadvantages them. We cannot tolerate this risk any longer. The *Action Plan for Pacific Education (2020-2030)* (MoE, 2020) calls for alternative approaches that are responsive to student achievement. It is our responsibility as teachers and school leaders to take risks by offering our students an alternative paradigm for success. Taking risks for me was in the form of returning into the classroom whilst continuing my postgraduate studies interrogating my own leadership practice.

Taking risks, taking responsibilities

Leading learning by continuing into higher education involves taking risks and taking responsibilities for shifting my own practice. When I started my team leader role, my leadership capabilities were developed through trial and error. It was not good enough for myself and for my students. I needed to upskill my theoretical understanding in order to inform my leadership practice. Johansson-Fua (2007) identified that school leaders who role model and 'walk the talk', nurture strong relationships with students, teachers, and parents. What better way to 'walk the talk' than to take risks and show my students and colleagues that learning is a life-long process? I demonstrated *Ako's* leadership capability by continuing to learn and grow, while also inspiring others in the process (MoE, n.d.). For me, shifting the school system was through implementing culturally responsive pedagogy like *tauhivā* in my leadership practice. Considering the significance of relationships in the educational development of Pacific students in Aotearoa (MoE, 2020), *tauhivā* provides an ethnic-specific perspective from the Pacific. I wanted to find out the role of *tauhivā* in influencing leadership practice and student outcome. My research led me to dig deep into Tongan worldviews for solutions that would help me lead learning in a school context with predominantly Pacific students. *Tauhivā* illuminates the nuances and potentiality of nurturing relationships where both harmony and disharmony coexist.

While harmony is ideal, this is not always the reality in a school community. Conflict resolution and dealing with school incidents are daily occurrences requiring immediate decision-making. The resolution of conflict is not always so straightforward, nor is it always done in a culturally appropriate way. To do this well, it takes time, resources, and a certain level of cultural competence (MoE, 2019). These criteria are luxuries that a school sometimes cannot afford or are too complex to be engaged. School leaders who provide targeted professional development contribute indirectly to raising student outcomes (Robinson, 2011). However, cultural elements and values such as the Pacific notion of relationships, respect, and reciprocity are not widespread in conflict resolution processes. The Tongan concept of *vātamaki* explored cultural approaches for navigating disharmonious relations in the schooling of Pacific and Tongan students. The following discussion adapts some of the findings from my Master's research and its application in shifting my leadership practice.

Shifting the system through research

Engaging *Vātamaki* in school leadership

School leaders who battle barriers. *Vātamaki* is a Tongan concept that encompasses the uncertainties and barriers of shifting the school system. My experience of *vātamaki* is associated with struggles, difficulties and tensions, yet these were the very essence that built my character and identity as a Tongan

school leader in Aotearoa. In Tongan culture, *vātamaki* has been traditionally used to describe disharmonious relations with negative connotations. Churchward (1959) defined *vātamaki* as unpleasant relations while Māhina (2004) and Ka'ili (2008) specify *vātamaki* as an asymmetrical or failure to perform *fatongia* or social obligations. In a school system, *vātamaki* was evident in every level of the school as a natural part of the learning and teaching process. I saw *vātamaki* as the disconnection between teaching a lesson and students' understanding; the tensions between colleagues' assumptions and a student's cultural background; the barriers between a senior management decision and a teacher's overall judgement. *Vātamaki* gave me a cultural lens to view the complexities and potentiality of relationships in shifting a school system. My research added that *vātamaki* also seeks opportunities for mediation, conflict resolutions and a pathway towards harmony. The complexity of *vātamaki* is a constantly negotiated space that moves beyond failure and unpleasant relations towards action as resistance.

