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Caring for classroom relationality in Pasifika education: A space-based understanding

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Abstract

The quality of relationships has been identified as a significant factor in Pasifika education. Pasifika education refers to students who have links with Pacific Islands, who are at schools in Aotearoa New Zealand. In the past, attention has been given to the type of person who can successfully create relationships as a teacher of Pasifika students. In this article, the focus is shifted to an examination of acts which can care for the state of the relationship itself. This is framed through va, a concept of Pacific origin. Va holds that relational spaces exist between people and entities which, under the ethic teu le va, require care to reach an ideal state. A dialogue between previous literature and the original research (data gathered from Pasifika students through interview and talanoa), provides a ground for discussing some aspects of va and the ways in which these can be cared for in teacher-learner relationships in Pasifika education. Through a Pacific lens, successful teachers of Pasifika students are those able to meet or to learn to meet, cultural expectations rather than simply those immutably gifted with a certain personality type. This understanding opens the possibility of cultivating relationships which can enhance Pasifika student success by grounding this understanding in conceptual language based on Pasifika thinking. In this way, an individualistic reading of Pasifika education is countered by a relational focus consistent with va.

Introduction

In this article, I address relationships in intercultural teaching and learning through Pasifika education, a contested umbrella term (Samu, 2006) which refers to the education of students with links to Pacific Island nations (Airini, Anae, Mila-Schaaf, Coxon, Mara & Sanga, 2010) who are resident in Aotearoa New Zealand. This topic is of day-to-day importance to me as a teacher-researcher who works with Pasifika students and supports Palagi (European origin) staff professional development. My dual role means walking the edge between understanding Palagi explanations of Pasifika education and appreciating Pasifika students' own perceptions of their educational experiences. I bring together individual-focused and relational understandings of the field, juxtaposing descriptive research from the turn of the millennium and thematically organised elements of my own research, drawn from my PhD study (Reynolds, 2017a).



A strategy of creating a dialogue between diverse understandings of Pasifika education is intended to confirm the longevity of Pasifika students' concerns regarding teaching and learning, suggest ways of re-reading past research in the field of Pasifika education, reveal how Pacific-origin concepts offer productive ways of thinking about practice in Pasifika education, illustrate the kinds of re-thinking required to make a difference in schools, and signal some ways teachers can reflect on practice and thus enact Pacific ideas about relationships in Pasifika education more deliberately. The article, therefore, is identifying notions to relatedness (Poltorak, 2007), or connection. It does so through a Pacific Indigenous concept, *va*. This concept exists in related forms in several Pacific Island cultures (e.g., Aiono-Le Tagaloa, 2003; Hoem, 1993; Ka'ili, 2005; Wendt, 1999) and in adaptive forms in Aotearoa New Zealand (Reynolds, 2016).

This article firstly offers a brief review of the literature regarding successful teacher-student relationships in Pasifika education. Next, I present a short discussion about *va*. Relatedness in school is understood by using *va* as an explanatory tool for data from original research. In this research, student voice is organised to reflect some aspects of *va* identified in the literature. The article concludes with a discussion and conclusion.

Literature

A body of work has grown in the literature of Pasifika education since the late 1990s which has foregrounded the importance of relationships (Devine, 2013; Evans, 2011; Hawk, Cowley, Hill, & Sutherland, 2002; Hawk & Hill, 2000; McDonald & Lipene, 2012; McMillan, 2012; Silipa, 2004; Siope, 2013, and others). Initially aggregating Māori and Pasifika education but subsequently focusing on Pasifika, this research has identified that the quality of relationships between Pasifika students and their teachers is a factor in student engagement and consequently in school-based achievement. Given that Pasifika academic achievement is, in general, lower than for the general population (see, for instance, New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2015), school-based relationships assume importance for Pasifika students and families, and for the education system as a whole. While class-based arguments can be held by practitioners to explain disparities of outcome in Pacific education (e.g. Spiller, 2013), Hattie (2003) suggests that inequity occurs in Pasifika education because those responsible “are doing something, or probably NOT doing something...[which] is a matter of cultural relationships” (p. 7). In this circumstance, it is important to ask what that ‘not done’ matter is, from where it originates, and how it can be understood and operationalised. That search in the context of Pasifika education is the purpose of this article.

