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## Lalaga: Connecting Beyond the Name

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### Abstract:

Aotearoa New Zealand (Aotearoa) is a nation shaped by the enduring effects of colonisation. For students educated in Aotearoa schools, success is defined by the cultural norms, knowledge systems, and values of Pākehā (white) New Zealanders. Research shows that, for students who sit outside this group, a main influence on their educational achievement is the quality of the relationships they have with their teachers. However, relationships in spaces shaped by colonisation (such as education), are hierarchical: they are defined by those in power and value is assigned to the dominant group's (Eurocentric) beliefs and knowledge. This article documents the steps taken to Indigenise the relationship between learners and adults in one school south of the Auckland central business district. It further explores the effects of disrupting the history of colonisation at this school (Kedgley Intermediate), a large co-ed school in the predominantly brown community of South Auckland, Aotearoa. In the years leading up to 2017, there was an erosion in school culture and a reliance on punitive punishments that reinforced power imbalances between adults and students. Staff had love for their students but lacked understanding of their experiences and values; they couldn't conceptualise the expectations the community had from those formally educating their children. Lalaga, at Kedgley in Papatoetoe, Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland), began with a majority Pasifika student population and a predominantly Pākehā staff as a whole-school approach focused on building relationships and moving away from a punitive punishment approach. We argue that, when time is taken to build meaningful relationships between students and staff, power is shared, and education thrives.

### Keywords

Pacific, Lalaga, Indigenising, Relationships, Education

## Introduction

Māori and Pasifika students have long been underserved within Aotearoa's education system. Education, at all levels, in Aotearoa has been shaped by colonisation and continues to reflect the effects of neo-colonialism: the retention of colonial systems and the "psychological injuries suffered by the colonised that continue to wound" Indigenous populations (Trask, 2006, pp. 102–103, as cited in Mayeda et al., 2014, p. 6). Māori and Pacific students' experiences of education across the sector demonstrate a range of ways they are racialised, marginalised, and stereotyped. Scholars such as Allen and Webber (2019), Fitzpatrick (2013), and Nakhid (2012) have highlighted the ways that Māori and Pacific students in particular education contexts have been impacted, and continue to be impacted, by such marginalisation. This marginalisation can be reflected in a range of ways, one being the way they are often depicted as being less intelligent and as academically disadvantaged (Allen & Webber, 2019; Fitzpatrick, 2013; Nakhid, 2012). In addition, Mayeda et al. (2014) examined Māori and Pacific students' experiences with everyday colonialism and racism at university and found Eurocentric and western privilege led to macro-exclusions of Māori and Pasifika people and culture in education. The same conditions that they found in tertiary education are also evident in primary and secondary schools across Aotearoa. The normalisation of Eurocentric curricula that present Māori and Pasifika topics within the context of social problems; the valuing of western learning styles by encouraging competitive and individualistic learning and representation; and having disproportionately low numbers of Māori and Pasifika staff and leaders in institutions. These are all part of the complex tapestry which is our current colonial system (Mayeda et al., 2014).

While educational systems in Aotearoa are underpinned by colonial norms, educators are not without agency and research demonstrates how teachers, principals and leaders in schools are challenging western systems of domination for the betterment of, not only Māori and Pacific populations, but for all students. This article contributes to the growing literature around the moves leaders are making to centralise culture and cultural knowledge in their schools. This manuscript details the development of *lalaga*, a whole-school approach to building relationships. We first provide the background of the school context in which this work is being done. We also provide insight into Pasifika people in Aotearoa – providing definitions and exploring how colonisation has impacted, and continues to impact, education in Aotearoa. We then discuss how *lalaga* was developed and implemented, drawing on the development of four key values.

Lee and Toso (2015) defined *lalaga* as the practice of weaving. In their study of ways to support under-represented learners in tertiary institutions within the Aotearoa New Zealand context, they framed *lalaga* as the "weav[ing] together for the success of tomorrow" (p. 36). In a similar manner, the *lalaga* in this paper takes into consideration a whole-school approach to strengthening relationships in light of students' future success.

## Pasifika people in Aotearoa

Although references to *Pacific* are used to refer to the migrant peoples from their ancestral homelands in Oceania, this article mainly utilises the term *Pasifika* to describe people from the Pacific Islands who now live in Aotearoa but continue to have family and cultural “connections to Pacific Island nations – the islands and cultures of Samoa, Tonga, Cook Islands, Fiji, Niue, Tokelau and Tuvalu” (Ministry of Education, 2018 p. 5). At Kedgley Intermediate, the context for this paper, the majority of the students who fall under this categorisation have historically been Sāmoan and Tongan. The authors of this article acknowledge that terms that homogenise large groups with rich cultural and linguistic diversity are, at their core, problematic. The choice was made to use this term as it is the one that appears most in research and is a broad descriptor with little history of weaponisation against the groups it endeavours to describe. The weaponisation of words and knowledge holds a long history in Aotearoa as a colonised nation and, as such, the next section explores how colonisation has impacted, and continues to impact, our education system.

