A duo-narrative of Pasifika early childhood education: Reconceptualising leadership in the political and social landscape

Jacoba Matapo and Manutai Leaupepe
University of Auckland, New Zealand

Abstract

This leadership story is presented as a duo-narrative of two Pasifika academics engaged in early childhood teacher education and leadership. Utilising talanoa, tuatua, and tuatua mai (Ravlich, 2016; Smith, 2014; Vaioleti, 2006) we explore the tensions for Pasifika early childhood education in the current political and social climate. The intention for this dialogue engages in problematising key concerns for Pasifika early childhood leaders, particularly issues of marginalisaton and underrepresentation in education. What emerges regarding the future of Pasifika early childhood education is the urgent attention required in leadership to navigate the neoliberal climate that has perpetuated a market driven sector. Our dialogue engages with such tensions: to question and conceptualise the complexities of leadership for Pasifika early childhood programmes, including initial teacher education. The journey of Pasifika early childhood education past and present is explored and drawing from cultural aspirations, insights and experiences we attempt to reconceptualise Pasifika leadership for the future of Pasifika early childhood education in Aotearoa.

Keywords: *Early childhood education; leadership; Pacific culture;Pasifika education; politics of education*

Introduction

What we present transpired over an hour and a half of talanoa, tuatua and tuatua mai. Talanoa is the talk, dialogue – with purpose and intentionality – associated with both Tongan (Vaioleti, 2006) and Pacific narrative methodologies (Farrelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2012). The Cook Islands concept of tuatua (Smith, 2014) is used here to describe informal conversations that emerge. The extension of this concept is tuatua mai (Ravlich, 2016) which involves the critical conversations that reveal contradictions, tensions and challenges. As we come from cultures that have a rich oratory heritage, it is only fitting that our narrative is underpinned by a duo-ethnography approach. Here we locate ourselves in our experiences (cultural and professional) in an attempt to dialogue, reconceptualise and juxtapose our telling of stories of leadership (Norris, Sawyer & Lund, 2012).

Vignette

It's a beautiful sunny afternoon on a Tuesday that is usually a busy day for both Jacoba [Samoan/Dutch] and Manutai [Cook Islands/Tahitian/Kiribati] who are two lecturers in the School of Critical Studies in Education at the Faculty of Education and Social Work. They have often talked about notions of leadership and what that means for them and what it might look like in Pasifika early childhood education (ECE) settings.

> ***Jacoba*** *Manutai, can we put a couple of hours aside to have that 'talk'? We don't even have to have it here on campus.*

> ***Manutai*** *Sounds like a plan and I'm hungry. Why not – let's do lunch in the park, Macca's on me!*

> ***Jacoba*** *I can take my phone and record our conversation.*

> ***Manutai*** *Cool, we can eat and talk, my favourite things to do.*

Scene setting

So it's off to the drive-through in Greenlane, then we make our way to Cornwall Park. We find a nice spot to sit. Partly shaded by a tree but open enough to feel the heat of the sun's rays. We both take a deep breath – yes it's been that long since we last enjoyed a breath of fresh air and the sun on our faces. For a slight moment, we even forget that we have just come from the busyness of work. We laugh – and loudly, as we both realise how great it is to be alive and well, to be able to appreciate once again nature and what it has to offer. We are now both ready to have that important conversation about what leadership means for the two of us. Jacoba sets up her phone. We talk, we eat, we laugh, we think deeply – we talk more, we eat more; we laugh more and our thinking about leadership begins to take its course.