One study which is particularly helpful is Hawk, Cowley, Hill and Sutherland (2002). This presents a contextualised description of teachers and their practices deemed effective for Pasifika students. It refers to work conducted in institutions in Auckland and correlates findings from independently conducted investigations in the primary, secondary and tertiary sectors. The secondary sector study aimed to explore effective teaching practice in schools in low socio-economic settings but the area of relationships provided an overarching theme across all three studies. A limit to the helpfulness of Hawk et al. (2002) in a Pasifika context is that the primary and secondary sector data aggregates Māori and Pasifika voice. Māori-Pasifika aggregation was a mark of the time - subsequent calls for ethnic-specific research to moderate aggregation under the Pasifika umbrella have been made (Airini et al., 2010). However, the tertiary data was drawn from Pasifika accounts of educational experiences and Hawk et al.'s (2002) argument discusses Pasifika education.

Key research findings in Hawk et al. (2002) include no correlation between teacher effectiveness and their ethnicity, age, gender, place of training or other ‘hard’ factors. Instead, ‘soft’ factors such as “attitudes, values, behaviours, effort and skills” are claimed to support effective practitioners to “form the type of relationship that would help their [Pasifika] students to learn”. The researchers suggest that the significant enabling factor is “the type of person” (p. 45) acting as a Pasifika student’s teacher. In support of this, they provide a taxonomy of person-based traits which includes empathy, care, respect and so on. A similar approach can be found elsewhere, such as in Siope (2011) where a

teacher-based taxonomy of responsiveness, accessibility and reasonableness is given. Because of its breadth and clarity, Hawk et al. (2002) will be used as a touchstone here, a point against which a re-reading of relationships in the field of Pasifika education can be referenced.

Taxonomic accounts of effective teachers can be useful. However, person-focused descriptions of extant effectiveness in Pasifika education are limited; they do not point to the spaces in which such effectiveness might be further developed, nor indicate how increased effectiveness might be achieved. Crucially, they do not provide a base from which practitioners can begin to develop new practice. While Hawk et al. (2002) provide valuable insights into the cross-sector durability of ‘what works’ for Pasifika students in relational terms, pointing to a personality type as the site of relational success in Pasifika education is problematic. The idea that some people are immutably born to teach in ways which suit many Pasifika students makes progress in Pasifika education a matter of strategic recruitment. This understanding offers no hope for students taught by tenured others, nor does it account for the ubiquity of Pasifika student concern for the quality of relationships.

Undoubtedly some teachers do work effectively with Pasifika students without deliberate strategising. This could be due to the way such teachers conceptualise relationships, a phenomenon which can vary between individuals. Giles, Smythe, and Spence (2012), for example, suggest that some teachers understand educational relationships as a space across which student and teacher traverse, a space of “trans-action” (p. 215), while others focus less on the functionality of space and more on connection as an inherent aspect of being human, realised as “genuine concern” (p. 216) in schools. Differences in conceptions might be related to personality type and may affect interactions in some way. However, they do not account for the ubiquity of relational concerns in the literature of Pasifika education. An alternative account which explains this aspect of the field involves appreciating relationships and relatedness through a cultural framework.

Va: A cultural account of relatedness

It is important to note that Hawk et al. (2002) are not unique in failing to offer a culturally nuanced account of Pasifika education. More recently, the Pasifika Education Plan (Ministry of Education, 2013) offers little by way of Pacific conceptualisation, and the recent Ministry of Education consultation draft of Tapasa (Ministry of Education, 2017), a navigation document for teachers of Pasifika students, uses Pacific concepts only as a title and to describe its own structure. No Pacific conceptual language is offered to teachers as a compass for practice. However, Pacific cultures offer concepts which can be productive for understanding Pasifika education and rethinking practice in the field. One such concept is *va*.

Va provides a Pacific-origin way of understanding relationships in Pasifika education. Briefly, *va* can be imagined as an always-existing relational space between people and things which is founded on a common spiritual origin through a shared creation. The *va* space is a site of flux between closeness/connection and distance/separation in which the spiritual, social and physical are interrelated. The meaning of things comes through their relationships rather than simply of themselves. Further discussion can be found in Aiono-Le Tagaloa (2003); Lilomaiava-Doktor (2009); Mila-Schaaf (2006); Reynolds (2016); Tuagalu (2008); Wendt (1999) and elsewhere.

