
Telling tales on the tail: One school's journey towards cultural responsiveness

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Abstract:

Pasifika peoples have long been tellers of tales. It is one of the ways our knowledge and wisdom is passed down from generation to generation. When it comes to the education of Pasifika students in Aotearoa, our tale is often defined by a tail of another sort – ‘the long brown tail’ of underachievement. The ‘tail’ is a reference to how Pacific Islands’ students are over-represented in the bottom of educational statistics in Aotearoa. My masters research completed in 2015 gave voice to the lived experiences of students from *above* the tail, and in particular gave voice to what they perceived as effective teacher actions and dispositions. Effective teachers nurtured students’ academic and cultural identities and as such were considered culturally responsive. Of particular significance was the manner in which culturally responsive teachers increased their influence on student engagement and achievement. These teachers operated from a strong sense of agency and on a foundational belief that their students also had agency in teaching and learning. Participants did encounter culturally responsive teachers, but it was the exception and not the rule.

This article is a reflection on the findings of the ‘tales from above the tail’ and leading our school journey towards a culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy. There have been significant culture shifts in the organisation to position our school and teaching staff to deliver a curriculum that is responsive to the identities of our local community. The work towards making cultural responsiveness the rule is definitely a journey. The challenge is to continually question our own deeply seated colonised thinking to give freedom to indigenising what and how we teach.

My tala (story)

I am the product of my grandparents' prayers and my parents' migrant dreams. Born in Samoa, my first 23 months of life were spent in the village of Salua, Manono Tai, where my mum, Fiapaipai Pela Mailata, grew up. My dad, Leaiataua Letauā Taupa'ū Vaisagote Ioane, had a mere 20-minute walk from his home in Faleū to meet my mum.

I was born to teachers, so you could say teaching is in my blood. My parents made the move to Aotearoa in 1971 and left their teaching jobs for the factory floor, for dad, and to clean inner-city high-rise buildings, for mum. When I was at intermediate school, my mum re-trained as a teacher and started teaching again in time for my brother to start school. My siblings and I were brought up in Grey Lynn, Auckland before the *yuppies* (middle-class people) moved in. My sister and I were schooled at our local schools while our younger brother attended school with mum for primary and then intermediate. When he started high school, we joked that mum would find a job there.

I like doing things on my own terms. I did well at high school but ended up dropping out. Then on a family trip to Samoa, I decided I would stay there and finish high school. My parents tried to make me come home with them, but I refused. After high school in Samoa, I returned home and worked for a while. When I told my mum I wanted to be a teacher she said, "Don't do it, it's too much work." After she passed away, it was then that I decided to apply. My deputy principal (DP) role came about because the person in the acting DP role kept telling everyone that the job was already hers. I applied for the job only to rock the boat, never thinking our principal would eventually offer me the job. Even turning my back on the doctorate after I completed my master's in 2015 was a "nah I will do it my way" moment.

Another constant at my core is the belief that teaching is my calling; so perhaps it is in my blood. My first year of teaching was in 1996, the same year our youngest of three children was born. I have always taught in South Auckland and served communities predominantly filled with people who look and sound like me. As a school leader, I describe myself as a teacher with the most difficult class in the school, the adults. As my scope of influence has grown, my purpose has not changed a lot: to grow people who lead learning, their own and others', so that learning can be transformative, in the spirit and in the flesh.

A journey towards making the exception the rule

In 2015 I completed a master's thesis entitled "Tails from above the tail: Samoan students' experiences of teacher actions as culturally responsive pedagogy." The research was based on the voices of nine Samoan young people who had successfully navigated their way through compulsory schooling in

Aotearoa. The aims were two-fold. Firstly, to challenge the narrative of the *long, brown tail* of underachievement; to posit the fact that not all Samoan students were in the tail of underachievement. Secondly, the research aimed to try to dig deeper into the teacher actions that successful Samoan students considered to be supportive of their learning.

At the end of my research, the *praxis-sioner* in me declared (to myself) that I wanted to return to school and put the research into practice. Who did I even think I was? The research showed that “while participants did encounter culturally responsive teachers, it was the exception and not the rule” (Fasavalu, 2015, p. i). My intention was to lead the learning of teachers so that culturally responsive pedagogy would be *the rule*, well at least in the spaces that I might have influence.

