



Waikato Journal of Education

ISSN 2382-0373

Website: <https://wje.org.nz>



Volume 27, Issue 3, 2022

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Editor: Kerry Earl Rinehart

Cite this article: Solomon, T. (2022). ‘Akara ki mua—Looking forward: Navigating education spaces as Cook Islands Māori. *Waikato Journal of Education*, 27(3), 21–28. <https://doi.org/10.15663/wje.v27i3.1019>

Link to this volume: <https://doi.org/10.15663/wje.v27i3>

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'Akara ki mua—Looking forward: Navigating education spaces as Cook Islands Māori

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I AM COOK ISLAND.

I am Cook Island.
I am gang related, often hated and definitely uneducated.
I can't spell or read, and I will not succeed because I am Cook Island.
A giant on the field, but never in class.
Low expectations from teachers because I could never pass...NCEA.
Come to school to eat corned beef and play court touch.
Never do any schoolwork because it's "too hard".
No literacy or numeracy, what even is university? And dux? Well that couldn't possibly be me.
Lower grades, lower pay. Hit the piss, hit my woman...then hit my children???
That is what I'm destined for... after all.
The mill, bush and go bus are my future career choices,
My self-esteem depleted by all these negative voices.
Too poor to be healthy, too hungry to read,
Can't afford to pay school fees, too many mouths to feed.
My DNA makes me primitive, my brown skin means I'm limited,
And I 'm a savage that inhales stupid substances prohibited.
I'm just a F.O.B,
a person who will get F.A.T,
a teenager who's gona be a D.A.D?
But when will the universe STOP and see the real M.E,
Instead of the stereotypical perception of society???
You see when I first started school, my story was already written,
A repeated narrative attached to generations smitten.
Lost visions, misconceptions, and negative perceptions,
Judgements already made because of my complexion.
So, what would a brother like me possibly know?
When my life has been determined by the status quo?

I am Cook Island. No. I am Cook Island.
My ancestors navigated the seas using only the stars,
They conquered the oceans, settled lands from afar.
They were agriculturists, marine biologists, nutritionists...scientists.
My great-grandparents, they came here so that we could have better,
Their belief that education could give us a brighter future.
They paved the way, made the sacrifices, built a legacy,
They believed it was possible, so why shouldn't we?
I don't understand this negative picture of my culture,
But I do know this -
What we do with that legacy is completely up to us.
I am gang related, my uncle lives in a cell
Instead of choosing to live, he chose a life in hell.
I can spell and read, I choose to succeed
Not just to achieve – but excel...
Excellence is the path I choose for me.
I don't give a damn about what society would have you perceive,
In my heart I know that I am capable of achieving my dreams.
Black, white or yellow, greatness is for all,
But I want to be remembered for using my brain, instead of a ball.
You don't have to play league or always pull sieg,
You don't have to beat a brother or smoke a bag full of weed.
I don't want to be the brown guy that stands idly by,
Watching others live life because I didn't believe.
I'm gonna navigate my life, put my faith in God's hands.
Be proud of who I am, no matter where I stand.
The good Lord said, all things work together for good to those who love Him.
So I'm gonna love Him, knowing that I can do all things because he strengthens me.
I am Cook Island.
My blood.
My bones.
My heart.
I am Cook Island.



Abstract

I know it seems somewhat unconventional to begin this paper with the words of my eldest son's Year 12 speech, especially when the first few stanzas reflect deficit profiling of Cook Islands Māori people. But this paper is not focused on deficit profiling at all—far from it. However, as I pondered on Fa'avae's abstract in this Waikato Journal of Education volume, I was moved by his inclusion of Pacific educator's voices from Realm nations with the intent to provide an “analytical lens centred on unpacking stories and insights” (Fa'avae, 2022), focused on change in Pasifika/Pacific education, in Aotearoa NZ. The emphasis on voices and stories reminded me of the purpose of my son's speech in high school—one that was inspired by the young writer Joshua Iosefa's 2012 spoken word poem titled ‘Brown Brother’ (Iosefa, 2012). In his article Fa'avae advocates for a greater presence of Pacific educators and leaders from Aotearoa NZ's Realm Nations in higher education, enabling their (our) voices, knowledges, and Indigenous languages, with the intent to inspire and empower others into this space, and prioritising insights often ignored. This paper is my response to his article.

