
Effective teaching for Pasifika learners - Know Me, Teach Me!

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Abstract:

Some Pacific learners are achieving very well in both primary and secondary schooling, but the system is failing many Pacific learners. An area that requires further development, therefore, within the New Zealand education system is for education to be more responsive to the diversity of its learners. That said, for teaching to be effective, teacher practice and pedagogy must be responsive to all learners. This article serves to explore what effective teaching for Pasifika learners looks like using three policy documents to analyse the journey. Employing discourse analysis, I examine the complexities of the policy documents and its nuances regarding Pasifika learners.

Keywords

Culturally responsive pedagogy, Pasifika, diversity, effective practice, teaching

Introduction

Before I delve into an analysis of discourse, I articulate here my own experiences as an educator which led me to inquire into the implications of policy on culturally responsive pedagogies for Pasifika learners in Aotearoa New Zealand.

It is another day and we are home from school. It is time to get dinner sorted alongside homework, house chores, and getting ready for tomorrow and I don't even want to think about my own work that needs to be done. Mr Year 13 is sharing about his day. I can't help but be concerned about his tone of voice and how he seems not only disengaged but also disgruntled about school and his teachers. I wonder what is going on in this space. As I sit and listen to another story of how my son feels, I feel saddened after hearing him explain how he and the Island boys are not listened to and that teachers don't care about them. I can't help but wonder if his discontent and complaining is him masking teenage laziness, or whether there is seriously something else to this. I guess I will find out at Parent Teacher interviews.

The night of parent teacher interviews has come around fast, there is a nervousness in the air as students worry about what teachers are going to say and parents cross their fingers that their kids are doing what they are meant to be doing. My son and I are sitting with his English teacher. He asks her how many literacy credits he has, as he has enrolled in the University of Auckland and wanted to confirm whether he had met their entry requirements. I was proud of my son for speaking up and for his drive to attend University. However, his teacher's response shocked me. Her demeanour changed and her eyes shifted between my son and I as she said in what I understood to be a sarcastic tone "Oh, I didn't think you were planning on going to university?"

The reflection above is a lived moment I shared with one of my children. We were both confronted with what we understood as bias and prejudicial attitudes from one of his teachers who, through her body language and tone of voice, communicated disbelief in my son and his ability to attend university. While some may see the reading of this situation as not necessarily underpinned by racialised profiling or assumptions, ample research within Aotearoa New Zealand (hereon in New Zealand) demonstrates that, for minority ethnic groups such as Māori and Pacific, racial stereotypes about ability or lack thereof continue to be present in our educational systems (see Allen & Webber, 2019; Nakhid, 2012; Turner et al., 2015; Webber, 2011). Furthermore, as an experienced classroom practitioner with over 20 years' experience, and due to interactions like the one described above, I have come to the conclusion that the question of Pasifika student achievement must be reframed and respond to "What are teachers NOT doing to engage, motivate and inspire many Pasifika learners?" I have chosen to position Pasifika as a cultural signifier in this paper because it has historical

significance during the 1970s and 1990s as Pacific migrant families shaped and communicated their aspirations for their kin to thrive in New Zealand (see Samu, 2013; Si'ilata et al., 2017). *Pasifika* is also the term that will be referenced throughout the article.

I have seen and experienced many changes in my years as an educator. These include what I see as positive changes such as the creation of the five previous Pasifika Education Plans to the establishment of the Action Plan for Pacific Education 2020-2030 as a response to lifting and improving Pacific achievement (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2020a). However, there have also been less-positive changes over my years in education, such as the introduction and implementation of National Standards in 2010 – their removal in 2018 was met with a sigh of relief by many educators who saw their implementation as an agenda focused on undermining public education (O'Connor, 2013). However, a constant that remains is the reality of Pasifika educational underachievement in schools.

While there are many contributing factors to Pasifika underachievement, such as socioeconomic status, access (or lack of) to educational resources and opportunities, the education system itself, schools, teachers and students themselves (Si'ilata et al., 2017). Common questions that are often asked by teachers, be it at staff meetings, departmental gatherings, professional development settings and the like arise: “What’s wrong with these kids?; “Why aren’t they learning?”; “What’s getting in the way of understanding new concepts?; “What’s stopping them from learning?” Some educators go a step further and try to find solutions to these questions by way of deficit theorising and blaming the students and their families, communities, and cultures for failing to adapt to a western education system. With regard to Pasifika learners’ achievement, deficit labelling (Nakhid, 2003) has become synonymous with Pasifika students. The *at risk* label frequently attached to Pasifika learners suggests that the New Zealand education system is not yet effectively achieving successful gains for these students (Allen et al., 2009). Success in education equates to improved qualifications which, in turn, “enhances employment prospects” (Samu et al., 2008, p. 145). This, in part, is why education is so important to our Pasifika families and their futures.