What follows is a reflection on the findings of the ‘tales from above the tail’ and leading our school journey towards a culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy. By no means are we there yet, wherever that is. Cultural responsiveness is not a tick-box exercise. If it was, it would not still only live in pockets around Aotearoa classrooms. We know that it is an ever-evolving journey towards a way of being.

The participants and their *meaalofa* (gifts)

The genesis of this research came out of a wondering: why is it that some Pasifika students succeed at school and others don’t? What is it that teachers can do better or differently that will improve Pasifika student success? This research also came out of a frustration: that our story in the education in Aotearoa is described, and I think defined, by the term “the long *brown* tail of underachievement” (Aumua, 2013; Rees, 2012; Smith, 2009). By continually linking underachievement with Māori and Pasifika peoples, underachievement has become part of the identity of brown people in Aotearoa – it has become part of their “master narrative” (Montecinos, 1995, as cited in Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). So, even when a brown student succeeds, they are still rendered *the tail* by the mere fact that they are brown.

The layers of assumptions inherent in master narratives (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002) have caused debates about the causes of underachievement of Pasifika students to be surrounded by deficit theorising – about the students, their families and their teachers (Bishop et al., 2003; Ferguson et al., 2008; Gorinski & Fraser, 2006; Seve-Williams, 2013). Master narratives of Pasifika students in Aotearoa would say they come with poverty, underachievement, overcrowded and literacy-poor homes, strengths in sports and singing and dancing, filled with stereotypes galore and more than enough deficit theorising.

A major aim of my master's research was to challenge the predominant master narrative by highlighting our *actual* master narratives. Telling stories of lived experiences not often told challenges the majoritarian story, and creates an oppositional discourse (hooks, 2014). I see this as a duty, what a Samoan ought to do, as Fetaui Iosefo challenges, "we within the margins must make visible the voices from the margins" (Iosefo & Aiga Ethics Komiti, 2021, p. 45).

The lived realities of the participants in my master's study was a tale of parental and family sacrifice, of reciprocal pride, of a pioneering spirit, of service to the aiga and community, of strength, agency, determination, of "talking back" to the identities placed upon them by the dominant culture (hooks, 2014). These were, and are, the true narratives of our peoples. Those of us who continue to serve our communities will recognise all of these traits sitting in our classrooms and learning centres today.

Student identity was central to the findings of the research. Sr Vitolia Mo'a, in a talk given to University of Auckland Samoan students (2018), described identity development as a sense of *becoming* rather than a static destination. She likened *faasinomaga* as identity, comparing it to tangled strands of wool and that the process of becoming was one where the tangled mess was gently coaxed, unknotted and made sense of, through the act of *sufisufi* (unearthing) and *lalaga* (weaving). *Faasinomaga* (identity) can be seen as having multiple strands and often we may *sufisufi* (gently unearth) one or two strands and begin to *lalaga* (weave) them into other strands, while sometimes ignoring another knotty bit of our *faasinomaga* (identity).

There were two distinct strands of identities that were discussed in the research findings. The participants came with a strong cultural identity, a sense of who they are. They also came with an academic identity, a sense of agency, self-motivation and resilience in their education. While I described these strands of identity as separate, they are in fact *lalaga* or weaved within the *aiga* (family). *Faasinomaga* (identity) as a process of becoming was evident in the ways that participants reflected on their schooling journey. Who they were in Year 9 was very different to who they were by the time they graduated despite some teachers not allowing them the right to "self-identify" (Siteine, 2010). While my master's research describes those strands of identity, it is without doubt that there are multiple strands of identity that the research does not explore. My application of *faasinomaga* (identity) as multiple strands is best (re)presented in this paper in its plural form as identities.

The cultural identity of the participants comprised the unique individual personality traits and the familial cultural values, aspirations and histories as well as their ethnic identity. The term *culture* encompasses all that makes up the person (Fasavalu, 2015 p. 66). One's cultural identity is inclusive of, but is not limited by, one's ethnic identity. Conceptualising a *cultural* identity as opposed to an *ethnic* identity is particularly useful because of the heterogeneity of, firstly, the group Pasifika, and secondly, of each of the individual Pacific nations themselves.