The history of Pasifika peoples in Aotearoa is fraught with stereotypes and marginalisation by colonial powers. Prime Minister of Sāmoa from 1976–1982, Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese, explained that Pasifika people first came to New Zealand for “job opportunities, money and most importantly, their children’s education” (Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 2021, para. 6). Pasifika migration to Aotearoa increased dramatically in the mid-20th century at the behest of the New Zealand Government and the business sector who were looking for cheap labour. By the 1970s, the boom of the postwar era burst. As a result, Aotearoa’s Pasifika community was “scapegoated by Pākehā and the mainstream media” (Tearoa Raela, 2017, p. 8). Melani Anae, a senior Pasifika scholar and member of the Polynesian Panther political party, describes the social and political climate during the 1970s as one of “racial tension and unrest as police and immigration authorities victimised Pacific Islanders they suspected of abusing the terms of their visas” (Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 2021, para. 11).

Throughout Aotearoa’s colonised history, Pākehā have stereotyped Pasifika in a variety of ways to perpetuate the legacies of colonisation. Stereotypes, often driven by the media, have characterised Pasifika as “happy-go-lucky and simple” (Justine Simeit-Barton, as cited in Pearson, 1999, p. 363), and “lazy, slovenly and inefficient or unmotivated, unhealthy criminals” highly dependent on Pākehā support (Tearoa Raela, 2017, p. 8). The continued success of colonisation relies on the media to cement negative stereotypes in the national consciousness (Stewart, 2018). South Auckland is a group of suburbs where the majority of the residents are Māori and Pasifika. As a result, the negative stereotypes that afflict both Māori and Pasifika communities are used to describe South Auckland (Allen & Bruce,

2017; Nakhid, 2012). Often painted as a hot-bed of crime, South Auckland “has some of the lowest rates of employment and educational achievement, high crime rates for violent offences such as homicides, child abuse and aggravated robberies and is home to some of the most deprived areas in New Zealand” (Nakhid, 2012, p. 14).

Institutional structures that privilege Pākehā ways of being, knowing and doing, and the mainstream media’s portrayal of Māori and Pasifika, has contributed to dominant discourses that position Māori and Pasifika within limited identity framings of their perceived shortcomings: low socio-economic status and underachievement (Houghton, 2015, p. 11). As a result, teachers often consciously, or unconsciously, set low expectations for these students leading to a 10–20% difference between Māori and Pasifika students and their Pākehā counterparts in both participation in schooling and achievement standards in reading, writing and maths (Houghton, 2015, p. 10). According to the latest available data (2018 and 2019), in Aotearoa, Year 8 students achieve ‘at’ or ‘above’ the expected National Curriculum levels at a rate of 35% in writing, 56% in reading and 45% in maths nationally (National Monitoring Study of Student Achievement (NMSSA), 2018, 2019). Kedgley’s Year 8 data from 2019 – the same year the data for reading and writing were released – show that 49.6% of Māori were at or above in writing, 57.9% in reading, 41.4% in maths and 49.5% of Pasifika in writing, 53.4% in reading and 44.7% in maths. Year 8 Māori and Pasifika learners at Kedgley Intermediate are above the national average in maths, within 2.7% of the national average in reading and above the national average in writing. National data also show this to be impressive as, nationally, Māori and Pasifika underperform in comparison to the rest of the population across all three subjects by 3–13 points (NMSSA, 2018, 2019).

## **Background of Kedgley Intermediate and the community**

Kedgley Intermediate is a large, urban intermediate school in Papatoetoe, Tāmaki-makarau, Aotearoa. Kedgley Intermediate School has been part of the Papatoetoe community for more than sixty years. In 2017, when the story of *lalaga* began, the school catered for 767 Year 7 and 8 students. Of these students, 20% were Māori and 53% were Pasifika. Although the student population has predominantly been Pasifika for the majority of its history, the school had previously been exclusively led by Pākehā male principals. However, in 2017, Pelu became the first Pasifika principal in the school’s history. Since then, Kedgley Intermediate’s staff has come to better reflect the community it serves. Of the 63 staff members who are currently employed at Kedgley, a majority of whom were hired during Pelu’s principalship, 81% are of Māori or Pasifika heritage. 39% of staff are Sāmoan and 19% are Tongan, reflective of the 30% of the student population who are Sāmoan and the 18.4% who are Tongan. Further, the 2022 leadership team, composed of the principal and three deputy principals, are all Pasifika. We

believe the increased representation of Pasifika staff is a result of the change in culture. Staff at Kedgley see themselves in the culture of the school, know that leadership and their colleagues understand their worldview and feel accepted as themselves. The staff reflects the school community, includes Pasifika who are committed to keeping the values and language of their culture alive, and who have a strong grounding in their faith.