Starting from the middle…

> **Jacoba**   *Here we are…having held programme leadership roles in various institutions (teacher education programmes). I want to talk about – my leadership journey, but first…tell me about your leadership experiences.*

> **Manutai**   *I have stepped into a programme leadership role in a default position. After a huge exodus of Senior Pacific academics, my understandings of leadership were concerned with knowing policies, regulations, infrastructures, the structure of the faculty that would either support or be a hindrance to my work with and alongside our students. I think about Greenleaf's work around servant leadership understanding, that to serve others is a way of leading people.*

The work of Robert Greenleaf (1977) and his ideas about servant leadership is concerned with placing "other people's needs, aspirations and interests above their own" (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002, p. 57). Within this type of leadership, there is a deliberate choice on the leader's part to 'serve' others, as opposed to leading (Greenleaf, 1977). For many Pacific people, service is understood from a very strong socio-cultural framework and is considered integral to good leadership.

> **Manutai**   *I am also inspired by notions of delegated or distributed leadership.*

Distributed leadership, sometimes called delegated leadership became prominent in the 1990s. This involved thinking of leadership regarding activities and interactions that are distributed and delegated to multiple people and situations (Copland, 2003).

> **Manutai**   *Transformational leadership, how this can equate to some real changes in an institution, in society even in the lives of students.*

Transformational – transformative leadership, first introduced by James MacGregor Burns (1978) focused on organisational objectives. In essence, this approach to leadership is a process of building commitment to organisational objectives and then empowering followers to accomplish those objectives. The result, at least in theory, is enhanced follower performance (Burns, 1998; Yukl, 1998).

> **Manutai**   *Leadership encompasses aspects of servanthood; it's also about the ways I can delegate or distribute aspects of my leadership role. I see in others the potential for growth. It's about succeeding leadership, planning and about how we continue to grow leaders.*

> **Jacoba**   *As I listen to you talk and with regards to Pasifika leadership in ECE, I recognise this is where we are both located as Pasifika early childhood lecturers, you know, in our work and commitment to the ECE sector. What are your main concerns as a Pasifika leader for the sustainability of Pasifika early childhood education in New Zealand? You're talking about sustainability, and seeing that potential in other people – what are your biggest concerns in sustaining and growing our sector itself? Our Pasifika ECE?*

> **Manutai**   *How do we continue to draw strength from one's cultural identity, preserving the language, preserving the cultures, and sustaining that for generations to come?*

The diaspora concept of Pasifika

The concept of Pasifika is a collective expression that refers to Pacific peoples who have migrated to New Zealand and is inclusive of New Zealand born Pasifika people. Pasifika ethnicities include Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, Cook Islands, Niue and Tuvalu (Leaupepe & Suani, 2014). The concept of Pasifika is not to represent homogeneity, rather it illustrates a collective symbol of unity (Wendt-Samu, 2010). Mila (2014) explains Pasifika as a diasporic concept within the New Zealand context and that Pasifika is inclusive of the way in which Pacific peoples operate within diasporic communities. The concept Pasifika is also contested as a collective label. Finau (2014) suggests that the term Pasifika should be challenged as a mechanism for naming, based upon bureaucratic agendas. So, although we engage with the concept of Pasifika in our conversations talanoa and tuatua mai, we also acknowledge the tensions that come with using such a term.

Historical and political contexts

The history of Pasifika ECE stems over four decades with the first Cook Islands playgroup being established in 1972 in Tokoroa. Pacific Islands Language Groups, also to be known as Pacific Language Nests, followed soon after in the mid-1980s with the successful movement of Te Kohanga Reo [Māori immersion early childhood education settings]. The maintenance and survival of Pacific cultural values, beliefs, languages and identities were to ensure that proceeding generations would be sustained (Leaupepe & Sauni, 2014).

