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## Ko e leo ke eke hā? Empowering tagata Niue living in Aotearoa New Zealand to claim its status in education

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The introduction is part of a Pasifika/Pacific education ongoing conversation. Like my colleagues, this intellectual space enables voice amongst other voices often sidelined even within the wider Pacific people category. My fronting of the question, “Ko e leo ke eke hā?” is intentional in me seeking to claim space for tagata Niue and make visible voices of empowerment. The descriptions I share of my journey in education is part of an ongoing *tūtala* from a tagata Niue perspective, adding to the existing *talatalanoa* with my colleagues from other Aotearoa NZ Realm Nations.

### Keywords

Tūtala; leadership; Niue; Realm nation; education

### Why tūtala?

‘Epeli Hau‘ofa’s (1994) “sea of islands” phrase is a constant reminder of the *fonua* (land) and *moana* (ocean) being significant to how we understand our connections to each other and our surroundings—the living and the perceived non-living. Engaging in *talatalanoa*, the practice of ongoing conversation matters to only some Polynesian people. Although *talanoa* is a concept that aligns with Niue language and worldviews, it is not a cultural practice I wish to utilise in this paper. Vaioleti (2006) and other Pasifika scholars have defined it from Tongan and other Polynesian perspectives related to talking, to telling, or to story. For me, the practice of *tūtala* resonates more as a generative practice. Compared to *talanoa* from a tagata Niue lens, *tūtala* has a more rigid structure with time restrictions where there is a process of instant decision making, whereas *talanoa* is dialogue without restrictions. *Tūtala* is defined as *tū*—to stand and *tala*—to dialogue or storytelling. By joining the words *tū* and *tala* is defined as to converse or chatting (Sperlich, 1996). To provide an in-depth meaning, *tūtala* is being an orator, where you are delivering a speech or talk upstanding as a sign of respect and dignity. *Tūtala* is also strongly connected to *fakatūtala*, in settings that require critical discourse to take place based on a set or desired purpose or intention. Furthermore, *tūtala* practice also extends into *fetutala aki*, where generative discussion is observed and felt amongst each other. The practice of *tūtala* is about ensuring that a safe space is provided for the community and individual issues or concerns are clarified and a possible solution can be negotiated. In my view, *tūtala* is a socio-cultural practice made sense through *vahā loto*, a tagata Niue relational space that centres on ethics of care and generous practice, as we seek to



understand our meaningful connections to other people and places in the world. When I approach conversation with my Pacific colleagues in this volume of the *Waikato Journal of Education (WJE)*, *tūtala* allows me to convey my thoughts in a precise manner. It allows me to share, express ideas and knowledge in settings where I feel comfortable because *tūtala* is embedded in my knowledge of thinking, seeing, knowing, feeling and doing. These all matter to *tūtala's* worthwhileness across collective settings.

Samu (2013) and Si'ilata et al (2017) advocate for the use of both *Pasifika* and Pacific as labels for migrants from the Pacific region. Similarly, I have opted to use both, and I give context to each. The terminology of *Pasifika* resonates mainly in Polynesia, though not all of Polynesia. In Aotearoa NZ, *Pasifika's* development was during the 1990s and was evident in Ministry of Education discourse (Samu, 2013). The term "Pacific", however, remains ongoing and has strong links to colonisation. Pacific is a term in which people from Micronesia and Melanesia connect more with. In this paper, I refer to each term or in the form of Pasifika/Pacific, but I am intentional with context.

## Niue—A realm nation

The kings of Niue, during the mission era, were structured to apply the laws that early missionaries had written, extending three petitions by each ruler with the support of the Council of Chiefs to Queen Victoria to become a British Protectorate. No outcomes were received of these petitions until 1900, when Basil Thompson arrived in Niue and declared it a British Protectorate. King Togia realised that negotiations had been going to have Niue be administered by New Zealand in 1901 until Niue became self-governed in free association with New Zealand on 19 October 1974 (Talagi, 2013).

Aotearoa NZ commits to serve Niue as a realm nation alongside Tokelau and the Cook Islands. However, the privileges of being a realm nation are not clearly defined in many domains, apart from having access to free health services, education, voting rights, NZ passports. We are often grouped as Pacific in anything that comes across our path, but our political rights and status are not acknowledged. The 2018 NZ Census indicated that the population of tagata Niue living in Aotearoa NZ was 30,867 in contrast to Niue's population of 1,719 in the 2017 Niue Census (Statistics Niue, 2017).

## Foundation of leadership

Growing up in Niue and having been exposed to living a simple subsistence type of lifestyle where my parents, great grandparents and extended family members lived off the land despite being civil servants provided a strong cultural foundation for me and my siblings. It was this simple upbringing that greatly influenced my worldview about life in Niue and the diaspora. Today, my sense of service and leadership is inspired by my upbringing and love for Niue and its people. My sense of empowerment is grounded in ensuring *vagahau Niue* (Niue language) and Niue culture are maintained and sustained for my son and the next generation of young people living in the diaspora.