As principal, Pelu implemented a review of the structure, values and culture of the school to ensure that Kedgley was best catering for the students and community it served. He began by talking to teachers and his staff more broadly. The prevailing message from long-standing members of staff was that the spirit of the school had eroded over recent years. Behavioural issues and stand-downs were common and there was a disconnect between the school and the wider community. In the years leading up to 2017, the school had become insular and removed from the community. Whānau and aiga (family in the Sāmoan language) were rarely invited into the school (usually only for parent–teacher interviews) and community events were almost never held. In Pelu’s first year of principalship, he opened up the school to the community. Coming from a Sāmoan background, Pelu knew that cultural practices were important to families of Pacific heritage and therefore invited parents back into the school to be part of cultural and choral performances by their children. These small, but seemingly radical changes, seemed to be widely welcomed by the community and community members accepted the invitation and began attending school events.

Prior to Pelu’s appointment as tumuaki (principal) at Kedgley Intermediate, the school had been one of the first in Aotearoa to adopt the positive behaviour for learning (PB4L) framework. PB4L is a school-wide behaviour and learning framework developed at the University of Oregon, United States of America, in the 1990s (PB4L Online, n.d.). Katie began working as a classroom teacher at Kedgley Intermediate in 2014 and by then, the implementation of PB4L was already erratic. Implementation of the school-wide approach varied from classroom to classroom. Some teachers adhered strictly to the guidelines, while others ignored them all together. Pelu did not like the idea of PB4L for a range of reasons, including that it was originally an American model (which meant it was culturally irrelevant to the students at Kedgley). Furthermore, his own pedagogy was underpinned by the central notion of building relationships with students and getting to know them.

Pelu started his teaching career at Kedgley Intermediate and found that, as one of the few Pasifika teachers, he was given a class made up by the *naughty boys* in the school. These boys, through sheer demographics of the school, were predominantly Pasifika. His relationship-centred pedagogy that was developed out of his life experiences as part of the Pasifika community and a Pasifika family, saw success early on. The benefits were clear – the naughty students who were put in his class because of his success with the naughty students the year before, began to see success at school (sometimes for the

first time). Pelu puts this down to his investment in building relationships with them. He has never been a heavily punitive teacher; his success with these students was not due to top-down or punitive measures. Therefore, he believed educators should not need a manual to connect with the students in front of them, rather that connection with students should be a guiding principle for all teachers. In addition, he was wary of the fact the framework still included punitive consequences for students who didn't follow the rules.

The established behavioural management systems weren't addressing these issues of concern. There was a desire from these staff members and the new tumuaki to do better for the students and wider community. Lalaga was Kedgley Intermediate's first step towards addressing this deficit and assisting the movement from school-wide mauri noho (a languishing environment) to mauri ora (one that is thriving). This manuscript explores the process and thinking behind the development of lalaga – a whole-school approach to disrupting the impacts of colonisation through Indigenising relationships through le va (relationality). Lalaga is our way of “placing the ambulance at the top of the cliff” – in essence creating a place where behaviours, emotions, and relationships can be tended to before stand-downs and other punitive interventions are required. Lalaga uses key Pasifika values to assist students and teachers to develop deeper connections and ensure success for all in the education system.

## Impact of colonisation on education

The public sector in colonised societies, such as Aotearoa, is shaped by the values and beliefs of the dominant culture (Pākehā/white New Zealanders), regardless of the communities they serve. It can be argued that education is “patriarchal and dominated by men, just like the workforce” (Trueman, 2015). In Aotearoa, it therefore can be argued that success is often defined by wealthy, cis-gendered Pākehā men. Crimson Education's (2022) Top 50 Schools in New Zealand shows that, out of the top 10 performing schools in Aotearoa, nine are located in Auckland. Out of that nine, eight are located in majority-Pākehā and wealthy suburbs in central Auckland and the North Shore. Seven of these schools are led by white male principals, the other three principals are white females. Majority-Pākehā schools in central Auckland are heralded as high-achieving and desirable, leaving Māori and Pasifika students in South Auckland often excluded from conversations about success and achievement.

