
Intentional leadership and *vā* critical shifts: A Samoan-Palagi school principal's *talanoa*

Stan Tiatia

[Samoan/Palagi from the villages of Taga, Savai'i] Tumuaki (Principal), Papatoetoe North Primary School, Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand.

Abstract

The paper is a leadership *talanoa* by a primary school principal of Samoan and Palagi heritages. The context of my *talanoa* is a descriptive account of my intentional practices, stories of my lived experiences, and contextual learnings aimed to shift school practices and structures so that Pasifika students succeed as Pasifika, a point clearly noted in the Tapasā policy. To prioritise the success of diverse *ākongā* in South Auckland, knowing and learning to work outside of the confines of school systems and governance processes within Aotearoa New Zealand schooling supported my work as a school principal and critical change agent. I write this paper using *talanoa*, the cultural practice of storying by (re)telling my leadership reflections and *ako* views as a Pasifika school leader. *Talanoa* and *vā* have been useful in my intentional practices.

Key words

School leadership, school principal, Pasifika/Pacific education, intentionality, *vā*, *Talanoa*

Introduction

Rarely are the stories of Pasifika school leaders evident in scholarly research and literature. I have certainly not come across a lot of *talanoa* written by Pasifika school leaders of their *ako* practices. My leadership story is of shifts, education shifts to be precise. Much like the somewhat invisible presence of Pasifika school leaders' voices and stories in education literature, I was unaware of this special issue

call for papers in the *Ethnographic Edge Journal* until the invitation to take part in the special issue came my way through word of mouth, from another Pasifika education leader. As a primary school principal passionate about inclusion, diversity, and social justice, I share my insights in this article alongside other Pasifika school leaders who also share their insights as part of the special issue. But before I do so, let me unfold my positionalities.

Positionalities: My whakapapa and upbringing

Positionalities have been defined as our social roles and responsibilities within our communities and in the wider society (Fasavalu & Reynolds, 2019). Whakapapa, like *gafa* (Samoan word for genealogy, see Pratt, 2007), matters in Aotearoa New Zealand *ako* which I define in this paper as encompassing, not only teaching and learning, but education as a whole. In other words, *ako* is not only about education at school but also learnings out in the community and at home. For Indigenous Pacific communities, *ako* is more than reading and writing at school, or teaching and pedagogies in the classroom, it is everything to do with education and learning that leads to the livelihood and flourishing of the collective and communities (Berryman & Eley, 2019; Si'ilata et al., 2017). In my view, this is often what is missing from the way education policies frame *ako* and its possibilities.

As to my relational positionalities, or the social roles and responsibilities I occupy, I story my humble beginnings as a school leader. I was born in Invercargill to a Samoan father and Palagi¹ mum. My father went down to the South Island from Tokoroa, a town in the Waikato region. He settled in Invercargill to work at Tiwai aluminium smelter, located in the South Island of Aotearoa New Zealand. During the late sixties and early seventies, although there were a number of Samoans who had moved to Tiwai, the prevalence of white Europeans was very noticeable. Like other Pacific people who grew up in Aotearoa New Zealand at the time, my father believed that it was unnecessary to have any Samoan language taught or spoken at home, so I had to be as Palagi as I could be. He thought it was the best way to move forward in the Southland community. Eventually, I got used to it. From there, I went into a boy's home because my father ended up in prison. Growing up in that boy's home led me to becoming a youth worker, and later I was challenged to become a teacher in 1993. So, I took it on. I then moved to Samoa for a few years, from 1998–1999, to learn more about my Samoan heritage and language. Whilst there, I taught at the Vaiala Beach School and later returned to Porirua in Wellington, based at an alternative school. I then went into the Ministry of Education's (MoE) national office under Trevor Mallard's leadership.

¹ Samoan word for person of European heritage.

Shortly after my time at the MoE National office, I went back to Invercargill as a local ministry officer in 2014, and from there I went back into schools, taking up a deputy principal (DP) and later a principalship role at a small school and later, a larger school in the deep south. In 2020 I moved to Auckland, did a short stint as a resource teacher for learning and behaviour (RTLB) manager. From there, I was appointed principal at Papatoetoe North School, the school I am currently at. Throughout my leadership journey, I have come across a lot of really valuable people that I have treasured, including the likes of Drs Mere Berryman and Rae Si'ilata, educational expert and principal colleague Katie Pennicott, who have helped me in different capacities, to craft my journey and theorise my dream.

