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## The Journey: Leadership through Relationships

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### Abstract

When we battle through adversity and uncertainties such as Covid, a Pacific lens brings cultural responsiveness where resilience, determination, and grit is evident. The power in 'talanoa' and 'whanaungatanga' is the driver for deliberate and intentional acts to **'shifting the system'**. A vision of 'Equity and Excellence' is achievable when we understand 'what we do' and 'why we do it' as opposed to 'what we say'. My talanoa in this article highlights my journey as a Principal in South Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand and how I have drawn on my family and ancestral dispositions to 'walk the talk'. Importantly, I discuss how my cultural heritage and values empower and influence my leadership as a Pacific Principal in shifting the system.

### Introduction

"E lele le toloa ae ma'au i le auvai" is a popular Samoan proverb that translates to "the toloa bird flies far, but will always return to the water" (Tu'itahi, 2018). The 'toloa bird' is known for its strength and speed when drifting between islands. These characteristics are metaphorical of my role as a first time principal where having strength, courage, responsibility, physical and mental capacity to move amongst challenging spaces and places are vital. I will begin this article by sharing my journey of principalship and how I have navigated as a Pasifika leader through unprecedented and challenging, yet rewarding spaces. I will discuss and share experiences of my upbringing and education to show how I have shifted the system, by using dispositions that are naturally innate such as aroha/aloha (love), respect, resilience, traditional beliefs, and values. To conclude, I will discuss my growth as a Pasifika leader and how

collaborative and cooperative working relationships are key to creating optimistic conditions for best learning.

## **'O le ala i le pule o le tautua' - Servant Leadership**

When I think of my parents, I am reminded of the Samoan proverb 'O le ala i le pule o le tautua - the pathway to leadership is through service'. In *Tautua Faatamalii - Servanthood with absolute integrity*, Apulu (2010) unpacks the role of a leader that serves with alofa (love). Being raised in the fa'a Samoa culture, a leader is someone visible and present, someone who makes themselves useful within the village for their aiga/family. The concept of servant leadership is one that comes naturally to our Pacific people where a leader does not assert themselves at the front but is there to serve.

As I reflect back to my powhiri as a first-time Principal, I remember feeling so proud, grateful and humbled standing amongst my family, friends, and colleagues. Thoughts of my mother who had passed away and my father who is bedridden and living in a rest home crossed my mind. I visualised the smiles on their faces and how proud of me they would have been if they were here to witness this day. My father Fetafune Lautofaali'ioaiga Toeie'u who is 88 years old, hails from the village of Malaemalu in Falealili in Samoa. My mother Clementine Mane Achica hails from the village of Sataua in the Safata district in Samoa, and also has Niuean heritage through my maternal great-grandfather. They were two of the hardest working and serving people I know, whom I believe I inherited my work ethics from. They embodied the principles of servant leadership.

My parents travelled to New Zealand from the Pacific and met in Tokoroa through my dad's cousin who was a good friend of my mum's. My father came to New Zealand in 1952 when he was 17 years old and arrived here from Samoa on the 'Tofua Ship'. He used to tell us that he brought with him only one pair of shoes, a small suitcase and 1 pound 3 shillings'. He had already left school at Form 2 (approximately 12 years old). Most of dad's jobs were in the factories, working at Bonds in Ōtara for more than ten years before moving to Reid Rubber in the early 1970s following his brother-in-law the late Tunai Pa'u Amosa. Dad would always send money every week to his father the late Rev Toeie'u and his mother the late Lita Toeie'u, who both served faithfully in the Methodist Church in Samoa for many years. He would tell us of how he would only write a short letter but that he would add many more pages to hide the money so that no-one could see through the envelope.

My mum worked in various roles and jobs, from cleaning the doctor's surgery in Ōtara and as a seamstress at GIGI fashions in Otahuhu. They lived a simple life - church, family and work. While we were not financially well off, we never lacked for anything. Like many of my generation, our life consisted of work, church, and family. My parents spent most of their weekends at the church serving

faithfully and dad was always nominated the church's secretary, a role he took very seriously. They believed it was their duty as parents to provide the best for their family, and that meant working, earning money and making sure we had food on the table and a roof over our heads. Our duty as their children included going to school and doing the best we could.