Academic identity is the participant “wanting to do well at school and seeing themselves as smart” (Webber, 2012, p. 13). Participants saw themselves as capable of achieving the goals set in negotiation with their families. They had a strong sense of agency and talked about their active role in their learning journey as enhancers and/or inhibitors to their success. Their ability to contemplate their educational experiences and talk about what did and did not help in their learning is reflective of an academic identity; an awareness of themselves as learners. Participants’ desires to achieve at school paired with self-efficacy led to student agency in their own educational outcomes.

Both cultural identity and academic identity were birthed, defined and nurtured in the *aiga* (family). Cultural identity was based on family values, aspirations and histories and included their Samoan-ness as defined within their family. Academic identity was linked to the family aspirations and interlinked with the migrant dreams of their parents. One of the main reasons for Samoan migration to Aotearoa was for the educational opportunities seen as better than in Samoa (Siope, 2011; Wendt Samu, 2010). Academic identity started at home with the expectations of parents that their offspring could, and would, experience success at school. Family values included academic achievement, therefore cultural identity and academic identity were inextricably linked for the participants in this study.

The teachers as effective practitioners

Culturally responsive pedagogy encompasses the notion that students bring their culture – their ways of knowing, understanding, learning and being – with them to school. Then teachers are responsible for responding in a way that positively influences students’ learning (Fasavalu, 2015). Overseas and Aotearoa theorists cite many research projects which call for a culturally responsive pedagogy for Indigenous learners (Chu et al., 2013; Coxon et al., 2002; Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

From the research participants’ perspective, teachers enacted culturally responsive pedagogy in three ways: (1) they built and maintained a *va tapu-ia* (sacred relational space) with students; (2) they were competent teachers with high curriculum content and pedagogical knowledge; and (3) they were focused on students’ success. These actions came from an agentic belief about themselves as teachers and their students as learners.

Faasinomaga as identities is primarily relational; it is both personal and mutual (Mo’a, 2015). Inherent in *faasinomaga* (identity) is the *va* (relational space) because anything relational has a *va*. *Va* recognises the interconnectedness “between man and all things, animate and inanimate” (Efi, 2007, as cited in Anae, 2010, p. 222). There are many types of *va* (Tuagalu, 2008). The *va* that most resonates with the

teacher–learner relationship is *va tapu-ia*, which literally means sacred relationships (Efi, 2007, as cited in Anae, 2010, p. 12). The *va tapu-ia* is a space made sacred (Anae, 2010). The *va tapu-ia* must be deliberately nurtured and maintained. In the context of the classroom, the teacher is primarily responsible for ensuring the *va tapu-ia* is kept sacred.

Looking after the *va* (relational space) is described as *tausi le va* (care for the relational space) (Refiti, 2009), or the more commonly known term *teu le va* (restore the relational space) (Anae, 2010; Wendt, 1996). The difference in terms is subtle and profound. Both terms are verbs or actions. *Tausi* means to care for, or to look after. *Teu* has also been attributed these same meanings with an additional meaning of *to tidy up or make right*. It is to this additional meaning that the late Amituanai-Toloa (2006) draws particular attention. Implied in the notions of tidying up and making right of a relationship is the idea that there was a soiling of the *va* (relational space), there was something wrong with the *va* that now needs to be restored or made right. Restorative practices are inherent in maintaining the *va tapu-ia* (sacred relational space)

Culturally responsive teachers were able to dynamically navigate the *va tapu-ia* (sacred relational space) and were able to *tausi* (look after) and *teu* (restore) the *va tapu-ia* as needed. This is the way that effective teachers nurture student’s cultural identity (Fasavalu, 2015). Teachers proactively connected with students as people. Participants were clear that the responsibility lay with the teacher and that teachers who showed genuine effort and a desire to get to know them, even when their strategies were lame, got credit in their eyes. The *va tapu-ia* was a respectful space where teachers shared power with students and genuinely took on student voice. These teachers also respected their students enough to tell us straight when things were not going well. Participants also found that teachers who demonstrated an ethic of care about them as a person but also as a learner by checking in about how they were going and about how their studies were going and providing support when able. This *va tapu-ia* is the intersection of a “learning focused relationship” (Absolum, 2006) and “a family like context for learning” (Bishop, 2019). The *va tapu-ia* proactively sought after by the teacher is *mafana* (warm) without losing sight of the fact that the purpose of the *va tapu-ia* is learning.