School leaders who lead in resistance. *Vātamaki* as disharmonious relations engage in a process of resistance. Resistance is having the capability to lead a different path from the norm. A Tongan-based cultural approach is a form of resistance that is responsive to Tongan students. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) points out that resistance is not a total rejection of western ways of knowing but a privileging of Indigenous knowledge. Resistance legitimises a challenge to power inequality and the marginalisation of Indigenous knowledge systems in schooling contexts. The embedded values of dominant western worldviews in formal education have alienating effects on students with differing worldviews (Thaman, 2003). I also add that school leaders with alternative worldviews such as the Pacific also experience alienation in the school system and need to enact resistance. *Vātamaki* not only challenges the differential treatment and barriers to equitable academic success, but also pushes back and denies this is the norm. My research affirms Indigenous Pacific knowledge systems in concepts such as *vā*, *tauhivā*, and *vātamaki*. They are all legitimate activities of resistance in shifting the school system towards alternative ways of leading and learning. While including Pacific knowledge and values in education policies is a good start, school leaders must ensure that the implementation occurs in ways that benefit and sustain student achievement. Continual resistance provokes opportunities for agency.

School leaders who are agents of change. *Vātamaki* involve school leaders who are leaders of change when disharmony occurs in the school community. Disharmonious relations embrace a proactive stance as an opportunity for strengthening and improving leadership practice. I am privileged to be a Tongan school leader who utilises the cultural lens of *vātamaki* to embrace mistakes and failures as stepping stones to improved practice. How the leader attends to conflicts and resolves them fairly garners buy-in and contributes to the cohesiveness of a school community (Johansson-Fua, 2007). *Vātamaki* allows me to attend to conflict and relationships as the natural cycle of growth and improvement. According to Robinson (2011), leaders of an effective school lead improvement as a way of being that is reflected

in their attitudes, values, and beliefs. As a syndicate team leader, *vātamaki* helps me to cope with the complications of leading from the middle – for instance, relations that need to be negotiated between the senior management of the school and the teachers and students that I care for. Sometimes, decisions in a syndicate team can be overturned by higher powers outside my control. *Vātamaki* recognises that barriers to progress do not resolve immediately, rather it encourages an ongoing critical process of negotiating and renegotiating decisions to fit within one's control.

School leaders who are critical thinkers

Vātamaki illustrates an intellectual process of critical thinking that challenges inequity and injustice within a school system. School leaders who are better informed with multiple perspectives can make better judgements on leadership changes that benefit all students. Through *vātamaki*, issues of disconnect and barriers to learning for marginalised groups of students such as Pacific and Tongans become more visible and transparent. My research on *vātamaki* was driven to find solutions that are culturally sustaining and accountable for Tongans. *Vātamaki* requires critical thinking to systematically reflect and act on the multiple relationships that exist within my space of leadership. Māhina (2008) clarified critical thinking as the internal qualities of the mind to produce objective knowledge. Implicit to his definition is the ability to also think subjectively from my Tongan viewpoint.

Participation in critical conversations continues to be a negotiated struggle of *vātamaki* for me. It is unusual in Tongan culture to speak up and directly address a concern especially when there is a difference in perspective, gender, age and social status. Awareness of these relational dynamics has an impact on my role as a school leader in Aotearoa. Cultural values such as *faka'apa'apa* (respect) and *anga fakatōkilalo* (humility) are vital qualities for a Tongan leader to build effective leadership (Johansson-Fua, 2007). However, these qualities can also be misinterpreted by those unfamiliar with Tongan culture as passiveness and lack of interest. Similarly, Pacific students also face similar discrimination in the classroom (MoE, 2019). The school context in Aotearoa remains underpinned by western-dominant values where my reality as a Tongan is incongruent with the expectations of a school culture. School leaders need to think critically about the role of schools in reproducing societal inequality and challenge this status quo through challenging our own individual mindsets.

School leaders who transform mindsets

Vātamaki transforms mindsets and differences in thinking through constant action and reflection. In my role as a school leader, transformation means leading change that responds to the community and students I serve. 'Eveli Hau'ofa (1995) encouraged Pacific peoples to develop a transformed mindset as a reminder that our thoughts can contribute to, or hinder, our own progress. The transformation of