Nahkid (2012) suggested the presence of low-income neighbourhoods, crime, gangs leads to South Auckland young people being “alienated from mainstream society” (p. 17). Institutional racism and stereotypes about Māori, Pasifika and South Auckland perpetuate *failure* and cement in the national consciousness damaging *truths* about the community Kedgley serves. In this way, colonisation has been incredibly successful in Aotearoa, working in exactly the way it was designed to: as a means of assimilation, displacement of people, and their culture. Early interactions between Māori and Pākehā

colonists, from the signing of Te Tiriti o Waitangi/The Treaty of Waitangi to the immediate failure of the colonist government to uphold Treaty principles, marginalised Māori throughout the history of Aotearoa New Zealand (Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 2020). The introduction of the Native Schools Act in 1867 contributed to the widespread privileging of the English language and contributed to the devastating loss of Te Reo and Te Ao Māori for many Māori (Calman, 2012). Ingrained stereotypes and Pākehā-prioritising systems and services have continued to *Other* and blame Māori and Pasifika for the consequences of colonisation and colonial thinking.

Assimilation and the eradication of Māori language and culture was the goal of early colonists and the New Zealand government. According to Ka'ai-Mahuta (2011), New Zealand's education system acted as the mechanism of the government's agenda to assimilate and dominate Māori language and culture. Te Tiriti o Waitangi promised protection of Māori taonga (treasures), institutions and culture. However, in 1877, Chief Justice Prendergast ruled the Treaty "a simple nullity" allowing the Pākehā government to legally ignore it, which it routinely did (Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 2020, para. 4). State policy over the next 150 years further solidified the government's desire for, and expectations of, assimilation. From 1816 and the beginning of missionary schools, education in New Zealand was used to "interrupt the intergenerational transmission of language and culture, thereby invalidating the world view of Māori" (Ka'ai-Mahuta, 2011, p. 200). Policies such as the Native Schools Act which incentivised teaching in English, gave teachers licence to punish students who chose to speak Te Reo Māori at school (Vini Olsen-Reeder in *Breakfast*, 2020). Government ordinances caused corporal punishment to be used as a tool to oppress Maori language and culture. Colonial policies such as these have long-lasting, negative psychological effects on both the collective and individual sense of identity and worth (Walker, 1990, p. 147, as cited in Ka'ai-Mahuta, 2011, p. 207).

Māori and Pasifika are disproportionately represented in Aotearoa's national Stand Down data, with both groups representing higher than the national rate (Education Counts, 2019). In her 2018 discussion at the *NZEI's Taking the Lead – Celebrating the Curricular workshop*, Mere Berryman highlighted at time when three out of five Māori boys were stood down throughout their schooling. Berryman (2018b) implored the education sector to shift their focus to this 20% of students who the education system is still not working for. Data from 2014 (but published in 2021) reinforce this inequity, showing that Māori were twice as likely to be stood down or excluded from school than Pākehā students (Education Counts, 2021a). In 2019, Māori males were stood down at a rate of 65 out of every 1000 students and Pasifika males at a rate of 48.1 out of every 1000 (Education Counts, 2019). This data shows long-term trends of failure by our education system to do its job: keep students in school and engaged in learning. In Aotearoa, most stand-downs occur between the ages of 13-15 years old, and, in 2017 the four high schools with the highest Stand Down numbers in Aotearoa were within a 20km radius of Kedgley Intermediate School (Palmer, 2018). All but one of the high schools has shared characteristic with

Kedgley: positioned in a low socio-economic community with a predominantly Pasifika and Māori student population.

## Indigenising education

Due to the shortcomings of our colonial education system, academics have looked for ways to close the educational gap. Earlier research focused on how to fix the deficits in Māori and, later, Pasifika students, focussed on how “they” inherently learn differently from other ethnicities, pathologised them as deficit and therefore destined to fail in mainstream education (Berryman et al., 2014). Four years later, Berryman (2018a) notes that educators themselves have “begun to modify the dominant power structure in education in search of students’ rights to the benefits from education promised to both Treaty partners under the Treaty of Waitangi” (para. 6). More recent attempts to address these educational gaps have moved towards reconceptualising what mainstream education values, through a Māori or Pasifika lens as a way of promoting success without assimilation (Ministry of Education [Ka Hikitia], 2008; Ministry of Education [Tapasā], 2018). These moves to disrupt the colonial system can be understood as moves towards decolonising education through Indigenising it.