Standing at the crossroads

I am a Samoan daughter, sister, wife, educator, and mother of three children. At this point in my professional and personal life, I find myself at a crossroad. The classroom where I had spent over 20 years nurturing, supporting, and growing young minds was my haven – my happy place because all the successes and achievements of my students (past and present) were consistent, genuine and celebrated. An example of this was when I was invited to a former Tongan pupil's Year 13 (last year of high school in Aotearoa New Zealand) graduation at an extremely prestigious private girls' school where, not only was she named Dux (top student in Year 13), she had also won a full scholarship to study law at the University of Auckland, New Zealand's top-ranked university. I was invited to the graduation because her mother told me her daughter always said that I was the reason she worked so hard. I had also told her when she was a young student that she could be anything she wanted to be if she worked hard and remained kind and respectful. Yet for my son, the classroom was an unwelcoming space of exclusion and despair. In my heart I knew I wanted to help but, as life goes, insecurities and self-doubt set in. Who am I? What change can I make? What can I do? I'm just a mum and a teacher.

The fire in my belly and focus on improved experiences for Pasifika students did not extinguish or subside. Instead, it only grew stronger, making me realise that, if I wanted to be part of a positive change to improve educational outcomes and teaching for Pasifika learners, I had to take the plunge, take a leap of faith, step outside of my own comfortable little world. I had to delve deeper into this topic and so the Master's journey began. I wanted to investigate for myself and answer the question "What do effective teachers of Pasifika learners look like?" I wanted to explore this question so that my children and other Samoan and Pasifika children will no longer be made to ever feel uncared for, de-valued, and excluded in the classroom.

Interestingly, in 2009 the MoE stated that the New Zealand education system needs to be achieving better outcomes for Pasifika students and lifting Pasifika educational achievement is a priority (MoE, 2009). Of great concern here is the fact that over a decade later, in my experience as a teacher and mother, I had witnessed minimal progress and improvement for Pasifika learners. Therefore, I was

interested in completing my Master's by looking at key policy documents, exploring the way discourse was used in policy to frame culturally responsive pedagogy. I was interested in unpacking these ideas and what this type of pedagogy looked like for Pasifika learners. My discourse analysis focused on three key policy documents of the Pasifika Education Plan 2013–2017 (MoE, 2013), Action Plan for Pacific Education 2020–2030 (APPE) (MoE, 2020a) and Tapasā Cultural Competencies framework for teachers of Pacific learners (MoE, 2018).

The aim of this article is to explore how quality teaching and learning for Pasifika learners are manifested in the classroom. Utilising a discourse analysis of the aforementioned policy documents was to highlight what policy and teaching strategies were being implemented and working in classrooms. Equally, the discourse analysis also made salient issues and areas within teaching and policies that were not visibly working in classrooms. I acknowledge that, just as Pasifika learners are unique individuals who come from distinctive backgrounds with rich traditions, languages and customs so, too, are the unique teachers and educators tasked with the privilege of ensuring that effective teaching is enacted and achieved. But “The evidence, however, shows that we still have a considerable way to go towards achieving the vision of the Education Act 1989” (MoE, 2020b, 2019, p. 2).

Pasifika education has traversed and transformed over the last three decades. But we have not arrived at our final destination yet, which is the entrenchment of quality teaching and learning for Pasifika learners in the New Zealand education system. Sir Henare's whakataukī best sums up the journey of Pasifika education,

Kua tawhiti kē to haerenga mai, kia kore e haere tonu.

He nui rawa o mahi, kia kore e mahi

tonu” “*You have come too far, not to go*

further. You have done too much, not to

do more”

(Ta Himi Henare [Sir James Henare] Ngati Hine elder and leader)

While much has been achieved for Pasifika learners, there is still “more to do” to ensure their educational experience is the best it can possibly be. This article begins by briefly outlining the discourse analysis methodology, it then describes the current educational climate for Pasifika learners, and then examines policy documents and their relevance to Pacific learners.

Methodology

Discourse analysis is concerned with actions and practice and is constructed on two levels (Potter, 2004). The first level of discourse analysis refers to the construction and use of words. The second level focuses on how discourse constructs views of the world. I drew on Carol Bacchi’s post-structuralist perspective of discourse utilising the ‘What is the Problem Represented to be? (WPR) policy analysis tool (Bacchi, 2009). I am persuaded by Bacchi’s argument that policies are discourses and, therefore, I use this approach to uncover how a particular representation of the problem – that fixing Pasifika underachievement in New Zealand schools has been reframed as Pasifika success. Doing so allows us to understand and explain critiques of Pasifika education in New Zealand. I believe that the second level of this construction is where Bacchi’s WPR policy analysis tool fits alongside, and is relevant to, my research because it delves beyond words. Crucial to my project was unpacking how the problem of Pasifika underachievement caused a disruption in the New Zealand education system and how this *problem* has been transformed into Pasifika success. Bacchi, therefore, argued that discourse analysis looks at the deep-seated ways of thinking that underpin political practices (Bacchi, 2018). Using a discourse analysis through Bacchi’s WPR analysis tool to examine the three policy documents achieved two polarising goals. One, it highlighted that the representation of problems are linked to knowledge and power and two, policies emerge and are created as a response to a problem that is socially constructed.