>**Jacoba**   *I'm just wondering what your concerns are because I've got a lot of concerns. My biggest concern and this may be a bit divergent from the topic of leadership, but I think it is about being aware of the political climate and the way that in the early childhood sector it is about knowing the neoliberal 'free market' agendas that are prevalent. It is about competition and I think my biggest concern as a leader, is: how do we go about growing and supporting the sector in a way where our Pasifika people can navigate the climate that they are operating in? How do we encourage Pasifika leaders to continue in growing their organisations in this political climate without having to compromise cultural values and beliefs? Having to compete with mainstream early childhood approaches and discourses "not that we are claiming to have a pure form of Pacific education" has jeopardised some of the aspirations and intentions that these Pasifika centres were opened for in the first place – so that's my focus. We talk about vision and servant leadership that are core values for Pacific people (our forefathers would have had a vision and would have practised service on a daily basis). How can we grow our leaders in ways to think of these contemporary issues in this political climate and remain committed to Pasifika ways of knowing, doing and being – and this plays out in many ways, in assessment and pedagogy, in relationships in policies, in philosophy in practice and interactions.*

The influence of neoliberalism was fervent in the late 1980s and 90s. This resulted in major educational reforms with the first significant step toward removing the responsibility of children in 1986 from the Department of Social Welfare to the Department of Education (Cooper & Royal Tangere, 1994). These were regarded as times of opportunities for Pasifika ECE to shift the political landscape and be actively involved in the developments of both the draft and final versions of Te Whāriki [New Zealand's early childhood curriculum document] (Mara, 2013; Ministry of Education, 1996). The developments of Pacific Language Curriculum documents that would complement other curricula would soon follow (Leaupepe & Sauni, 2014).

>**Manutai**   *Philosophically we are positioned where? And what has that meant for us? And where has that taken us? We would have to think about our political maneuvering.*
>
>**Jacoba**   *And those questions I think any leader should be able to engage in and critique – to be able to understand policies.*

Manutai   *Understand the policies that affect our sector, that have influenced our sector, but equally important how some policies that have been introduced or implemented in our sector have been hindering or enhancing the kind of services that are provided within Pasifika ECE – its influences in its various shape and forms.*

Jacoba   *We know when the statistics were published in 2014, the prediction was that the largest increase in demographics will be the Pasifika population. So what does this mean for Pasifika children, that the majority are enrolled in mainstream ECE? This further emphasises the importance of Pasifika ECE services as a place where Pasifika children can engage in their first experiences in and with education. We need to understand that we are the marginalised, we need to understand that we make up only 2.2% of the entire ECE sector, so the fact that we are so limited in our representation, our presence in the sector requires attention. Why is it that Pasifika services are still being shut down due to compliance and governance issues? These concerns can't go on being ignored and as a leader you need to think about these, not only in your community context, or own organisational context but also the wider political issues affecting the ECE sector. You know, Pasifika parents are in a situation where they have to choose mainstream because that's the only option available (other than home-based care).*

Manutai   *Luafutu-Simpson's (2006) work about Pacific Island parents' choice informs us of why parents make those choices. Our children are well spread out.*

Jacoba   *That's why I think our programme demonstrates a huge commitment to the ECE sector. What we are trying to do, is engage teachers of Pasifika learners with Pasifika philosophy and pedagogy. We understand that not all of our students are going into Pasifika ECE contexts and that for many, they may teach in mainstream ECE. What can they bring with them, not only to nurture the children in their care but also those teachers that they are working with, to inform, to grow a greater awareness with their colleagues of Pasifika practice?*

Manutai   *When you think about it our Pasifika specialisation is originally one of three programmes being offered. With Auckland University of Technology closing their Pasifika ECE programme, we are now one of two and we are now the only university that offers this specialisation. That is contextualising the wider political issues – because the government are not willing to increase funding into tertiary education for Pasifika, which has had wider implications too regarding how we can get our people trained and qualified.*

From the early 1990s, our Pacific pioneers have been involved in the design and development of teacher education programmes (Airini et al., 2009). At the Epsom campus, three programmes have emerged which have seen many Pacific women and men graduate with qualifications that allow them to teach in both mainstream and Pasifika ECE services (Leaupepe & Sauni, 2014).