Culturally responsive teachers were effective practitioners who knew their content and how to deliver it in an engaging way that caused learning. Knowing the content was more than today’s lesson, it was about where this lesson fits in the bigger picture and how it was preparing students for the next stage of learning both in subject area and in the next year level or schooling sector (Fasavalu, 2015). Participants saw engagement based on need; the expectation was that the teacher was going to notice what they needed and respond appropriately. Sometimes it was to go over learning that hadn’t stuck, sometimes give them the opportunity to practise new learning, and sometimes to move on. Sometimes it also meant holding students to account when they were not doing what was needed to learn. Participants also saw teachers managing the learning environment as key to their engagement because an ill-managed

classroom distracted them from their learning. These actions nurtured student's academic *faasinomaga* (identity).

Culturally responsive teachers demonstrated the above capabilities from an agentic belief about themselves and their students. They were passionate about continual growth of their teaching practice and the continual progress their students were capable of (Fasavalu, 2015). These beliefs nurtured cultural identity because they were aligned with the beliefs and aspirations of the *aiga* (family). Believing in the agentic potential of students also nurtured student academic identity because it empowered students to be active in their learning. These beliefs were evidenced in the high expectations teachers held of themselves as teachers and of their learners. Teachers created learning spaces where students could make mistakes, and mistakes were seen as an important part of learning. Teachers were aware that learning would take time and supported students in their learning and in managing the other important parts of their lives so that they could focus on learning.

Although in my master's research these teacher actions were described under different themes, it is evident how interrelated they are. All of these elements worked together to create teacher credibility in the eyes of the participants. Teachers who knew their stuff but could not, or did not want to manage the *va tapu-ia* (sacred relational space) didn't have credibility. Teachers who had a good relationship with students but did not cause learning didn't have credibility. Teachers who had both those attributes but did not believe in the agency of their students didn't have credibility. Teacher credibility was the currency for positive influence on student learning, and beyond.

The setting for this *tala*

I became the principal of Waimahia Intermediate School in Term 4 of 2016. Waimahia Intermediate is located in Clendon, Auckland. Our school population is made up of 36% Māori, 26% Samoan, 13% Tongan, 7% Cook Island Māori, 6% Fijian, 4% Indian, 3% Middle Eastern, 2% each of Niuean, Filipino, NZ European and 1% other Asian. Our teaching team is reflective of our school population with mostly Māori and/or Pasifika heritage.

I was fortunate in that I inherited a school with a really strong sense of who they wanted to be. In fact, it was one of the things that attracted me to the job. The Board of Trustees had already re-named the school to “bring history and honour back to the area by honouring mana whenua as its first settlers” (Ponika-Rangi, 2013, p. 1). Connections with *Tainui* (Waikato tribe) as *mana whenua* were further strengthened when, with *iwi* (tribal) permission, a visionary statement from Kīngi Tāwhiao was adopted as the school *whakatauki*; *Māku anō e hanga tōku nei whare* ~ I, myself, shall fashion my own house.

Core values, described as *pou* (post) in the *whare* (dwelling), are *mana* (prestige, authority, spiritual power), *manaakitanga* (kindness, generosity) and *mātauranga* (knowledge and wisdom).

Perhaps it is not surprising that I was called to a school with a *faavae* (foundation) so clearly linked to my research interests and personal aspirations. It is, after all, an absolute must that the leader of an organisation believes in the values and vision of that organisation. The move towards a mana-enhancing, self-determining school that centred Indigenous *mātauranga* (knowledge and wisdom) had started before my appointment and I saw my job was one of strengthening this vision and building the infrastructure and practices around it so that we all were working towards it.