Bacchi's WPR analysis tool identified silences or gaps in the policy documents driven by the MoE – Pasifika Education Plan (PEP) 2013–2017, APPE 2020–2030 and Tapasā. The silences that were identified in the documents are overwhelmed by the goals and objectives set out by the MoE. In turn, users of these policy documents can become distracted by the aims and targets provided and easily overlook the silences concealed within. In addition to the identified silences, a more significant theme with even deeper implications for education has emerged. That is, the intended outcomes for the policy documents have been created as a response to the construct of improving education outcomes for Pasifika learners. However, improving education outcomes in New Zealand is underpinned by a political agenda that aims to build a “productive and competitive economy” (MoE, 2013 p. 1) through a strong education system. For Pasifika learners then, the direction of Pasifika education shifts the focus from effective teaching and learning to an education system driven by the economy.

The current educational climate for Pasifika learners

“Pacific translates into Pasifika in several of the Pacific languages spoken in this nation [New Zealand]” (Samu, 2006, p. 36). In 2018, National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) showed that, while results for Pasifika learners have steadily improved, there still remain significant achievement gaps between this group and European and Asian learners. Pasifika students achieved 72%, 77% and 66% at NCEA Levels 1, 2 and 3 respectively. Additionally, in 2019, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) showed that the attainment of University Entrance (UE) for Year 13 Pasifika learners was 30%, which remains significantly lower than Year 13 European and Asian students' UE results at 55% and 59% respectively. (NZQA, 2020).

In the mid-1990s, three progressive phases occurred in the development of Pasifika education. Phase one was an increase in government-funded and directed programmes into research and development of Pasifika learners. Phase two was an aggregation of government-funded research programmes which resulted in the third phase – an expansion in professional learning development determined by evidence-based research outcomes of phase two. A direct political response that occurred was lifting

Pasifika educational achievement became a government priority. Pasifika students were identified as a priority learning group and the development of the first five-year PEP 2001-2005 occurred at the same time. Since the launching of the first Plan in 2001 to present day, there have been a total of five Pasifika Education Plans. The PEP provides the MoE with strategic direction for improving education outcomes for Pasifika peoples. The overarching vision is to “raise Pasifika people's success in education and through this to ensure full participation and successful contribution to the economic, social well-being and transformation of our country” (MoE , 2006).

Action Plan for Pacific Education 2020-2030 (APPE)

The APPE comprises five key shifts in which have been prioritised by the government to ensure that Pasifika learners and their families obtain an equitable and excellent education. These five key shifts are Shift 1: Government to work reciprocally with diverse Pacific communities; Shift 2: Confront systemic racism and discrimination in education; Shift 3: Enable every teacher, leader ... to become culturally competent with diverse Pacific learners; Shift 4: Partner with families to design education opportunities ... so that aspirations for learning and employment can be met; Shift 5: Grow, retain and value highly competent teachers, leaders ... of diverse Pacific heritages. As a teacher I believe that Shift 3 in the APPE is significant because it outlines how the government will support effective educators and classroom practitioners in the new Action Plan. It states that it will “enable every teacher, leader and educational professional to take coordinated action to become culturally competent with diverse Pacific learners” (MoE, 2020a, p. 6). Culturally competent teachers are practitioners who create classrooms that are figuratively and physically inclusive and safe that reinforces a “sense of belonging and place as a learner, as a student” (Samu, 2013, p. 238).

Cultural competence is not just about the inclusivity of the individual. Practitioners who enact culturally competent practice provide specific guidance in learning about and acquiring skills that are needed in how to be successful in subject-specific learning (Si'ilata et al., 2017). Cultural competency does not preclude teachers who do not share the same ethnic background as Pasifika learners.

“Regardless of ethnicity, teachers can improve their practice in creating opportunities for Pasifika learners to make timely, meaningful connections” (Si’ilata, 2014, p. 257).

Tapasā: Cultural Competencies framework for teachers of Pasifika learners

“The Tapasā Cultural competencies framework is a tool that can be used to build the capability of all teachers of Pacific learners across all education sectors” (MoE, 2018, p. 1). The document aims to contextualise quality teaching and learning within a Pacific learner setting by providing a Pacific lens to the Standards for the Teaching profession and the Code of Professional Responsibility and Teaching (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, n.d.). While documents such as Tapasā are important as they position Pacific understandings and values as central to education, there is still tension as it is often misconstrued that Pasifika teachers are the best teachers for Pasifika learners. Tapasā is a framework that supports teachers of Pasifika learners, Pasifika teachers included. Importantly, the document clearly states “cultural competency does not override effective pedagogy” (MoE, 2018, p. 9). In short, the best teachers for Pasifika students are the best teachers – regardless of their ethnic background. Crucial, therefore, in this context is unpacking how the problem of Pasifika underachievement caused a disruption in the New Zealand education system and how this *problem* has been transformed into Pasifika success.

