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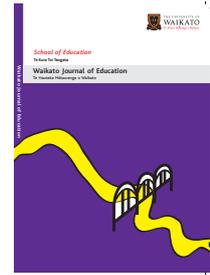
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Voyaging the oceanic terrains: Sustainability from within Pasifika Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

Using the Pacific metaphor of the vaka, va'a, waka [canoe] this review considers the journey of Pasifika early childhood education (ECE) in Aotearoa New Zealand over the past decade. The discussion covers three major areas within the Pasifika sector: the need to celebrate the strong heritage and resilience of Pacific early childhood educators and researchers; second, contemplating our future voyages in the ECE sector with its uncertainties and the dominance of competition; third, the articulation on aspects of quality in Pasifika early childhood policy and practice required to steer the vaka forward. The Pasifika ECE sector has on many levels been 'targets' for producing outcomes that are more suited to dominant discourses. Beyond broad aims and goals there remains no comprehensive strategic plan to comprehensively implement policy or empower Pacific ECE services, including those services that desire to respond more effectively to Pacific children and fanua [family] to build upon their funds of knowledge. In the last decade, government has invested heavily in participation in this non-compulsory sector and left issues of quality to somehow languish and develop inconsistently. Despite isolated examples of initiative, innovation and creativity in Pasifika ECE, there is an absence of any substantial knowledge-building or joining of dots on the global educational map: teacher education and qualifications, professional development, access to quality service provision, assessment and review. Our voyage is still suspended in the oceans of policy and inconsistent implementation of policies and professional practice. Unless the focus in Pasifika ECE is increasingly placed upon a rights-based discourse, there is little hope of reaching the shores of equity and equality for Pacific children and whānau [family] within ECE in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Keywords

Early childhood education; Pacific; Pasifika; New Zealand

Introduction: Building the vaka

This article contains personal reflections on a long career in Pasifika education from tertiary to early childhood. Some assertions are intended to provoke discussion and critique in relation to the voyages of Pacific educators in Aotearoa New Zealand. The terms 'Pasifika' and 'Pacific' are used



intentionally throughout this article. The term Pasifika was developed by the Ministry of Education as a collective term to embrace all of the main Pacific communities who have settled in Aotearoa New Zealand. It is also used as an adjective in terms such as the Pasifika Plan, Pasifika early childhood centres, and the Pasifika education sector. Where mention is made of people—children, fanau, specific communities—the word Pacific is used to denote a particular group or groups whose heritage/s are derived from island states within the Pacific Ocean. There is a place called the Pacific: Te Moana Nui a Kiwa from which Pacific peoples derive their strength and mana and that is also the rationale behind the metaphor that frames this article.

The va'a, vaka, vaha has symbolised the successful migration and settlement of Pacific peoples across the vast ocean of Moana Nui a Kiwa. In contemporary times migration is more rapid by air, but the fortitude and courage of ancestral sailors and navigators remains strong and meaningful.

Since early literature and critique of Pacific education in Aotearoa New Zealand it has been the leadership and the strong aspirations of migrant Pacific peoples that has provoked policy response first by the Department and then after 1990, the Ministry of Education (Coxon & Mara, 2000). In the 1970s and 1980s Pacific women working within their ethnic and church communities were aware of how indigenous Māori [New Zealand indigenous people]

were losing their language and culture and they did not want this to happen to their own children increasingly being born in their adopted country (Mara, 1999). Contemporary Pacific early childhood education (ECE) services, teachers and researchers owe a considerable legacy to the pioneers of the sector. They were steadfastly involved in the development of the first draft and final version of Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 1993, 1996), the establishment of playgroups in churches, garages and community halls, the pursuit of teaching qualifications and upgrading of qualifications, the establishment of the first home-based project Anau Ako Pasifika, and the licensing of their ECE groups (Mara, 1999).

During the 1990s and 2000s many changes were being made across the whole ECE sector and so the seas upon which the relatively new Pasifika vaka was being constructed and provisioned to sail the seas were turbulent and relatively unpredictable. The fact that Pasifika services and Pasifika research into ECE took place was largely due to the deliberate inclusiveness and collaborative professionalism of influential ECE policy and research leaders. Key Pacific leaders, such as Fereni Ete, Teupoko Morgan and Eti Laufiso, were recognised in both worlds and included in consultation and the framing of forward directions. During this period a body of applied research was also beginning to grow most significantly within the Centres of Innovation projects. More specifically the Aoga Fa'a Samoa in Auckland was a leader in disseminating immersion pedagogy in Gagana Samoa in Aotearoa New Zealand (Taouma, Tapusoa, & Podmore, 2013).