Keywords

Cook Islands Māori; stories; storying; Patu Tuatua; Pasifika/Pacific

Introduction

When my son wrote his speech, he deliberately used the context of the school speech contest as a way to enable his voice. It gave him a context to address issues of marginalisation he felt Cook Islands Māori students were experiencing (including himself) at the time. The speech contest gave him the space to respond to the deficit stereotypes he and other Pasifika/Pacific students faced and an opportunity to tell a different story, one that captured excellence. In his opinion, this was the only way that his voice would be heard, in a space that confronted the voices of dominant groups' biased opinions and values, often hidden behind the banner of diversity. My concern is around how many Pasifika/Pacific young people's hopes, motivations and concerns are visible to educators and which spaces and contexts their voices are prioritised in schooling. Although this paper does not directly capture or articulate young people's voices, it is an opportunity for a Cook Islands educator, mother, church and community leader, and doctoral researcher from Tokoroa in Waikato to share her reflections on Pasifika/Pacific education and education research in Aotearoa NZ.

Before I continue, I explain my use of the Pasifika/Pacific descriptor in the context of my paper. A detailed version of this can be found in Fa'avae's paper. Pasifika and Pacific are similar yet different (Samu, 2013). Both descriptors are valid in the education of our students in Aotearoa NZ. Pasifika was used in the 1990s to categorise migrants from the Pacific. Most of them came from Polynesia. However, Pacific migrants from Micronesia and Melanesia do not connect with the term Pasifika because it is not a concept within their vernacular and world views.

My son wanted what we all want—for our voices to be heard. In a society where this has not been the case, it is refreshing to be part of a wave of change that enables the voices of others, especially in the field of education research. It is on this pretext that I wish to base my response. Although the area of Pasifika/Pacific research is still comparatively new, the field is dominated by voices that are not representative of my son's. There are very few academic voices in education research that are in fact of Cook Islands Māori ancestry, and even fewer in Tokoroa. I understand that this is growing, with of course myself as part of this renaissance. You may ask, well why is it so important that your son's voice is represented in academic research? The answer is simple. Our culture counts too (Bishop & Glynn, 2003; Bishop & Berryman, 2006).

The term “Pacific” is in fact problematic and disputable, one that is being debated in “Pacific” spaces throughout Aotearoa NZ (Samu, 2013). It comes with the assumption that all Pacific nations are the same. Yes, there are similarities, but there are more characteristics that in fact differentiate each unique ethnic group. None of us wish to be identified as the same because we’re not. My statement is not a judgement, especially when early Pasifika/Pacific researchers have worked hard to pave a path for people such as myself, to emerge into the field of research and use our Indigenous lens to continue to represent the voices of our Pasifika/Pacific peoples. Instead, it is merely an observation, one that encourages and beckons for more Cook Islands Māori educators and academics to pick up the torch that has been carried by others, and move forward for the benefit of our communities, and the learners in those communities. Therefore, I wish to take this opportunity to use my enabled voice and advocate for a greater presence of Cook Islands Māori voices in education research.

Patu tuatua

As part of the enabling of my voice, and other Cook Islands Māori voices, I wish to ground my thoughts, my self-reflections, through the use of *patu tuatua*—a Cook Islands Māori socio-cultural practice used in Cook Islands communities. *Patu tuatua* is an intergenerationally-inspired method of storying and storytelling. These are intended to be shared with the hope that those listening will benefit and learn from the experiences that have been shared. Within *patu tuatua* the conversations of connections, the nature and origin of knowledge and meaning making is exploratory. As an epistemological (concerned with knowledge and knowing) and ontological (concerned with reality) process grounded in Indigenous Pacific bodies of knowledge, *patu tuatua* as a concept, cultural practice and worldview validates all things Cook Islands Māori—knowledge, values, beliefs, perspectives, practices and language.