Māori communities and their leaders have also looked to improve the outcome for their own children through processes of Indigenisation. In response to language loss and cultural erosion due in part to the colonising school system, Māori came together to form education models that supported Te Ao Māori. Total immersion preschools, Te Kōhanga Reo, opened in 1982 and primary schools, Kura Kaupapa Māori, in 1985 as a response to widespread loss of Te Reo Māori as a result of the assimilation through education that had occurred since the late 1800s. In English-medium schools, the Ministry of Education’s approach, with the support of academics, took the form of cultural competencies frameworks. Cultural competency frameworks such as *Ka Hikitia* (Ministry of Education, 2008) for teachers of Māori students and *Tāpasa* for teachers of Pasifika students (2018) from the Ministry of Education show an increased commitment at the highest levels of education to advocate for these marginalised groups. Berryman (2018a) explained the first iteration of *Ka Hikitia* in 2008 sought to assist Māori students experience equity and achievement as Māori and was developed out of solutions trialled by Māori communities and the educational system over the last 20 years. More recently, research by Rawiri Wright (Kenny, 2021) highlights that, perhaps culturally competent frameworks do assist in Māori achievement, as they found that students enrolled in Kura Kaupapa experienced National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) at higher rates than Māori who attend English-medium schools. He attributes this to the methodology and pedagogy that is rooted in the belief systems of Te Ao Māori.



## Indigenising relationships

Part of the process of decolonising educational practice is through the development of relationships from Indigenous perspectives. The co-chair of Te Rūnanga Nui o Ngā Kura Kaupapa Māori (the council that oversees Māori-immersion schools in Aotearoa), Rawiri Wright explained that, although there have been improvements in Māori student achievement in what he terms *majority culture* schools, the cultural gap between Māori students and their non-Māori teachers can be insurmountable (Kenny, 2021, para. 19). He believed “if there isn't sufficient cultural connection then those teachers are not going to get the best from those students” (Kenny, 2021, para. 20). He further believed that, unless there are “significant changes in what teachers do and how they do it, in terms of creating connections with those students, it's going to be probably more difficult to get those kids across the line” (Kenny, 2021, para. 20). While Māori are a different group to that of Pasifika, it is important to examine best practice for all students via a Māori lens. As tangata whenua (people of the land) and Treaty partners, Māori are entitled to access best practice. Not only are there moral and ethical responsibilities to ensure Indigenous people have equal access to education, but “the right to a high-quality and culturally respectful education for indigenous peoples is protected by a number of international human rights instruments” (Consentino, 2016, para. 7). In April 2010, the New Zealand government issued a statement of support for the United Nations' Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People. The declaration is a human rights document that outlines the right of all Indigenous Peoples to self-determination, culture and identity, education, economic development, religious customs, health and language (Te Puni Kōkiri, 2022).

A popular theme amongst academics advocating for Indigenising the education system has been encouraging teachers to engage with *culturally responsive* pedagogy. Berryman et al. (2018) suggest a pivot towards establishing what they term *cultural relationships* in order to engage responsively with the curriculum and pedagogy for teachers of Māori students (p. 4). They argued these relationships need to be reflective of the true intent of the Treaty of Waitangi: an equal transfer of knowledge and access to resources. In order to develop *true* cultural relationships, Berryman et al. (2018) suggested viewing these relationships in terms of mana orite. Simply stated, mana orite means equality. However, Berryman et al. (2018) made the distinction that, through this view, it is the responsibility of both parties to maintain the mana (prestige or authority) of the other and that the mana is inherently orite (equal). Russell Bishop and Mere Berryman (2006) explained that, in these contexts:

- power is shared;
- culture counts;
- learning is interactive and dialogic;

- connectedness is fundamental to relations;
- there is a common vision of excellence for Māori in education.

Berryman et al. (2014) espoused that, since the signing of The Treaty in 1840, the relationship between the Crown and Māori has been imbalanced. They explain cultural relationships require us to create spaces in which we:

- listen;
- open opportunities for sharing;
- nurture mind, body and spirit;
- build relationships that support mana and wellbeing.

The collaborative report, *Te Kura Huanui: The Treasures of Successful Pathways* (Education Review Office, 2021) report, found there were five key conditions across the Māori-medium education sector that ensured success:

- Mana Māori Motuhake – being Māori
- Tikanga Māori
- Whanaungatanga – relationships and connectedness
- Ako – teaching and learning
- Kanohi Whatakite – leaders as visionaries

Berryman et al. (2014) referred to whanaungatanga and explain, “it is only through relationships that we come to know what is in each other’s heads, hearts, and inner beings” (Berryman et al., 2018, p. 6). These descriptions of relationships are the essence of *lalaga* at Kedgley Intermediate. The similarities between what Berryman et al. (2014) described as best practice for effective relationships for teachers of Māori students has clear parallels in what is described in *Tāpasa* (Ministry of Education, 2018) as the values that underpin the majority of Pacific worldviews: spirituality, service, belonging, respect, leadership, reciprocal relationships, inclusion and *alofa* (love in the Sāmoan language).

