

---

## TE VAKA POKAIKAI - Voyage to Excellence

### Tereapii Solomon (a) and Teokotai Tarai (b)

(a) [Cook Islander from the villages of Nikaupara and Amuri, Aitutaki] Pasifika/Pacific Dean, Tokoroa High School, Waikato, Aotearoa New Zealand

(b) [Cook Islander from the village of Ivirua, Mangaia and Rutaki, Rarotonga] Deputy Principal, Tokoroa High School, Waikato, Aotearoa New Zealand

### Abstract

Secondary school teaching is a profession that requires critical reflexivity to bring about change for marginalized communities. Fortunately, this is something we as Pasifika/Pacific leaders often do, with the intent to improve education outcomes for the students we teach, especially the Pasifika/Pacific students we have stewardship over. Everything we have done and continue to do at Tokoroa High School and in our community is intentional. We are intentional in our planning, conversations, and actions. In this paper we intentionally prioritise the use of our own cultural knowledge, values, and practices to enable change; shifting direction towards Cook Islands-inspired patu tuatua (conversations) within the western education system we work within, in Aotearoa-NZ. We often draw from our ancestral knowledge through sources that are not published in western academia but are deeply embedded in our ancestral knowledge systems tied explicitly to our 'enua - land. Our positioning of patu tuatua stems from being inspired by Indigenous Pasifika/Pacific practices and finding the courage to develop a cultural framework that connects with Cook Islands worldviews from and within the context of education. Our cultural framework – Te Vaka Pokaikai is based on five key components: Orama – vision; Kite – knowledge; Itiki'anga – connections; Piri'anga – relationships; and Te Au Irinaki'anga – values.

### Key words

Patu Tuatua, Indigenous knowledge, Pacific student success, intentional, cultural framework

## Introduction

Before we go on, let us explain some of the technical writing strategies used in this paper and rationale. The label *Pasifika/Pacific* is inclusive and acknowledges the development of Pasifika by the Ministry of Education (MoE, 2018) in the 1990s to represent the Pacific and Pacific migrants and their children who have now settled in Aotearoa-NZ. The term Pasifika/Pacific is also inclusive of Melanesian and Micronesian communities in the nation (Samu, 2013; Solomon, in press). We have decided to italicise the Cook Islands Māori words, terms, concepts, and Indigenous Pasifika/Pacific ideas used in this article, which is merely for the readers as a way to show visual distinction between the languages we are working with. By no means is the italicising of the Cook Islands language in this paper intended to diminish its significance and value or place it as an undermined space. Alice Te Punga Somerville (2022) adds to this discussion with her comment, “when the foreign words are camouflaged in plain type you can forget how they came to be there” (p. 10). In this instance, the foreign words are Indigenous Cook Islands words.

Everything that is known about our Cook Islands Māori history before the arrival of Christianity is connected to oral traditions and Indigenous bodies of knowledge (Futter-Puati & Maua-Hodges, 2019; Newport, 2019). Myths and legends differ across the 15 islands, but the similarities lie in the expression of those ancient stories told through storytelling, song, dance, and chants. But these are more than just ‘myths and legends’ to Cook Islands people. Woven through these stories are historical, spiritual, and sacred lessons taught to our Cook Islands Māori children today. Stories of migration, navigation, and settlement; of our communicative reliance through prayer to supreme beings even before Christianity was introduced; stories of bravery and courage through adversity; of champions who dared to leave behind their familiar lives, seeking for opportunities that would bring further prosperity for their families and communities (Joseph, personal communication, September 3, 2022; Nooroa, personal communication, December 22, 2021).

A perfect example of navigation is the discovery of Aitutaki in the Cook Islands by the warrior Ru (see Tiro’s personal journal, n.d.). Aitutaki, one of the southern islands of the Cook Islands, is located in the South Pacific. According to Tereapii’s great-grandfather Tururangi (Turu) Tiro’s personal journal, his ancestor Ru left his homeland, the island of Tupuai with a small group who trusted in his leadership and his vision, in search of a new home. Despite the challenge of uncharted waters and a vast unconquerable ocean; Ru and his followers ventured into the unknown, determined to find a new home with greater opportunities. Along the way they faced incredible tribulation. They were confronted by a tremendous storm which had the potential to destroy their *vaka Ngapuariki* (ancestral canoe), their lives, and of course, end their great adventure. But Ru was not perturbed by the Goliath that he was facing.

Instead, he relied on the cultural practices of his *ai tupuna* (ancestors) and called upon the mighty God of the Sea:

***“Tangaroa i te titi*** (Tangaroa on high)

***Tangaroa i te tata*** (Tangaroa below)

***Eueu ake ana ra o te rangi*** (Clear the skies)

***Kia tae atu te vaka o Ru ki uta.***” (So, Ru’s canoe may arrive on land safely)

History teaches us that when Ru finished calling upon Tangaroa, the ocean waves became calm, the strong winds ceased, and the stormy clouds parted, revealing a new land in the distance. He named the land Ararau-Enua-o-Ru-ki-te-Moana – the ancestral name for Aitutaki. Ru and his travelling party settled the land of Aitutaki. The people flourished in their new home, and it is believed that all Aitutakians can trace their genealogy back to Ru and one of his four wives. His story has been handed down through the generations of Aitutaki people, through storytelling, song, chants, and dance. Where would the people of Aitutaki be if Ru had not shown such courage and acted on his vision to seek for better opportunities?