Tapasā builds on the PEP 2013-2017 framework suggestion that at the centre of Pasifika educational success is the learner, their aiga (family) and communities. Cultural competence across the education sector therefore is imperative, not only at the coal-face of the classroom, but at all levels and that teachers require support in achieving this. Teachers need instructional leaders who know how to lead their teachers’ professional learning and knowledge development. They also need broader systemic support, sometimes provided through external experts who are able to work in co-constructed ways to challenge teachers’ existing beliefs, and improve their classroom practices (Si’ilata, 2014, p. 5).

The document was designed to support non-Pacific teachers to confidently utilise culturally responsive practice with Pacific learners. Culturally responsive teaching or pedagogy is defined as culturally affirming and validating, and teaching to and through the strengths of diverse students (Gay, 2018). Further, Si'ilata et al. (2017) asserted that, “for Pasifika learners, culturally responsive pedagogies are of crucial importance and at the heart of such approaches, are responsiveness to Pasifika cultures, languages, and identities” (p. 913). Tapasā urges non-Pacific teachers to integrate and implement the values and knowledge of these uniquely diverse learners into their planning and teaching practices. With the richness of the unique Pasifika cultures in classrooms today, teachers of Pasifika learners have a wide and lavish landscape of cultural knowledge and expertise to tap into to plan and implement authentic contextualised teaching and learning. In turn, cultural diversity is normalised, embraced and celebrated.

Pasifika Education Plan 2013-2017 (PEP)

The PEP 2013–2017 was the fifth policy Plan created by the government and the MoE to improve Pasifika education outcomes. Pasifika learners had been identified as being *priority learners* (Si'ilata et al., 2017, p. 914). The PEP makes explicit the importance of working in partnership with other educational agencies such as the NZQA, Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand (TCANZ) and the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC). The document also “aims to promote closer alignment and compatibility between learners’ educational environments and their home and cultural environments” (Samu et al., 2008, p. 144).

The impact of key educational policies for Pasifika

To contextualise the summaries of these policies it is important that I reflect on how the documents resonated with me, my study, my journey. The PEP 2013–2017 was the government strategy for the MoE to navigate improved educational outcomes for Pasifika learners. Similarly, with the APPE

2020–2030, it is the government’s commitment to ensuring equitable outcomes for Pasifika peoples. The intention of these documents served a two-fold purpose. First, it acknowledges that more needs to be done to improve learning outcomes for Pasifika students. Second, it is an inbuilt acknowledgement that previous strategies and processes did not work to enhance Pasifika learners, so more funding and resourcing was necessary. However, the documents do not explicitly map out how these teaching and learning improvements will be enacted in the classroom for Pasifika learners. Instead, the documents are inundated with goals and targets that must be reached without giving clear direction in how these will be achieved. Interestingly, highlighted particularly in the APPE is the notion of financially incentivising education. With the government committing \$80.2 million dollars to improve learning outcomes for Pasifika peoples, again it falls short in clearly articulating how this will be done in the classroom between teacher and learner. The objective of the study was to explore what effective teaching for Pasifika learners looks like. What was found, in sum, however, was that both the PEP and the APPE are oriented towards goals and targets rather than teaching and learning.

As an experienced teacher, teaching and learning from a Samoan lens is all I know. The values of *respect, faith* and *service* and the importance of my culture was instilled in me my entire life. “Respect is a value that underpins Pasifika ways of being” (Rimoni & Averill, 2019, p. 4). Thus, growing up, these are pillars that have helped shaped my world view and equally have impacted on my teaching practice. “Service is a fundamental value for teaching of Pacific-heritage learners” (Rimoni, Averill & Glasgow, 2021, p.13). In the classroom, these transferable traits have been relatable for, and positively responded to by, the many Pasifika learners I have taught. That is, Pasifika learners have been able to see how our/their rich lived experiences do matter and can enhance the way we think about and learn at school. “There are similarities coming from the Pacific islands where customs and traditions, though not the same are similar” (Nakhid, 2012, p. 23). In the same vein, students and colleagues who do not share the same culture or belief system as me have been given a brief insight to how family, faith and culture positively impacts on the lives of many Pasifika learners. This does not imply, however, that I wear rose-tinted glasses and apply the ‘one size fits all’ model for my

students. Quite the contrary, I have found that the fact that I am Samoan is a huge asset to all the schools that I have taught in. My Samoan identity affords me a dual identity in a western education system because I can view, process and articulate my thinking in two platforms, Samoan and a western outlook. In turn, my students, colleagues and workplaces have been privileged by the use and application of my Samoan world view on education. I have been blessed to be part of curriculum development and review teams within schools where our local school curriculum were based on key Samoan values of *faith, family* and *culture*. Thus, the thousands of Pasifika teachers like me in our schools and educational institutions are enriched by the cultural capital that people like me take into school daily.