As Kedgley Intermediate is made up of predominantly Pasifika learners, it is important to give significant weight to Pacific conceptualisation of the world and learning. *Le va* (Sāmoan) and *vā* (Tongan) are Pacific concepts that encapsulate the notion of relationality from a Pacific, yet predominantly Poly-centric, lens. Other cultures have similar concepts to *le va* including *wa* in Hawai’i, *mā* in Japan and in Aotearoa *wā* in Te Ao Māori. It is commonly translated as the “space-between” or the continual relationship between people and place (Engels-Schwazpaul, 2018, p. 3) *Le va*, is defined by art historian Bernida Webb-Binder (2009) as a “realm where personal and cultural stories of identity through space and time are imparted” (p. 27).

Le va relates to land and identity “via cosmological connections to place that underpins relational values and personhood for Sāmoans” (Refiti et al., 2021, p. 78). In addition, Sāmoan scholar and poet Albert Wendt (1996) states va “is the space between, the betweenness, not empty space, not space that separates but space that relates, that holds separate entities and things together in the Unity-that-is-All, the space that is context, giving meaning to things” (para. 15). Melani Anae (2007, as cited in Airini et al., 2010, p. 10) describes le va as a spatial way “of conceiving the secular and spiritual dimensions of relationships and relational order, that facilitates both personal and collective wellbeing”. ‘Ana Taufe’ulungaki (2004, as cited in Airini et al., 2010) explains that, in lea faka-Tonga (Tongan language), relationships are described by the concept of va or vaha’a which literally means space or space in between, but that “in Tongan communities, relationships or the space between any two individuals or groups, or between communities and nature, are defined by the context in which the interaction occurs” (p. 10).

Researchers attest that learning, through a Pasifika lens, “places a strong emphasis on optimal relationships in the va as the primary or pivotal philosophical and practical change-maker” (see Anae et al., 2001, as cited in Airini et al. 2010, p. 9). Before the space is readied for the learning, the va needs to be valued by all involved. Valuing and tending to le va is called teu le va (Gagana Sāmoa, Sāmoan language) or tauhi vā (lea faka-Tonga) as the valuing, nurturing or looking after of these relationships to achieve optimal outcomes for all stakeholders (Anae, 2007, as cited in Teu Le Va (Anae, 2010). Teu le va is the “caring for and valuing the va” (Anae, 2010). Wendt (in Webb-Binder) explains ‘ia teu le va’ is crucial, especially in cultures that “value group unity more than individualism, that perceive the individual person...in terms of va, relationships” (p. 27). The active cultivation of le va takes time and vulnerability from all parties in the space. The learning erodes when le va is not cultivated. The breakdown of le va is referred to as soli le va (trampling of le va) in Sāmoan.

We know that, for Pasifika students, relationships are a vital component of successful engagement in the learning process and that reciprocal relationships are a value that underpins most Pasifika cultures (Tapasā). *Ua Aoina le Manogi o le Lolo* (Amituanai-Toloa et al., 2009) stated that improving schooling for Pasifika students requires teachers to form “strong emotional relationships” as well as having strong “instructional attributes”, having high expectations, seeing education as service-orientated and a positive affect (p. viii). In the context of Kedgley Intermediate, respect for fa’a Sāmoa, anga faka-Tonga and te ao Māori is enacted through the culture of lalaga and le va. In the following section, we document our experiences at Kedgley Intermediate before we created lalaga, our experiences trialling lalaga over the next few years and the introduction of the core values. We use our experiences with lalaga that was born out of the specific needs of our school to illustrate how we have addressed stereotypes around success and Indigenous students.

## Lalaga

Lalaga began in a meeting with a student, their mother and the school's social worker in 2017. The student had reported that they were being bullied and, as a result, was feeling unsafe at school. At the end of the meeting, Pelu asked the mother why her daughter had told the social worker and not her teacher about the bullying. The mother said her daughter didn't feel comfortable sharing with her teacher because she felt they didn't have a relationship. This teacher was high performing amongst the staff and had a reputation for being able to build real relationships with the students in their class. It drove home for Pelu the realisation that all students needed to be connected to adults in the school, otherwise there was the potential for students who were quiet, well-behaved and achieving well academically, to fall through the cracks in a classroom. The information learned in the meeting, coupled with the concerns of an eroding culture, set off alarm bells for Pelu. He did not want another year to pass as tumuaki with students experiencing bullying and feeling as though they had nowhere to turn.