There are several encounters of great leaders depicted in our oral histories, right across the 15 islands of the Cook Islands. These leaders had vision and a desire for ‘more’ for our people – even if it required leaving behind what was familiar. Our people have a history of migrating to new lands for better opportunities (Low, 1934). That migration has required that they navigate across the great ocean of the Pacific to accomplish this. Just as Ru left Tupuai in search of these opportunities, many families left the Cook Islands in the mid-1900s and came to Aotearoa-NZ to do the same (Low, 1934). Our grandparents and parents were part of this exodus, choosing to settle in Tokoroa.

The forestry industry was booming at the time, as was the case across the whole of Aotearoa-NZ. There was a labour shortage, and many Cook Islands Māori families came to Tokoroa to work. Tokoroa was a small farming settlement which grew as New Zealand Forest Products built the Kinleith mill, bringing more work into the small town (Swarbrick, 2015). Choosing to leave behind all that was familiar to them – their plantations, lagoons, oceans, villages, churches, families – their lives as they knew it, they sacrificed everything to start again. With these new beginnings came new challenges – being exposed to a new language, a new culture, working in the cold climate, working for someone else, exposure to racism and deficit slurs, and striving for access to educational opportunities (Anae, 2020). But these challenges did not dim their aspirations and dreams, which were to take advantage of the opportunities given to them to provide a better life for their posterity. Our grandparents and parents, like Ru, became

agents of change; champions of the cause who were courageous enough to move from their familiar plantations and lagoons, and into the industrial world of the twentieth century.

It is on this foundation that we wish to build and add our own story of navigation, but a story of navigating the educational terrain of Aotearoa-NZ. Through the cultural practice of *Patu Tuatua* (conversations), we share how we became champions for our Pasifika/Pacific students within the secondary school context. With the desire for improved education outcomes for our Pasifika/Pacific students, most of whom are Cook Islands Māori, we set about creating change ourselves. This required a major shift, not only in our practices and pedagogy, but also in our thinking, our dialogue, and our perceptions. We shifted away from a deficit-model that saw our Pasifika/Pacific students as lacking potential, to a strengths-based approach, focused on them succeeding as who they are and choosing to be strong in their cultural values and sense of collective belonging (MoE, 2018).

## Patu Tuatua as a valued practice

### Patu Tuatua - as a philosophy, concept, cultural practice

Before we delve into our journey, we wish to ground our unpacking of *Patu Tuatua* initially as a philosophy. *Patu Tuatua* is contextually meaningful and carries wisdoms valued by Cook Islands Māori people. Cook Islands Māori orality, that is, the thought and verbal expressions of meaning are relational (Futter-Puati & Maua-Hodges, 2019). The Cook Islands Māori knowledge canon is centred on Indigenous Pacific philosophies, a kind of spiritual and sacred understanding of humanity's close connections with the land and other domains of knowing and being (epistemology and ontology) (Futter-Puati & Maua-Hodges, 2019; Newport, 2019). Spirituality, in this instance, refers to the aspects of our Cook Islands culture that are considered sacred and usually involve matters of the heart. Of particular importance are the spiritual connections made through *papa'anga* (genealogy), not only to people, but also to important places such as '*enua* (land), *moana* (ocean), *tuātau* (time), and *vā* (space). Our *papa'anga* leads us to names of people across different generations of time, which in turn lead us to important places and the stories of events that occurred at these places (Joseph, personal communication, September 3, 2022). As people share their stories through *patu tuatua*, lessons may resonate with listeners intellectually, as well as spiritually which often permeates through heart-felt moments and deep connections.

As a concept within Cook Islands Māori communities, *patu tuatua* (conversations) are embedded in our oral histories and handed down from generation to generation. *Patu Tuatua* is a conversation, one that

encourages the natural use of storying and storytelling. In Cook Islands Māori, *patu* has several meanings. In the Rarotongan dialect *patu* as a noun is a stone or concrete wall (University of the South Pacific (USP, 2016); while in the Mangaian dialect, one of its uses as a verb is to strike; and in the Penrhyn dialect it is a verb which means to beat or kill. However, the most common use of *patu* is as a verb which in Aitutaki, Mangaia, Manihiki, and Rarotonga – means to build. The terms *tua* or *tuatua* as nouns mean speech or story in the Rarotongan and Penrhyn dialects (USP, 2016). As verbs they mean to talk or speak. In Aitutaki and Mangaia, the term ‘*tara*’ is used. This is similar to the term *tala* (to tell, to story) within *talanoa* (Vaioleti, 2006), a socio-cultural practice and tradition common in most parts of Polynesia. Therefore, *Patu Tuatua* are conversations that give people the opportunity ‘to speak to’ a particular theme or question with the intent to ‘build on’ and help others to learn from what is being shared. While people share their thoughts on the theme or question, they naturally share stories of their own lived experiences that help others to grow in their shared understandings.