The role of servant leadership was displayed consistently throughout my life as for our family and for many Pacific peoples, the pathway to leadership has always been through service. As Enari (2021) argues, young Samoan children are taught that service is important and that this is seen at family gatherings, church events and village fundraising activities displaying at a young age the concepts of obedience, loyalty, respect and love. Therefore, leadership and service are intertwined in our everyday lives and a part of who we are raised to be.

## **Systems and Processes**

My parents were always obedient and abided by rules, laws and regulations which is what they knew to be good and acceptable through their cultural upbringing of showing respect. However, when it came to knowledge of the New Zealand educational system, they were less aware. For example, they were unaware of how the New Zealand high school zoning system worked and had very little time to read or fill out enrolment forms, especially as English was their second language. In Auckland where I grew up, schools had enrolment zones. This meant that you could only enrol into a school if you lived within the school zone area. Stewart et al. (2021), argued that policies and decisions made around zoning at the time were highly political and contestable due to limiting people's choice of school. For my parents, they did what many Pacific Island families did and that was trusting in the education system.

As the youngest of five girls, it was thought that I would automatically follow in my older sisters footsteps and attend Ōtāhuhu College which was out of zone as we lived in Ōtara. However, to my dismay I was not accepted based on my entrance exam results. This type of enrolment system and process did not set us up for success. This was because it did not give any preparation or instructions to what was expected, or the opportunity for either our parents or us to ask questions.

Growing up, my siblings and I were always taught not to 'ask questions' or to challenge our elders as this was seen to be impolite and not showing fa'aaloalo/respect in the fa'a samoan culture. At school, this was the same for the relationship between us as students and our teachers. The teacher was always right and we were expected to do as we were told and that is exactly what we did. Tanielu (2000), articulates that Samoan children often enter school with a set of behavioural rules and traditions already instilled in them from a very early age and they hold tight to these behaviour rules. These behavioural

rules include “sitting still, keeping quiet, listening carefully, speaking only when asked, and being rewarded with the stroke of a stick or broom for misbehaviour” (p.49). While Tanielu (2000) is writing from a Samoan educational context, her insights are still relevant to Samoan students in Aotearoa New Zealand as faa'Samoa values are still adhered to by many families here in Aotearoa. She argues that it can be hard for Samoan students' as they have to learn to adapt their behaviour in different forums.

### **Migrant Aspirations**

My parents wanted us to have the best education possible. My dad never went to high school, yet he was one of the most intelligent people I knew. His words of wisdom guided us while growing up and 'try your best' was a central mantra in our household. Like any parent, they wanted their child to have a safe and sound education that was equitable to any other child in New Zealand. They believed that a sound education would lead to a career path, a good job, and enough money to support the rest of the āiga (family) back in Samoa. This belief still resonates today with many Pasifika parents and was reflected in the Ministry of Education *Action Plan for Pacific Education 2020 -2030*. Many Pacific parents, learners, and leaders within the Pacific community shared cultural values and agreed that having a good education was very important and providing plenty of opportunities to ensure success for children (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Another important factor to my parents and many other Pasifika families was the need to send money back home to the islands to help them as part of their service to the family. According to Salesa (2017), economic stability and being able to support families who were living back in the islands is a key aspect of Pacific cultures. This was the dream for many of our Pacific Island parents who migrated to New Zealand.

### **Disempowered and Low expectations**

The high school I attended in the late 1980's was predominantly Pākehā (New Zealander of European descent) at the time with only a few Māori and Pasifika students. All students were streamed according to academic ability and I soon understood that opportunities looked very different for Pacific Island students or those who were not streamed into the top classes. I believe that many of my peers were full of potential but felt disempowered and struggled to achieve academically because their teachers held low expectations, unconscious bias, prejudices, and a deficit mindset towards students who were culturally different from themselves. Samu (2006), argues that the most direct cause of student success or failure in education, is dependent on the interactions between teachers and learners at that “interface

between two culturally embedded worlds – worlds that reflect the unequal, imbalanced power relations of wider society” (p. 138). This aligns with Laufili - Tigafua (2020), who stated that one reason that can hinder Pasifika students’ achievement is how some teachers can hold negative stereotypes of Pasifika students. She argued that when Pasifika students enter schools, some teachers already have assumptions about them which often limits the progress of these students.