What did the documents tell us works for Pasifika learners?

The PEP 2013–2017 was the government’s strategy for improving education outcomes for Pasifika peoples. Previous PEPs focused on the underachievement of Pasifika learners. For example, Pasifika students are generally performing below national means. Another example from the PEP 2006–2010 stated there was “a need to increase Pasifika students’ achievement in education” (MoE, 2006 n.p.). In the 2013–2017 PEP, however, Pasifika students’ education outcomes were improving significantly. “More Pasifika learners are achieving NCEA Level 2 or equivalent qualifications and gaining entrance to university” (Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 1). Progress too, was noticeable in that the levels of participation and engagement of Pasifika learners across the sector had risen. Notable was the change of terminology that occurred. Two significant changes took place within the PEP 2013–2017. Firstly, a shift in a newly founded understanding of who Pasifika people are, emerged. Secondly, a move to reframing the reductive language from focusing on Pasifika underachievement to an additive emphasis of Pasifika success began.

The language shift found in the PEP 2013–2017 is not only significant linguistically but pedagogically as well. The shift went from looking at what Pasifika learners cannot do to what they *can*. With “a sharper focus on provider performance” (Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 1), the PEP draws on the *Pasifika Success* compass to reiterate for teachers the importance of personalising practice and

pedagogy. Acknowledging that a learner's family and cultural heritage play a major role in the life of a Pasifika student is crucial. The need for teachers to use a strengths-based approach with diverse learners is imperative. According to Siilata et al. (2017), "in order for Pacific learners to be successful in the dual (and often multiple) worlds they live in, effective teachers should acknowledge, strengthen and build students' capacity and capability in both" (p. 909). In sum, the PEP focuses on centralising Pasifika learners (and their families) in all teaching and learning.

After 19 years' service in the primary school sector, I transitioned into the secondary sector where I was a house dean as well as a social sciences and learning support teacher. These various hats I wore within the high school context allowed me to see first-hand how vocabulary changed about Pasifika learners and education at large, but also how teacher pedagogy and teacher practice was shifting. Deficit theorising about learners was being replaced by reframing the negative into a positive. I also experienced this reframing as part of my role as a dean, which was to ensure students' pastoral and academic needs were being met and nurtured. As the academic mentor to Year 13 students, many sought my assistance in ensuring they had enough credits for University Entrance and that they were, in fact, on track. In addition, during our talanoa (conversations) of academic mentoring, I reminded the students that they belonged in the system as high-achieving students and that they were equally entitled to tertiary education alongside their non-Pasifika peers. Our talanoa would centralise on what they had already achieved and what was still required of them to progress further. The discussions were heartfelt and honest. The students saw their roles as dutiful daughters, hard-working students and high-achieving academics. Disrupting the old narrative of Pasifika underachievement to Pasifika success was not a 'job' in my role as their dean. In fact, it was simple, because in short, these high school students epitomised Pasifika success, they just had to get used to hearing and believing it.

Reflecting on the PEP, in my role as a teacher and dean it has never been difficult for me to centralise Pasifika learners (and their aiga/whānau) in all teaching and learning because, as a Samoan, it is difficult to separate the learner from their family. In my Samoan world view, a learner is not a solitary or individual figure. Rather they belong to a collective – their aiga (family). To centralise learners,

Pasifika learners are the starting point in making connections and building positive relationships between home and school. Noteworthy however, is that effective culturally responsive practitioners acknowledge this fact and keep learners front and centre of mind to inform planning and assessment (TCANZ, 2017). Utilising students' prior knowledge and cultural capital in a classroom to engage and inspire learners is just one trait of an effective teacher. An elaboration of what this looks like in practice in real teaching time in a real classroom is missing from the PEP.

In 2018–2019 consultation meetings led by the MoE across New Zealand with Pasifika learners, families and communities took place, resulting in the design for the APPE 2020–2030. Deliberately or unwittingly, the MoE employed two culturally responsive strategies at the meetings: *Talanoa* and the *Vā*. *Talanoa* is dialogue or the sharing of stories (Vaiotele, 2006) and the *Vā* is the awareness of relational space in relational contexts (Anae, 2010). *Talanoa* was applied to gauge Pasifika voices regarding education issues for Pasifika learners. The point of difference between the APPE and the previous five Plans, is that the strong community voice and presence which were absent from the former documents is present in the APPE. Suggested here is that the partnership between Pasifika communities and the government had strengthened, which further reinforced the notion that Pasifika education was transforming. The vision for the APPE is “diverse Pacific learners and families are safe, valued and equipped to achieve their education aspirations” (MoE, 2020a, p. 4). By strengthening the relationship between the government and Pasifika communities, the APPE illustrates the importance of consolidating education aspirations within Pasifika learners which ultimately leads to Pasifika success.

