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POLITICS AND PEDAGOGY: The final frontiers of Pasifika early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Introduction

The title of this presentation is attributed to that iconic television series in which the crew of a certain spaceship “boldly goes where no man (sic) has gone before...” and they proceed to claim: “space: the final frontier”. In many ways we could apply these quotes to the history and development of the Pasifika early childhood education sector in Aotearoa New Zealand.

We have boldly gone into new territories and crossed frontiers we never thought we could, or would, in the relatively short history of our place within the wider early childhood sector in this country. Yet we still have some frontiers that challenge us on the journey towards quality provision, and towards a clear demarcation of our place within the galaxy of other early childhood services. In effect, I believe there is still work to do to achieve a full assertion of our Pacific cultural and linguistic identities in our society at large, and in particular within the early childhood education sector.

At the outset I must pay tribute to the early pioneers (mainly women) in the sector who worked so hard to establish language groups and centres in this country. Women such as Poko Morgan and Mii Teokotai in Tokoroa; Fereni Ete and Feaua’i Burgess in Wellington, and Jan Taouma, Materena George, Alice Ripley, and Matautu Alefaio in central and south Auckland, to name a few. The efforts of these women in those early crucial years, and the many women associated with them, laid the foundation for our current achievements. Since the 1970s Pacific women involved in Pasifika early childhood services (playgroups and licensed services) have surmounted many challenges and obstacles in the establishment and survival of our sector. I also want to acknowledge the work of the Early Childhood Development Unit (ECDU) and the contribution of its Pacific staff to the development of our sector (Mitchell & Mara, 2001). Many of those women are still involved in the Pasifika early childhood sector,

in the Ministry of Education, other educational agencies, service providers and consultants, and even within services.

Along with all other early childhood services, the Pasifika early childhood sector has developed within the context of changing political ideologies, changing education policies, regulation revisions, and new curriculum developments. In our Pasifika sector, overlay all of these political and policy changes with the changing social and economic conditions of Pacific peoples in the last 30 years in Aotearoa New Zealand. Add the imperatives to maintain our own languages and cultures through our aoga amata and other Pacific services, add the drive for increased qualifications, add the sector's own drive (supported by the Ministry) to license and charter our services, and we begin to gain a more comprehensive overview of the challenges the Pasifika early childhood sector have confronted in the last 12 to 15 years. The impressive number and diversity of provisions we see within the Pasifika sector today is testament to the commitment and tenacity of Pacific women throughout this country.

It is important to acknowledge that Pasifika early childhood educators, over several decades now, have been consistently and strongly supported by leading palagi/popa'a researchers and academics in the early childhood sector such as Anne Meade, Helen May, Margaret Carr, and Linda Mitchell. The sector has always been accorded a "place at the table", and fully included in the developments of curriculum documents such as *Te Whāriki*. We were also involved and represented in the consultation and drafting of the early childhood strategic plan – Ngā Huarahi Arataki – resulting in specific outcomes for Pasifika within each of the three goals of the strategic plan: increased participation, improving quality, and promoting collaborative relationships (Ministry of Education, 2002).

The main purpose of this paper

In this paper I am deliberately being provocative and challenging to Pasifika early childhood educators, centre managers, and to families and communities who use and support our services. Equally, through a review of research to date, and my reflections on that work, I want to encourage those from outside the Pasifika sector to continue their support of us as we work towards providing improved quality services to our children and their families. It is essential that any sector-wide support, however, be based on an informed understanding of our history, and our destiny, within the wider contexts of early childhood education within Aotearoa New Zealand.

The case has already been made for support and co-operation between Pasifika services and other early childhood services (Burgess & Mara, 2000). Any external support should encourage us to have increasing ownership and autonomy as far as possible, so that our own cultural paradigms and beliefs find expression in our own pedagogies, approaches to assessment, and evaluation.

It is my contention, based on recent research findings, that there is still some way to go for Pasifika early childhood services to achieve the three main goals of the strategic plan. The question arises: Where should the most effort be aimed first, in order for our services to report significant gains in all these areas? Even more importantly, who makes the decisions about our priorities and who has to make sure they happen?

The frontiers that are the subject of this paper bear a very strong resemblance to the goals of the strategic plan (i.e. increasing participation, improving quality, promoting collaborative relationships) and the Pasifika Education Plan (namely, the focus on improving the quality of Pasifika education services). Within those two interlinking policy frameworks the frontiers for Pasifika early childhood include: sector-wide advancement in quality pedagogy (learning and teaching), quality provision in terms of centre management and financial sustainability, and the leadership of qualified and experienced staff, equitably remunerated and supported through ongoing quality needs-based professional development.

The question is how can the Pasifika sector as a whole take more ownership in charting the course ahead, mapping their own pathways to the frontiers? How can we best utilise and gather together the collective strengths from within the Pasifika sector to ensure all Pacific children and families receive consistently high quality early childhood programmes and services? I bring my viewpoint to the debate.