Why *talanoa* as a method in this paper? Connecting with *vā*'s role in my use of *talanoa* to story and tell

I use *talanoa* to story my critical reflections of my lived experiences and *ako* views as a Pasifika school leader – *talanoa* is a cultural practice that is grounded in Samoan ways of doing and expressing reflexivities. Relationships are important in my line of work as a Pasifika school leader because, without strong connections with the people I work with, serve, and advocate for, I might as well not be in the leadership position. Building and strengthening my understanding of my *vā* with others and sharing this is my intention in this *talanoa*.

Other Pasifika/Pacific communities value *talanoa*. Even Pasifika/Pacific education research values *talanoa* practice. My use of Pasifika/Pacific is similar to Samu (2013) and Si'ilata et al. (2017). Both carry historical significance and should not be ignored (see the next section for more detail). Although other Pasifika and non-Pasifika educators/researchers name critical autoethnography (CAE) as a valid method of critical reflexivity to storying their lived experiences, they also affirm and encourage the use of Indigenous Pacific approaches when decolonial intentions are a goal of their educational research work (Iosefo et al., 2021). In this paper, I have chosen to capitalise on *talanoa* because it provides a cultural framework that aligns well with the ethics of *vā* socio-relations (Anae, 2016). Similarly, to communicate to teachers and school leaders the Indigenous Pacific or Pasifika concepts I am working with in this paper, I have chosen to *italicise* them. This is purely for style and ease of reading.

As a concept, *talanoa* can be separated into two parts. '*Tala*' is to do with story or stories and '*noa*' is to do with ordinary, something unknown, or nothing (Suaalii-Sauni & Fulu-Aiolupotea, 2014; Vaioleti, 2006). *Talanoa* as a cultural practice in Samoa means to story, to tell, to talk, or to discuss. Like many Indigenous Pacific practices, socio-relational *vā* is a key principle that maintains the conduct of relating or relationship building (Anae, 2016). From a Samoan perspective, *teu le vā* means "to value, nurture,

and care for *teu* the secular/sacred and social/spiritual spaces (*vā*) of all relationships” (Anae, 2019, p. 1), and *tausi le vā* refers to the maintaining and keeping of good relations within the community (Tuagalu, 2008). The Samoan psychology researcher Byron Malaela Sotiata Seiuli (2016) noted:

... in the Samoan context, “such a [credible and reliable] connection is intrinsically linked to Samoan-held values of *fa’aaloalo* (deferring honour), where one is called upon to *teu ma tausi le vā*, that is, to nurture the relational space. To neglect the reciprocation process or to assume *Palagi* [western] research patterns of non-association can lead to the relational space being disrespected, thereby dishonouring the reputation or dignity of those being asked to engage in this space.” (p. 58)

My *talanoa* involves the storying, telling, and expressing of my reflections and views as a school leader of Samoan and Palagi heritages. I also share the descriptive moments of my school leadership insights and practices as I navigate my Samoan–Palagi identity. Similarly, my *talanoa* unfolds school leadership practices in the primary school setting within Pasifika/Pacific education.

The school I currently serve

The school I currently serve is located in Mangere East, South Auckland, a part of the wider Auckland region to the South of the Central Business District. In 2018, the total school roll was at 830 (MoE, n.d.). The school’s ethnic make-up: 22% are Māori, 1% Pākehā, 27% Indian, 24% Samoan, 10% Tongan, 7% Cook Islands Māori, 9% other. Our primary vision is for our tamariki (children) to be happy and healthy, enjoying success as themselves. High quality relationships and conditions for powerful learning are what we promote for families, their tamariki, and staff. We opened our Te Whānau Tupuranga Māori bilingual classes with three whānau classes for new entrants to year 6 (ERO, n.d.). Since 2018, our goal has been to strengthen our culture of high expectations; the nurturing of educationally powerful relationships with parents, whānau and community in ways that impact positively on tamariki’s learning outcomes; and supporting the programmes for tamariki with additional learning needs (ERO, n.d.). In 2022, we opened four bilingual Samoan classes and a New Zealand first, one Hindi bilingual class, with the plan in place to open a second.

Pasifika/Pacific education

Pasifika² education is a field of study within the wider education context in Aotearoa New Zealand. Meaningful leadership that impacts Pasifika students requires intentional practice. Pasifika education and education in general, in this context, have not always intentionally storied and shared the experiences of Pasifika/Pacific school leaders. The paper is my attempt to share my stories and insights into what it is like to lead teaching and learning in schools with diverse students, in particular those of Pasifika heritages. My story of educational leadership, both the challenges and successes, provide understanding of what is involved in an intentional practice so that the outcomes of participants within education are met.