## Education in my early years

My early recollections of education were being part of the local village playcentre in Mutalau. It was a very vibrant atmosphere with the mothers in our village. They would meet regularly in the local village Salim Hall. Every morning I would see older children in the village in their uniforms on their way to primary and high school. This made me wonder what it would be like to go to primary school with children of different age groups. When I turned four, I started formal education at Kofekofe Primary. My mother walked me to school on my first day. We lived five minutes away from the school, surrounded by many neighbouring homes where their children also attended the school. There was an

expectation that I would achieve a very high standard of learning. I remembered being disciplined on my very first day because I could not write my name properly. And of course, I had no idea why I was put into that situation. In the evenings my parents would help me with my homework under the dim kerosene lamp. Electricity was absent in our household until I was six or seven years old. My parents had inherited the electricity bill from our extended family members who had previously occupied the home. It took them a long time to eventually pay it off until the electricity was reconnected. My father worked in the plumbing department, and mum started working at the Niue hotel.

There were only four of us in our class, and I was the only male. There were limited resources to cater to learning. We were only provided with three exercise books and a pencil. I only found out in later years that these pencils were primarily for art, hence why it was dark and messy when you attempted to erase your errors. Each of us was asked to bring a small woven mat for sitting on the floor and to have a reading book bag that was sewn up by my mum. Later, we were also asked to have a sewn bag for our toothbrush and cup. I thoroughly enjoyed mathematics because I got to collect little rocks for subtraction and addition activities. Otherwise, seashells, cats' eyes or dry beads were stored in jars. *vagahau Niue* was the medium of instruction at school; English was rarely heard, and none of the learners knew how to say simple phrases or pronounce words in English until later classes. Whenever a new student joined us from Aotearoa NZ whilst on holiday, the students in my class were often too shy to engage because of the embarrassment of having to speak in English.

The school had a library that was poorly resourced with a few books. If the opportunity was given to take a book out, it was for the enjoyment of looking at illustrations. Many of the illustrated books were just two colours or they were black and white.

## Seeking new horizons

Relocating the whole family to Aotearoa NZ was a very difficult decision that my parents had to make despite having a successful construction business in Niue. Our home was always busy hosting many events, activities and visitors. We enjoyed the luxuries that were not accessible to others in the village. My father was a migrant himself from Tonga in the late 1970s to Niue. He was part of his extended family who was brought over to build some of its housing at the time. He had lived in Niue for nearly 20 years when he opted to migrate here. During those years, there was a flourishing Tongan community on the Island. They contributed enormously to Niue's economy and infrastructure. Like him, my father's Tongan relatives also married local Niue women. The legacy he left on Niue Island is fresh in the minds of the Niue people for whom he served.

In late 1993, my youngest brother and I accompanied my mother to Aotearoa for medical reasons. We lived with our great aunt whom we call our nana; she is my great grandmother's younger sister. Faseini Pierre was her name, and her only daughter Marie-Rose were both teachers at Kofekofe Primary in Niue prior to migrating to Aotearoa NZ. My father and my other two younger siblings joined us in early 1994. It was also an opportunity to reunite with old schoolmates from primary who were now at Clover Park Intermediate in Otara, later becoming the first middle school in Aotearoa NZ.

## Encountering hurdles with determination

Like most Pasifika/Pacific families who are concentrated in low socio-economic areas, there is judgement on us in terms of the level and standard of education we receive. I grew up in Otara, South Auckland—a place I am proud to affiliate with. It was the focal point of many Pacific education initiatives both negative and successful. It mirrored also the education I encountered from primary to tertiary studies. It was often very challenging because you learn how to live and overcome social issues and obligations with family, church and community. Despite the many obstacles, I always took the advice given by our parents that success only comes to those who take the opportunity to act and change.

My mother had been a firm influencer in my life successes. She is a very strong leader in our family's lives. In general, female leadership is visible at all levels in the Niue community, and it should be acknowledged. Throughout my schooling years, I have taken on student leadership roles, such as student representative at my high school Board of Trustees (BOT). I continued to expand and grow these skills during my years at university. You are able to advocate for the needs of Pacific learners although I knew I had far more privileges than my other brothers and sisters from the Pacific. Even though tagata Niue is a minority in terms of numbers compared to other Pasifika/Pacific groups, we were unique in how we led. I was elected as secretary for the University of Auckland Cook Islands Students Association for two consecutive years and went on to be elected as the president of AUPISA (Auckland University Pacific Islands Students Association). It opened up doors to develop my skills but most importantly advocated and contributed to decision-making on behalf of Pacific students in tertiary studies at the national level. My appointment in the Ministry of Education (MoE) Pasifika Advisory Group as a student representative for the tertiary sector exposed my understanding by being included in these forums. The advantages of being bilingual, i.e, competent in *vagahau Niue* and English, provide a different worldview that I draw on throughout my years in education and work career. It is who I am and is a point of difference from any other individual.

## Conclusion

My brief description of *tūtala* is a narrative reflection of personal perspectives and experiences of a tagata Niue living in Niue and Aotearoa–NZ, guided by time and space. Even though we may enjoy and welcome the privileges of being a realm nation, we continue to struggle because our status and entitlements are not clearly defined. Sometimes I feel that as realm nations we become too comfortable and that things are taken for granted. But we need to challenge ourselves as leaders in our own spaces for our people to be proactive and learn to exploit opportunities that come by and not be apologetic for whatever circumstances you face but champion what is rightfully for–by–with Niue. It is about taking the *mana* of my people into the future and not feeling distraught by fear because we understand the realities we are facing as a minority and being Pacific in Aotearoa–NZ, a *fonua* of whenua that we now call home.

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