In Pasifika education, *va* is particularly important in teacher-student interactions when ethics such as the Samoan reference *teu le va* (Airini et al., 2010; Anae, 2010a, 2010b, 2016; Mara, 2013), or its Tongan relative, *tauhi va* (Devine, Teisina, & Pau’uvale, 2012; Helu-Thaman, 1988, 2010; Ka’ili, 2005; Poltorak, 2007), are appreciated. *Teu le va* (to henceforth use the Samoan reference except where a specific Tonga reference is under discussion) as a cultural expectation provides a way of understanding the anticipation of care frequently expressed by students in the literature of Pasifika education. *Teu le va* has been described as “to value, nurture, look after, and if necessary to tidy up the *va*” (Anae, 2010a, p. 12). Well-configured relationships are those where acts which *teu le va* are occurring. Teachers, because of the social-interactive nature of their work should aim towards an ideal state of relatedness (Helu-Thaman, 1988).

Pasifika students expect relationships between themselves and teachers to be positively configured through care of one form or another (Hawk et al., 2002; Si'ilata, 2014; Silipa, 2004). Indeed, Silipa (2004) frames such expectations through “‘va fa’afeangai’ (mutual respect of each other’s space)” (p. 198). The ethic of *teu le va* involves obligations to fulfil these expectations. It defines an ethical role for teachers which involves recognising and respecting the ways they are connected to students, and performing actions which demonstrate as a matter of course an intent to promote closeness and harmony. This focus on care coincides in part with Noddings’s thought about the role of the teacher as ‘one-caring’ (Noddings, 2012; Owens & Ennis, 2005). However, *teu le va* in Pasifika education is a cultural expectation placed on all those who are related in the educational space, not a principle to be exercised solely by teachers. Helu-Thaman (1988) says Tongan teacher role descriptions include modelling care for the *va* through interaction; care is not a subject or area of learning as such, but a way of life performed across relational contexts in a holistic world. Further discussion of Pacific-origin relational ethics can be found elsewhere (e.g., Anae, 2016).

In Pasifika education, the demonstration of care within a Pacific-origin cultural expectation is both interpersonal and professional. Where teachers *teu le va*, subject-based pedagogical activity will acknowledge the sanctity of the person being taught while concurrently enhancing the relationship between the student and the discipline or subject being studied (Tuagalu, 2008). A focus on the well-being of Pasifika students at the expense of honest communication about their learning needs can lead to emotionally comfortable but cognitively unchallenged students (Otunuku & Brown, 2007). This negative combination denies the intent of education itself. In such cases, an educational *va* is not being nurtured because an appropriate balance between the personal and professional is absent. In an ideal situation, the reinforcement of interpersonal connection should support, not avoid, the facing of an educational challenge. As an alternative to a person-centred account of fruitful relationships in Pasifika education, one based on *va* deals with the consequences to the relatedness of acts undertaken by those involved. Voice-based data from my research will be used here to provide exemplification of acts which may *teu le va*.

Original Research

The original study which informs this article focuses on the question of what male Pasifika students see as a success (Reynolds, 2017a). A single site case study was conducted in a high decile school in an urban centre in Aotearoa New Zealand, a contrast to the low decile schools investigated by Hawk et al. (2002) fifteen years previously. A high decile rating indicates a school set in an area of relatively high-cost housing, suggesting a high socio-economic environment. A low decile indicates the opposite. However, many of the concerns expressed by students in Hawk et al. (2002), are present in data from my own investigation, indicating the longevity and ubiquity of Pasifika students’ concerns regarding teaching and learning.

Data in Reynolds (2017), were gathered through a research design which featured a mediated dialogic (Nakhid, 2003) relational methodology (Reynolds, 2017b), and a variety of methods including interview and *talanoa* (Fa’avae, Jones, & Manu’atu, 2016; Farrelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2014). *Talanoa* are relationally focused interactions between researcher and contributors. The students who participated were in their first year of secondary education and thus relatively new to the case study school. Consequently, their recorded responses were not limited to a single school and refer to both primary and secondary educational experiences. Pasifika students form a minority of around 8% of the case-study school’s population. The participating cohort of seventeen represented approximately half of the Pasifika students in their year group, Year 9 (13-14-Year-olds). Parents also took part in the study along with teachers and some senior students who facilitated *talanoa* and clarified meaning. Several Pacific Island nation allegiances, including to Samoa, Tonga, Fiji and Niue, were held by those involved. As a teacher/researcher, my aim was to investigate the notion of ‘Pasifika success’ in order to support its further achievement.