Before the 1990s, the term *Pacific* was commonly used to categorise and group second to third generations of New Zealand-born and raised Pacific (Samu, 2013). As Pacific people settled in settler-colonial nations like New Zealand and Australia, the drive for decolonial resistance that countered colonial persistence often led to developing labels and codes that enabled self-determination for them. The term *Pasifika* and its intended purpose carries a sentiment of self-determination by the Pacific educators and leaders in Aotearoa New Zealand during the 1990s (Samu, 2013). Under the leadership of the former Associate Minister of Education (MoE) Jenny Salesa, the move away from using the term Pasifika and the return to fronting Pacific education in MoE policy has somewhat shifted the valuing of the historical inspirations and struggles of Pasifika education leaders and scholars (Si'ilata et al., 2017).

Educational leaders are urged to “move beyond practices that hinge on Pasifika learners adopting majority culture language, literacy, and identity in order to achieve academic goals” (Si'ilata et al., 2017, p. 1). Si'ilata et al. (2017) developed the *Va'atele* framework, based on the ocean-voyaging double-hulled canoe, that acknowledges the relevance of Pasifika students' linguistic and cultural resources within curriculum learning at school. Their study claims, teachers and school leaders play an important role in Pasifika learners learning to “connect rather than replace, the worldviews, languages, literacy practices, and experiences of their homes with the valued knowledge and literacy practices of the school” (Si'ilata et al., 2017, p. 1). This paper shares the intentional practices by a Pasifika school principal who values the home knowledges and practices of the families in his community in South Auckland and unpacks the ways he strengthens the learning and leadership connections for *ākonga*, their whānau, and teachers.

² Pasifika is a category developed in the 1990s by the Ministry of Education and Pasifika educators and leaders as a way group and collectivise the communities settled in New Zealand at the time. However, Pasifika is not a term that all people of Pacific heritage from Oceania connect with.

Enacting Te Tiriti o Waitangi

Te Tiriti o Waitangi is the founding document of Aotearoa New Zealand and signified a legal agreement between Tangata Whenua (the Māori people of the land) and the British settlers and the crown. Enacting Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Te Tiriti) principles in our schools is one way to ensure Pasifika and other languages, identities, and cultures are made aware of Aotearoa New Zealand whenua, mana ōrite (equity), and the privileging and maintaining of mana whenua (the integrity and power of the land and respect to Māori people). Enacting leadership practices that intentionally shift thinking and doing for ākonga, their families, and teachers relies on *vā*, a valued social practice that underpins Pasifika seeing, feeling, and doing. Investing in students' development of their sense of belonging and wellbeing, as well as students' academic excellence and helping them reach their potential, are all necessary and significant goals for teachers and school leaders who value honouring and enacting Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Berryman & Eley, 2019).

The MoE's (2020) vision is for all ākonga in Aotearoa New Zealand to succeed personally and achieve educational success (see also MoE, 2016). Sometimes success is heavily emphasised as being mainly academic and MoE and schools focus a lot on this measure (Berryman & Eley, 2019). But as Berryman and Eley (2019) argued, academic success measures mainly students' cognitive abilities and that is "a narrow goal" (p. 985). Schools should focus on "supporting students to become strong and secure in their own language, identity and culture" (Berryman & Eley, 2019, p. 985).

Enacting Te Tiriti as tauwi (non-Māori) is sometimes unclear. The Pākeha-Māori relational tension is evident and articulated in Te Tiriti o Waitangi. But the intersections between Tauwi-Māori interconnections are not always obvious (Huygens, 2016). There are various definitions of tauwi, meaning "foreigner, European, non-Māori, colonist, person coming from afar, gentile, heathen, outsider, alien, stranger" (Te Aka, n.d. para. 1-5). For Pasifika who have ancestral ties to Māori as people of Te Moana nui-ā-kiwa, the tauwi or non-Māori identifier and label carries a somewhat specifically distinct meaning compared to other migrants from Europe and Asia. However, under Te Tiriti, the tauwi label is a reminder of decoloniality's layered and nuanced meanings for Pasifika/Pacific who not only have ancestral ties with Māori as tangata Moana (people of Oceania) yet are settlers and migrants on Aotearoa New Zealand whenua (land). This forces all migrants and settlers who have no Indigenous tie to Aotearoa New Zealand whenua to consider the oppressive nature of colonisation and its harmful impacts on tangata whenua who are striving to achieve self-determination and healing (Huygens, 2016; Kidd et al., 2020). My responsibility as a school principal is to ensure the aspirations of our Māori community members are centralised and privileged.