Pelu made the decision to try something different, something he thought might work. When visiting other intermediate schools in Auckland to see how they structured their learning, we became aware of mentoring groups that focused on academic outcomes. This was not an issue in 2017 at Kedgley Intermediate, however, the small group size that allowed a more one on one style in a school of over 700 students was a possible remedy to students not having strong relationships with adults in the school. For the rest of 2017, purposeful planning meetings with the senior leadership team occurred and focused on the logistics of creating a whole-school approach that allowed time for relationship building to occur. Pelu's teaching experience, personal pedagogy, and observation of mentoring programmes at other schools resulted in him creating and implementing lalaga as a whole-school approach that included students working in small groups during timetabled lalaga time. Lalaga was first trialled for a year in 2018.

In Year 7, when students enter our school, they are assigned a trusted adult who remains with them throughout their two years at Kedgley. Every adult in the school, except for one person in an administrative role, is responsible for a lalaga group. Each trusted adult meets with their 14–16 students for half an hour, three times a week. During this time, it is up to the group and their trusted adult to spend that time in a way that fosters the relationship between the students and the trusted adult. For the first year, trusted adults were given room to experiment with different types of activities. During the first year, there were differing levels of buy-in from staff. Throughout the first year, the senior leadership team made adjustments to the expectations as a result of what they were seeing around the school. Trusted adults who spent a lot of time playing games with their students were asked to include talanoa (discussion) into their lalaga time and vice versa. As we stand now, lalaga involves a

combination of games, team building activities and talanoa. Further, all students in the school provide feedback at least once a year about the connection they have with school staff and their trusted adult in particular. This decision was made to ensure lalaga continues to be effective at Kedgley, the needs of the students are being met and to provide staff with feedback about how they are meeting the expectations of their employment.

### Timeline of lalaga

**2017** – Meetings with staff to establish the current state of the school. The realisation that there was a need and want from staff, and a need for students to have better relationships within the school.

**2018** – Trial of lalaga Monday, Wednesday and Friday for the entire year. Throughout the year we discovered some teachers were using the time exclusively for playing games. It was recommended by senior leadership that at least one of the three sessions were used for discussion alone, or that a mixture of discussion and game was needed.

**2019** – Lalaga is solidified as part of the school structure and culture. Continued to re-evaluate the best practice for the school. Some teachers needed to work on opening up and speaking with students as people, others needed to focus on balancing game play and conversation. During 2018 and 2019, anecdotal evidence showed that students were disclosing more personal information and whānau situations than the preceding years to their teachers and other staff members. As a result, referrals to our in-school social worker increased.

### Development of core values

At Kedgley Intermediate in 2022, lalaga underpins everything we do, the learning, the structure of the day, curriculum, hiring decisions, staff professional development, and behaviour management systems. We found that, in 2019, the values that were becoming embedded in school culture due to the introduction and success of Lalaga, were fleshed out and developed into a set of core values for Kedgley Intermedia staff that reflected Bishop and Berryman's (2009) effective teaching profile for teachers of Māori students. The profile outlines the actions effective teachers use daily.

- Manaakitanga: Caring for students as Māori;
- Mana motuhake: Caring for the performance of Māori students;
- Ngā whakapiringatanga: Creating a secure, well-managed learning environment;
- Wānanga: Engaging in effective learning interactions with Māori students;
- Ako: Using a range of teaching strategies;

- Kotahitanga: Using student progress to inform future teaching practices.

Each element of an effective teacher underpins the Kedgley core values that we developed for our school. These values drive the culture of the staff and have become a daily reminder of their *why* – the reason they chose to become educators and work at Kedgley Intermediate. The creation of these values was an attempt to further embed *lalaga* at the school and for it to not rely on the foundation staff members staying at Kedgley. The core values were developed as a way to take *lalaga* from a three-day-a-week session, to a cultural norm within the school. Now, when new teachers commence employment at Kedgley, they sign a wall in the staffroom that has the core values on it as a visual reminder of the commitment they make when they join the teaching profession and, more specifically, the commitment to the students at Kedgley. We articulate Kedgley’s core values below.

**Figure 1:** Kedgley staff wall



### Lalaga, Leadership, and Laughter

This core Kedgley value is the real essence of lalaga and the foundation of our school culture. We know our connections are genuine through the weaving of long-lasting relationships staff have with students. I have had past students regularly reach out to old teachers and lalaga trusted adults and let them know about their achievements at high school, invite them to sporting championship games or ask for help with their school work. In Bishop and Berryman's (2009) effective teaching profile they refer to this principle as wānanga. They describe wānanga as "engaging in effective learning interactions with Māori students" through "a rich and dynamic sharing of knowledge" (p. 31). At Kedgley Intermediate School we first share our varied experiences, values and heritage, we clear the space for conversations about learning and curriculum.