The practice of *patu tuatua* comes from the Cook Islands religious service or gathering known as *Uapou* (which literally means a collective effort). *Uapou* is a common event that occurs regularly in Cook Islands communities. It is a way of bringing our people together to understand religious and spiritual matters (Joseph, personal communication, September 3, 2022). The practice of *patu tuatua* can vary based on the nature of the people present, their needs and intentions, and the kinds of conversations that take place. As individuals speak to the theme of the *Uapou*, and share stories of their lived experiences, this unpacking helps others to learn and grow.

*Patu tuatua* is a valued communal practice (Joseph, personal communication, September 3, 2022). In our Cook Islands communities in Tokoroa, the most common use of *patu tuatua* as a socio-cultural practice of shared stories, conversations, and learning, can be found amongst the *Vaine Tini Patu Tuatua* (Cook Islands Māori Women). The *Vaine Tini Patu Tuatua* gather often in Tokoroa, to seek guidance and clarification around Bible readings. When they meet, they are given a reading accompanied by a question or two. One by one, those who wish to share their understandings of the reading will do so, and address the question posed. Women share their stories confidently, as the process is culturally relevant, allowing speakers to share freely with their Cook Islands lens.

People may disagree and share opposing opinions, but respect is always shown. When each speaker shares, the others listen and naturally ‘*akangateitei*’ the speakers (Joseph, personal communication, September 3, 2022). ‘*Akangateitei*’ is a Cook Islands Māori verb which means to honour or respect (USP, 2016). Although the women in the *Vaine Tini Patu Tuatua* engage in conversations within this formal church setting, the type of *patu tuatua* experienced is shaped by their sense of connection and purpose. For them *patu tuatua* encourages and nurtures their relational connection in the group, while

at the same time their stories of their lived experiences, and their opinions are valued. Generally, but not always, they will speak in Cook Islands Māori. For our *mama*'s (elder women), it gives them the opportunity to speak freely, as Cook Islands women, mothers, and female elders.

In recent years, within the *Uapou* setting, *mapu* (youth) and *mapu pakari* (young adults) are also encouraged to share, as a way of building their own connections to our Cook Islands Māori culture, but also as a way of strengthening their own understandings under the guidance of our *metua* (elders) (Joseph, personal communication, September 3, 2022). The joy of hearing young people speak our Cook Islands Māori language is evident in their facial expressions and in the applause they give as each person shares. While the sharing is taking place, those who are listening build on their prior knowledge and take away from the conversations what they need for their own learning. *Patu Tuatua* as an intergenerationally-inspired method of storying and storytelling intended to be shared and carry hope that those listening will benefit and learn from the imparted shared experiences between generations, from *metua-metua* (elder to elder), *metua-mapu pakari* (elder to young adult), and *metua-mapu* (elder to youth).

### **Patu Tuatua as migrant conversations and connections**

As a migrant people of the Pacific who relocated to Aotearoa-NZ, navigating two worlds is a struggle. This struggle is evident across the generations of Cook Islands families in our community. Part of this struggle is the navigation of knowledge that matters, but whose knowledge – western or Indigenous? *Papa'a* or *Kuki Airani*? This question is ongoing within education spaces globally but is being addressed by Aotearoa-NZ Māori and other groups who take up the challenge to centralise Indigenous knowledge (Bishop & Glynn, 1999; Smith, 1999). By asking the questions ourselves within the space that we work in, we too embarked on this journey. Within *patu tuatua*, the conversations of connections, the nature and origin of knowledge and meaning making is exploratory. As an epistemological and ontological process, *patu tuatua* validates all things Cook Islands Māori – knowledge, values, beliefs, perspectives, and practices (Joseph, personal communication, September 3, 2022). Identities as Cook Islands peoples are also validated as participants share their stories. Connections are made through the sharing of *papa'anga* (genealogy) – a common practice when someone speaks. Additionally, through using our language comes the preservation of that language and our culture.

## Our navigation

In 2009, at Tokoroa High School, our Pasifika/Pacific learners were struggling to achieve their academic goals in NCEA. In general, they were disengaged and defined by teachers and the school as underachievers. As Tereapii explains:

At the time, I was a brand-new teacher. I had recently returned to Tokoroa from Australia and was hired at the school to teach a Level Two English class that nobody wanted to teach. The class was predominantly made up of Pasifika/Pacific and Māori boys – rugby league boys. Teokotai was the Pasifika/Pacific Dean at the time. It was apparent, from the moment I saw Teokotai in action, that she was on a mission. Our Pasifika/Pacific achievement rates were at the bottom, but she was determined to make a difference, and I was determined to be a part of it – whatever “it” was. At the time, the school system and programs were failing our Pasifika/Pacific students. The deficit theorising of Pasifika/Pacific learners, as well as Māori learners was evident as the responsibility of this failure was put back on to the students, under the rationale that “they just weren’t capable”. We realised that if there was going to be change – it needed to come from us. We had to be the difference for our Pasifika/Pacific students. Change was needed and back then, as the Pasifika/Pacific Dean, Teokotai initiated it. I gladly supported her plight.