There are several meanings for the word *patu* in our Cook Islands Māori language, but its most common use is as a verb, which in the Aitutaki, Mangaia, Manihiki and Rarotonga dialects means “to build” (University of South Pacific, 2016). *Tua* or *tuatua*, as verbs, means “to talk” or “speak to”. On the islands of Aitutaki and Mangaia, the term *tara* is used. *Tara* is similar to the term *tala* in *talanoa* (Vaiotei, 2006). In most parts of Polynesia, *talanoa* is a common socio-cultural practice and tradition. Therefore, *patu tuatua* is a conversation where participants are encouraged “to speak to” a chosen theme or question. As participants share their stories, those listening “build on” their own knowledge and learning takes place. Through the natural sharing of stories of their own lived experiences, participants not only help others to grow in their shared understandings, but also enable others to use their voices too.

Patu tuatua has its origins from the Cook Islands Māori formal setting or service known as *uapou*. *Uapou* means “collective effort” (Joseph, personal communication, September 3, 2022). Traditionally, *patu tuatua* has been implemented by Cook Islands peoples as a way to understand religious matters from a spiritual perspective. As a way of growing our Cook Islands peoples’ knowledge on these religious matters, the *uapou* brings people together to fellowship through *patu tuatua*, *pure* (worship) and *imene* (singing). It is a common event that occurs regularly in Cook Islands Māori communities. Collectively, participants share stories of lived experiences with the intent and hope that those stories will edify and uplift someone else.

A key component of *patu tuatua* is the unpacking of knowledge shared. When people share their stories through *patu tuatua*, these lessons have the potential to resonate with listeners both intellectually and spiritually. These are often experienced through heart-felt moments and deep connections. Learning is self-determined, where people differentiate what is important to them. Key messages in the stories are building blocks, and it is up to each individual to take what they need to build up their own knowledge (Joseph, 2022). Although learning is largely an individual journey within formal schooling, for Pasifika/Pacific people learning is intended to be shared, thus benefiting the collective (Bishop et al, 2014; Samu, 2013). Spiritual learning moments have the potential to bring about change and growth

too, as individuals are strengthened by the experiences of other people, including entities that are unseen. Within a western framework, the inclusion of spiritual matters may not be considered valid knowledge, but in Indigenous cultures, including Pacific cultures, spiritual and sacred matters are embedded in our very knowing's and beings (Bishop & Glynn, 2003).

The practice of *patu tuatua* is often associated and connected to the *vaine tini* (women) in our Tokoroa community. *Vaine tini patu tuatua* meet often as a way of fellowshiping and supporting each other. When they meet, they are usually given a bible reading, accompanied by a question based on that reading. One by one, those who wish to share their understandings of the reading, address the question posed (Tarai, personal communication, July 17, 2022). Women share their stories confidently, and generally, but not always, they will speak in Cook Islands Māori. For our *mamas* (elder women), it gives them the opportunity to speak freely, as Cook Islands women. When each speaker shares, the others listen and naturally '*akangateitei* the speakers. '*Akangateitei* is a Cook Islands Māori verb which means to honour or respect (University of South Pacific, 2016). Sharing stories is not always easy, but the women are encouraged and nurtured in the group, while their stories of their lived experiences and their opinions are valued. Conflicting opinions eventuate, and sometimes debating takes place but always '*akangateitei* or respect is maintained within the setting.

My desire to use *patu tuatua* is not in any way an attempt to add to the “clutter” in Pacific research, referred to by Sanga and Reynolds (2017). I am at the very beginning of my doctorate research, learning what it means to do Indigenous research and be a Pasifika/Pacific researcher. Already, I feel privileged to be myself and speak using my own words. With a conviction to stay true to my identity as Cook Islands Māori, the implementation of *patu tuatua* allows me to be my real self, with my own cultural knowledge, my reflections, my feelings, my interpretations and all that is encompassed in being Cook Islands Māori, without requiring justification for doing so. *Patu tuatua* not only enables, but also validates my “Cook Islands Māori” voice, where I position myself as a Cook Islands Māori woman, mother, educator and researcher.