Where to start was a real quandary. I have to admit that one of the factors for our starting place was where I was at as a leader. To be completely honest, I was overwhelmed. As a very new principal, the strands of my leadership *faasinomaga* (identities) were being tested to breaking point. The leadership learning curve was steep and included areas that I had had little real experience in and even less passion for. Let's just say my 'property manager', 'chief financial officer', and 'human resources manager' identities were definitely a tangled mess and there were several strands too many to unravel at the same time. There was more frustrated tugging of those strands of my *faasinomaga* and way less *sufisufi* (gentle unearthing) going on. I just wanted to be a leader of learning. As a deputy principal I had had the luxury of being able to focus on teaching and learning, so it is what I knew well.

Building a va tapu-ia

The first term of my principalship was spent listening and observing. I met with all staff to get a sense of where the school was at from various perspectives within the organisation and what they saw as priorities and ways forward. I had inherited a grieving staff who had lost their principal when he had died suddenly. Although this context did bring its own intricacies that I was mindful of, I'd like to think I always would have started with building the *va tapu-ia* (sacred relational space) with who I saw as my class. I was new to this school and new to this part of Manurewa. Who was I to think that I knew best what was needed? I found that people were hungry for change but were sceptical of what that might look like.

I spent time in the classroom getting a sense of what learning looked like from students' perspectives in different classrooms and in different programmes. I can remember being in one class and you could hear a pin drop the entire 20 minutes I was there. When I asked students about learning there were often awkward silences and descriptions of learning where the teacher was in sole control of teaching and learning and students' did not appear to understand the relevance of what they were learning except that it might help them in high school.

While *va* (relational space) needs to be built between people, I believe it is also important that we build and maintain a *va* with the vision and values, with the *whenua* (land) and *wairua* (spirit) of the community we serve. Particularly when we need to enact those every day. At the start of 2017 we started with deepening our *va* with our school identity. *Mana* (prestige, authority, spiritual power) is our first core value, so getting in touch with the *mana* of our school was a great starting point for vision casting. It was a deliberate signal that the changes that were coming would be aligned with who we aspired to be as a school. As a staff we climbed our *maunga* (mountain), *Matukutureia*; we looked out over our *moana* (ocean), *te manukanuka o Hoturoa*; we visited two parts of our *awa* (river), *Puhinui*, and we listened to the *pūrakau* (stories) of *Manurewa* at our local *marae* (communal and sacred meeting ground).

Learning-focused relationships are fundamental to teaching and learning (Absolum, 2006; Bishop, 2019). The first professional learning we engaged in started with how to build learning-focused relationships in our classrooms, based on the work of Michael Absolum (2006). We wanted teachers to learn to manage the climate of the classroom and how to foster and build a learning-focused relationship with students so there was shared ownership and responsibility for learning. One enlightening piece of the work was contrasting a ‘caring teacher’ and a ‘learning-focused teacher’. The *talanoa* (conversations) showed that most teachers thought that their relationships with students needed to focus on addressing any affective issues before learning could happen.

We have worked to ensure more than one adult that they have a *va tapu-ia* (sacred relational space) with; more than one person who knows them well, will check in regularly with them and advocate for them when needed. Firstly, the classroom teacher, who is responsible for up to four days of the learning week. Our students also belong to one of four *whānau* (families). *Whānau* provides other adults with whom our students get to interact with regularly. Last year we introduced *Lalaga*, scheduled time for ‘weaving’ relationships, which we learned about from another intermediate school who had introduced *Lalaga* to promote a *va mafana* (warm relational space) between a small group of students and a significant adult in the school (Leaupepetele, 2022 [this issue]).

Mana-enhancing is a term we use often. When we think of our core value *manaakitanga* (kindness, generosity) we think *mana-aki*, to lift *mana*. The relationship between teachers and students must be a *mana*-enhancing one for both parties even when the *va tapu-ia* (sacred relational space) is soiled. The measure of the strength of any relationship is what happens when there is conflict. I can remember the early days when a teacher tried to convince me that incorrect uniform was a stand-down offence. Now, when there is a breakdown in the *va*, most teachers will work at *teu le va*, (restoring the relational space) and we support our students to enable them to do the same.

Towards a culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy

At the time of the research and in the early presentations of the research findings much was made (by me and those who came to the presentations) of the teacher actions that would nurture cultural and academic identity. I think this is indicative of what I have experienced as a teacher and as a leader of teachers – we all want to get to the action as quickly as possible – “what can I do to fix what I am doing so that my student can learn?” (On a less generous day, I think the question may have been more like “what can I do to fix this kid so they can learn?”)