To facilitate change, our goal was to go back to the core of our nature as Pasifika/Pacific peoples – as Cook Islands Māori people. Within the western system that we worked in, we were restricted and disempowered. An in-depth reflexive process allowed us to disrupt and move towards the decolonisation of our own teaching practice, which led to the meaningful contextualising of our leadership practice. We recognised that we could not change the western system that we worked in, but we could do things differently within that system, in our own spaces. This revelation opened our minds to the realisation that we needed to be more intentional – intentional in our thinking, our planning, our conversations, but more importantly, intentional in our practices. This shift in our thinking became the catalyst for transformation. We committed ourselves to being agents of change in our Tokoroa context.

## Orama - Vision

Our Pasifika/Pacific people have always looked back to the stories of our ancestors and learned from the lessons of the past. These stories are imprinted in our minds – tales of heroes who sacrificed everything for change. Some heroes had chiselled bodies and carried the title of *ariki* (chief) or *tumutoa* (*warrior*), while some wore *mumu* (traditional island dresses) with a *tiare* (flower) in their ear, carrying

the sacred title of ‘*mama*’. The inspiration for the vision that motivated our change came from our migrant parents and grandparents. Teokotai took us back to their dreams and aspirations, their ‘why’ for crossing the oceans to settle in Aotearoa-NZ. This was best articulated by former member of parliament Lumanuvao Laban:

Like many Pacific Islanders, my parents left their homes, families, and country to come to New Zealand and provide their children with education and opportunity. They worked hard so that we could succeed. (Laban, 2007, p. 2)

With newfound resolve, the dreams and aspirations of our parents and grandparents for our children to get a good education and to access the opportunities of the western world became our vision. Their dream became ours. Adopting that dream as our vision gave us direction and focus. Using it as a foundation to build on, we added our own dreams of excellence – a desire for our Pasifika/Pacific learners to not only achieve academically, but to excel at everything that they wished to pursue in the education context – sports, culture, academics, performing arts, and leadership – to become the best version of themselves.

Once the vision was established, we sought to gather a team together who believed just as we did. Eventually, a small group of teachers came together to work with our students. Conversations became our weapon of choice to persuade students of the success that lay ahead of them if they put their trust in us and our vision for them. Over time, we experienced a shift in our students as they took on board the messages that they were hearing from us. This shift brought about a deliberate change amongst all of us - teachers, students and our community of parents and grandparents. We dreamed and we worked collectively, to achieve the aspirations of our families.

## **Kite - Knowledge**

There were several areas of growth for us in relation to knowledge. Bishop and Glynn (1999) advocated for teachers to build on the prior knowledge of students when they entered the classroom. They argued that many teachers in mainstream settings expected students to leave their identity and prior knowledge at the school gate, instead of building on that knowledge as a foundation for learning. Within our Tokoroa community, many of our Pasifika/Pacific students – Samoan and Cook Islands Māori especially – have attended *Aoga mata* or *Punanga Reo*, language immersion early childhood centres. Within these centres, children are immersed in Indigenous contexts where Indigenous languages are the medium of instruction. For many, these centres are an extension of their homes – building on the cultural knowledge the students already have and strengthening their cultural identities (Bracefield, 2018).



Unfortunately, for many of those students, when they left their early childhood centres they attended mainstream schools that did not always engage students in further learning contexts that reflected their early childhood education (ECE) teaching and learning experiences of genuine care and cultural immersion. With this in mind, we understood and acknowledged that our Pasifika/Pacific students were coming into high school with a plethora of skills and knowledge from their own lives, including their own cultural capital. Using this as a foundation, we focused our initiatives at strengthening what they already knew, especially their Pasifika/Pacific knowledge, values, and beliefs systems, and built on this for future learning. Henry (1992) advocated that, for Cook Islanders to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow, they needed to acknowledge and grow from traditional Cook Islands cultural histories and knowledge. This was a key focus in our journey.

The most significant use of our own Cook Islands knowledge, which allowed us to naturally introduce our cultural values and belief system, was the implementation of the *oire* (village) metaphor. In the wider Tokoroa Cook Islands community, our migrant grandparents, and parents, had already set themselves up as a village, even referring to our community as *Oire Tokoroa* (the village of Tokoroa). Many of our students were being raised by their grandparents, while their parents worked. Being raised in the *oire* is different from being raised as individuals in nuclear families. In the *oire*, everyone is responsible for each other. Our grandparents and parents brought with them this way of communal life from the islands and implemented it here in Tokoroa. There was an understanding that they would be strengthened, and supported within the *oire*, as opposed to working out this new life in a foreign land on their own. This is an aspect of *oire* life in Tokoroa, a practice that has occurred ever since our people arrived in Aotearoa-NZ. We took this metaphor and adopted it in our school setting.

A key component of the village or *oire* metaphor is the value of our grandparents, and for some, great-grandparents. Their influence in the family was integral to the nurturing of our students within the extended family. Often while parents are working, grandparents and great-grandparents are left to care for the children. This reliance on our *tupuna* (grandparents/great-grandparents), positioned our students, our children, to learn the intergenerational cultural practices within their homes. Although we did not refer to ourselves as an *oire* within the school, we extended the notion of *Oire Tokoroa* into our school setting, teaching our students that we were all connected and responsible for each other. This was an aspect of Cook Islands life that our students understood, as it was already a natural occurrence in their lives. Through implementing the *oire* metaphor, intergenerational values, practices, and knowledge that were a natural part of our students' homes and wider community, naturally occurred in our school setting. These included *tauturu* (ongoing support), *aro'a* (love), *oronga* (giving), *'akapūma'ana*

(comfort), and *taokotai'anga* (unity). However, these were actioned using our own *'akono'anga* (way things are done in our Cook Islands culture), where people are of the utmost importance.