Embedded silences within the policy documents

The next section identifies themes that I refer to as the “silences” embedded within the documents. The silences that are discussed are what I consider to be the “missing pieces” or “gaps” in the policy documents. Identifying the silences offers insight into how policy documents are created and enables a better understanding of whose interests are truly served at the heart of policy and strategic plans. These silences, therefore, highlight what is not working for Pasifika learners. Bacchi (2000) talked

of the “non-innocence” (p. 50) of how policy problems are framed, how this influences what is thought about and how these impact on possible causes of action and how it also influences what is *not* thought about. That said, I view the idea of what is not thought about digs deeply into bringing “such silences in problematizations out into the open for discussion” (Bacchi, 2000, p. 50). Given this, I support Bacchi’s notion of “what is not thought about” as being crucial in this context of examining the policy documents because it highlights how such silences in problematizations need to be out into the open for discussion.

The PEP stated “Pasifika learners, parents, families and communities are at the centre of learning” (MoE, 2013, p. 3). However, there is no demonstration in the PEP that outlines how this will be implemented into classrooms or measured by schools. There is little guidance in the document to suggest how the placement of Pasifika students, families and communities at the centre of learning is actively enacted in the education system. Further, the document does not explain how the concept of centralising Pasifika learners was reached or if, in fact, is valid. The problem or silence, therefore, that becomes salient in the PEP is the lack of direction to illustrate what centralising Pasifika students in their learning looks like in classrooms, or, more importantly, how Pasifika education achievement is improved by doing so. The effects produced by the problem in the document is that teaching then becomes driven by data, forcing educators to meet targets as opposed to creating authentic learning opportunities. Therefore, by consolidating teachers’ understandings about Pasifika students’ “ways of knowing’ also helps teachers develop a richer idea of the Pasifika child as a whole person” (Samu, 2006, as cited in Rimoni & Averill, 2019, p. 6). Further, the silences become more striking for teachers who are still refining their craft, their pedagogy and practice. It is my view that the PEP does not go far enough in explicitly mapping out the most effective teaching and learning strategies that enhance Pasifika learner knowledge and abilities. It is pertinent to question: How did these silences come about? It is also my view that the silences are inherent within the documents as a result of various factors. Firstly, the PEP was established to improve Pasifika education, however, by the same token, it was only made possible with the incoming Labour government in the 1990s making Pasifika learners a priority. Silences or gaps within the document are inevitable as more time, resources and

research continue to be needed to ensure improved outcomes for Pasifika learners are consolidated. That said, however, a start has been made by the creation of the PEP and the APPE to improve learning outcomes for Pasifika learners. More transparency in the area of how to centralise Pasifika students and clear direction in how to use this knowledge to plan successful classroom programmes for teachers is what I believe is missing from both the documents. Another noticeable absence is how centralising learners can inform planning and assessment tasks and enhance learning. There is a risk that teachers could become focused on *frontloading* students with content knowledge to pass assessments and become data-driven as opposed to enriching the lives of learners. Thus, a balance needs to be sought between teaching *to* the curriculum and teaching *with* the curriculum. *Teaching with* is the skill that effective teachers have, to not only teach their specialised subjects, but also to implement the teaching of life skills in their areas of expertise by way of embracing and empowering students to become critical thinkers, problem solvers and collaborators, as well as independent learners.

Two key silences were identified in the APPE, *Pacific success* and *Pacific education aspirations*. In terms of Pacific success, the problem represented is that no definition is provided in the document. Further, the policy outlined what the government was already doing to support Pacific success with the development of “bilingual resources” (MoE, 2020a, p. 18), but no explicit description was offered. Additionally, the list of objectives set out in the document to support the concept of Pacific success, distracts users of the document from noticing the absence of a definition. Problematic here is, how can Pacific success be quantified if no measure or definition is given.

Similarly, with the concept of Pacific education aspirations, no clear definition is given to illustrate what these are. Two key issues arise. Firstly, are these aspirations representative of all the Pasifika people in New Zealand? Second, how were the aspirations to be collated and measured for success? These issues combined, emphasise the importance of critically examining the constructs of success and aspirations. Moreover, what do success and aspirations mean for Pasifika learners and by whose measures? A deep-seated assumption underlying the problem is expressed in the document as stating the APPE seeks to “ensure that the doors to all education pathways are open and stay open for Pacific

learners to pursue life-long learning” (MOE, 2020a, p. 4). Implicit is the idea that education pathways are not open for Pasifika learners. Moreover, if pathways were opened and previously available for Pasifika students, what has caused them to close? The document once again, does not provide scaffolding into opening these metaphoric doors.

In *Tapasā*, the initial problem is the ethnic-specific approach is not defined and therefore does not provide practical steps for teachers about how to implement these. Various Pasifika methodologies are listed on page 3, yet the document offers no guidance for what these ethnic-specific methods look like in practice. *Tapasā* comprises three overarching teaching competencies referred to as *Ngā Turu*. The *Turu* describes behaviours and understandings at different stages of the teaching journey’ (MoE, 2018, p. 8). The *Turu* are pragmatic steps for teachers when engaging with Pacific learners. However, there is no indication of how the *Turu* are ethnic-specific and made relevant for the diverse Pasifika learners. The *Turu* do not illustrate features of differentiated teaching approaches that can be utilised in classrooms to enhance learning. The question therefore remains: how are Pasifika learners benefitting from these documents if no explicit definitions and pathways are being offered?