A key question I continue to ask myself is: *how do we enact Te Tiriti o Waitangi in schools and in education?* We all have the right to be protected, to participate, to partner with others. Whether we are

Samoan, Tongan, Niuean, Fijian, Indian, Chinese, Argentinian, Brazilian, Italian, or from the US; wherever we come from, as people living on the whenua of Aotearoa New Zealand, we have a commitment and responsibility to protect and honour Te Tiriti. We can do this through manākitanga, the Māori value associated with caring for relationships with people through “kindness, hospitality and showing respect for others” (Ruwhiu & Elkin, 2016, p. 313). Whanaungatanga is another cultural value appreciated by Māori communities which is to do with respecting “collective interdependence between and among humankind” (Ruwhiu & Elkin, 2016, p. 313). My main responsibilities as a school principal when working with teachers from diverse ethnic backgrounds is to share understandings of *teu le vā* or *tausi le vā* (Anae, 2016; Tuagalu, 2008), manākitanga, and whanaungatanga. But there are so few school principals and deputy principals in Auckland of Pasifika/Pacific heritages, where a large proportion of Pasifika/Pacific communities live. I believe Pasifika/Pacific school leaders have what it takes to show and activate specific and unique ways to honour Te Tiriti through their specific ethnic (often multi-ethnic) values and professional training and understanding within educational leadership practice.

One way we have honoured multi-ethnic values is through the honouring of languages within our school. We have established our first bilingual Hindi class at Papatoetoe North School. I really admire people who have a second language, or more. My first language is English. My lived experiences have been useful in my change leadership practice because I have been able to reflect on the familial decisions that were pertinent when I was growing up in the South Island. I have come to realise now that my experiences are not isolated instances but reflect what other New Zealand-born Pasifika have had to go through too (Anae, 1997, 1998; Mila-Schaaf & Robinson, 2010; Samu et al., 2019). Although I understand my father’s decision for me not to speak *Gagana Samoa* whilst growing up in Invercargill, I realise its implications on my identity as a school leader and my Samoan heritage. But it is what it is, I am who I am, and I always try to bring who I am to the table.

The parents at my school and staff appreciate my honesty. Some of our young people have heritage languages at home and English is their second language. Students who are bilingual, I think that is a real strength for them. For me, I feel that I have missed out on that. I would have been somewhat stronger if I learnt the Samoan language when I was growing up. Also, I realise now that I am not the only Pasifika-born and raised person in Aotearoa New Zealand who does not fluently speak their ancestral language (Mila-Schaaf & Robinson, 2010). A lot of Pasifika/Pacific have gone through similar experiences (Anae, 1997; Samu et al., 2019). This has impacted how they feel and the levels of their self-esteem. This was one of the reasons I chose to go back and spend time in Samoa. It was an invaluable time and experience.

Understanding the education system to better support families, teachers, and students

My first priority when I came into Papatoetoe North School was how to strengthen the journey of families within our school system. To do that I wanted to understand how the system can better support families and the students as well as teachers. Our education system has flaws and it is inequitable. As much as the Ministry of Education (MoE) tries to support schools, there are mechanisms in the mechanics of the New Zealand education system that are hard to change. But I have realised that there are things school leaders can do to disrupt the mechanics of the education system. It really comes down to the school leaders and their willingness to change the norms. This is what I learnt doing professional leadership development (PLD) with Dr Mere Berryman and Dr Rae Si'ilata.

The Covid-19 global pandemic unmasked the actual state of inequity in schooling and the wider Aotearoa New Zealand society. It revealed the limitations of the system and its bureaucracy, and it has brought to the fore certain education and societal issues that are deeply embedded. The digital divide, for instance, is an example of the inequities that persist in urban Aotearoa New Zealand education (ERO, 2022). Although researchers claimed the internet and social media “enable[ed] key familial relationships to be newly empowered” (Thomsen et al., 2021, p. 141) during Covid-19, the internal mechanisms within the education system itself did not serve to fully benefit minority families. Māori and Pasifika families living in multi-generational households across Auckland often did not have access to the digital devices and wi-fi infrastructure to engage and succeed during online learning throughout the Covid-19 national lockdowns (ERO, 2022). As much as the MoE can try and support schools, the issues are bigger than us – inequity is a societal issue, filtered through to our education and schooling practices. What kept our school going during Covid-19 was our community and the manākitanga and collective generosity of staff as well. This is why *teu le vā* and *tausi vā* are necessary (see Anae, 2019; Seiuli, 2016; Tuagalu, 2008).