Extending the *oire* metaphor into our school setting naturally brought with it our own cultural practices, values, and knowledge. However, for us to give our students the best education, we too had to strengthen our own knowledge base around our curriculum subjects, and confidence with the expectations of the National Certificate of Education Achievement (NCEA), the main national qualification for Aotearoa-NZ secondary school students (NZQA, 2022). Once this knowledge was consolidated, the focus then became transferring this knowledge to our students. Intentional conversations, with intentional planning became an effective tool in helping our students to empower themselves in their learning journeys. Unfortunately, students don't always have all the knowledge that they need to navigate secondary school and NCEA. With a firm belief that knowledge is power, we set about ensuring that our students understood what was required of them in NCEA.

Conversations were held with parents and students together, to explain the expectations of NCEA, including information around endorsements. We recognised the need to include parents in these conversations, so that our students would receive support in their home environments – an aspect that research identifies as pivotal to the academic success of individual students (Education Review Office (ERO), 2015). Additionally, parents knew exactly what was required of their child to achieve their academic goals and could engage in their own conversations without us. Students were empowered and taught how to engage in conversations with their teachers so that they could track their own learning and progress. In these conversations, students and parents were able to express concerns and challenges around learning. Solutions and support were offered in these conversations. Homework classes were also created to support students with extra time, resources, and access to staff for further tutoring. Eventually, this grew into a community-based homework centre, with the introduction of the Power Up programme (MoE, 2021). Power Up was a Ministry of Education funded initiative, where Pasifika/Pacific communities were given support with their children's learning. In Tokoroa, this came in the form of weekly homework programmes held in the two secondary schools. Students attended homework class, with their parents and siblings. Teachers were also invited to participate and give extra support to families.

We also taught our students and our families to ask questions, especially questions such as “Sir/Miss what's the criteria for excellence?”, or a question as simple as “How do I get excellence?” Asking questions is not a natural occurrence for our children as they are taught in our Pasifika/Pacific cultures not to ask questions. As argued by Jones (1991), the knowledge, habits, and skills of the dominant west are valued more and are reproduced within schooling systems as valued cultural capital. We deliberately

taught our students the art of asking questions and building up their confidence in doing this. Asking deliberate questions and showing them “which questions” matter more in NCEA is our way to highlight cultural capital that matters more in the western schooling system in Aotearoa-NZ.

Wherever it was possible to do so, our Pasifika/Pacific learners were immersed in learning programmes and contexts that reflected their Pasifika/Pacific cultures, with a particular focus on the Cook Islands Māori culture, as most of them were of this ethnic group at Tokoroa High School. Our Cook Islands students were immersed in our cultural practices as opposed to learning about how to be Cook Islands from textbooks. In other words, it was not enough to just learn about their culture in subjects like social studies and history that emphasises diverse cultures and societies in their curriculum. It was important for students to be encouraged to look for ways they can be themselves everywhere they travel in the school. The classroom, for many, became an extension of their homes and the community, an effective triangulation focused on strengthening the cultural capital of these learners, so that they could navigate the learning spaces that they moved into as proud Pasifika/Pacific youth.

An example of this was the introduction of the Tivaevae unit, in all Cook Islands Māori classes. A small group of *mamas* were invited to come in to teach our children how to make Tivaevae – hand sewn Cook Islands bedspreads or quilts. The *mama*'s sat alongside students, and Teokotai (the Cook Islands Māori teacher) as they took them through the *tivaevae* process, one stage at a time, and sewed together individual *tivaevae*, and pillowcases for students to keep at the end of the unit. Students, teachers, and *mama*'s worked together, sharing in the learning experience together. The *mama*'s spoke Cook Islands Māori to the students as well as English, to engage them in this cultural learning experience – one that was truly authentic.

Another example is the participation of our students in cultural experiences such as giving a *Pure Ngutuare* (devotion) when a family member of our students passes away. The location of our school is unique in that it is surrounded by four churches: the St Luke's Pacific Islands Presbyterian Church, the Seventh Day Adventist Church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and the Samoan Assembly of God Church. We have students and staff at our school who belong to each of these congregations. The St Luke's Pacific Islands Presbyterian Church serves as a place where all Cook Islands peoples come to gather, much like a marae. Cook Islands people are able to use the church resources for any type of gathering - meetings, community events and many celebrations. This is also the place where many Cook Islands peoples from the community are brought to lie when they pass away. Students are taught to lead the *pure ngutuare* and speak Cook Islands Māori, or Samoan, depending on their ethnicity. They take from the classroom what they have learnt and use that knowledge in this authentic cultural context. With the declaration of the Cook Islands Māori language

as being vulnerable and at risk by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Sio, 2018), activities such as the ones that have been mentioned serve, not only to increase the knowledge base of our learners, but also to strengthen and grow our Cook Islands Māori language.