Systems and processes the Ministry have put in place to support the practice of these educational policies.

The PEP maps out the government strategic planning in how to shift and improve Pasifika education. This is accomplished through goals and targets set out by the government to “accelerate literacy and numeracy achievement and gaining NCEA Level 2 qualifications as a stepping stone to further education and/or employment” (MoE, 2013, p. 8). However, this can also be viewed as it being the goal of the government to create conditions for Pasifika communities to help “build a more productive and competitive economy for all New Zealanders” (MoE, 2013, p. 1). In the document, the placement of Pasifika students at the centre of learning simultaneously shifts the focus to building a strong economy shows a juxtaposition. That is, are the two factors connected? If so, how and why? “For Pacific peoples, the dominant influences on education policies are knowledge economy discourse

and their own demographic and socioeconomic location in New Zealand” (Samu, 2020, p. 198). Again, key questions arise such as, firstly, what is the connection between centralised learners and the economy? Second, what impact did the New Zealand economy have as a driving factor to improve Pasifika education? Economic growth and improved outcomes for Pasifika learners are inextricably linked in the PEP. “Focused education policy on Pasifika is not surprising, given that New Zealand’s economic development could be adversely affected, especially in the Auckland region, if their education success rates are not improved” (Samu, 2020, p. 198). Simply, the data-driven targets set by the government to “increase the number of Pasifika school leavers leaving with NCEA Level 1 literacy and numeracy, increase the percent of Pasifika 18-year-olds to achieve NCEA Level 2 or equivalent” (MoE, 2013, p. 8) becomes the vehicle to support this educational policy.

The APPE outlines what the government is already doing in schools for Pasifika people. One example is the supporting of, and the provision of, bilingual resources. Further, Pacific success and Pacific education aspirations are constructs that present as being positive shifts taking place in Pasifika education. For readers of the document, Pasifika voice is being heard and acknowledged in the APPE in the form of actions undertaken by the government to ensure success. However, on a deeper level, closer scrutiny of how the constructs were created must occur. Therefore, the concept of Pacific success and Pacific education aspirations are defended by way of financial incentivising, with the government committing “\$80.2m to protect Pacific learners and families”. (MoE 2020a, p.6). The provision of funding for Pasifika education, strengthens the position of the government in determining the changes that will either transform or stagnate progress for Pasifika learners.

The notion of Pasifika voice in the document in my view, questions the integrity of the consultation process carried out by the government and the Ministry of Education. When the nationwide consultative hui/fono/meetings were taking place to gauge Pasifika voice about what they wanted from the New Zealand education system for their Pasifika children, this was an historic undertaking because nothing like it had ever taken place previously. The intention, therefore, of collecting Pasifika voices was both noble and heart-warming. However, the question does beg, what were the government’s true intentions behind these fono? Was it just another political ploy for the government

to implement their already laid out agenda and were Pasifika people really going to benefit from the new Action Plan? The question that surfaces, therefore, for me as a Pasifika educator and parent is: “Were the participants (voices) at these consultation meetings representative of all Pasifika communities in New Zealand?” Are their views shared collectively or are the ideas shared in the APPE of a select few? The genuineness of the consultation process therefore in my view is downplayed by the fact that nationwide consultation meetings took place seeking to hear Pasifika voices.

Culturally competent teaching - where to from here?

To conclude, the final section will surmise four key reflections about the impact each of these documents have on Pasifika learners and make suggestions for where to next. The objective of the PEP was an outline of the government’s commitment to improving education outcomes for Pasifika learners. The creation of the PEP is an illustration of how far Pasifika education has traversed. And that there is still some way to go. For me as an educator, and a parent, it is an acknowledgement on the part of the government that Pasifika education and Pasifika learners are a unique group of people who will continue to thrive and succeed in New Zealand. Largely contributing to the success of Pasifika people is an excellent and equitable education system that actively utilises and implements the knowledges and skills that these learners already possess. Effective classroom practitioners who can positively engage, motivate and inspire Pasifika learners are most successful when planning and assessment tasks are delivered through a culturally responsive classroom. As effective teachers we “need to ... support students to enable them to bring their own knowledge and ways of being into the classroom” (Allen et al., 2009, p. 17).

Building and nurturing positive relationships and connections with both learners and families is inherent in culturally responsive pedagogy (Nakhid, 2003; Si’ilata, 2014; Samu, 2006). Moving forward, therefore, the New Zealand education system will only grow stronger by the maintenance of excellent quality pre-service teacher education programmes and pathways. Additionally, school

leaders must continue to upskill and *grow* all teachers professionally, personally and culturally. Ensuring teaching and learning opportunities, resources, and ongoing professional development for teachers are readily available to refine and improve their pedagogy and practice are necessities so that, ultimately, effective culturally responsive practitioners are at the forefront of every classroom nationwide.