Features of va in the context of Pasifika education

A thematic approach was used when analysing Pasifika student voice in Reynolds (2017). This revealed information about the accomplishment by Pasifika students of valued goals such as success as acceptance, participation, resilience, academic achievement and so on. Here, data from interviews and talanoa has been reorganised to reflect some aspects of va discussed in the literature. This shifts the focus from students' ideas about success to a consideration of relational concepts and relational language. The value of this strategy is to signal some ways in which teachers can reflect on practice in order to more deliberately enact Pacific ideas about relationships in Pasifika education. The discussion is shaped by paying attention to some features of va: a relational focus, space, multi-dimensionality and contextual hierarchy.

Relational focus

Va, by nature, is a relationally-focused concept. As an ethic, *teu le va* has been described as the "valuing or cherishing of relationships" (McFall-McCaffery & Cook, 2014, p. 5). A first step in valuing a relationship is acceptance. Many student responses in the study suggest being accepted as a key form of success for Pasifika students is the achievement of a highly treasured goal.

An important site of acceptance for junior students can be relationships with other Pasifika students, particularly senior students. However, the positive relationality described amongst Pasifika students can also be found in student-teacher relationships. This connection is made clear by comparison. For instance, one student said of a primary teacher, '*She respected me. And it felt cool...cool to be accepted for who I am.*' When describing his connection to the fictive kinship (McGavin, 2014) of Pasifika 'brothers', he claimed they accepted him '*like Ms [X] which is pretty cool.*' Cross-context relational similarity can also be demonstrated through shared language. Both Pasifika peers and preferred teachers were described as '*having my back*', a term which indicates commitment regardless of circumstance, behaviour or contribution and which has been reported elsewhere (Samu, 2015).

The evidence that a single framework encompasses different contexts in Pasifika education suggests that Pasifika students consistently value closeness in relationships. That is, the literature supports the idea that context does not affect what is valued. For example, the language of the family is used by Pasifika students to describe positive experiences in education (Bills & Hunter, 2015). Hawk et al. (2002) report effective teachers relating to students "as they would a family member" (p. 45) and students who embrace family-like connections in school and want to learn from a teacher "who loves us" (p. 47). Leupepe and Sauni (2014) describe Pasifika educators of early childhood teachers as "compelled by love" (p. 1717) in their work. Pasifika student voice in Bills and Hunter (2015) explicitly links acceptance, love, risk-taking and achievement. Parents, fictive kin and teachers provide different contexts for relationality: relatedness will differ between them. However, where acceptance is communicated, the achievement of the ideal of *teu le va* is likely to be enhanced

Many kinds of action performed by teachers can contribute to students feeling accepted. Hawk et al. (2002) discuss the attention Pasifika students give to a teacher's body language. This finding is supported by the present study where students indicated an awareness that body-based actions made them 'feel welcome' or 'accepted'. These include smiling and 'gentle', 'polite' and 'friendly' behaviour. For instance, one 'kind' teacher was described thus: 'Never gets angry and that. He's always positive and that. Like never negative. Always smiling. Laughing...' Similar responses are recorded by Spiller (2013). When consistently performed, positive acts can communicate acceptance to a student as a person engaged in education. In ideal cases, this can be to the extent that 'everything [the teacher] does with you feels all good with you'. The idea of being 'with' indicates closeness and acceptance, perhaps through the giving of 'respect'. The benefits of this level of close identification are reported in the literature such as Silipa (2004). When a student feels that a supportive teacher is

‘with’ them, positive teacher rhetoric such as ‘[t]here’s no wrong answer’ may be more likely to be translated into risk-taking action and commitment by students.

Va as space

Proximity

Since va is a spatial understanding of relationships (Wendt, 1999), it is unsurprising that Pasifika students in the study often referred to classroom geography. A teacher’s position relative to a student in the classroom space is important. For instance: *Instead of them [teachers] yelling from a far distance, they [effective teachers] actually came up to you to see what was the matter... if they know something’s wrong, they come up to you...* It can also be affirming for students when teachers ‘*come up to you instead of you holding a question.*’ Through movement and the closing of space, proximity between students and teachers can be a positive aspect of relational success.