Jacoba   *This is a bit of an ad hoc question – but it may relate back somehow. You know how the Pasifika Education Plan is projected to end next year 2017 – what do you think will happen for our Pasifika learners because this particular strategy covers ECE all the way to tertiary? It impacts us in multiple ways, directly and indirectly. I am wondering once that strategy comes to an end, what will the emphasis be for Pasifika learners regarding the Government's commitment to education?*

Manutai   *For me, I'm going to turn this slightly around. If you have the Pasifika Education Plan being implemented with particular strategies, who's monitoring those strategies? How do we know that they are being adhered to? Who is being made accountable for ensuring that in each sector the goals that are outlined in the plan have been met?*

Jacoba   *I know that there have been attempts to monitor it through ERO – a Pasifika strategy of ECE – key indicators. I am not sure how universities or tertiary providers are held accountable for ensuring the Pasifika plan is implemented. I wonder how and why achievement rates as indicators of success in education have become the focal point for funding when success to me means so much more than passing grades. What about the collective responsibility in Pasifika education, how is success in a collective different to an individualised notion?*

Manutai   *If you take the document like the Education Commission (TEC), it has particular strategies about Māori and Pasifika with regards to students experiencing success. TEU get funding to support priorities outlined in the TEC strategy. How do we measure up to that?*

The Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) Pasifika Framework 2013-2017 is responsible for funding a tertiary education system that assists all Pasifika New Zealanders to reach their full potential and contribute to the social and economic well-being of New Zealand. The Tertiary Education Strategy (TES) 2014-2019 provides strategic direction for the tertiary education sector to identify Pasifika learners as a priority group and raise Pasifika success at all levels.

Navigating leadership: Pasifika perspectives

Jacoba   *I am interested, as these impact us in multiple ways, not only the students we're working with but the Pasifika ECE community we are engaging with and also our actual roles as lecturers. So you know there's multiple levels. So if we're looking at leadership, that is actually about growing people, you have to take into consideration all of the other influences as well.*

Manutai   *What do you give credence to? What's a priority and how do you even begin? Leadership – is multifaceted, dynamic, complex, but at the same time, there are so many expectations required of a leader especially when it comes to Pasifika ECE. I don't know of your experiences, but it seems that other people like to talk on behalf of the programme instead of coming and talking to the very people on the programme. And that seems to be an accepted practice. I find that hard to fathom. Yes, you have those who mean well and have good intentions, but can actually do more harm than good to particular programmes like ours. Often there are times I'm sitting in meetings and if I do not want to say something, it's because I choose for that particular moment on that day that that's not my battle, but, others in the room tend to feel or take it upon themselves and I'm thinking – if I'm not saying anything or not wanting to contribute to this discussion at the moment – it's not a priority.*

Jacoba   *See there's things here that I think are important to the Pasifika programme, and when we're looking at leadership that is specific to Pasifika communities it is about the way that leadership is conceptualised and enacted. There is a strong presence of hegemonic discourse in early childhood education particularly around specific modes and methods of leadership, and a lot of that is borrowed from business models. So we need to challenge that – they are not only borrowed, but they tend to be quite gendered models as well. So there's all these another kind of implications that come with leadership. I'm interested in your perspective here, what are your thoughts of Pasifika leadership? If we were to come out and say that yes we have a Pasifika ECE programme, and our vision is growing Pasifika leaders. What would that mean? What would it entail, without having to borrow concepts that are already situated within other leadership discourses? What does leadership mean for Pasifika ECE? That's what I'm interested in. Perhaps we can consider reconceptualising it to us in our roles as lecturers and within our particular programme.*

Manutai   *I think that it's a good question to ask, and it is quite problematic regarding how I could approach that.*

Jacoba   *Leadership itself is something quite fluid; it is open to multiplicity.*

Manutai   *And it can be contested. I know what you're saying about borrowing ideas from here and there, but if we were just to think solely and purely on what leadership is in Pasifika ECE. What leadership looks like? What skills attributes, and qualities would they have to possess? How do we define that? How do we measure it?*