## ***Itiki'anga* - Connections**

Connections were a significant part of our navigation. Acknowledging the prior knowledge of our Pasifika/Pacific students, especially their cultural capital, and cultural language, strengthened their identity and identity constructions. Homi Bhaba (1996) affirmed the relevance of cultural identity and spaces of interconnections. Bhaba's (2004) use of concepts such as ambivalence, mimicry, and liminal third space confronts the internalised process of assimilation and the significance of a range and "mixture of all identities being negotiated" (as cited in Allen, 2021, p. 5). Tāpasā (MoE, 2018), a Pacific cultural competencies framework in Aotearoa-NZ education aimed at effective, quality teaching practices, highlights the significance of mixed cultural and ethnic identities in creating a strong sense of belonging for Pasifika/Pacific learners.

Embracing the identity, culture, and language of diverse learners is a huge motivation to encourage them to strive for success. It is important to create an environment that nurtures and values diverse cultural backgrounds so that learners feel supported, respected, and are able to uphold their cultural identity in their learning environment. (MoE, 2018, p. 1)

One of the most engaging learning activities for our students is to trace and learn their *papa'anga* (genealogy) – an intergenerational cultural practice. Much like the Māori *pepeha*, a Cook Islands *papa'anga* teaches our students, many of whom have never been to the Cook Islands, how they are connected to their *ipukarea*, their ancestral homeland. When learning their *papa'anga*, they are also encouraged to learn a *pe'e* (chant) and stories that identify which part of the Cook Islands they are from. The intention of the learning activity is *connections* – not only for the students to the Cook Islands, but also for the wider community to the students. When students share their *papa'anga*, and they are encouraged to, as soon as they start with their *pe'e*, those Cook Islands Māori peoples listening who are able to identify the origins of the *pe'e* will make connections with those students straight away.

A key learning experience that is integral to our efforts is the inclusion of a senior students' trip to the Cook Islands every two or three years. Unfortunately, Covid-19 put a hold on those plans for some time now, but we are looking again to going in the near future. Our last visit was in 2018. The majority of our Cook Islands students have never been to the Cook Islands. With a desire to strengthen their connections and identity, we endeavour to take our students back to the Cook Islands and visit

Rarotonga, Mangaia and Aitutaki. While on these islands, students are immersed in language and cultural experiences. They are encouraged to share their *papa'anga* with every group that hosts us. Prior to this visit, students will have been given opportunities to share their *papa'anga* with the wider community in Tokoroa and receive support and encouragement from their families to do so. It is a moment of pride for grandparents and great-grandparents when they see this practice actioned by our young people.

Sharing your *papa'anga* in the Cook Islands is a significant event. For our students, at first, it is a daunting task but, after a few times of sharing and understanding the connections that are made from that sharing, it is eventually something that becomes natural for the students to do. For those listening, connections with families are made straight away, as they are familiar with the *pe'e*, stories, and names shared. Tongan scholar Tevita Ka'ili articulates the importance of sharing genealogies as it brings to the forefront various kinship branches and positions people in relation to one another (Ka'ili, 2017). When students stand in the villages that their parents, and grandparents were born and raised in, these events are emotional. When they see their family homes or, for some, the foundation of their family homes, when they see the schools and churches their parents and grandparents were raised in, these moments are emotional. When they see the places where the stories of their ancestors took place, these moments are emotional. For children born and raised in Aotearoa-NZ, the significance of a learning experience of this nature cannot be underestimated.

Connections strengthen learners, and connection comes with knowing who we are. For Aotearoa-NZ born Pasifika/Pacific learners, connection comes through identity. We value identity, and not just as people who claim a particular ethnicity, but we are also very specific in our identity. For example, Cook Islanders will be very specific, and identify not only as Cook Islanders, but also in terms of their *enua* (island), and even their *oire*. We can even identify further and refer to our *puna* or *tapere* (district). Teokotai is very vocal and passionate about her identity as a *Mangaiian* woman from the *puna* of *Ivirua*. Tereapii is also very passionate about her identity as a *Aitutakiian* woman from the *oire* *Nikaupara*.

An important tool in helping our students to understand the importance of identity, is the teaching from the Aitutaki *pe'e* (chant/proverb): *Nōku ei tōku purotu, nō roto i te kutikuti o te rangi e; My beauty is my own, given to me from the heavens above*. Its meaning is powerful in terms of the divine nature of our students. Embracing the message in this *pe'e* is to take ownership of your identity regardless of who you identify with. But, more importantly, it is the spiritual (*ora'anga vaerua*) connection that comes with that identity, whether it is the spiritual connection to our ancestors, and ancestral homeland, or the spiritual connection to a higher realm. Part of this spiritual connection is the faith that comes with Pasifika/Pacific families who are religious.

The beauty of the *Aitutakiiian* pe'e '*Nōku ei*' lies not only in its meaning but also in its unpacking. Although our children are nurtured and supported in this collective or village setting, '*Nōku ei tōku purotu*' (my beauty is my own) also advocates for the individuality of our students, that it's okay to be who they are in every way. But we can also add to this idea by saying '*Nōku ei tōku reo*' (my voice is my own), which highlights the importance of students' individual voices and the encouragement for them to use their voices and articulate their own thoughts, feelings, and learnings. We can extend this once again and add, '*Nōku ei tōku kite*' (my knowledge is my own) – an emphasis on the growth of knowledge that benefits the learner themselves.