disharmony, difference, and conflict in my leadership practice requires a continuous effort to strike a balance and a middle ground between my Tongan worldview and the school worldview. School leaders need to have a genuine desire to be the change they want to see. Sometimes that change requires going beyond the prescriptive textbook practice of the classroom and going beyond the borders of the school gate to weave connections and relationships outside of comfort zones. According to Bishop (2019), transforming mindsets begins with the school leader, who has the most influence over student outcomes. *Vātamaki* is the process where the school leader identifies disconnection and tension that occur in the learning process and responds by engaging in positive theorising. Personal biases are parked on the side while the school leader goes that extra mile for the students in their care. *Vātamaki* does not offer a quick-fix solution, nor does it imply permanence when problems are resolved. Rather *vātamaki* offers a cultural approach to school leadership that is transformative with an ongoing exchange of harmonious and disharmonious relations (Māhina, 2004). The following discussion offers an alternative paradigm shift that engages the Indigenous notion of relationality. In the Pacific, relationality is expressed in the concept of *vā*.

Shifting the system through Pacific leadership practice

Pacific school leadership

Relationality is central to Pacific school leadership. An understanding of what school leadership means from a Pacific perspective provides a helpful lens to understanding alternative ways for shifting the system. Relationality provides an alternative approach by valuing relationships and connections as critical for making sustained change. Pacific school leadership is closely associated with Pacific leadership rooted in Pacific worldviews (Sanga, et al., 2021). Vaai (2017) described Pacific worldviews to encompass relationships as the life source that nurtures Pacific peoples. Pacific school leaders recognise that reality is affected by a relational view of the world which impacts practice. Chilisa (2019) explained that Indigenous reality consists of multiple connections to the living and non-living world. Pacific school leaders understand that knowledge construction in the process of teaching, learning and leading is not individually owned but rather relationally shared (Wilson, 2008). Pacific school leadership will be further explored using two relational concepts: *service* and *ako*.

Service in Pacific school leadership

Education, from a Pacific perspective, is viewed as a vehicle for service and leadership. The notion of service is premised on a set of Pacific values such as respect, reciprocity and collective benefit. The

Samoan phrase *O le ala i le pule o le tautua* (the pathway to leadership is through service) points out the inherent nature of service in Pacific leadership which is crucial in nurturing Samoans' ways of life (Fa'aea & Enari, 2021). In Aotearoa, Māori leadership is manifested in service to the community and supporting Māori success as a collective (Hohepa & Robinson, 2008). Service for Tongans is found in the expression *'Alu 'o ako ke ke 'aonga* (go, be educated to become worthwhile). This familiar phrase contains the aspiration of many Tongan parents including my own. The *Action Plan for Pacific Education* is a 10-year commitment to cater to the educational aspirations of diverse Pacific communities in Aotearoa (MoE, 2020). For Pacific communities, education becomes worthwhile when applied in service to the family, church and community (Kalavite, 2010). From a Pacific perspective, an effective school leader is someone who leads through service to improve the lives of students and others in the school community (Johansson-Fua, 2003). School leadership has a vital role to enable these Pacific aspirations in schools by providing quality service so that students become worthwhile citizens in local, national and global contexts.

Ako in Pacific school leadership

Pacific school leaders recognise that the process of *ako* is a continuous cycle. *Ako* is a fluid and holistic approach to teaching and learning as a lifelong process. In Māori and Tongan, the term *ako* refers to the actions of both teaching and learning (Thaman, 2004) emphasising that one cannot occur without the other. In Aotearoa, *ako* is a key leadership quality that is expected of all school leaders (MoE, n.d.). School leaders who embrace *ako* demonstrate quality practice by leading collaboration in teaching and learning. Pacific school leadership, therefore, equates with quality leadership as it seeks ways to improve practice as a learner as well as a teacher. Similarly, students who are encouraged to be learners and teachers in their learning are more likely to take ownership of their learning outcomes (MoE, 2019). In my context, the concept of *ako* was evident while leading a community of learners in my syndicate team. Teachers inquire into their practice for specific strategies to raise student outcomes. The concept of *ako* was sustained when teachers met on a regular basis to share and learn from each other. This school-wide initiative engaged all teachers where success stories and failures became a learning opportunity for strengthening practice. Teachers worked collaboratively as leaders of change by examining their own beliefs and what works best for their students. School leaders who facilitate opportunities for teacher inquiry that enact *ako* are also enabling the conditions for raising student outcomes.