Tuatua akama'ara'anga—Honouring the sacrifices

“We benefit from walking forward, by looking back carefully.”

(Sanga & Reynolds, 2017, p 200)

Within the context of western research, rarely are stories told specifically from the lived experiences of Cook Islanders in Aotearoa NZ. Amongst the diverse ethnic groups that make up Pasifika/Pacific peoples in Aotearoa NZ is a population of approximately 80,000 people who identify as Cook Islands Māori—80% of which were born in Aotearoa NZ (Sio, 2021). There are approximately 22,000 people who identify as Cook Islands Māori in Australia, with just under 7,000 of those born in the Cook Islands itself (Australian Bureau of Statistics for the Department of Home Affairs, 2018). In the Cook Islands, the population sits at 17,600 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2022). The Cook Islands Māori language has been classified by UNESCO as being vulnerable and at risk of being lost (Sio, 2018). This is significant. Without our language, who are we? With the majority of Cook Islands peoples living in Aotearoa NZ, there is an urgency and responsibility for us to do more. The survival of our language ensures the survival of our culture, and within that culture are the knowledge, values, traditions and practices that our children need to be connected to their Indigenous selves.

Sanga and Reynolds (2017) argued that energy should be directed to ensuring the survival of that which gives Indigenous peoples meaning and belonging. To move forward into the future as a Cook Islands people, our children must know the stories of their ancestors, those who migrated across oceans to discover and settle the Cook Islands, but also the migration of our own grandparents and parents, who came to Aotearoa NZ. Some families are fortunate in that they have strong traditions of handing these down through the generations, but some are not so fortunate. These stories are woven into our *papa'anga*

(genealogy) which keeps us connected to who we are. They help us to understand and experience life as Cook Islands Māori and claim our place in this world. For those Cook Islands people who do not live in the Cook Islands, especially our *mapu* (youth) and *tamariki* (children), this is even more important as they—as we—navigate life in a country that is not indigenously ours.

There are two stories of my grandparents that I treasure that are evidence of the sacrifices made for my family. I want to share them to honour their sacrifices. My maternal grandparents' family home sits as a reminder to our family of such sacrifices. Situated across from the St Luke's Pacific Islands Presbyterian Church, 5 Kelso Street, Tokoroa, sits a humble Forest Products house that has served as our family home for decades. My maternal grandmother Bateseba Daniel's passed away in March of this year; my grandfather passed in 1996. One of the stories that was shared with our family, right before we took her from our home to lie at the church for her funeral proceedings, would have a profound effect on me. I listened intently as my mother shared with our *koputangata* (family) the significance of 5 Kelso Street.

When my grandparents lived in Aitutaki, they lived quite humbly and slept on a mat on a dirt floor. When the opportunity came to immigrate to Aotearoa NZ in the early 1960s, they didn't hesitate. They vowed to each other that they would work hard to buy a home, with the promise that their children and grandchildren would never have to sleep on a dirt floor again. My grandparents worked hard their entire lives—my grandfather in the Kinleith Mill and my grandmother as a cleaner at the Tokoroa Maternity Hospital. In August 1973, two months before I was born, their dream of buying a family home came true. Both of my grandparents have passed away. Our family home still stands and is still in our family. They were proud Cook Islanders, who gave up everything in our ancestral homeland of Aitutaki, so that their posterity could have a better quality of life.