School operational compliance is something that schools, boards of trustees (BOT) and school leaders have to manage. For us, we had to learn to jump through hoops. To keep looking for every dollar that we scrape together and trying to make that work for our students and our school, that was what we did. For me, it felt like we were having to serve the system rather than the system serving us. The challenges have always been, “why is Wellington MoE trying to tell us what should be happening here in Auckland?” Why could processes not be filtered through the Auckland office on a day-to-day basis rather than us having to jump through the hoop for any part of the MoE? One of the skills that I have had to learn on the job as a school principal is to hustle. If you are not so good at that, then you are at a disadvantage. And if you do not have the experience to work within, not only the systems, but the

language of the systems, then you will really struggle. Regular reporting in written English, for instance, is another good skill to have as a school leader.

Disrupting the system: working-with allies and adopting guerrilla politics

Working with allies to achieve the successful outcomes of students is important. Every new Ministry-driven or policy-driven initiative that comes through sounds like it is a good idea. But I try to buffer that and think about how these initiatives can be implemented well within the leadership structure of the school. The questions I often ask are: how do I manage such initiatives when I am considering the connections with parents/whānau? What do I need to consider when thinking about the *vā* between staff, staff and parents, staff and students, and between students? – and then working through what will work for us to build our community. Thinking in that frame of mind, through those kinds of considerations, has always been challenging and makes me not enjoy what I do sometimes. But the value of facing such challenges is that it builds me and strengthens my resolve.

I have had to learn to manipulate the education and school system to be able to benefit my community and benefit my students. For example, at the end of the Covid-19 national lockdowns, we have been able to open up our new bilingual Hindi and Samoan classes, which has been the celebration of where we are right now. I want my staff to speak in Hindi, Samoan, and Te Reo Māori when engaging with each other. I want parents to be able to come to our reception and even into the principal's office and be able to speak a heritage language if they choose to. We have Hindi-speaking, as well as Samoan- and Māori-speaking staff members, and that was really important to me because it enables families who speak Hindi and Samoan to feel connected when they enter our school. When you consider embracing *vā* relations and connections that way, you start to look for ways to build on peoples' strengths (Fasavalu, 2015; Iosefo et al., 2021).

I use guerrilla politics when describing my leadership practice within our education system because I have had to think outside of the box. Limited access to funding pools for particular needs at the school has slowed down our progress to support the priority groups in our school. I have had to utilise guerrilla politics by honing in on the things that I can change, not to be defiant or antagonistic, but to make a difference for my community. Largely, my approach has been to help the system and its people see how it might operate here better, so that it can actually benefit the schools and the communities around Papatoetoe and South Auckland. I use guerrilla politics to help restore disaffected people, groups or communities throughout our community. It is my way of enacting my critical agency responsibility yet

maintain *teu le vā* and *tausi le vā*, my life values, beliefs and dealings with inequity and social justice across the system, including the community.

As a school leader, I can get disheartened when things are held back because of MoE bureaucratic processes, especially when I cannot do anything about it. But when I get to a point where I can have some form of power and feel empowered, where I can have influence, then I will use that. I have to do it through a sense of *mana ōrite* (Māori concept of equality, see Te Aka, n.d.), considering the needs of others, considering the manner of other people that I am working within the system. Whether I am working with MoE people or with my leadership team, teachers, parents and students, how can I consider them and the ways they can strengthen our leadership vision and practice? How do I build them up in what I am doing and consider that so that they can reciprocate with me? I take this approach with the MoE people I work with and tell them, “if there’s any way I can support you in your mahi [work], let me know because I’ll be there for you.”

Working reciprocally with my senior management team, teachers, *whānau* and students is more agentic (Berryman & Eley, 2019). Presenting solutions is necessary and cuts down the waiting time. Communicating clearly your ideas helps too. I have found that working with a solutions-based focus means that other people are more likely to be able to work with me on it, and I have been able to get to that point of critical change. I have worked on a project with Wellington Resourcing (within the MoE). Individually they have good intentions, they want to make a positive impact in education. I have seen positive system outcomes by working with them, helping them to see how policy outcomes affect the operation of a school and therefore influencing their bureaucracies to help achieve their individual and collective intentions, as well as mine. Building that kind of *tausi le vā* even with people outside of your own ethnic group is useful.