Culturally competent teaching lies at the heart of culturally responsive practice. Again, this does not mean sharing the same cultural identity with Pasifika learners in order to be an effective teacher (MoE, 2018; Si'ilata et al., 2017). Rather, it is about knowing the students' learning styles. It is also about opportunistic teaching of incorporating knowledge from, and about, students' cultural, social or religious backgrounds into the classroom – often referred to as “teaching moments”. Culturally competent teaching is about contextualised learning. For example, for Pasifika students who do not necessarily identify with their Pasifika roots, culturally competent teachers can confidently and skilfully navigate their practice to meet and cater to all learning needs – all the while maintaining the integrity of the learner. I have seen this in action at my former place of employment. In a low-decile, all-girls secondary school where 90% of the students are Pasifika, one particular teacher who is held in extremely high regard by the students (if not the highest) is the Pakeha male history teacher. His pedagogy and practice epitomises culturally competent teaching because he has an understanding of these students' ways of knowing (Samu, 2006). His knowledge of how the students learn, his awareness of when to pull back or accelerate with content and knowledge teaching is a seamless fluid motion that this particular colleague continues to refine and master, particularly with Pasifika students. As a result, over the last five or six consecutive years, history has had the second highest pass rate in NCEA Levels 1, 2 and 3 respectively at this school, with high rates of Merit and Excellence endorsements from its Pasifika students. The acknowledgement that culturally competent teaching practice is paramount for Pasifika learners in classrooms is further testament to how much work has been done. The next step, to go further, consolidates the notion that quality teaching for Pasifika learners necessitates culturally competent teaching because “skilled and confident teachers (and leaders) are important for Pasifika educational success” (MoE, 2018, p. 3).

The acknowledgement of valuing Pasifika knowledge is another example of how far Pasifika education has travelled in shifting from a Eurocentric system (Si'ilata et al., 2017, p. 912) to a more culturally responsive structure. And I believe that the New Zealand education system must continue to emphasise the value of Pasifika knowledge in the *New Zealand Curriculum*. Further, Pasifika knowledge must be viewed as inherently enhancing western knowledge. Rather than referring to Pasifika knowledge as an *add-on* or another extra thing to do, or even considered to be not valid. The education system needs to acknowledge the authenticity of cultural capital Pasifika learners have so that teachers can and will continue to integrate it into mainstream thinking, teaching and learning through their planning and assessment tasks in their classroom programmes. “Research shows that students are more motivated to take control of their learning in classroom environments that recognise them, draw relevant connections to their lives and respond to their unique learning needs” (Ambrose et al., 2010 as cited in Chu-Fuluifaga, 2022, p. 2).

The role of the Teaching Council is crucial in being a platform for effecting change. Implementing change to improve education outcomes for Pasifika learners illustrates the *going further* in the journey of Pasifika education. For me, through my 20-plus years at the coalface, in a classroom in front of learners, change can only come about when the Teaching Council mandates and implements the urgent change and transformation needed, so that the real beneficiaries – the students – of effective teaching and learning can prosper, achieve and succeed. An example of this is the introduction of these policy documents. Tapasā the Cultural Competency Framework is the Pacific lens to the Teaching Standards, yet is not obligatory for teachers to utilise, which begs the question: What is the point of having the document? Is it just another ministry tick-box criterion to cover or address Pasifika learners? To compensate that it is not mandatory to use, teachers of Pasifika learners are encouraged to read it, go on professional development about it, talanoa with colleagues, discuss at staff meetings, etc. I believe therefore, that in order to move forward, the Teaching Standards need to mandate the use and application of these cultural literacies, these MoE policy documents of Tapasā and Tataiako (for Māori learners). This will ensure that teachers are given the tools and support to upskill and

refine their teaching practice so that effective culturally responsive practice is enacted in all classrooms for, and with, all learners.

Final summary

My journey while undertaking my Master's was to investigate what effective culturally responsive teaching looks like for Pasifika learners. Along the way, there have been moments of wonderment through the policy documents' acknowledgement that Pasifika education is crucial. Pasifika learners are important and valued. There were also times of bewilderment and frustration that Pasifika learners, while deemed priority learners are still not getting the urgent, expert and financial support required to accelerate progress and improve educational outcomes. Pasifika education has traversed and transformed over the last three decades. But we have not arrived at our final destination yet, which is the entrenchment of quality teaching and learning for Pasifika learners in the New Zealand education system. Sir Henare's whakataukī best sums up the journey of Pasifika education; while much has been achieved for Pasifika learners, there is still "more to do". A final suggestion, therefore, is that further research in the area of ongoing and sustained education improvements for Pasifika learners is required.

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