My paternal grandmother, who's name I carry, is someone that I truly '*akaperepere* (treasure). She was responsible for my siblings and I while our parents worked during the day. As a young child, I watched as she walked into the frosty back yard in her *mumu* and jandals to gather wood for our fire. Once she had made the fire, she then prepared breakfast for all of us. While we ate breakfast, she made our beds and got our clothes ready for school. As we got ready for school, she took care of our breakfast dishes and got our lunch money ready. She never made us lunch. Sandwiches, in her mind, were for *papa'a* (Caucasian/European) and not something she considered "real food". Before we left for school, we sat with her and read our *Tia*—designated bible verses for the day. We took turns reading the English version, followed by her reading the Cook Islands Māori version to us. She then prayed for us before we left for school. When school ended, we would arrive home to a cooked meal. My grandmother did everything for us. We had one job—to go to school and learn. She was a strong advocate for the education of the *papa'a*. I was the eldest and so the expectation was higher. Her dream was for me to attend university and "be somebody". I didn't even know what university was back then, but I listened earnestly. Her dream became mine.

I am forever grateful for the sacrifices of my grandparents, and also my parents. They encouraged us (myself, my siblings and cousins) to make the most of the life that we had in this *papa'a* world. However, there were decisions that they made, ones that they thought would be in our best interests that proved to be a greater sacrifice. I spent more time with my paternal grandmother, as I was a sickly child. She was very skilled at cooking our Cook Islands *kaikai* (food), and she was also very talented at sewing *tivaevae*. I can remember many times asking her if I could help cook or sew. She would scold me and tell me that I couldn't do it, that my hands were made for writing. Then she would remind me that I had one job and I needed to go and do it—my job was to study. My maternal grandmother was very much the same. She was a *tivaevae taunga*. When I would ask her if I could help, she would say no, that I needed to spend my time studying. Both of my grandmothers have now passed away and taken those traditional skills with them. They never did teach me to sew our *tivaevae* or even cook our traditional *kaikai*. But I did go to school, and I did study. When I graduated with my master's degree, I was flanked

by both women as I walked up to receive my degree. Before I reached the Vice Chancellor, they moved ahead of me and they honoured my achievement with a *pe'e* (a traditional chant):

Tama tiki e! Tama rangi e!
 Ka apai runga e! Ka apai raro e!
 Ka apaipaina no te rangi e!
 Ka ruta kina e – ka mimo! Oosh!
 Ka mimo! Oosh!
 Ka mimo! Iekoko!

It is common for families to honour graduates with cultural acknowledgements of praise. There were many haka that day, which always sends shivers down my spine. In our Cook Islands culture, *pe'e* is usually done by our males. Not that our women can't do it—but it is more common for our males to do it. But that day, the honour was mine to have been acknowledged by both of my grandmothers. Both were strong advocates of our Cook Islands culture and language. They loved being Cook Islands Māori.

The greatest sacrifice in my upbringing was made by my father. The 1970s–1980s were a time of unrest in Aotearoa NZ for Māori and Pacific peoples. People had lost their jobs as a result of the downturn in the economy. Racism was rampant, and incidents such as the Bastion Point Protest and the Dawn Raids were evidence of how Māori and Pacific peoples were being treated (Anae et al, 2015). Thankfully, groups such as Ngā Tamatoa and the Black Panthers were created, to stand up to the injustices that were being experienced right across the country. My father wasn't one to be influenced by political events, but he understood the political climate that had penetrated our communities. He believed that for his children to get a good education and to progress further in the *papa'a* world we needed to distance ourselves from our cultural activities (meetings, dances, gatherings) and language. He decided that we would not be immersed in either, as other Cook Islands families in our community were.

Even though both my parents spoke Cook Islands Māori to each other, they only spoke English to my siblings and I. Fortunately, my grandmother (Dad's mum) did not feel the same. She was our champion for our Cook Islands Māori language and our culture. She was the difference for us. Even though we weren't immersed in the culture and language in our own home, when we were with her, she made sure that we were. As a result, I understand the language, but my *reo* is very basic. Despite my father not teaching us to speak Cook Islands Māori, we were raised with strong Cook Islands traditions and practices. Respect for our spiritual matters was always paramount. We were taught to pray daily and give thanks to God for all that we had been blessed with. Respect for family, especially our elders, was of the utmost importance. We were taught to serve our community.