My growing awareness of teachers having low expectations of Māori and Pacific students and my need to shift what was a deficit mindset way of thinking, sowed the seed of becoming an educator. I wanted to make a difference, and teaching was the career pathway I believed would contribute to shifting the system. I became passionate about teaching children, which was innate and natural for me. I already had a role model, my eldest sister who was a primary teacher in the early 1980s. Unfortunately, my first application to Teachers College, which I completed with a school career counsellor was unsuccessful.

After graduating high school with School Certificate and secretarial skills, I worked as a Colour Communication consultant earning \$12 an hour. It was a small business surrounded by white male management. The work experience and lack of prospects made me more determined to apply to Teachers College and the University of Auckland. My aspirations to be an educator had not waned but only grown stronger. I wanted to be an educator and leader of effective change, to help shape and guide people with their dreams.

## **Dream to Reality**

My dream to become a teacher became a reality when my second teaching application was successful. I believed a large part of this was having the support of my family and husband at the interview. Fast forward, today I am an accomplished, inspirational, and proud Pacific educator and leader of learning with more than 25 years of experience in primary school education. Growing and developing as a teacher, moving into school management and becoming a Principal have helped shape me as a leader of change. I continually aim to promote a culture of excellence and commitment to improving student achievement through parent and whānau community engagement and talanoa. Fa’avae et al., (2016), explains that ‘Talanoa’ is all about relationship building and argued that without relationship building, the kind of talanoa that takes place can only be at the superficial initial meeting level. Consistent with this is Halapua’s (2003) definition, who asserted that ‘Talanoa’ is carried out in an environment of trust, respect, cooperation and a willingness to reach a status of understanding and relationship. Throughout

my journey, I have seen first-hand an imbalance of power with Pasifika parents feeling lost in the system, lacking the confidence to share what they know and what success looks like for their child. Therefore, it is my aim in this role to reach out to Pasifika families and have a talanoa with them. This talanoa would include making them aware of the importance of having an open communication with myself and the school.

## **Already culturally woke**

My experiences teaching in predominantly South Auckland schools in Mangere and Ōtara have been a privilege and proven invaluable. In my role as deputy principal/SENCO (Special Education Needs Coordinator), I visited families on different occasions as the meetings on school site were not always made available at a suitable time for parents. When I visited families, I noticed the struggles and the reality for some families. I will never forget the time I went to drop off a food parcel for a family where the glass front door was broken and the mother had been waiting some time for the landlord to repair it. My thoughts were focused on the health and safety of the two little toddlers in the house, but I did wonder how the landlord did not seem to realise that this was something urgent that needed attending to. Witnessing the struggles that these families were going through made an impact on the decisions I was making in my role as Deputy Principal of how and what we could do to provide resources that would help them to be safe and happy.

Working in some of the lowest socioeconomic areas of diverse and multicultural communities, I gained immense knowledge and empathy especially for our Pasifika families. This made me realise how we needed to shift our thinking to what those needs are, before we can focus on any improvement in shifting student achievement. As Pacific Island leaders and educators, we naturally serve and awahi (help) our families, whānau, students, staff, and the wider community. Through my own lived experiences I already knew first-hand what culturally responsiveness was before it became a buzzword in education. To be culturally responsive is to have the ability to be culturally aware, identify potential biases and accept that everyone's cultural contexts differ from one another.

The Tapasā Framework (Ministry of Education, 2018) highlights that being culturally responsive requires a willingness to be open, and sometimes make and learn from mistakes. For me being culturally responsive is an important part of who we are not only as teachers and educators but as people. To recognise that we all come with different views and beliefs impacts on what we view as important. Understanding people's various experiences, traditions and values can help us in understanding their points of view. My own culture, traditions and values are very much a part of who I am and where I am today serving our community.