A key value of proximity is that it supports care for the va between a student and their teacher by not unnecessarily exposing their interactions to others. Many va co-exist and overlap in a classroom space - not everyone can be trusted to know or respect their place in each. Public exposure can be a source of potential shame, the avoidance of which can be a powerful motivating factor in behaviour for people originating in the Pacific (Suaalii & Mavoa, 2001).

Education requires participation, actions which take place in space. Through a va lens the configuration and scale of space can matter. Student respondents were vehement that they understood the value of asking questions, acknowledging areas of ignorance and confusion did not emerge in the study as problematic. For instance, one student explained: *‘Asking questions and getting taught until I learn, and then I get the hang of it... it’s all good...’* However, when discussing participation as a success, students offered space-based advice to teachers. For instance, *‘if we look stuck, come and ask us things so we can understand it so then we can actually do our work.’* Further, the intersections between scale, proximity and shame can be theorised as underlying a preference for interactions in which teachers *‘come up to you one-on-one and you don’t do in front of the class’*. Such comments suggest a correspondence between the way actions are positioned in the physical dimension of the va and their significance for the socially-focused and/or spiritual aspects of relationality.

Wider space

Teachers often teach in ways which assume that wide physical and social spaces are unproblematic for all students. The often-used pedagogical strategy of asking students to raise their hands to ask or answer a question in a whole-class environment was described as particularly problematic by parents and students in the study. This context can suppress the willingness to question: *‘I am scared sometimes to ask questions [in class] because I don’t want to get it wrong.’* It can also affect the willingness to offer public answers: *‘I would be embarrassed if I got it wrong. Cos other people might not know it but then again you don’t want to be embarrassed [if you get it wrong].’* Descriptions of Pasifika students as quiet can be found in the literature (Chu, Glasgow, Rimoni, Hodis, & Meyer, 2013; Spiller, 2013). This is often attributed (particularly by teachers) to shyness (Reynolds, 2017a). Parents of students in this study said many teachers had, over the years, described their sons as shy and quiet, a negative judgement on their level of participation which was often referenced against whole-class pedagogical techniques. By contrast, parents could describe environments in which their sons were neither shy nor quiet. Claiming that shyness, an aspect of personality, is the explanation for Pasifika classroom quietness places emphasis on the individual and ignores the relational qualities of the learning space. In effect, such thinking erases va and its role in classroom education.

Discomfort, like participation, is located in space. Mila-Schaaf and Hudson (2009b) say that in a well-cared for va, “conflict is minimised” (p.17). Teacher behaviour which is ‘harsh’ can encourage

distance as a way of avoiding the discomfort of conflict. The following revealing response describes the effect of a teacher's action on one Pasifika student's feelings within a group: 'I take it with them. I take that shouting with them. It's like I just be there and be shouted at as well.' Probably intended by the teacher to create punitive discomfort for a small number of students in a class, shouting unintentionally affected the student because of his connections to peers. A disturbance to the teacher-class va cannot be selectively limited. Shame can be shared across space.

Shame can also be produced where a student's efforts are used in a wide space as an example for others. Although teachers and students alike may recognise the value of learning through a future-focused critique of current understandings, the consequent environment of shame produced by public critique may have long-lasting consequences:

I think everyone is looking down on me...I guess when they use you as an example [it] deters you from trying, from answering again like, just afraid of that mistake, of that same feeling, that...it feels really bad because you know you are actually trying to, it's your best and your best isn't good enough.

The emotions evoked by this incident made learning harder. The lasting consequences for this student were to *'not like'* the subject and to *'give up'*. It is hard to imagine that the teacher set out to distance the student from the subject or to create shame for them. Presumably, the pedagogical tactic in use had a track record of success with other students. A consideration of the spatial and ecological aspects of va suggest that the teachers' learning intention was defeated not in the cognitive sphere through an inability to learn. Instead, emotions contingent on the state of intersecting relationships may be responsible for the abandonment of engaged effort in the subject.