Engaging Pacific *vā/va* in school leadership

Vā-relationality

Vā offers a Pacific cultural approach to school leadership. Leading through *vā* is not a prescribed formula of leadership, but a way of being and a mindset shift that is developed over time and is accessible to both Pacific and non-Pacific leaders. The core business of learning is to improve student outcomes (Robison, 2011). When the student is at the centre of learning, *vā* recognises the student as a relational self, connected to multiple relations (Efi, 2003). The student brings to the school their own cultural funds of knowledge which present a rich resource to inform quality practice (MoE, 2019). An effective school leader affirms the diverse cultural identity of all students and *vā* provides a pathway for Pacific students. Relationships through *vā* are significant in Pacific worldviews and how Pacific students respond to their learning in schools. Samu (2006) points out the dilemma for Pacific students of walking in two different and often contradictory worlds: the school and the home culture. Samu also points to the power inequality that exists where the dominant culture of the school further diminishes minority cultures such as those of Pacific students. *Vā* offers a counter-balance affirming the Pacific worldview in students' learning. The challenge remains for school leaders who are willing and brave to take the offer of leading through *vā* in order to cater to the needs of all students. In the context of engaging Māori learners, Bishop (2019) called out school leaders to adopt a relational pedagogy through positive theorisation. In the same vein, *vā* provides a relational approach familiar to Pacific cultures while recognising Māori as tangata whenua. *Vā* recognises the similarities across Pacific values such as reciprocity and respect, as well as the differences that make each ethnic group unique. *Vā* is a sustained effort and, constantly nurtured over time with all members of the school community, contributes to raising student outcomes and overall school improvement.

Reciprocity in Vā

Reciprocity is a Pacific principle that has guided my own leadership practice. Home–school partnerships have been noted factors that have an impact on the student outcomes of Pacific students. The vision for the *Pacific Education Plan* in Aotearoa (MoE, 2020) identifies the significance of home–school partnership relations. Yet, parent engagement remains an area of concern. As a Tongan teacher with a high proportion of Tongan students in my school, I was compelled by my *fatongia* (social duty) to promote and sustain the Tongan language and culture. A starting point was to call a community consultation with our parents. It was vital to have a shared understanding between teachers and parents on how to best support Tongan students, their identity, language and culture in our school. The meeting was conducted using Tongan protocols of prayer, Tongan language, and talanoa circle which provided

an authentic and safe space. Tongan parents, grandparents, and teachers were able to converse freely about successes as well as concerns with student outcomes. Tongans reciprocate relations based on knowledge of their *fatongia* (social obligations) with the intention of maintaining harmonious relationships (Ka'ili, 2017). The voices gathered from this meeting informed our Tongan overview plan but, more importantly, established a long-term working relationship with our Tongan community. However, our success with the Tongan community was not adopted school-wide. Partnering with families of Pacific students is a reciprocal process based on genuine care for improving student outcomes (MoE, 2019). Shifting the school system requires school leaders who are at the forefront of initiating reciprocal opportunities such as home–school partnerships. These opportunities also need to be flexible and nurtured over time with support from the whole school community.

Fluidity in *Vā*

Shifting the school system utilises *vā* as a fluid and constant flow of interconnected relationships. *Vā* recognises the power and dynamism of relationships where positive and conflicting relationships are constantly negotiated. Pacific realities consist of a continuous rhythmic movement of relationships that are connected and fused without boundaries (Vaai, 2017). In a school system, *vā* enables the survival and sustainability of Pacific values of care for people, the environment, and beyond. Cultural continuity is ensured by this fluid and holistic pattern of relational shifts (Thaman, 1999). However, the sustainability of *vā* has been challenged by differing conceptions and misconceptions. *Vā* is beginning to ensconce mainstream policies and documents while it highlights the multicultural reality of Aotearoa, there is a danger of cultural appropriation and tokenism. *Vā* decorates school policies as the ‘flavour of the month’ but lacks in-depth engagement that impacts practice and student outcomes. Such malpractice is derogative and unethical towards Pacific peoples and specifically our Pacific students. A timely reminder and challenge are presented for us school leaders about our responsibility in protecting the sacredness of the *vā* as underpinned by traditional Pacific values and belief systems. As Bishop (2019) points out to school leaders, without seeking to understand the diverse values and beliefs in the reality of our students, such as *vā*, little success is bound to happen with student outcomes. Shifting the school system through *vā* is beneficial for all students. The Ministry of Education calls for the need for ethnic-specific cultural practices that impact student outcomes (MoE, 2019). My position as a Tongan school leader in Aotearoa is strongly shaped by *tauhivā*, a Tongan cultural practice of nurturing relationships.