## **Pasifika Proud Kids**

In New Zealand, we are unique in the fact that we acknowledge and celebrate different Pacific languages through Pacific language weeks that are set throughout the year. According to the Ministry of Pacific Peoples (2020), “Pacific languages are a key cornerstone for the health and wellbeing of Pacific people and history shows us that a loss of language leads to a loss of culture and identity” (para. 2). Since 2010, the Ministry for Pacific People has been supporting Pacific language weeks, promoting and raising awareness of the diversity of our Pacific languages in Aotearoa. Every year they work closely with Pacific communities to maintain and promote Indigenous languages across the country, encouraging their use in daily lives to help them thrive.

Pacific Language Weeks are an opportunity to share our Pacific culture and heritage in schools, where Pacific families are encouraged to contribute their expertise and participate in the school community in lead roles. Leading Pacific language weeks as a Deputy Principal of a large Decile 7<sup>1</sup> school allowed me to create small shifts in the system, where teachers were able to plan throughout the year an overview of Pacific language weeks as part of our school organisation. I found that there was potential for other projects to provide more opportunities for Pacific Island students, not just Pacific language weeks.

I had decided to put together a proposal that involved a selective group of Pacific Island students who would learn more about their identity, culture, and heritage through an inquiry model of implementing visual arts, oral language skills and key competencies. The group came to be called ‘Pasifika Proud Kids’ (PPK). The aim was for these students to see that their culture, identity, values, and whakapapa were central to who they were as individuals. We would share stories, and I would share my story of how I thought I needed to leave my cultural makeup outside the school gates.

## **Pasifika connections**

As a leader it was important to intentionally provide opportunities through Hui and Pasifika fono as a way of making connections specifically for our Pasifika families and for them to be involved in the initiatives that were being implemented in the school. For example, we designed our school’s Pacific

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<sup>1</sup> Decline ratings in New Zealand are an indicator of socioeconomic status of the school’s population and determine the amount of funding received from the Government.

education plan through co-design using engagement, hearing from the community and implementing their feedback. Together we identified what success looked like for their children. Our plan aligned with the strategic goals and five key shifts in the Ministry of Education 2020-2030 Pacific Education Plan (Ministry of Education, 2020). The Ministry of Education gathered feedback from a representation of voices from Pacific communities, professional educators, teachers, outside agencies and church leaders which were then included in the Pacific Education Plan document.

Our school leadership team at the time were able to track our School's Pacific Education Plan initiatives against the overarching objectives for the education system. They were able to identify the 5 key system shifts (Ministry of Education, 2020) needed for Pacific learners and families to meet the objectives. This was important for accountability and responsibility by the leadership team to ensure the goals over the next three years were being achieved. Being a Pasifika leader and driving the Pacific School Education action plan, did come with its challenges. Although the 'Pasifika Proud Kids' (PPK) initiative was an important part of my role, there were disruptions such as Covid 19 and sustainability, which had an impact on how effective the 'Pacific Proud kids' (PPK) programme was in the school after I had left.

## Re-engagement and Attendance

One of the priorities in the school was re-engagement and attendance or, rather, a lack of it. A staff member expressed annoyance and frustration blaming parents for a student not achieving because they did not come to school every day. In my experience, comments such as these came from a fixed mindset. It did not address the issue or support the family's situation and it meant that 'we' were a part of the problem and not the solution. The system and process we had in place by sending truancy officers to students' homes clearly wasn't working and something had to change.

Although I did not know the families in question, I knew I had to find out for myself why their children were not attending school. I took it upon myself to request for a list of families who were absent from school or had not re-engaged or returned to school during Covid and I drove out to their homes. Often, I would turn up and it was the wrong address. Other times, many of the families were transient and often at the whim of landlords. I was there to build relationships not to judge or make assumptions but to listen and learn. I had taken it upon myself as a leader in the school to shift the system and initiate change in the way the school interacted with families. It was important to visit families and find out what support they needed, because the current process and systems were not working and often resulted in teachers or schools making biased judgements. This positioned schools as an unwelcoming place for many families.