Pasifika education is ecologically located in wider spaces than schools. Classroom relationships are not isolated from those which exist outside. An additional contextual complication which can affect the various va in Pasifika education is race. In a society where Pasifika people are widely portrayed in negative ways (Loto et al., 2006), and perhaps especially in highly academic schools where Pasifika students are in a minority, their understandings of what happens in classrooms can be overlaid by experiences of race. For instance, one student explained: *'the white guys, if you get the answer wrong they stare...laugh at you...make fun of you...'* The micro-aggressions (Sue, Capodilupo, Nadal, & Torino, 2008; Sue et al., 2007) to which Pasifika students are routinely exposed (Mayeda, Keil, Dutton, & Ofamo'oni, 2014) affect behaviour. Complex attributions for patterns of interaction which acknowledge a wider context than the individual student-teacher relationship may *teu le va*; they may be helpful to teachers when 'reading' what they experience and deciding how to act in class.

Va as hierarchical and reciprocal

A term which has been used to describe a cared-for va is 'balanced'. For instance, describing the actions of neighbours who care for the va between them, Mila-Schaaf (2006) writes, "[o]ne respects the other and ensures balanced reciprocity of giving and taking" (p. 11). Two aspects of relationally-focused balance emerge from this study. The first involves the value Pasifika students attach to teachers' relational practice. The second is the use by teachers of their position to make space for Pasifika students to give.

Teachers' relational practice as giving

Tuagalu (2008) describes the va of education as involving a gift which connects student and teacher. He says that education as a gift "is inalienable as it is to some extent part of the person. It bears the identity of the giver and the relationship between the giver and recipient...it links the giver to the recipient" (p. 120). Three main kinds of contribution were valued by students in this study when teachers gifted them to relationships: expertise, commitment and the self.

Students value the skills of teachers in giving subject expertise. The willingness and facility to explain an issue or area, to go ‘*in depth...deep down*’, to ‘*tell everyone what to do like good*’ are what allow a teacher to give in this way. In effect, through the action of the teacher, the student comes closer to the teacher’s expertise. Consequently, the teacher has the potential to assist the student to develop a positive connection in the va with their subject. Hawk et al. (2002) report similar comments from Pasifika students in the tertiary sector. Student-teacher-subject va will be discussed further below.

As well as expertise, students also reported valuing a teacher’s commitment to them as people. This can be communicated by a variety of actions such as “*she’s emailed my parents, saying she wants me to do really good...*” and “*she keeps trying to help me, like keeps on asking me if I understand, if I am doing it like well or no*”. These actions involve the gifts of time and care, which in turn can lead to the students realising that they matter to their teachers.

Valuing the people with whom one is connected need not be confined to formal teaching time. Interactions away from class can also communicate commitment and build connections. The literature suggests that the gift of time can be present even in detention-type situations where sociability is part of an interaction that is not limited to punishment (Siope, 2011). In the hierarchy of teacher-student relationships, a teacher may be regarded as ‘above’ a student, based on age and position. However, in Hawk et al. (2002) respectful teachers were described by Pasifika secondary students as “accepting the students at the same level as themselves” (p. 45). Gifts which dignify students care for the va through balance.

The final form of a teacher giving is of the self. Pasifika students in this study described valuing the information teachers sometimes give about themselves. For instance, the action of one teacher in describing his diet before asking students for information about their food was praised: ‘*Before he asked us about what we ate he told us about him. Cool.*’ Students claimed this led to them being prepared to disclose. The valuing of this kind of gift can also be seen in the literature. Silipa (2004), for example, quotes a student claiming: “Sometimes the teacher shares with us her own story...you feel confident to share your own story” (p. 198). When teachers use their position to offer the gift of personal information, this has the potential to facilitate the closeness of knowing: reciprocation becomes an option for Pasifika students. Teachers’ gifts can act to support balance in the va in a context where students, by definition, are expected to offer their participation and commitment in pursuit of learning.

Teachers making space for Pasifika students to give

The actions of teachers to create space for student input were valued by students in this study. Describing the actions of a well-liked teacher, one student explained: ‘*They show you, they give you opportunities to speak, then it will be their turn to explain their thought on the thing that you are thinking, and they will give you feedback and help you understand the subject more.*’ This account of give-and-take suggests that value is attached to dialogic learning characterised by turn-taking. Little space is created for student participation where a teacher dominates interactions. Such teachers ‘*talk too much*’ and ‘*don’t let us speak for ourselves*’. Similarly, students in Hawk et al. (2002) complained about some teachers “not listening to us” (p. 47). If the classroom va is to be cared for through balance, students require opportunities for input. In order to give through participation, students need teachers to provide time and a suitably comfortable space.