Engaging Tongan *tauhivā* in school leadership

Tauhivā is a holistic core principle of nurturing relations that has a significant impact in my approach to shifting the school system. In simple terms, *tauhi* refers to ‘actively nurture’ and *vā* refers to the

‘space in-between’. In Tongan culture, the ultimate goal of *tauhivā* is to maintain beautiful and harmonious relationships (Ka’ili, 2005). As a school leader, my ultimate aim is to raise student outcomes. *Tauhivā* comprise the specific leadership actions and strategies that I use in my practice to influence the improvement of student outcomes. For instance, I use cultural practices such as *talanoa* for collaborative group discussions in literacy and mathematical sense-making. *Tauhivā* involves the intentional application of cultural practices such as *talanoa* as a teaching strategy as well as explicit teaching of the underpinning of its values. Utilising cultural approaches such as *tauhivā* equates with effective teaching (Thaman, 2008). It is also important to understand the cultural underpinnings that guide these cultural paradigms. *Tauhivā* is guided by Tongan principles such as *faka’apa’apa* (respect), *lototō* (humility) and *mamahime’a* (loyalty) and, when applied in teaching and leading, contributes to nurturing improved student outcomes.

Theorising *Tauhivā*

Tauhivā through a Tā-Vā lens

A Tongan theoretical lens helps to gain a deeper insight into the role of *tauhivā* in impacting my practice as a school leader. *Tauhivā* is theorised through the *Tā-Vā* (time-space) philosophy of reality from Tongan scholar Okusitino Māhina (2004). According to Māhina, *tā* (time) and *vā* (space) are inseparable in reality. In schools, time and space are crucial in the relationships between Tongan students and leaders. Time is arranged differently which impacts shared relationships. In Indigenous Pacific cultures, notions of the past, present and future are fluid and relevant to each other. The past is always placed in front of a Tongan, while the future remains behind. In my leadership practice, the memories and aspirations of my ancestors for a successful education and life of service are key drivers in my daily reality. Similarly, in class, opportunities are provided for students to draw on their past history and cultural realities in order to make meaningful connections to their future learning goals. The implication for school leaders of Pacific and Tongan students is the need to be culturally aware and to take action. Bishop (2019) suggests positive theorising, which involves a willingness in teachers to be agentic in seeking to understand diverse realities and utilising this knowledge effectively to improve student outcomes.

My approach to shifting the school system is specifically guided by active nurturing and maintaining relationships in my school community. As a culturally specific approach, *tauhivā* involves an eternal flow of relationships between *vālelei* (harmonious relations) and *vātamaki* (disharmonious relations) (Ka’ili, 2008; Māhina, 2004). *Tauhivā* can be expressed using the metaphor of a mat. The top side of the mat exposes taken-for-granted assumptions of harmonious relations which are familiar with Tongan

tradition (Ka'ili, 2008; Thaman, 2008). As a school leader, shifting the school system through *tauhivā* is responsive to improving student outcomes. The following discussion illustrates how I have enacted *tauhivā* through the Tongan concepts of *fua fatongia* (fulfilling obligations), *fetongitongi* (shape-shifting), and *fakahohoko* (reconnecting).