When I turned up to one house, the family who greeted me in Tongan were clearly taken aback to see a staff member and not a truancy officer at their door. I introduced myself to them and asked permission to speak with them and explain the reason for my visit. They invited me in and I spent the next hour listening and learning about why their child was not at school. It turned out that both parents had to work, so the older siblings had to stay home to look after the younger children. Sometimes they would all stay home if one child was sick. To the family, they didn't feel they were doing anything 'wrong' as their wellbeing was the priority. To the education system, it was our job as educators to ensure every child attended school, regardless of any barriers or challenges they had at home. I knew that if this one family were struggling, then there must be others who were going through the same thing and were reluctant to communicate with the school. For me, it came down to being aware of what was important for our families, why and how these impact on what happens for that child. From their simple act of opening the door and welcoming me into their home, this was a real opportunity to build a relationship with the family and support them outside of the school setting. The power dynamics had changed because I was in their space, and which we often find can allow you to be more vulnerable but also out of our comfort zone and into their space.

## **Shifting from a deficit to strengths-based model**

While I continued to grow and develop in my role as a deputy principal leading student achievement, local curriculum, implementing and analysing assessment tools and strategies, it seemed that more and more of my time was also being taken up with administrative tasks. This included dealing with behavioural issues, and parent concerns. At times it was quite stressful and management systems in schools were not always effective. I was often asked to deal with our high needs students who were mainly Māori and Pasifika. I noticed some teachers had a deficit mindset and approach, making assumptions as to why these students were behaving a certain way. Yet clearly, there had been no communication or attempt to establish a relationship with these Māori and Pasifika families. I knew that although our school had started on a journey of developing cultural competence, there was still a long way to go to make a mindset shift for some teachers.

It's only natural that I came into the school with my Pasifika lens, it was a driving force to the vision and high expectations I had for our Māori and Pasifika children. I believe that whanaungatanga is a core value that needs to be prioritised as part of the school's Kaupapa (principles, ideas) and culture. I always knew I wanted to become a principal, because I had seen first-hand the decisions Principals made that inspired me to make an impact on students achieving in school. I wanted to be that Principal who was able to make a difference, help lift student achievement and give back to the community.

Finally, after seven years of being a deputy principal, I decided to start applying for Principalship. I was shortlisted for a number of schools and one of the common questions posed from school boards was “What will you as a leader do to improve student achievement outcomes for all students?” I would respond by asking them, “What is the school currently doing that is working well and making a significant difference for Māori and Pasifika students?”. I believe that the challenge is not just about shifting a systemic approach, but trying to shift a mindset of the way we do things to why we do it that way?

I can still remember that exact Sunday afternoon when I received the phone call from the Board Chair offering me the principal role. Feelings of shock, emotional and extreme humbleness all rolled into one, because who would have thought that this ‘young Samoan girl from Ōtara’ could ever become principal of a coveted primary school. Yet here I was, I was so proud to represent my Pasifika community, especially for my parents and family. The adage is true ‘when one of us succeeds, we all succeed’. My response was “yes, I accept the role and for as long as you want me”, with tears running down my face and excited for this next chapter in my life.

## **Relationship building - Teu Le Va (Nurturing Relationships)**

As a first-time principal, the most important thing for me was to ensure I was intentionally building relationships with the senior leadership team, the staff, our whānau and students. It was also important that families see that school is a welcoming, warm, caring, and friendly environment. A place where all tamariki are provided with quality education aligning with our school vision ‘Aroha, Ako, Angitu’ - ‘Together we care, we learn, we succeed’. My first week in the job was getting to know the leadership team around me and the roles and responsibilities they held in the school. It was important that I was able to listen and hear from the staff one to one what they were passionate about; what opportunities would they like to see in the school? and what do they believe should be the next steps? What came through were themes of family, whānau, āiga, values, wellbeing, and whakawhanaungatanga. Reflecting on what was shared from the conversations and talanoa, it made me realise how we as educators come with our own beliefs and how we see the world through our own eyes. It validated my leadership style grounded on a high trust model, being visible, vulnerable, and curious.