Our first focus for teaching and learning was *what* students were learning. We looked beyond the achievement objectives and focused on bringing to life the principles of the New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) (2007). We started making changes to our curriculum content to make it more relevant for our students. A project and problem-based approach to inquiry was introduced with projects that would impact our students, school and community. We visited schools like ours to find a more relevant way of teaching maths that didn’t involve the constant requests to buy more text books.

For teaching practice to shift, teachers needed quality feedback (Absolum, 2006). Professional learning was undertaken to learn ways to use student voice as feedback and to raise our assessment literacy so that we would begin to notice, recognise and respond appropriately to what students were saying and doing in class. Leaders learned how to have open to learning conversations to help us have difficult conversations that would support a shift in practice in a mana-enhancing way.

Over time, as we learned what worked for our students, our board and leadership team developed some fundamental *faavae* (foundational) documents that hold us true to what we believe about teaching and learning for our community. Our curriculum framework outlines the role of different stakeholders in shaping teaching and learning for our *tamaiti* (children, Samoan language). Included in the framework are our theories of learning, what we know works for our students:

- that learning is a social activity and knowledge and understanding are constructed by learners in relationship with others;
- that learning focused relationships is key; students bring their own cultural capital and their identities are central to what is relevant;
- that students apply skills in integrated rather than isolated ways and make sense of new learning by connecting it to prior learning; and
- that for learning to be effective students must own the learning process.

The way we conceptualise our curriculum and teaching and learning is described using the analogy of a *faletele* (big house). Our core values are our *poutū* (pillars) which are deeply embedded in our

foundation of relationships within a *va tapu-ia* (sacred relational space). The dome-like *taualuga* (roof) of our *faletele* (*big house*) we liken to our graduate profile, and it is held up by and inclusive of our core values. Our graduate profile was developed through several *talanoa* (conversations) and *hui* (meetings in Te Reo Maori) and encompass the aspirations of our school community. Supporting the outer edge of our circular roof are *pou-lalo* (lower posts). The *pou-lalo* is our curriculum framework which encompasses our theories of learning and forms the basis of our pedagogy. Between each of the *pou-lalo* are *pola* (blinds). *Pola* can be raised or lowered as needed to provide shelter from the elements. These *pola* are our curriculum content, learning areas, programmes of learning. Several sections of *pola* can be lowered at the same time around the *faletele* which is likened to our integrated approach to learning. *Pola* are made from woven pandanus leaves like our local curriculum is woven through our national curriculum to provide meaningful contexts for learning.

An expectation of the New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) is that the curriculum reflects and values the histories and traditions of all its people and that students' identities and languages are recognised and affirmed. The Ministry of Education uses the term *local curriculum* to describe how each school is contextualising the national curriculum through what the local community's aspirations, special characteristics and needs are. The local curriculum is an exercise of untangling these strands of *faasinomaga* (identity) that make up the school context. What is important to learn for each school? The answer to this lies in the identities of the people the school serves.

Mana, identity, *faasinomaga* was a constant focus by making it part of our curriculum for both staff and students. We now start every school year with a *mana*-focused staff-only day where we expand or reinforce our understanding of the *mana* of our calling as a school and the *mana* of the community we serve. Through this work we try to connect with people who have the experiential understanding and historical ties with the knowledge, and we try to connect with the *whenua* (land). Over the years we have spent time at our local *marae* (communal and sacred meeting ground), walked our school *pepeha* (identity and relational ties to the land we are from), learned the *pūrakau* (stories) at each of our *kāhui ako* (community of learning) schools, learned about the *kingitanga* (King Movement) at *Ngaruawahia*, and spent a day with the Polynesian Panthers.

Starting the year as a staff, learning and reinforcing our individual and collective *mana* is crucial to keeping us grounded in who we are and who we aspire to be. With 89% of our school population of Māori and/or Pacific nations descent, we have a commitment to Indigenising our curriculum. Lilomaiva Ema Siope's *wero* (challenge) that, as teachers, "we are duty bound to ensure that our children ... learn in their schools about their amazing wayfinding ancestors and their core values ... to have a solid foundation of their stories to hold them steady and true in the changing world. This is not their privilege, it is their right" (2018).