Fua fatongia - Fulfilling obligations

Tauhivā is marked by how I fulfil my *fatongia* (social obligations) as a school leader. Some *fatongia* are explicit while others are hidden and complex. My *fatongia* lies in the core business of learning and improving student outcomes (Robinson, 2011). I am a classroom teacher who has *fatongia* to raise the achievement of a diverse group of students. At the same time, I am a syndicate leader who has *fatongia* for operating a cohort of students with four other teaching colleagues. The students and staff I am responsible for are from diverse cultural backgrounds and trying to strike a balance among these relations is part of my *fatongia*. Fa'avae (2018) points out the reality and challenges of walking in two worlds – where picking one over the other is unrealistic. *Tauhivā* guides me as I attend to my *fatongia* of ensuring that student outcomes are positively impacted. *Tauhivā* operates on an assumption that students in my class and teachers in my team would reciprocate and fulfil their own *fatongia*. However, the complexity of relationships within a school system has both relations of harmony and disharmony in co-existence. A school leader's *fatongia* is made more complex (Johansson-Fua, 2007) when things do not always go to plan and *fatongia* are not always reciprocated. *Tauhivā* offers a unique cultural leadership capability unique to Tongans which caters to the diversity of Pacific communities (MoE, 2020). *Tauhivā* encourages the school leader to strike a balance between Pacific values and the values of the school.

Fetongitongi - Shape-shifting

The ability to *shape shift* in numerous *fatongia* is vital to *tauhivā* for harmonious relations. *Fetongitongi* is a Tongan concept that describes shape-shifting where the root word *fetongi* means to change or to switch something for another, while *fetongitongi* implies fluidity and continuity in such change. Ka'ili (2005) referenced the Polynesian hero and prominent shapeshifter, Maui, whose tales of changing into different forms of birds and fish are evident in Pacific oral history. Likewise, nurturing strong relationships in the school system requires school leaders who are adaptable and intentional at shape-shifting between their different roles. When I am a teacher, my *fatongia* is to improve student outcomes and well-being. At the same time, the students in front of me represent multiple relations, their parents, guardians, families, and culture. I am also accountable for the relations that connect the student to learning. During a syndicate team meeting, my *fatongia* focused on providing the best teaching

opportunities for my teaching colleagues including sharing in their success and attending to their concerns. In a senior management space, my *fatongia* shifted to become an advocate for my students, teachers, and their families. Shape-shifting in *tauhivā* is complex and requires ongoing reflection, however, it contributes to managing and leading a harmonious team.

Fakahohoko - Reconnecting

Hohoko refers to genealogical connections which are essential in facilitating good leadership. The term *faka* is a prefix that indicates action while *hoko* means to connect. *Fakahohoko* can be understood as efforts for continuous connections of the multiple relationships that exist within the school community. Genealogy has a strong influence on Tongan identity based on connections to the *kāinga* (kin members) or fonua (land) (Ka'ili, 2005). Tongans make up the highest ethnic group in my school. Most students share genealogical connections to Tonga as our country of heritage with a few connected as kin members. During our cultural classes, we *tauhivā* through lessons on Tongan language and culture where students strengthen their connections with each other and with their identity as Tongans in Aotearoa. *Tauhivā* can also be nurtured with non-Tongans who share a kin-like space such as a school or a classroom. While celebrating Tongan language week, I organised a week celebration for the whole school. The organisation was enabled by cooperation and support from across the school community, our senior management, staff, students, and parents. This example paints a picture of how the school system could be shifted to embrace cultural competence with diverse Pacific learners (MoE, 2020). It also points out that the effort to make shifts in the school system cannot be limited to a one-off celebration. In order to sustain alternative cultural approaches such as Pacific language weeks, careful and strategic planning with cooperation from all facets of the school community is needed for genuine shifts to occur.

Aofangatuku - A reflecting point

I privilege Indigenous Pacific and Tongan notions of relationality in concepts such as *vātamaki*, *tauhivā* and *vā*. They are legitimate ways of shifting the school system. My journey is a constant negotiation of harmonious and disharmonious relations for I walk in multiple worlds and *tauhivā* with multiple relations. My article offers no conclusion because relationality is dynamic and continuous, and my journey does not end here. Instead, I leave you at a reflecting point, to pause and deeply relate your own

leadership journey and ways you have shifted the system where relationality thrives and is sustaining of all learners.

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