To be able to work alongside this group of leaders successfully, I knew that the most important thing I needed to remember was maintaining my cultural values that I grew up with. My fa’asamoa (Samoan) values are embedded in me and have become integral to my leadership practice. Consistent with Esera (2002), “fa’asamoa is largely defined by the values that Samoan people support and maintain”. These values are seen and upheld through their relationship with others and most importantly, God. He

emphasised that integral to being Samoan is maintaining ‘le va fealoa’i’ meaning the interpersonal relationships between an individual and others” (p.4).

To be successful in this role, I knew that sharing power with other leaders (leadership team) meant that I would firstly have to establish good relationships with them. My upbringing and beliefs aligned with Reynolds (2016) and how he asserted that relationships are very important. He explained that for many Samoan people, respect and humility are fa’asamoa values and characteristics that help maintain ‘le va fealoa’i’ (the interpersonal relationships) or to ‘teu ma tausi le va’ which translates to looking after the space between themselves and others. Teu le va’ is also seen as a concept that dictates the nature of relationships and the way in which one ‘looks after the spaces in between’ (Reynolds, 2016).

The Teu Le Va approach is significant because as described by Anae (2016), it infers protocols, cultural etiquette, both physical and sacred. It also suggests “both proscribed and prescribed behaviour and the concomitant moral and ethical underpinnings of behaviour” (p. 121). Teu le Va helps to understand what relationships are, how they are created, what they mean and how they are sustained. Anae (2010), stated that understandings of the va and teu le va described “the fatu (essence) of fa’asamoa” and the “sacredness (tapu)” of the va (relational space) (p. 122). Therefore, I knew that in this leadership role I would have to ‘teu ma tausi le va’ between me and the other leaders, no matter what challenges I came across.

## Creating a school culture

There are two Principals on my leadership journey that have stood out for me and who have inspired my leadership style. The first principal was Nelson Eggleton, Principal of Dawson Primary School from 1999 - 2004 would walk through the school visiting every classroom, daily without fail. At first, I was surprised because I have never seen this at a previous school. It became ‘the norm’ and all the students knew him. I saw the positive influence he had on the students and teachers, just by being visible. I thought if I ever become a principal one day, then this is one thing I want to model.

In the first few weeks of my own principalship, I made a decision to create a culture where the principal would be visible, approachable and available for staff, students and whānau. I would walk through the classes and greet the teachers and students on most days. At this time, the wearing of masks was mandated by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health to ensure the safety of our students using the Covid Protection Framework. What teachers, staff, and parents found difficult was that the masks were sometimes a barrier to understanding conversations. There was also a stigma where masks

were not as friendly for making contact with our families, however, we continued to follow these rules and guidelines.

The second principal who was a key role model for me was Tone Kolose, Principal of Wymondley Primary School from 2002 - 2012. He was a leader who practised what he preached, walked the talk, and showed this through getting to know the community well by connecting with the students and their families. He was proud of his Samoan culture and encouraged other students to be proud of who they were. Tone always got involved in what students were learning and brought out the best in them using their gifts and talents. He was a leader that inspired you to get involved with what was happening with the community by initiating opportunities for the community to engage and be part of what we were doing in the school, thus creating a powerful partnership and relationship.

## **The C word - Covid-19**

I knew transitioning from deputy principal to principal would be a new challenge for me. Becoming a principal while the country was in lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic, came with its own set of challenges and implications for our students and their learning. It was a very stressful time for many of our teachers, staff, and parents, because we had never experienced such a crisis before that would impact the well-being of staff and challenge how we would respond to Covid-19. The impact of Covid on our Pacific learners was evident according to the article (Education Review Office 2020) 'Learning in a Covid -19 world - The impact of Covid-19 on Pacific learners'. One of the key findings according to the report identified Pacific students encountered extra challenges during lockdown such as transitioning back to school, equity of access to devices and connectivity. Extended family situations meant that some Pacific students were slower to return to school. and some language barriers with Pacific families created some additional complications to schools' communication efforts.

In schools we have noticed the negative impacts it has had for our Pacific learners. Covid-19 related disruptions have occurred within the context of these persistent inequities. The stories shared by students acknowledged the determination, resilience, grief, grit, success and challenges they had been through. As a new Principal I was up for the challenge. I have always lived by and practised the servant leadership principle 'O le ala i le pule o le tautua'. I found that being 'up the front' can be uncomfortable at times, but I knew it was time to 'lead from the front'.