I mention these stories for two reasons. Firstly, to acknowledge the sacrifices made by my grandparents and parents so that we could have what they believed was better quality of life than what the islands could give us. Secondly, to highlight that although it wasn't their intention, some of the decisions made by my grandparents and parents disabled us culturally. How many other Cook Islands adults throughout Aotearoa NZ did the same? I would argue that this is one of the reasons our Cook Islands Māori language is vulnerable.

Tuātau tuatua—Our time to share

I now live in a time where my grandparents and their peers have passed away, and with them, their cultural knowledge. I feel a strong sense of responsibility to use my research journey to honour them and their stories. I believe that there is much to be learned not only from their stories, but others like them. Their aspirations and dreams for their posterity motivated them to become agents of change, where

they left behind their plantations and lagoons, to work in the factories of the western industrial world. It is now up to my generation to take those same stories and add our own. For me, that involves the struggle of being caught in between two worlds. It includes the navigating of different values, languages, practices and knowledge; the dismissal of my own culture as unimportant; and also the confusion of my own identity, as Cook Islands Māori versus that of a New Zealand-born “Kiwi”.

Even though I am an adult now, the inner schoolgirl within me remembers vividly the hurt that came when teachers didn’t pronounce my name properly. It hurt because my name was also the name of the person I loved most in this world, a name that was given to her after an important event in my great-grandfather’s family. This occurred all my schooling life. I remember studying topics on the Romans, Greece, Hitler and the Germans, and watched many slides of ancient places in Europe. I learnt about the Commonwealth and her Majesty the Queen and did an individual project on Greek gods. What I don’t remember is ever once feeling like there was anything in the classroom that even remotely reflected my family or my heritage, and there were no slides of our ancient places. My family’s ancient stories were labelled myths and legends and considered fiction. It was as if “my story” didn’t mean a thing.

Bishop (2005) argued that people lived storied lives. Every child upon entering the classroom already comes with prior knowledge—their own stories, existing narratives that allow them to make sense of the world that they live in. “Learners are empowered/facilitated through stories that grow from their own prior knowledge to new understandings appropriate to their own understandings” (Bishop, 2005, p 262). Our Pacific learners—our Cook Islands learners—need to see themselves and their own stories in the learning spaces that they move into. When I attended school, my story, or the story of my people, was non-existent in the learning spaces that I grew up in. At the end of the 1990’s, researchers Bishop and Glynn (1999) advocated for classroom teachers to build on the existing knowledge of Māori learners at the start of the new millennium. Although they were referring specifically to Māori, this was applicable to all learners. My son of dual heritage (Cook Islands Māori and Aotearoa Māori), who was Year 12 in 2018, was fighting to have his voice heard and valued—his story. How, in the 21st century, can there have been such little change?

Sanga and Reynolds (2017) once again advocated that what counts for Pacific peoples is what research can do to celebrate, develop and support their lives as both unique and connected wherever they are. For Cook Islands peoples, research has the potential to fill the silence when it comes to Cook Islands “storying” and “stories”, so that Cook Islands *mapu* (youth) who live in Aotearoa NZ, like my son, can see themselves represented and valued in spaces where that representation has been missing. Additionally, through these stories, connections will be made, relationships strengthened and identities authenticated as our children learn to navigate as Pacific peoples, as Cook Islands peoples, in a world heavily influenced by digital technology in the 21st century (Bishop et al., 2014).

Conclusion

In Aitutaki we have a beautiful proverb that reads, “*Nōku ei tōku purotu, nō roto i te kutikuti o te rangi e* —My beauty is my own, given to me from the heavens up above”. In a time where there are so many conflicting messages about identity, values, knowledge and practices, messages that question the very essence of who we are, the lessons learnt from the stories of our ancestors, the lessons woven into the stories of our *papa’anga* have just as much value for our Cook Islands Māori *mapu* and *tamariki* that are navigating their lives today. For Cook Islands peoples, Pacific research has the potential to create a space that enables their voices, that celebrates their histories, that allows for their stories to be told—unashamedly, unapologetically, intentionally—so that they know who they are is enough.

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