Some historical background

Before looking at the contemporary landscape of Pasifika early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand, it is important to look back at some of the past research that first highlighted the significant and ongoing issues within the sector. Those findings may just help us to articulate the exact nature and extent of the current situation for the sector. It may also help in the description of the final frontiers that are before us. This research also shows that we have been articulating our needs and priorities for some time now.

The challenges and barriers involved in Pacific Island Language Groups, becoming licensed and chartered early childhood services during the 1980s and 1990s, are well documented (Mara, 1998). For that research report in 1998 I interviewed key informants from all of the government agencies that had a relationship with Pacific Islands Early Childhood Centres (PIECCs), I interviewed representatives of the Pacific Islands national early childhood organisations, and I interviewed teachers and parents from seven different licensed and unlicensed centres.

I want to focus particularly on the future challenges articulated by the national organisations in that study, in terms of their own role in taking PIECCs forward into a

positive future. The key informants also suggested strategies that would address those challenges:

- All the Pacific Islands associations remain viable, credible, and work together co-operatively
- Centres strive for higher levels of immersion and achieve quality in this aspect of their services
- Pacific early childhood trainees be trained in their own Pacific languages
- Development and publication of full translations of policies and documents
- More detailed analysis, by each association, of needs across the entire Pacific sector before undertaking any strategic planning
- More effective strategic planning by the associations and crown agencies
- A re-evaluation by associations of what they are doing, why they are doing it, and where they are going
- Further qualifications and training of staff
- Defining and working towards quality for themselves (their own definitions of quality?) (Mara, 1998, p. 32).

In 1999 I reviewed the professional development provisions for the implementation of *Te Whāriki* in PIECCs and the approaches they were using in the assessment of children's learning and the evaluation of their centres. Since my small-scale research was carried out as an extension of the work I had done with Podmore and May (1998). I also canvassed the idea with the participants about the possibility of an action research project for PIECCs in order to strengthen the implementation of *Te Whāriki* in their centres.

Both the focus groups and the advisory committee in the 1999 study highlighted two important factors that might work against effective implementation of the early childhood curriculum framework.

The first factor they described, was the lack of a theoretical underpinning to *Te Whāriki* when interpreted in a culturally and linguistically diverse context such as Pacific centres. In other words, our centres were expected to implement beyond what was essentially a bicultural framework. It was clear that any iteration of *Te Whāriki* for implementation and evaluation in Pasifika services is “not simply a set of translations”.

The second issue raised by participants in the 1999 report was the need for professional development in the implementation of *Te Whāriki*. For professional

development to be effective it had to be based, they argued, on present knowledge (as it relates to Pacific families and children) and the ease with which centre staff used the document. More importantly, the effectiveness of any professional development is the ability of the staff as a whole to access quality professional development at centre level and cluster level.

I wrote then:

It (*Te Whāriki*) represents ‘new territories’ in programmes and provisions for Pacific Islands children and their families (Mara, 1999, p. 39).

Further, our study recommended: “Much work needs to be done as each Pacific ethnic group goes through the necessary processes to articulate this base.” At that time, in 1999, the Tongan early childhood association, Utu Lelei, was working on the *Te Whāriki* framework to address this need for a sound theoretical base, and for practice to be grounded in an appropriate cultural context.

In addition, that report confirmed that participants in all of the focus groups (including one in the South Island) fully endorsed the need for an action research approach to assist in the implementation of *Te Whāriki*, provided it was carried out using Pacific aims, methodology, and approaches that met the current needs of PIECCs.

In 2003, Meade, Puhipuhi, and Foster-Cohen completed a report to the Ministry of Education outlining *Priorities for Pasifika Early Childhood Education Research*. Although its intended focus was on research it also provided, in Part A of the report, a status report of the Pasifika early childhood sector. Their conclusions on pp. 36–37 make for some sobering reading.

These conclusions are summarised as:

Considerable government input (has gone) into increasing participation and improving quality in Pasifika ECE.

The health of the Pasifika sector is not good, indicated by:

- levels of additional support required;
- greater numbers of services requiring discretionary reviews by ERO; and
- balance of professional development tipped towards administration and management rather than teaching and learning.

Questions about infrastructure advice and support, fragmentation, entry into the sector when self-management model at its peak, no strong association or umbrella organisation

Lack of support for language development role of PIECCs.

A focus on implementing *Te Whāriki* has slipped down the list of priorities.

A focus on maintaining and developing children's proficiency in their Pasifika languages (sic) not even visible.

Need for a clear stance on bilingual and immersion approaches to language in early childhood education.