Student-teacher-subject va

Va exists between entities (Wendt, 1999), human and otherwise. Tuagalu (2008) suggests that the va between teacher and student should be configured so that a positive va between a student and the subject develops:

This, then, is the *va* between teacher and student. Teachers use concepts and tools such as learning styles and critical thinking, and their intimate knowledge of Western forms of learning to enable the student's relationship with the subject being studied. (p. 122)

As in other literature (e.g., Siope, 2011), student-voice in this study describes the way in which teacher and subject can be closely connected by Pasifika students. The actions of a teacher can have a negative effect on a student's relationships with a subject:

If you are comfortable to go forward in learning into that subject and you will be, Yeah I wanna do this, but if you don't get the support from ... your teacher that makes you think low of yourself, if teacher says I can't do it, I can't do it so I better just give up.

However, the qualities of relationships between a teacher, a learning environment and a subject can also align in affirming ways:

Well for me, it's teachers. You could have a fun relaxed subject and I have a good teacher that really pulls me into the subject and then I would start liking it, and I could engage in it right throughout the whole year.

Schools sometimes ask students to avoid selecting a subject because of the teacher. Through a *va* lens, subject selection based on teachers has logic. Although schools may be unlikely to allow Pasifika students to choose their teachers, they might learn much from investigating the reasons for the choices which Pasifika students wish to make. If schools take action to enhance teacher capability based on such learning, an opportunity exists for *teu le va*.

Va as contextual

Culture can be understood as “a system of logic with its own underpinning assumptions and internal coherence” (Mila-Schaaf & Hudson, 2009a, p. 115). Pasifika students during their schooling lives will encounter various relational spaces. Many of these will operate in versions of two main cultural logics, one of Pacific origin and one derived from Europe. This duality places value on students being able to negotiate fluently between various *va* through forms of edge-walking (Tupuola, 2004), or the exercise of polycultural capital (Mila-Schaaf, 2011; Mila-Schaaf & Robinson, 2010). Pasifika students contributing to this study have elected to be a minority in a ‘*white school*’ for a variety of strategic reasons. Whilst valuing comfort and acceptance at the outset of their journey in secondary education, neither parents nor students wanted an outcome where success, however conceptualised, was only achieved in groups where students were ‘*masani*’ or well-known.

Over time, Pasifika students need to be supported to operate successfully in less familiar environments. That this is possible is shown in the following comment by a senior Pasifika student:

Over the last couple of years I have made brotherhoods with guys that you wouldn't expect like a couple of Palagi guys...that I share with like the PI guys, the brotherhood, that enjoyment. I guess I made different friends being PI when I was acting PI but I made friends that are white when... my confidence grew like me answering questions...

Teachers who understand Pasifika education as a journey which involves the ability to operate successfully in a progressively wider range of *va* can position themselves to support their students in this. Teachers who learn how to *teu le va*, especially in the initial stages of relationships, can act deliberately to be close to their students and to bring students close to their subject. They can then journey with them by exchanging relational skills from different worldviews, trade disciplinary understanding and personal experience, and practice mutual care.

Discussion

By weaving together student voice from Hawk et al. (2002) and Reynolds (2017a) amongst sources, this article has demonstrated the longevity of concerns Pasifika students show regarding relatedness in education. Such concerns include the desire to be relationally close to teachers. The argument has also drawn attention to the way that past accounts of relationships in Pasifika education have tended towards descriptions based on the individual. Hawk et al.'s attention to the "type of person" (p. 45) who makes a good teacher of Pasifika students is a case in point. However, the concerning symptomatic pattern of inequity currently visible in Pasifika education (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2015) stretches back over many years (Education Counts, 2017). This pattern suggests that processes and understandings beyond the level of individuals are in play. It is obvious that teachers and students vary in personality, but there are limits to the value of seeking to account for, and hence change, long-lasting processes by reference to the traits of individuals.

The voice-based data in this article suggests there is value in using a *va* lens when seeking to understand relatedness and relationality in Pasifika education. A developing understanding of *va* offers teachers a way of re-'hearing' their Pasifika students' voices, preferences and expectations by referencing cultural contexts of the Pacific as they play out in classroom experiences. Such an approach engages with one of the distinctive aspects of the field – the culture of Pacific origin. Thinking about education through *va* also offers agency to teachers because new actions can be based on new learning despite the type of person one may be. A developing understanding of *va* may offer Palagi teachers a way of recognising the importance of the quality of their relationships with Pasifika students and how this can affect the way a student sees their relationship with a learning area.