Jacoba   *How do we navigate within the community context, and we understand too that the community context is not the same either? We are not trying to create a one image of Pasifika, we understand that it has to be dynamic and not static.*

Manutai   *Things that are based on personal preferences as well, that shapes who you are as a person. If I envision this Pasifika ECE leader, what are some of the qualities and attributes that this person would possess? Yes, I would want them to be knowledgeable, but what knowledge am I talking about? There's cultural knowledge, Western world knowledge, there's academic knowledge – knowledge itself can be explored. I also want this person to be relational, to build and strengthen relationships, that's about our networks – because you know, when our communities are not happy, they're not shy to show us that they're not happy.*

Jacoba   *There is something, though, there is a presence of a Pasifika leader, and for me what stands out – my grandfather. He could walk into a room without saying a word; he could whisper, and people would listen.*

Manutai   *Ethics of love and care, putting others before yourself.*

Jacoba   *Service is not just when you feel like it, it is spontaneous, it can be at a moment that you're not ready for, but you need to get out there and do something.*

Manutai   *And in your service, you just serve without expectation of return.*

Jacoba   *This is what I challenge in leadership – leadership as a practice of transaction, doing something for another person where you expect a favour in return? It's not about that from a Pacific perspective.*

Manutai   *Service, to the people, for the people, about the people.*

Jacoba   *And it is your service that creates your credibility for people. If you just talk and your actions don't meet what you're saying, it just goes under the rug, yes – your credibility is gone.*

Manutai   *Adding to that, spirituality is another aspect of leadership, and is more than intuition.*

Jacoba   *Yes and with spirituality, we need to consider that we are Pasifika leaders operating in a diaspora and our sense of belonging is not only fixed to Pacific Islands. I realize in our early childhood programme we have older generation Pacific woman and younger New Zealand-born students. The disparities of this diaspora are expansive, we have those who are culturally competent and attuned to Pacific ways of knowing, and we have a younger generation who enrolled in the programme to reclaim their own Pasifika heritage – to learn cultural philosophies practices and pedagogies.*

We hope that our talanoa and tutua has inspired a new way of thinking about leadership. It is no coincidence that our paths have crossed. Our experiences as Pacifika women, our time as practitioners served within the ECE sector, our roles as academics engaged in research and literature, our relationships with families, church and communities have shaped and influenced our views of leadership. We realise the responsibilities that we shoulder are great and while we are in this particular time and space – we are 'called' to lead.

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Authors

Jacoba Matapo is of Samoan Dutch heritage, born and raised in Aoteroa/New Zealand. Jacoba's passion for Pasifika education has stemmed from personal experiences as a Pasifika navigating cultural, political, and social tensions in her education journey. Jacoba has traversed a range of leadership roles in her professional career, including centre management in early childhood education and program leadership in initial teacher education. Jacoba's love for learning and community engagement has supported her work in research through arts based practices in early childhood education to Pasifika leadership and pedagogy. Jacoba's current doctoral research locates her work within diasporic multiplicities, attempting to re-imagine Pasifika leadership as a cultural and collective political act. Jacoba is currently lecturing in the School of Critical Studies in Education, Faculty of Education and Social Work, the University of Auckland.
Email: j.matapo@auckland.ac.nz

Manutai Leaupepe is of Cook Islands, Tahitian and Kiribati heritage. She is the Programme Leader-Practicum Coordinator [Year 1] for the B.Ed (Tchg) ECE – Pasifika Specialisation. She lectures in the School of Critical Studies in Education at the Faculty of Education and Social Work, the University of Auckland. Her field of research is a Pasifika conceptualization of the notions of play within the context of teaching and learning within ECE in Aotearoa New Zealand and the Pacific. Her work articulates and foregrounds Pasifika indigenous theorizing of play within ECE and teacher education programmes. Her proposed doctoral studies will examine the notions of leadership within Pasifika educational settings. It is concerned with the associations made to student achievements and outcomes.
Email: m.leaupepe@auckland.ac.nz