The current position in our trajectory towards the “final” frontiers

The object of this paper is not to perform an audit on what has been done or not done and who is responsible for the present situation. It is time to consider what will advance the sector from now into the future, towards improved quality provision, improved staff qualifications, improved participation rates, and reaching the other goals within the current policy frameworks. Research shows that these issues have been a concern of the sector for six or more years and perhaps it is time for some assertion on the part of the Pasifika early childhood sector itself to ensure a number of frontiers are broken through.

The government funding that Meade et al. (2003) describe in their report has gone primarily into establishing our services and centres.

There are still concerns about the quality of Pasifika services as reported by the Education Review Office in their Annual Report for the Year Ending 30 June 2004. (Education Review Office, 2004, p. 2). Accessing the ERO website you can readily see that a number of Pasifika centres require supplementary visits. A large proportion (15 of the 28 centres in South Auckland) were reported by ERO as having to be revisited as it “had concerns about all aspects of teaching and learning at a large number of these centres”.

My purpose is essentially to re-look at the issues raised in 1998, 1999, and 2003 and to attend again to what the voices of those most closely involved in the Pasifika early childhood sector were saying, and then ask: Do these matters continue to be important to us? Do we still all agree that our Pacific children deserve the highest quality of early childhood provision? If so, then how can those fundamentals for Pasifika early childhood education be moved even further forward towards our final frontiers?

For much of the history of the Pasifika sector it has been the churches, and more specifically our Ministers' wives, who have provided support for our early childhood services to grow and develop (Ete, 1993). In Fereni Ete's case her aoga amata in Newtown, Wellington, was also one of the first to provide training in the Samoan language for an early childhood qualification. In that sense, yes, our beginnings were from within ourselves and within our own Pacific communities. However, historical circumstances have changed and we find in our current situation, our futures require a significant level of collaboration with outside agencies and stakeholders.

The running of a church and the running of an early childhood service are two different enterprises, even though there have been historical reasons for their mutual location. There are useful arguments and cultural reasons for such a co-existence, not only for the provision of buildings and other facilities, but also for the automatic access to spiritual, cultural, and language support by the wider church community. However, our early childhood services are required to be run like small businesses, and they are businesses that operate in a highly regulated environment because of the levels of government funding they receive. Many of the women who began our language groups and centres did so because of their desire to pass on our Pacific languages and cultures that we had brought with us from our home island nations, not necessarily to become business managers.

As Meade et al. (2003) report, the most rapid growth in Pasifika centres took place at the height of the self-management model in educational administration and centres, resulting in the establishment of Pasifika licensed centres as individual and stand-alone services. Apart from the Pacific early childhood associations which sprang up such as Kautaha Aoga Niue, Utu Lelei Tongan Association, Te Punanga o te Reo Kuki Airani, and the PIECCA (Pacific Islands Early Childhood Council Aotearoa) only the SA'ASIA (Sosaite Aoga Amata Samoa i Aotearoa Incorporated) that has maintained wide support, has continued to grow, and has remained an effective leader in the sector. Its strength and influence is logical given the demographic of Samoan people being over 50 percent of the total Pacific populations in Aotearoa New Zealand. However, I am concerned about the smaller Pacific communities and how they can support each other and collaborate across the country.

A number of these associations do continue to operate as a support network through meetings and fono and such like but none, apart from the previous overarching role taken by PIECCA, have had a co-ordinating role or advocacy role across the Pasifika early childhood sector. Many associations and networks are now themselves providers or are contracted to provide advice and support to centres to meet management and governance regulations.

The realities of early childhood provision with and for Pacific children and their families

The challenging situation in which Pasifika early childhood services find themselves at the present time, is due largely to policies and decisions that were made, and continue to be made, about teacher qualifications and teacher registration. At various times, whether it was because the input of Pasifika advisers and teachers was ignored, or whether providers of courses had no overview of the supply and demand for teachers in the sector, or whether the Ministry and NZQA and perhaps even ERO, were not all co-ordinated, I am not sure, but I make the following observation.

Every time our teachers have upgraded their qualifications, the goal posts or criteria for “trained” staff and the person responsible has also been lifted. Whilst we would all applaud the reasons behind these “upgrades” the implications for staff in Pasifika centres have been major ones. The resulting situation has been that some individual teachers in Pasifika centres, who want to stay teaching in the sector, have been in training for many years in a row. Further, this training has to be done part-time because of family commitments and it has to be completed alongside running a centre, dealing with outside agencies, and meeting the demands and needs of children and families in their centres. In addition, teachers have been totally dependent on the ability and/or willingness of their employing management committees to assist with training either through paying fees or time off to study (not on pay, however). Conversely, teachers have received their diplomas and degrees only to find later that their employers (the centre management) cannot match the pay rates (or working conditions) of teachers in kindergartens or childcare. This situation is particularly difficult where the non-Pasifika services are in close proximity to a Pasifika service, which is crying out for qualified staff and would readily employ our Pacific graduates at better rates of pay and conditions. Such is the dedication of our early childhood teachers in the Pasifika sector to the aims and objectives of promoting and maintaining our ethnic languages and cultural heritages that they remain in relatively less well-paid positions.