### **Piri'anga - Relationships**

Relationships matter to Pasifika/Pacific people (Iosefo, 2021). Within the *oire* metaphor is the importance of *piri'anga* (relationships). '*Nōku ei tōku purotu*' is about growing the identity of our learners, and with that comes *aro'a* (love) – *aro'a* for self, *aro'a* for the *kōpu tangata* (family), and *aro'a* for the *iti tangata* (people). Our students have a natural *aro'a* for the families that they come from, especially for their grandparents and great-grandparents. Often it is because of the *aro'a* for their grandparents and great-grandparents that our students want to do well in school – an act of gratitude and *aro'a* for the sacrifices made by those very people. With that *aro'a* comes a desire to reciprocate what has been given to our students.

While navigating our journey with our students, we not only support them in strengthening their connections, but we also support them in building positive relationships with the wider school community, and the community itself. This has required being humble enough to approach other staff members and invite them into our learning spaces to support our Pasifika/Pacific learners. Through conversations we are able to help staff members understand our vision for our students and bring them on board as part of the journey to success. This collaborative process includes an element of pastoral care, where everyone is focused on the wellbeing of the students, while also encouraging them to determine what success looks like for themselves. Sometimes, part of the pastoral care involves sharing a well-deserved *kaikai* (meal), which students are always so willing to partake of.

Our relationship with the community is an aspect which separates us from other school communities, because of our connections outside of the school. Essentially, we are part of the community. As teachers, we advocate for positive relationships for our students and staff in the schooling context. However, outside of school, we are church leaders, community leaders, and 'aunties'. The relationships that we have with our students in the wider community, extend into the school community strengthening our

connections. An example of this is where our students call us ‘aunty’ instead of ‘Mrs’ and ‘Miss’. This practice may seem unprofessional and too familiar by non-indigenous educators, but this familiarity is part of the acknowledgement of the stories our students bring with them into the school setting. The journey to building culturally responsive relationships in school requires very little effort as it is already naturally occurring, as a result of what is done in the community. The triangulation of supportive efforts and positive relationships between ‘āpi’i (school), *kōpu tangata* (family), and *iti tangata* (Cook Islands peoples) are key components to the overall success of our students.

Part of positive relationships is the principle of reciprocity. Reciprocity acknowledges that within positive relationships is the understanding that we are all learners with knowledge that benefits all. There will be times where the student’s cultural capital is stronger than that of the teacher, and in some instances, the students will be placed in positions of teaching. Reciprocal relationships pave a pathway for open dialogue, mutual respect, and power sharing. These moments provide for opportunities of empowerment and engagement, where the learning is self-determined, and student led. Additionally, power sharing establishes stronger relationships of care and the student’s knowledge is valued, key aspects advocated for in Tāpasa (MoE, 2021).

## **Te Au Irinaki’anga - Values**

Within our Pasifika/Pacific cultures is a strong set of values that are founded on the principle of ‘*akangateitei*’ or respect – respect for God, respect for family, respect for elders, respect for others, and respect for self. Within these concepts are the unwritten rules of responsibility to family, the practice to pray and express gratitude for all that we are blessed with, the notion that success in education benefits the entire family, and that service to others is essential to the well-being of the family. Within the school setting, it is not always easy to practise and maintain our Pasifika/Pacific values. However, within our tutor system, namely Te Manava Pasifika, Teokotai ensured that our pastoral care was built on our Pasifika/Pacific values. These values are always at the core of what we do.

Recognising their values in the context of education helps students to feel a sense of belonging, and a sense of pride, which also eliminates the conflict that comes with the wonderings around whose values are more important? After years of education spaces being dominated by western philosophies, knowledge, practices, and values, the implementation and practice of Indigenous values within those same spaces is a necessary shift. With the growth of Aotearoa-NZ’s diverse populations and the increasing number of young Pasifika/Pacific peoples, it is also timely. More than anything is the desire for us as facilitators of learning, to watch our students understand that they definitely belong in education spaces, and not only belong, but excel. When students are grounded in their core

Pasifika/Pacific values, with a strong sense of who they are – the desire to learn increases, the ability to navigate learning spaces grows, as does the confidence and empowerment to self-determine their own success.

## Conclusion

Navigating our journey as Cook Islands Māori educators using our own cultural capital, and implementing a Cook Islands Māori cultural framework within the western system that we work in, has brought success for our students. Once our Pasifika/Pacific learners were grounded in their culture and identity, they were more confident to navigate the other learning spaces they moved into. Much like the navigator Ru, we had no idea where we would end up, we just knew that we had to leave that familiar shore of deficit theorising to bring about change for our Pasifika/Pacific learners. As a result, our Pasifika/Pacific learners have achieved incredible success in academic achievement and leadership. Their success has brought great celebrations for their families – a recognition of the efforts by the generations of family who have supported them, as well as their collective dreams and aspirations for their children. We have learnt so much ourselves as facilitators of learning. Perhaps the greatest lesson for us is the understanding that now, more than ever, our Pasifika/Pacific students need *champions* – agents of change who are not afraid or ashamed to go against the status quo and challenge systems of mediocrity, complacency and inefficiency with low expectations of our students; champions who will advocate for them loudly and proudly despite the disruption it may cause; champions who will see the future leaders in our students; and finally champions who will guide them through a journey of learning, enabling them to be their true selves – proud Pasifika/Pacific youth who stand confidently in the different worlds they have to navigate in this, the 21st century.