Challenges: Surviving the waters

Pasifika ECE services since the 1990s have survived the changing tides of wider developments in ECE. They have negotiated moving services from playgroups to licensed services requiring them to develop policies, meet regulations as they kept changing, becoming employers and paying tax, adherence to employment law, and the power struggles of governance and management. Cultural and religious factors set up contradictions and challenges in mapping out the development of each Pacific centre or service.

As with all ECE services, Pasifika services are required to implement the bicultural curriculum Te Whāriki and they did so originally with only minimal contextualised professional development (Mara, 1999). Together with assessment, self review and evaluation, a number of centres pioneered writing Learning Stories in their own Pacific language. They made use of equity funding to employ Pacific community members to assist in the transmission of language and cultural knowledge. In 1993 the Te Whāriki document included Tangata Pasifika under each of the principles and aims alongside special

education needs and home-based services (Ministry of Education, 1993, p. 31). In 1996 those references disappeared, apparently for ‘editorial reasons’. In 2016 the Draft for Consultation of Te Whāriki’s specific mention of ‘Pasifika theories’ is outlined on page 14 but with no evidence or publication listed in the references. In effect, in the policy maps for the ECE sector in Aotearoa Pasifika, ECE knowledge has been progressively rendered less visible for early childhood teachers to source as credible knowledge. Pasifika services and those services accessed by Pacific children and their families are without direction beyond the Pasifika Education Plans Early Learning goals (Ministry of Education, 2010).

Culturally-specific process quality factors such as building relationships, teaching, learning and bilingual/bicultural pedagogical knowledge from the diverse Pacific ethnic groups have never been fully documented beyond Samoan and Tongan. Bicultural and bilingual literacy (in addition to te reo rangatira [the indigenous language of Aotearoa New Zealand]) have been developing but only in isolated centres. This appears to be very short-sighted given the demographics of the largest city in the country and the population growth in bilingual and multilingual communities (Podmore, Hedges, Keegan, & Harvey, 2015).

Changing tides and terrains

During the years 2004, 2006 and 2009, a team of researchers carried out comprehensive research of the implementation of the ECE Strategic Plan *He Huarahi Arataki*, led by Linda Mitchell, then a researcher at the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (Mitchell, Meagher-Lundberg, Mara, Cubey, & Whitford, 2011). In that study, evidence from Pasifika centres of process quality factors was collected by the author, including community collaboration and participation. Knowledge of the aspirations of Pacific parents became visible. The data also revealed the qualifications of Pasifika teachers’ progress towards 100 percent qualified staff in each service as being the lowest across the sector. It was argued within the ECE Strategic Plan that the teacher qualifications are an important dimension of quality. The indicators were already there in 2009 that the sustainability of quality ECE for Pacific children and their families was elusive (Mitchell et al., 2011). As each change in the requirement of qualification level of the supervising teacher was raised, Pasifika ECE teachers would have to upgrade their qualifications. Little of that evidence has surfaced into subsequent policy development or has been used as a basis for informed professional development for teachers. It would be and has continued to be an ongoing issue in the raising of quality in Pasifika ECE in Aotearoa.

It is a truism that change does not really signify progress, particularly when unequal outcomes persist for a significant minority of learners. With a change of government and the superseding of the ECE Strategic Plan much has changed on the waters of ECE. In fact the structure, delivery and policies continue to change and adapt to the prevailing political and economic discourses: privatisation and competition are now features of the sector, corporatisation, takeovers and sharemarket participation are common practices as successful entrepreneurs have received government funding as a significant basis for their investments. There has been a very rapid proliferation in home-based services and granting of licences with minimal restriction or monitoring of local or regional access to quality services by the government.

This growth has been a direct consequence of the participation in ECE targets set by the National Government in 2011 with Pacific children and their families designated as a ‘priority’ grouping in policy documents. Such categorisation has its limits as well as inherent problems in policy development whereby the target grouping is restricted in ever moving beyond a labelled category (Mara, 2014). The drive for 99 percent participation can be critiqued in the pursuit of this target (well funded by government) because it resulted in such adaptations such as the ‘bussing’ of Pacific children across town and ‘special offers’ to attract parents to certain services and away from others. These approaches have led to a marginalisation on maintaining quality ECE, particularly in development of

relationships with communities, parents and whānau as children travel some distance from their homes and familiar community networks (Mitchell, Meagher-Lundberg, Arndt, & Kara, 2015).