Yes, more money has recently gone into Pasifika centres and I hope our teachers do receive their increases. Further, with the demands of registration how many Pacific registered teachers are available to mentor and supervise for registration? I pose these questions not to specifically lay any blame or responsibility but rather to ask what will be done from here on in? More specifically, how will our Pasifika early childhood sector, collectively, respond to this situation of qualifications, training, and retention of qualified staff.

Ways forward?

If we look at other services such as kindergarten, playcentre, childcare, and others we could perhaps take some pointers from how they operate and also reflect on what we can learn from them. Yes, they all have a longer history in Aotearoa New Zealand, but surely that can help us to avoid some of the traps they fell into on their own journeys to the present.

How did those associations prepare for their “final frontiers”? My perception is that they acted collectively and strategically: to achieve better pay and conditions, to set up professional development systems and criteria appropriate to their service’s philosophy, and they set up systems for the development and maintenance of infrastructure (governance and management including financial management). They did this so that the teachers could get on and do the teaching, get on and implement

the curriculum, whilst the overarching association provides (or contracts in) regular opportunities for training and staff development that is separate from increasing qualifications.

Research completed by NZCER for the Ministry (which has yet to be published) across three projects (Use of Equity Funding; Quality in Parent-Led Services; and the Evaluation of Phase I of the Strategic Plan) included case studies for Pasifika services. A pattern has started to emerge for the Pasifika case studies. When placed alongside other early childhood services one factor stands out: that Pasifika lack an effective overarching association that could act as support and advocate collectively for the sector and one that can broker a relationship with the main agencies: MOE, ERO, Teachers Council, and professional development providers. Currently each centre has to work independently and in relative isolation to address teacher registration processes, qualifications, and training and the many other issues they face.

It is my understanding that SA'ASIA is close to setting up a new structure, modelled on the Kindergarten Association. This will mean that aoga amata in Aotearoa New Zealand are creating opportunities for collective action, and a level of overall co-ordination that the Pasifika sector urgently needs. My hope is that they create opportunities for teachers to get together to work on the development of pedagogy, our own Pacific metaphors and pedagogies. It must not get stalled and bogged down by the financial and management priorities, even though they are important. Quality teaching and learning have to be fostered beyond training providers and become owned and shaped by the sector itself, not imposed. If we do not focus more on high quality teaching and learning we will be putting our children's educational futures in jeopardy.

In my research work I have visited Pasifika centres and playgroups up and down the country. Our teachers do work incredibly hard, for lower wages and in restricted working conditions, they work with communities with needs that impact negatively on families' abilities to provide for their children, and they are also part of those communities. Pacific early childhood teachers, I believe, need the support of an effective association to shoulder some of the administrative burdens placed upon them so they can get on with the job of teaching our children – and in order for the sector to move forwards.

Summary and conclusion

Our Pasifika early childhood sector needs to find its voice and its collective feet, and that has to happen soon. We have to collaborate across services to be in a position to shape our own directions and our own journeys. Governments need us to work with them (collaboratively) on plans and projects that are aimed at goals that we all share, for our children and families, and for the sector.

But it is now time for some reality testing. The sector needs to collectively and truthfully articulate what we believe our current situation to be in regard to our resources and capacities. Our collective organisation then needs to sit down with the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs and work through what the sector priorities are, what needs to be done first (because we can't do everything at once), decide together where funds could be strategically directed, and insist that whatever resources are given and wherever funding is directed that it is effectively monitored so that all stakeholders know what has been achieved, and what there is still left to do.

The strategic plan and the Pasifika education plan logically provide the policy frameworks but it is at centre and service level that the policies are implemented. In this way the Pasifika sector has some ownership of its direction, and it can "keep the agencies honest" in relation to achieving our shared goals.

And finally, but not least, our Pasifika early childhood association, whatever it is called, must insist upon more robust and extensive research in our Pasifika early childhood services; insist upon more evidence-based approaches to pedagogy (beyond the significant achievements of the aoga amata in Auckland that is part of the Centre of Innovation), and a comprehensive plan for needs-based professional development that includes centre-based as well as whole cluster development, and an increasing use of approaches such as action research.

I believe the Pasifika early childhood sector can continue to go where no one else has gone before. But, like the (in)famous space ship, we need leadership with a vision, a good map of the universe, a compass, collective hard work by the whole crew, and hope, and we will blast through the frontiers, ensuring our Pacific children and their families have access to what we all dream of: the highest quality early childhood education we can provide.

Mauruuru, Malo, Fa'afetai. Thank you for your attention.

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