Changing schools’ physical landscape and structure: The *faleo’o* as communal places and spaces

As defined by Pratt (2007), a *faleo’o* is a small house located at the back of the main house, a place for people to rest and take shade from the sun. Today, a *faleo’o* is built as beach fales for tourists in Samoa. Its main function is to act as a place of rest from the hot sun, or for guests to stay. In a more formal context, the *faleo’o* is defined as an important structure in a typical Samoan village setting (Faleolo, 2016). Social work researcher Moses Ma’alo Faleolo (2016) described the *faleo’o* as a structure or house used to hold “meetings, discussions, decisions, planning and outcomes are agreed upon and forecasted” (Faleolo, 2016, p. 64). When I lived and worked in Samoa in 1998, I really enjoyed seeing the *faleo’o* when we drove from the Faleolo airport across other villages. I noticed there were *faleo’os*

located throughout the villages. Outside almost every school in Samoa, often near the entrance there would be a small *faleo* 'o for parents to sit, *talanoa* with others from the village, whilst waiting for their young. Some parents/caregivers would sit there until lunchtime, and the child would come out and have lunch with them, and then they would sit there and wait until the end of the school day and go home with them.

I wanted to consider building a number of *faleo* 'o at Papatōetoe North School. Utilising some of the funding we got from MoE, we were able to establish *faleo* 'os at the school gates. We now have small *faleo* 'os at all our gates and got a couple built within the school and are used as shared spaces for language and communication, so that our parents can sit, talk, *korero* (to tell, say, speak, read, talk, address in Māori, see Te Aka, n.d.), *talanoa*, laugh, discuss and relate in their own heritage languages. It is our way of motivating and challenging the community to use their heritage languages within the school grounds. I really want parents and their tamariki to use the *faleo* 'os because they are valuable to our school and the safe development of their culture, language, and identities (MoE, 2018).

By changing our school's physical landscape and structure through the building of *faleo* 'os we are intentionally decolonising what a school ought to look like. Naturally, this can change the way people feel about what a formal school ought to do for students. What we are doing is shifting the way teachers think about teaching and learning. Our teacher aides are using the *faleo* 'o within the school for group work. Kids have worked out there on an individual basis with teacher guidance. We have one *faleo* 'o built amongst the gardens used by classes to grow things.

Our school buildings, reception, and office spaces carry colonial ways (Berryman & Eley, 2019; Kidd et al., 2020) that often do not encourage meaningful and caring *vā* connections with parents. Our inclusion of the *faleo* 'o gave us an opportunity to think differently about approach and practice. During Covid-19, we were able to use that opportunity to say to parents who were frustrated with the Covid-related changes and the mandatory use of face masks, "look we have to meet outside because of ventilation." And so when a parent wanted to talk to me, I would walk them out into the *faleo* 'o and we would sit down and *talanoa* for a while. This instantly changed the warmth between us. An example of this was when a parent disagreed with our approach to the mandatory facemask use in the classrooms. He was really concerned about it for his child who had breathing issues. At the time, the Covid-19 national traffic light restrictions forced us to stick to the rules unless there was a medical exemption provided. And so, the parent came in to have that discussion. Instead of coming into my office and sitting across a desk, we went and sat in the *faleo* 'o and we *talanoa*. I was able to explain the restrictions from the school's perspective. I remember feeling the wind blow through and as we sat there together under the *faleo* 'o, I turned to him and, in a more open and considerate tone, said:

You know what? In six months-time we're not going to be talking about this. We're going to be talking about your children again, and we're going to be talking about their learning. And we're going to be looking at those things that are important. What we're talking about now is important right now, but long term it isn't.

Our conversation changed because the whole atmosphere of our interaction had changed. Being outside in an open space under the shade of the *faleo* 'o changed what began as a somewhat heated discussion into a *talanoa* that connected. From there we developed a plan that worked for the father as well as his child. The child had the option of coming out of class every hour and having a break in the *faleo* 'o.

Navigating my Samoan-Palagi positionality

I do not always know how to follow the *fa'a Samoa* way, but I do respect it. This is something I learnt when I lived and worked in Samoa. I connect with the Samoan values of *teu le vā* and *tausi le vā*, the nurturing and maintaining of respectful relationships. But I also identify with my Palagi heritage through my mother because I am part of her and her Palagi heritage is a part of me. People have called me *fia palagi* and I am not ashamed of that. Being a New Zealand-born Samoan–Palagi has also shaped who I am and my critical and agentic leadership practices which has enabled my appreciation of social justice, decolonisation, and agentic practice (Anae, 1997, 1998). I also value Māori principles like *manākitanga*, *kaitiakitanga* (Māori term for guardianship, stewardship, see Te Aka, n.d.), *whanaungatanga*, as well as *mana ōrite* (equality). They have supported my leadership practice as a school leader in Aotearoa New Zealand and my responsibility and commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