The programme evaluation of the ECE Participation Programme reported that “children experienced transition to school in a range of ways from very positive to somewhat challenging” (Mitchell et al., 2015, p. 8). This diversity of outcomes for the participant sample of Māori and Pacific children occurred despite an intense focus on positive outcomes and successful transition. The researchers add that when transition “worked well ... there were culturally compatible cross links from the school with the child's home language and culture”. For many Pacific children speaking and learning in their heritage language and the opportunity for successful transition in such terms still remains very limited.

The diversity of Pacific languages together with other migrant languages and ethnicities is a reality in Aotearoa and it was for this reason that a group of researchers and teachers in Auckland, led by Dr Val Podmore, investigated the ways in which ECE teachers (who are for the main part monolingual) appropriately respond to the funds of knowledge brought to centres by different linguistic and cultural backgrounds: Māori, Pacific and the wider ethnic grouping within contemporary communities. The distinction is made between learning through language rather than learning a language in isolation, based on functional repetition, de-contextualised of cultural meanings and nuances. The case studies included in Mitchell et al. (2015) highlight the need for responsive and professional pedagogical practice that is informed by the considerable international research on cognitive flexibility achieved when learning through more than one language. Potentialities and opportunities for navigating Pacific-centred ECE knowledge and pedagogy continue to be circumscribed. Knowledge gained through such research needs to be central to teacher training and ongoing ECE teacher professional development.

Although a contested term, quality has been very rigorously researched in Aotearoa New Zealand and what it means for Pacific ECE communities is explored shortly. It is crucial to contemplate how the effects of this multi-layered sea change for ECE and the effects on Pacific children, in particular, who have been lured into lower or variable quality services, will play out into future educational achievement, including successful transition to school.

Within this context, Pacific ECE services are still requiring proportionately more frequent Education Review Office (ERO) visits. Pacific centres that have not been sustainable have been closed, and if re-opened, not always with Pacific leadership involved. Unfortunately, the only evidence available to provide to confirm this situation is anecdotal and it is highly unlikely details will ever be uncovered due to commercial sensitivity. Nor is there much political will to investigate or sponsor research across the Pasifika ECE sector to find any correlation between quality provision and quality outcomes.

There are very few successful Pacific entrepreneurs in ECE and therefore it is difficult to discern what benefits there have been or ever will be for Pacific communities within a privatised and competitive ECE model. The policy requirement and the funding of centres and services based on 80 percent qualified staff also has to be closely interrogated. It should be asked who actually benefits from this two-tier approach to quality provision of teachers. Many centres and services are providing 100 percent staff because they believe all children, including Pacific children, deserve highly qualified staff but they are accomplishing this through internal structural changes and without any overall policy support or encouragement.

It would be interesting to determine the success factors in relation to entrepreneurship and business development in ECE. If the government was funding quality from all ECE services, no matter the provider, there would need to be comprehensive monitoring for outcomes for Pacific children and their families as a priority grouping. The Education Review Office should exercise their powers of unannounced visits to centres to overcome some of the anecdotal reports of ‘window dressing’ that occurs and in particular in areas where children are determined under new governmental initiatives to be ‘vulnerable’ or disadvantaged while accessing ECE. In the author’s view, those children and their families should be the very clients who receive the highest quality provisions, which includes fully qualified teachers. In the case of Pacific children, the urgent need is for fluent bilingual teachers both

in ECE and in the first years of school. Such resources are essential if the goals, targets and actions of the most recent Pasifika Education Plan 2013–2017 (Ministry of Education, 2012) are to be fully achieved. Such investment would have positive social and economic outcomes for the whole of society in the medium and longer term.

The Education Review Office published a report with a focus on leadership to support improvement within Pacific services (ERO, 2015). This report has some insights but needs to be contextualised within the historical, cultural and socio-economic conditions prevailing for Pacific communities, their ECE services and all other services that are accessed by Pacific children. The report is an important initial resource but one which needs further implementation and trialling as to its usefulness to quality pedagogical practice and to professional support monitored and evaluated to show robust outcomes.

Mara and Kumar (2016) outline a framework for analysing culturally responsive pedagogy and assessment for Pasifika ECE but it is likely not to be advanced without further exploration by the Ministry of Education and/or ERO. This represents another opportunity offered from within the Pasifika ECE sector to understand and implement responsive pedagogy across a range of services. Thus far there is little funding and resourcing offered for the implementation of the Pasifika Education Plan to advance such strategic development.