The facility to learn is a trait of all humans. Given time, space, resources and willingness, learning how to fulfil the cultural expectations of others should be possible whatever those expectations might be. Indeed, as the literature and the students cited above show, some teachers behave in ways which present Pasifika students with environments that engender the trust required for the risk-taking of learning with little strategy, perhaps because their own expectations of relationships align closely with those of their students. However, conceptualising *va*-based expectations is a move towards answering two questions posed by Hawk et al. (2002): "Can teachers learn to develop effective relationships with students?" and "What type of professional development will help teachers most?" (p. 49).

Hawk et al. (2002) rightly say that enhancing relationships is "not a matter of applying a formula of strategies" (p. 48). A taxonomy of behaviours is not an effective way to reconstruct the way relatedness is understood by individuals, especially since contexts vary widely between different schools and classrooms. Ways of nurturing relatedness are conditioned by aspects of the role, time, space, wider relationships and so on. Instead, the findings from this study indicate that space for teachers to develop approaches may be created by an understanding of appropriate ethical expectations, supportive input from student voice and a developing understanding of some aspects of *va* within which to frame action. In such circumstances, the result can be a transformation of thinking about relatedness in the classroom which can lead to a deliberate change in practice (Reynolds, 2017b). It may be that having a conceptual base for action can lead to sustained changes in teachers' educational practice with longevity to match Pasifika student concern about the appropriate configuration of relationships.

Schuster (2008) asks, "Who are the best teachers for Pasifika students?" and proffers the following reply: "The best teachers of Pasifika children are ... the best teachers. It's empathy, not just ethnicity, that's important" (p. 12). This article argues that it is meeting an expectation of empathy within a relational space which is key, not a choice-based decision to give it. Although the concepts of *va* and its ethic *teu le va* are a challenge to those with other expectations and ideas about relationships, it is important to remember that teachers' expectations are part of an ecology. Siope (2011) for instance, discusses as problematic "the cultural hegemonic practices of a mono-cultural society" (p. 14.) like not smiling until April and using Term One to show that the teacher is the 'boss'. Other negative behaviours described by students in this study and in Hawk et al. (2002) include many acts

which reinforce the separation between students and teachers as if that were an accepted aspect of a teacher's role. Examples include 'yelling from a far distance' and teachers who 'don't let us speak for ourselves'. Reducing the formality and control involved in such physical and relational distancing can, according to one teacher, be "a bit of a challenge" (Reynolds, 2017b, p. 6), perhaps because a teacher's expectation is to be protected by formality. The challenge of *teu le va* has the potential to expose habitual and historically constructed ideas of this nature to scrutiny and subsequent reconstruction. However, this challenge can be rejected in the form of an unwillingness to learn, motivated by, amongst other things, the security of exercising power in accustomed ways within "the school's cultural standards of normality" (Gay, 2000, p. 46).

Conclusion

This article asks questions about what language should be used to discuss Pasifika education. Hawk et al. (2002)'s research in which Māori and Pasifika groups were conflated was of its time. It deserves respect because it revealed hitherto obscured information of great value. The literature on Pasifika education has developed such that research should be confident to talk about Pasifika education in its own terms. This involves adapting and thus validating the relevance of wisdom from the Pacific in the diasporic context of Pasifika education. However, the extent to which this progress is matched in the field of education through the intersection of research as practice and teaching/learning as action, is an issue. As discussed above, the Pasifika Education Plan (Ministry of Education, 2013) and the recent Ministry of Education consultation draft of *Tapasā* (Ministry of Education, 2017), provide little cultural reference to guide thinking. There may be reasons for this, but the challenge to practitioners of re-thinking their activities through conceptual means has a value which should not be lightly given away. The key to Pasifika education is what happens in classrooms. Positive changes in practice, informed by a growing understanding of *va*, can occur if the effects of not following *teu le va* are countered by making *va* visible to Palagi (and Palagi trained) teachers. Pasifika education as a space in which students, parents, teachers and wider society can mutually benefit will be enhanced if those responsible for the education of Pasifika students come to recognise the presence and contribution of the Pacific in that intercultural space.

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