I consider my positionality when working in a team environment and draw from my Samoan as well as Palagi values. In 2022, we still have students who have not come back to school even though the Covid-19 traffic lights system has been lifted nationwide. I have turned to considerations of *mana ōrite* as we aim as a school to raise attendance and prioritise better engagement with parents and their tamariki. Our challenge now is to (re)think our existing ways and processes and trial new and different ways of working. We are keen to consider the bespoke solutions. For instance, special education is an area of need and so, rather than focusing on one person as our dedicated special educational needs coordinator (SENCO), our senior leadership team has decided to make this our priority. We have a SENCO team. We all sit around and for the students on our list, we look at bespoke solutions and consider who is best to connect to the individual student's *whānau*. Who is best to connect with this particular family? Who has ever had some interactions with this family? It could be a particular teacher, the senior leader, the literacy specialist coordinator (LSC), a social worker in schools (SWiS) worker, deputy principal (DP), an office worker, someone in reception who has made those connections with their family before, or me as the school principal.

Ongoing tautua (service): Leadership building and nurturing

Leadership that is meaningful for the context of Covid-19 and its associated challenges requires practices that are concerned about individual and collective morality and the significance of human relationships (Ruwhiu & Elkin, 2016). *Tautua* is the Samoan concept for service and is very much connected to *teu le vā* and *tausi le vā* (Fa'aea & Enari, 2021). Fa'aea and Enari's (2021) framing of *tautua* as a pathway to leadership that needs to be considered as an intergenerational lifecycle is an appreciation of our Samoan Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and doing. Therefore, how do I make leadership in a style that is intergenerational and ongoing and works for the people who are in my school, a reflection of the community in Mangere East, South Auckland? Through leadership development, how do we ensure *tautua* is not disconnected with genuine care associated with *teu le vā* and *tausi le vā*? What does that look like within a school and how does that connect with non-Pasifika/Pacific? Fostering an environment where we trust our partnerships is really important. *Tautua*, *teu le vā* and *tausi le vā* provide frameworks that considers "alternative ontologies, epistemologies and worldviews, providing for richer and more meaningful understanding of leadership for the 21st century" (Ruwhiu & Elkin, 2016, p. 309). Exploring how such cultural values from Samoan perspectives can connect with other cultural values will only strengthen the school's approach to meaningful leadership practice that connects with the diverse ethnic groups and families at the school.

Conclusion

My *talanoa* in this paper as a Samoan-Palagi school leader has been intentional in articulating my leadership practices and experiences at a primary school in South Auckland. *Teu le vā* and *tausi le vā* have been useful in navigating my leadership journey, *tautua*, and engagement with my senior leadership colleagues, teachers, families, and students at the school. Shifting the system is an ongoing concern and is not a responsibility that only a school principal carries in their line of work. All within the school system have a role. Taking an agentic practice based on *mana ōrite* is important and it continues to teach me to draw on the people, community, and place around me for guidance.

References

- Anae, M. (1997). Towards a NZ-born Samoan identity: Some reflections on labels. *Pacific Health Dialog*, 4(2), 128–137. <http://pacifichalthdialog.nz/pre-2013-archive/Volume204/No220Pacific20Peoples20in20New20Zealand/Viewpoints20and20Perspectives/Towards20a20NZ20born20Samoan20identity20some20reflections20on20labels.pdf>
- Anae, M. (1998). *Fofoa-i-vao-'ese: The identity journeys of NZ-born Samoans* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. The University of Auckland. <https://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz/handle/2292/66>
- Anae, M. (2016). Teu le va: Samoan relational ethics. *Knowledge Cultures*, 4(3), 117–130.
- Anae, M. (2019). *Pacific research methodologies and relational ethics*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.529>
- Berryman, M., & Eley, E. (2019). Student belonging: Critical relationships and responsibilities, *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 23(9), 985–1001. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2019.1602365>
- Education Review Office (ERO). (2022). *Learning in a covid-19 world: The impact of covid-19 on Pacific learners*. <https://ero.govt.nz/our-research/learning-in-a-covid-19-world-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-pacific-learners>
- Education Review Office (ERO). (n.d.). Papatoetoe North School [website]. <https://ero.govt.nz/institution/1429/papatoetoe-north-school>
- Fa'aea, A. M., & Enari, D. (2021). The pathway to leadership is through service: Exploring the Samoan tautua lifecycle. *Pacific Dynamics: Journal of Interdisciplinary Research*, 5(1), 93–100. <http://dx.doi.org/10.26021/10643>
- Faleolo, M. M. (2016). From the street to the village: The transfer of NZ Youth gang culture to Sāmoa. *New Zealand Sociology*, 31(2), 48–73.
- Fasavalu, M. (2015). *Tales from above the tail: Samoan students' experiences of teacher actions as culturally responsive pedagogy* [Masters' thesis] University of Auckland.
- Fasavalu, T., & Reynolds, M. (2019). Relational positionality and a learning disposition: Shifting the conversation. *The International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives*, 18(2), 11–25.
- Huygens, I. (2016). Pākehā and tauīwi treaty education: An unrecognised decolonisation movement? *Kōtuitui: New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences Online*, 11(2), 146–158. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1177083X.2016.1148057>
- Iosefo, F., Harris, A., & Holman-Jones, S. (2021). Wayfinding as Pasifika, indigenous and critical autoethnographic knowledge. In F. Iosefo, A. Harris, & S. Holman Jones (Eds.), *Wayfinding and critical autoethnography* (pp. 15–27). Routledge.