We start with knowing our students and their histories well. We learn each other's name stories, we learn about the ways we uphold each other's *mana* and the *mana* of our class, *whanau* (house) and school. We learn the *pūrakau* (stories) of our *rohe* (local area) and the important *tupuna* like *Kīngi Tāwhiao* and *Mahia*. Together we learn the important *pūrakau* of our *rohe*, *mana whenua*, *iwi*. Because our school *whakatauki* (proverb, saying) is from *Kīngi Tāwhiao*, we learn about the *kingitanga* (King Movement) and the context surrounding *Kīngi Tāwhiao*'s vision for his people. Our students learn about *rongoā* (Māori medicinal remedies), wayfinding, the star compass, the *Mau* movement, *Polynesian Panthers*. They have learned about the Doctrine of Discovery and terra nullius and other such legal means of oppressing our people.

With the focus on shifting the content of our teaching and learning and the structures we put in place to support shifts in teacher practice towards being more effective – did teacher practice shift? Yes, to varying degrees. Like with children, learners' progress is not consistent between learners. Some teachers made significant shifts in their practice and others didn't make as many shifts. I also think that some teachers had more shifts to make than others and so there was a sense of being overwhelmed. In hindsight, perhaps as a leadership team the pace of new learning for some teachers was too fast and there was not enough time for them to embed new practices.

As I write that sentence, I am reminded that, in my research, one of the elements of being a good teacher identified by participants was to “give us time to do it by ourselves” and that “when I'm learning something hard, the best way for a teacher to help me is to be patient” (Fasavalu, 2015, p. 54, 62). Yes, as leaders wanting to create change and improvement, we need to remember that learning takes time, even when we are adult professionals.

More important than whether teacher practice shifts happened is the question did student learning improve? Yes! After two years of professional development, we saw significantly more students making expected and accelerated progress in reading (+24%), writing (+6% then another 5% after 2 years) and mathematics (+29%). Numbers of those making progress were maintained or increasing each year until Covid-19 changed the teaching and learning landscape in Aotearoa.

Those results are great. But the varying degrees of teacher practice shifts were also reflected in the student data from class to class. There is room for improvement so that all our learners are experiencing the learning progress they are entitled to.

Towards an agentic disposition

As leaders, our role is to create a shift in the hearts and minds of the people we serve and ourselves. Only then will there be sustainable change in our everyday practice. What does it mean to create a shift

in our hearts and minds? In essence, we were undergoing a process of disidentification, a process of critiquing the thought structures built through our experiences of being colonised and living as a minority within a settler colony (Chawla & Atay, 2017). The construction and deconstruction of identity happens within the *va* (relational space) (Siope & Aiga Ethics Komiti, 2021).

One of the barriers we identified to building *va tapu-ia* (sacred relational space) and improving teacher practice was shifting the thinking of our team, including our own. Our school curriculum framework says that teachers are to “actively discard deficit thinking” but deficit thinking was, and is still, present, albeit less and less. When having discussions around student assessment information, some teachers attribute lack of progress to the child’s lack, while attributing student positive progress to their teaching.

While designing learning with an Indigenous lens we realised that one of our barriers was our own colonised brain. Colonised thinking is ever-present. When sharing about learning after a language week, many of our students shared that Pacific nations were “discovered” in such and such a year. I can remember cringing outwardly, that our students were still exposed to that thinking and that teachers hadn’t corrected that Wikipedia *fact*.

Our lack of content knowledge about how colonisation happened in Aotearoa and the Pacific was very evident when we were planning a project for our students about first encounters with pākeha. One of us talked about the Doctrine of Discovery and what it allowed colonists to do and there were many blank faces around the room. From that conversation and other observations came a teacher project-based learning to inquire into “how colonisation has affected my thinking”.

This was a lesson in how to sit in discomfort without armour (Brown, 2021). We committed to naming things no matter how uncomfortable – victim blaming, racism, bias, white supremacy, white fragility, patriarchy, deficit thinking, colourism, privilege, and imposter syndrome. Naming things was really confronting but if we can’t say the words, how can we recognise it, actively call it out, proactively do better?