NEG 9 (Education Counts, 2021b) aims for "increased participation and success by Māori through the advancement of Māori education initiatives, including education in te reo Māori, consistent with the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi. This goal starts to be achieved at Kedgley through our commitment to this core Kedgley value. We take the time to engage with students in a way that best serves their cultural needs.

### Lean on me

Lean on me is reflective of both the Pasifika value of reciprocity and the Māori value of manaakitanga (Bishop & Berryman, 2009). Mana refers to a person's authority and aki, "the building and nurturing of a "supporting and loving environment" where all students can be themselves (p. 30). Pelu anticipated that the development of lalaga would allow for students to get to know each other and their trusted lalaga adult better, and become more comfortable in the school environment.

Berryman (2018b) referenced the work of Sir Mason Durie to explain the role of educators in New Zealand, stating that it is our job to help our students protect and build their mauri. Durie (1999) articulated that, from a Te Ao Māori perspective, mauri ora "encompasses inner strength, vitality and a secure identity" (p. 3). Berryman quotes Durie as defining mauri ora as "when a person is engaged in positive relationships with others, feels a sense of belonging, is spiritually and emotionally strong, and is positive and energetic" (Berryman, 2018b). Berryman adds that the role of teachers is to "move students from positions of mauri noho (languishing) to mauri ora (wellness and vitality)" (p. 3). We believed that in the years leading up to lalaga, our Māori and Pasifika students' experiences within our English-medium school left them, and the school, firmly in a state of mauri noho.

In 2019, the Ministry still required all schools in Aotearoa to meet the National Education Goals (NEG). NEG 2 stated that schools must ensure “equality of educational opportunity for all New Zealanders, by identifying and removing barriers to achievement” (Education Counts, 2021b). *Lean on me and lalaga* was one way in which Kedgley aimed to meet this NEG. By cultivating relationships that are genuine and focus on the wellbeing of all students in the way they require, it was anticipated that teachers will be one step closer to identifying and removing barriers to achievement. By cultivating relationships that are genuine and focus on wellbeing NEG7 promises “success in their learning for those with special needs by ensuring that they are identified and receive appropriate support” (Education Counts, 2021b). By designating Māori and Pasifika students as priority given lower levels of achievement and school retention, we use *lalaga* to address their individual needs in order to address the wider educational ones. Through taking time to understand how to best support and learn aside Māori and Pasifika learners in *lalaga*, teachers are partaking in their professional responsibility to uphold National Education Goals.

### **Infinity and beyond**

*Lalaga* works to develop relationships and help to break down unconscious bias. In Bishop and Berrymans’ (2009) effective teaching profile, they refer to this principle as *mana Motuhake*. They describe *mana Motuhake* as “the development of a personal or group identity” (p. 30). In essence, *mana Motuhake* describes the creation of a *whānau* environment within the class ensuring an equal balance of power. In a *whānau*, the power is shared because “you know who they are and they know about you” (p. 30). In their research, Bishop and Berryman found that “teachers get what they expect of Māori students” (p. 30). Low expectations equate to low achievement. Assuming the best of educators in the New Zealand context, any low expectations are a result of an unconscious, rather than explicit, bias. An unconscious bias can be defined, as it was by the University of California’s Office of Diversity and Outreach (n.d.), as prejudices in favour or against a group that “individuals for outside their own conscious awareness” (para. 3). *Lalaga* works to develop relationships and help to break down unconscious bias as staff and students get to know each other.

### **Yeah, nah...**

The mindset required by staff in adopting *lalaga* as a foundation to their professional practice, can require a shift in thinking for some. Our core Kedgley value encourages this thinking to occur. Berryman and Bishop’s (2009) effective teaching profile’s *kotahitanga* and *ako* give us the pedagogy to do so. Berryman and Bishop describe *kotahitanga* as a collaborative response to a shared goal or using student progress to inform future teaching practice and *ako* as a teaching–learning strategy that



promotes rich dialogue between parties (p. 31). In short, Yeah, nah asks Kedgley staff members to challenge themselves to adapt to the students in front of them.

## Conclusion

Fundamental to the dramatic positive shift in school culture at Kedgley Intermediate over the last five years, is the disruption to the traditional colonial education system through le va and lalaga. At Kedgley Intermediate, the implementation of lalaga as the foundation to the school culture was the first step in Indigenising relationships within the school, Indigenising the environment and Indigenising the culture of the school. Through creating an environment that reflects the cultural values of the majority of the students, we have created an environment that is increasingly attracting staff members who reflect the students that the school serves. Research shows that when the institution reflects the students it serves, incidents of macro and micro-exclusions decrease (Mayeda et al., 2014). Indigenising relationships at Kedgley Intermediate School has helped improve the relational space between staff and students, changed the way in which behaviour problems are dealt with and has created a safe place for the students we serve.

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