- Kidd, J., Came, H., Herbert, S., & McCreanor, T. (2020). Māori and Taiwi nurses' perspectives of anti-racism praxis: findings from a qualitative pilot study. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 16(4), 387–394.
- Mila-Shaaf, K., & Robinson, E. (2010). Polycultural capital and educational achievement among NZ-born Pacific peoples. *Mai Review*, 1, 1–18.
<http://www.review.mai.ac.nz/mrindex/MR/article/download/307/307-2282-1-PB.pdf>
- Ministry of Education (MoE). (2018). *Tapasā: Cultural competencies framework for teachers of Pacific learners*. <https://teachingcouncil.nz/assets/Files/Tapasa/Tapasa-Cultural-Competencies-Framework-for-Teachers-of-Pacific-Learners-2019.pdf>
- Pratt, G. (2007). *A Samoan dictionary: With a short grammar of the Samoan dialect*. Kessinger Publishing.
- Ruwhiu, D., & Elkin, G. (2016). Converging pathways of contemporary leadership: In the footsteps of Māori and servant leadership. *Leadership*, 12(3), 308–323. DOI: 10.1177/1742715015626326
- Samu, T. W. (2013). *Pasifika education: Discourses of difference within Aotearoa New Zealand* [Unpublished doctoral thesis]. University of Canterbury. UC Research Repository.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.26021/9971>
- Samu, L. V., Moewaka Barnes, H., Asiasiga, L., & McCreanor, T. (2019). We are not privileged enough to have that foundation of language: Pasifika young adults share their deep concerns about the decline of their ancestral/heritage languages in Aotearoa New Zealand. *AlterNative: Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 15(2), 131–139. <http://doi.org/10.1177/1177180119835228>
- Seiuli, B. M. S. (2016). *We are not brown-palagi: Navigating cultural boundaries in Samoan research*. *Journal of Indigenous Wellbeing*, 1(1), 53–67.
<https://journalindigenuswellbeing.co.nz/media/2022/01/36.29.We-are-not-brown-palagi-Navigating-cultural-boundaries-in-Samoan-research.pdf>
- Si'ilata, R., Samu, T., & Siteine, A. (2017). The Va'atele framework: Redefining and transforming Pasifika education. In E. A. McKinley & L. T. Smith (Eds.), *Handbook of indigenous education* (pp. 1–20). Springer.
- Suaalii-Sauni, T., & Fulu-Aiolupotea, S. M. (2014). Decolonising Pacific research, building Pacific research communities and developing Pacific research tools: The case of the talanoa and the faafaletui in Samoa. *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 55(3), 331–344.
- Te Aka. (n.d.). *Māori dictionary*. <https://maoridictionary.co.nz/search/?keywords=taiwi&search=>
- Thomsen, P., Lopesi, L., Gushiken, G. P., Damm, L., Lee, K. L., Pickering-Martin, E., Iosefo, F., Naepi, S., & Tuiburelevu, L. (2021). Negotiating the digital Va: Emerging Pacific scholars and community building on twitter. *Journal of New Zealand Studies*, (33), 140–152.
<https://search-informit-org.ezproxy.auckland.ac.nz/doi/10.3316/informit.268197320726848>

Tuagalu, I. (2008). Heuristics of the vā. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 108–126. DOI: [10.1177/117718010800400110](https://doi.org/10.1177/117718010800400110)

Vaioliti, T. M. (2006). Talanoa research methodology: A developing position on Pacific research. *Waikato Journal of Education*, 12, 21–34. Doi: [10.15663/wje.v12i11](https://doi.org/10.15663/wje.v12i11).