## References

- Allen, J. M. U. (2021). Producing, reinforcing, and resisting the health(y) education student: A critical ethnography of health education in South Auckland schools [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Auckland.  
<https://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz/handle/2292/56819>
- Anae, M. (2020). *The platform: The radical legacy of the Polynesian Panthers*. Bridget Williams Books.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1996). Cultures in-between. In S. Hall & P. Du Gay (Eds.), *Questions of cultural identity* (pp. 53–60). SAGE. <https://sk.sagepub.com/books/questions-of-cultural-identity/n4.xml>
- Bishop, R., & Glynn, T. (1999). *Culture counts: Changing power relations in education*. Zed Books.
- Bracefield, C. (2018). Looking back to move forward: Supporting second language learning in Aotearoa-NZ. In *He Kupu*, 5(4), 60–68.
- Education Review Office (ERO). (2015). *Educationally powerful connections with parents and whānau*. <https://ero.govt.nz/our-research/educationally-powerful-connections-with-parents-and-whanau>
- Futter-Puati, D., & Maua-Hodges, T. (2019). Stitching tivaevae: A Cook Islands research method. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 1–10.  
<http://doi.org/10.1177/1177180119836788>
- Henry, G. A. (1992). Education for educational development. In B. Teasdale & J. Teasdale (Eds.), *Voices in a seashell: Education, culture & identity* (pp. 9–14). University of South Pacific.
- Iosefo, F. (2021). *The ruminating of the Samoan va (relationships in-between) and the musing and connection of identity*. Routledge.
- Jones, A. (1991). *At school I've got a chance: Culture/privilege – Pacific Islands and Pakeha girls at school*. Dunmore Press.
- Ka'ili, T. O. (2017). *Marking indigeneity: The Tongan art of sociospatial relations*. The University of Arizona Press.
- Laban, L. (2007, November 29). *Narratives for Pacific peoples*.  
<http://maidenspeech.beehive.govt.nz/speech/narratives-pacific-peoples>.
- Low, D. (1934). Traditions of Aitutaki, Cook Islands. *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 43(169), 17–24.  
[https://www.jps.auckland.ac.nz/document//Volume\\_43\\_1934/Volume\\_43%2C\\_No.\\_169/Traditions\\_of\\_Aitutaki%2C\\_Cook\\_Islands%2C\\_by\\_Drury\\_Low%2C\\_p\\_17-24/p1](https://www.jps.auckland.ac.nz/document//Volume_43_1934/Volume_43%2C_No._169/Traditions_of_Aitutaki%2C_Cook_Islands%2C_by_Drury_Low%2C_p_17-24/p1)
- Ministry of Education (MoE). (2018). *Tapasā: Cultural competencies framework for teachers of Pacific learners*. <https://teachingcouncil.nz/resource-centre/tapasa/>

- Ministry of Education (MoE). (2021). Talanoa Ako. Pacific talk about education and learning. <https://pasifika.tki.org.nz/Media/Files/Talanoa-Ako/Talanoa-Ako-Pacific-talk-about-education-and-learning>
- Newport, C. A. (2019). Vaka moana as policy space: Navigating the Cook Islands case of climate change mobility [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Auckland. <https://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz/bitstream/handle/2292/45207/whole.pdf?sequence=2>
- New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA). (2022). How NCEA works. <https://www.nzqa.govt.nz/ncea/understanding-ncea/how-ncea-works/>
- Samu, T. W. (2013). Pasifika education: Discourses of difference within Aotearoa New Zealand – [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Canterbury. [https://ir.canterbury.ac.nz/bitstream/handle/10092/8731/thesis\\_fulltext.pdf?sequence=1](https://ir.canterbury.ac.nz/bitstream/handle/10092/8731/thesis_fulltext.pdf?sequence=1).
- Sio, A. (2018, July 28). Be proud of your heritage and protect its future. <http://beehive.nz/release/be-proud-your-language-and-protect-its-future>
- Smith, L. (1999). Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples. Zed Books.
- Solomon, T. (in press). 'Akara ki mua – Looking forward; Navigating education spaces as Cook Islands Māori. *Waikato Journal of Education*.
- Swarbrick, N. (2015, June 11). Waikato Places – Tokoroa. In *Te Ara – the Encyclopaedia of New Zealand*. <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/photograph/27357/tokoroatakes-shape>
- Te Punga Somerville, A. (2022). *Always italicise: How to write while colonised* [eKindle version]. Auckland University Press.
- Tiro, T. (n.d.). The Personal Journal of Tururangi (Turu) Tiro, 1905-1975. Accessed 1 September 2022. [https://www.myheritage.com/names/tururangi\\_tiro](https://www.myheritage.com/names/tururangi_tiro)
- University of the South Pacific. (2016). Dictionary of Cook Islands languages. <http://cookislandsdictionary.com/sources>