We committed to undergo deep reflection, to hold up the mirror to our own experiences as consumers of, and producers within, our education system in Aotearoa. We pulled apart comments teachers had made about us and comments we had made about students. There were many uncomfortable silences as realisations hit home. It was a good and timely reminder that the oppressed can and do sometimes become the oppressors (Freire, 1996).

One of our teachers shared that she could see that colonisation is like “the matrix” (in the movie). It is there all the time, but we don’t always see it. In the *talanoa* (conversation) that ensued, another teacher said that being neutral about things like the Treaty wasn’t really neutral. We saw with fresh eyes how

some of us had been and continue to be othered in our schooling (and society) and that we have been party to doing this to our students through the curriculum.

Our leadership team has been slow-reading *Wayfinding Leadership* which supports leaders to think and enact leadership from an Indigenous perspective (Spiller et al., 2015). In our *talanoa* (conversation) after each chapter we have marvelled at how enculturated in the western way of thinking we are. Even with most of us being Indigenous beings and all of us believing how *woke* we are, the special context of our school and the *whakatauki* (proverb, saying) and the *faletele* (big house) etc., changing our mindsets is hard when the default is to think from a western viewpoint. Shifting our thinking is definitely a work in progress.

The moral of the *tala*

The questions that remain are:

- Do we nurture the cultural and academic identities of our students?
- Do we enhance teachers' capability and capacity to continually learn to be effective teachers, who know their stuff and cause learning in an engaging way?
- Do we have content that is relevant to who our students are and who they strive to become?
- Are our teachers agentic in their own growth as teachers?
- Do our teachers believe in and grow the agency of our students?
- Are we changing the master narratives of and for our students?

I think I answered all of these questions at the start when I said that we are not *there* yet.

Certainly, our school culture has moved towards being a more culturally responsive school in its curriculum and pedagogy. What we are learning unapologetically privileges brown, Indigenous people of colour, and the knowledge and ways of being of brown, Indigenous, people of colour. This is not to say that we have eliminated all western thinking from our curriculum. But we are committed to presenting learning in a way that does not promote that western thinking is superior to Indigenous thinking. We have done this well in our project-based learning, literacy and maths. It is still in pockets in other parts of the curriculum, so we know there are learning areas that need more attention.

Our pedagogy has shifted too. *Va tapu-ia* (sacred relational space) is all important and we are continually looking at ways to enhance the *va tapu-ia* between ourselves and our students, their families and our wider community. Most of our work to date has been about teacher–learner relationships, with some focus on building a learning-focused relationship with students' families. Our parents support their child and turn up when needed, even when it's hard. We want to increase the opportunities for our *aiga* (families) to engage in the learning at school on their terms.

The culture shift can also be seen in what we value as learning and what we believe learning looks like. This is evidenced in the language of learning you will hear in our school every day. It is evidenced in the types of inquiries and learning our students engage in. It is evidenced in our sharing learning events with whānau that showcase learners who are confident in who they are now and are becoming. It is evidenced in the way we interact with our students and each other when the *va tapu-ia* (sacred relational space) is soiled. And it is beginning to be evidenced in what we include in our achievement data and how we measure it.

It is the phrase, “to varying degrees”, that keeps me up at night. From class to class the positive shifts towards a culturally responsive pedagogy varies. What creates the variance? People, the adults, us. The importance of teachers having an agentic disposition as the *faavae* (foundation) of their actions is crucial. Shifting mindsets was and is a critical part of making cultural responsiveness a way of being. I think we underestimated how hard it would be to shift hearts and minds. We underestimated how confronting we needed to be in order to start and maintain those shifts. And we underestimated how much time it would take to make new thinking and new practices our new default, the rule instead of the exception.

So, are we *there* yet? Yes and no. Yes, in that I do believe we have made being culturally responsive the rule at our school. No, because we aren’t there yet in terms of how well we enact that rule. I take heart in what Spiller et al. (2015, p. 163) say about being preoccupied with the destination:

For the wayfinder the ‘destination’ is not a scenario, vision, forecast or a future state.

It is a living conviction that requires the release of the potential in the moment

- and this is the place where the wayfinder leader works:

in the place of potential, the place between what is known and what is yet to be.

And so, we continue on in the *place of potential*.

Faafetai, ma ia manuia!

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