### **Tumuaki to Manager**

My role as a leader had shifted more towards a managerial role and the focus on improving student achievement. We were now collecting Covid data where we would be calculating first days of isolation according to symptoms and information from parents. It was admittedly overwhelming at times, not knowing whether we could keep the school open because we were short staffed and teachers were either sick, isolating or had symptoms. Staff's wellbeing was a priority as these were not 'normal' times and it was hard still trying to navigate my way around school operations and dealing with contractors on property projects. Alongside of this, I still had the day to day running of the school and all Principals were required to track and monitor cases in their schools.

Communication was a huge focus and parents wanted to be informed of any updates, and rightly so. I would draft letters in the evening in preparation for the following day, once approved by the Ministry of Education through ongoing bulletins sent out weekly. All information needed to be clear and simple for parents to understand. I had many late nights checking that parents were notified if their child or the classroom was a close contact. I had to gather and enter data and contact Ministry of Education advisors to make sure information was being distributed in a timely manner. On top of the administrative duties, I was expected to report to the Ministry of Education regularly.

### **Leading in isolation**

If I thought things were chaotic, after only three weeks in my new role I caught Covid and went into isolation with my family for ten days as in accordance with Ministry of Health guidelines. It was not the start I had envisioned for myself or the school. I felt very vulnerable at this time and things were now out of my control, not being able to lead on site or make decisions feeling helpless and frustrated. I knew the order of communications was crucial, and I wanted to ensure everyone was kept informed. One of the most difficult things I've had to do was to tell our school community. I let my leadership team and support staff know first, then the school board, and then the school community. Communication through email, telephone and text messages was not how I had hoped to communicate with the team, especially with our parents. I was not sure how they would respond to the Principal having Covid and being on leave.

## Vision, mission, values

The situation of Covid was not an ideal situation, which I believe is an understatement. Learning to work in a new environment and with a new team was a challenge, not only for myself but for everyone as the team was still getting to know me. Working collaboratively was imperative and understanding and using the team's strengths was important. I saw my role as a leader was to ensure that students are at the centre of all of our decision-making. Reviewing the school charter and strategic plan, which the Ministry of Education required from all Boards was one of the first tasks set before me by the board. This was a good opportunity to work together as a team to set our goals, look at how these could be measured effectively and what 'success' looked like to our school community.

As a leader of the school, it was important for me to spend time with the teachers in their classroom environment and to get a good understanding of what happens and start to build relationships. I could see an opportunity that would allow us to refocus our energy on what was priority and that was teaching and learning. My methods were to again challenge the status quo, ask the questions and allow them as teachers to dig deeper into what they were doing and why. For some, it was because they had always done it that way. For others, it was because 'this is the only way I know and it works'. As highlighted by Spiller, et al. (2015), being a 'Wayfinding leader' required me to step into the unknown and not be afraid of adversity and facing challenging situations.

## Conclusion

As a first time Principal/Tumuaki, leading my staff, students and whānau during these unprecedented times has been challenging but rewarding. I have managed to navigate the disruptions to school life grounded by the Pasifika values and lens I bring. These are through persistence, resilience, grit and looking at situations through a Pacific lens to understand that there is power in 'talanoa' and 'whanaungatanga', which has been the key for me as a leader. Families are struggling to survive, and this has impacted on what we are seeing in our schools through our tamariki. Investing my time with whānau and hearing their story has helped to identify specific needs, but most importantly to show manaakitanga. It is through these key conversations, seeking the right support and working together as a community can we help empower our people, in order for us to improve and shift the system. I go back to the dream my parents had of coming to New Zealand, Aotearoa for a better life. For me they portrayed leadership through their character, resilience, work ethic, respect, humility and a belief that they could achieve anything by 'working together'. They are my role models and it is through their

actions of who I am today. A proud Pasifika Principal/Tumuaki achieving the dream not only for one person but a dream for all of us through hard work and ‘shifting the system’ together.

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