Plotting our own journeys

As time moves on in the 40 year history of Pasifika education in Aotearoa New Zealand, it is an urgent priority that Pasifika ECE will now need to plot its own journey given the fragmented policy response to research that has emerged from Pacific researchers and teachers. The vaka is loaded with people of integrity, a growing body of emerging researchers and teachers who have the necessary preparation and motivation for carrying further the vision of Pacific communities in Aotearoa New Zealand. In the last decade the policy context allows for some measure of casting off but as soon as it seems progress for leaving port begins, once again the vaka is hauled back to its moorings through lack of overarching leadership, strategic planning, resourcing and the sector tides once again work against sailing to dreamed-of destinations.

Whilst Pasifika ECE may appear to be somewhat port-bound, there are also possibilities for planning for new destinations and for exploring new ports of call. With leadership and collaboration within the sector, it is time for Pacific communities to embark upon a rights-based agenda, to remind the present and any forthcoming government about the rights of all New Zealand children, whatever their origin or heritage, under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC). Articles 7 and 8 (rights to an identity), articles 28 and 29 (rights to a quality education), and article 30 (cultural rights specifically) should be the central spar of any agenda vaka to remind the government of its obligations as a signatory.

Pacific educators and researchers in Aotearoa should be seeking to establish and maintain wider regional and global networking, taking the agenda of quality culturally responsive pedagogy using Pacific languages, cultural values and beliefs that such an agenda is well articulated to wider education fora. For example, the Organisation Mondiale pour L'Éducation Préscolaire (OMEP) (nd), an international Non-Government Organisation (NGO), which advocates for young children and their families, and is affiliated to UNICEF, UNESCO and the Council of Europe, is one possibility. At that level more robust advocacy can take place. At the Second International Pasifika ECE Conference held in Auckland in 2016 there was discussion about the possible reinstatement of OMEP in Fiji and a network of Pacific ECE teachers and researchers in Aotearoa New Zealand being established. Hopefully, that will become a reality.

Looking to the future of Pasifika ECE in Aotearoa New Zealand, it seems that social networking and IT developments that can facilitate regional and global networking can be more extensively exploited. Indigenous revitalisation within Pacific countries and the relationships which already exist through

heritage and ancestry are growing, and the sharing of ideas and innovations are increasingly possible. Revitalisation and consolidation of Pacific languages may vary according to the size of population and current linguistic retention levels but educational collaboration could equally benefit both home countries and Pacific communities in Aotearoa New Zealand in the achievement of Pacific bilingual education.

Quality in Pasifika ECE: Drawing the charts

Future innovation in Pasifika ECE will depend upon a level of clarity regarding pan-Pacific definitions of quality in ECE and those definitions and interpretations have to be widely communicated. Such criteria in most areas will be the same as for the wider ECE sector but with some qualitatively different priorities. All ECE services are still required to implement Te Whāriki and a review of previous research into quality in Pasifika ECE are likely to include three areas of process quality indicators:

- **Culture:** The Pacific values and beliefs about children, the legacies that each community group wants to gift to the next generation; how community service-led leadership and responsibility will be demonstrated and carried out; building of respectful relationships; the demonstration of humility, responsibility and commitment to Pacific beliefs and values.
- **Language:** The extent and nature of opportunities provided for Pacific children to learn through their heritage languages; continued experiences with mature, fluent speakers that provide deeper syntax and semantics; the deepening flexibility in communication and multi-modal expression; development of active and passive bilingualism; pedagogy based on international research to enhance bilingual literacy and cognitive flexibility; confidence in innovation of language and oration.
- **Identity:** Children explore, determine and choose their own contemporary identities which are flexible and contextually constructed; identities which can be multiple, transferable and integral to self-efficacy as a learner; ethnic and cultural self esteem and pride.

Conclusion: Mapping new voyages

Time is well overdue for the full recognition of Pacific epistemologies, paradigms and funds of knowledge as being valid within a diverse and inclusive education system. It is time for Pacific teachers, parents, families, researchers and recognised educational leaders to get alongside committed organisations and teachers to steer the vaka into seas of Pacific self-determination, to seek new networks outside of the constellation of current policy agencies and structures, to gain sponsorship and resourcing from funders who are willing to trust Pacific leaders to lead. Stakeholders within Pasifika ECE are the only ones who can build the wellbeing of the sector and initiate the building of the Va within and across agencies (Airini, Mila-Schaaf, Coxon, Mara, & Sanga, 2010). Those parties who do not want to engage or support will have to be left on the shore as empowered Pacific families and children sail on towards achieving equity and equality in Pasifika ECE. This is a destination they have had the right to dream of, to expect to pass on for more than four decades and into the future in Aotearoa New Zealand.

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