Barriers to Pasifika learners' engagement and strategies to support Pasifika learners in early childhood settings.

Sina Fowler | *New Zealand Tertiary College*

This article investigates barriers to Pasifika learners in a range of educational settings in Aotearoa New Zealand and offers strategies for kaiako to support Pasifika learners in overcoming these barriers in early childhood settings. This article will also explain and define the term 'Pasifika' according to the terminology used in the *Pasifika Education Plan 2013-2017* (Ministry of Education, 2013). The growing population of young Pasifika learners in educational settings and the disparities between Pasifika learners' achievement and other ethnic groups is a concern. This article examines the ways that this disparity is being addressed by the New Zealand Government through Ministry of Education policies and documents, and how these initiatives can support kaiako in early childhood settings to support Pasifika students to fulfill their potential and achieve academically.

Introduction

Pasifika learners are the fourth-largest and fastest-growing ethnic group in Aotearoa (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2016). The term 'Pasifika' is an umbrella term coined by New Zealand Government agencies to describe migrants from the islands of Melanesia, Micronesia and particularly Polynesia (MoE, 2018). Seven-point four percent of the New Zealand population identify with one or more Pacific ethnic groups (MoE, 2016). The population of Pasifika children and young people is increasing and is predicted to reach 20% of the school population by 2050 (MoE, 2020a). As Pasifika learners make up a large percentage of learners, it is essential that all kaiako have the cultural competencies and knowledge to support their engagement and success in early childhood settings.

Despite significant gains over the last ten years, Pasifika learners are still achieving below their peers in schools (MoE, 2020a). The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2015 shows that Pasifika students are underachieving in numeracy, literacy and science compared with their Pākehā, Asian, and Māori counterparts (OECD, 2016). Likewise, the *Pasifika Education Plan: Monitoring Report 2015* (MoE, 2016) revealed that Pasifika students are more likely to leave school without a qualification and less likely to go onto higher education compared to their non-Pasifika peers. This disparity is addressed in the two overarching objectives of the *Action Plan for Pacific Education* (MoE, 2020b) which are to create barrier-free access and provide world-class inclusive public education for all learners.

In this article, stereotype threat and institutionalised racism are examined as critical factors that impact Pasifika learners' self-efficacy and engagement with learning. Barriers to enhancing Pasifika learners' learning for non-Pasifika kaiako and centres include liberal multiculturalism, a lack of cultural knowledge and competency, and ineffective

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leadership (MoE, 2020a). Following this, key strategies are discussed in conjunction with the Ministry of Education documents with a focus on *Tapasā: a cultural competency framework for teachers of Pacific learners* (MoE, 2018), *Action Plan for Pacific Education 2020-2030* (MoE, 2020b), *The Pacific Languages Strategy 2022-2032* (Ministry for Pacific People, 2022) and *Best Practice for Teaching Pacific Learners* (MoE, 2020a).

Barriers to Pacific learners: systemic racism and stereotyping

Pacific learners and families identify racism as a key barrier to learning and engagement (MoE, 2020b). Processes of colonialisation in Aotearoa New Zealand have presented whiteness as the benchmark in education meaning that diverse students' cultures, knowledge, ways of being, and language are devalued and excluded from education norms (Liu, 2007). In order to achieve this, diverse students must forsake their cultural heritages and identities to prescribe to Eurocentric criteria (Paris & Alim, 2017). This problem is evident in an Education Review Office report (ERO) (2018) finding that only 37% of early childhood services intentionally promoted home languages or used cultural lens to support learners and whānau. In order for students to achieve, it is argued that diverse students must forsake their cultural heritages and identities to prescribe to a Eurocentric criteria (Paris & Alim, 2017). Despite the large and ever-growing student population of Pasifika learners, only a small proportion of schools have specific initiatives to support Pasifika engagement, and the adaptation of culturally responsive practices such as employing Pasifika perspectives, themes, and languages are largely absent (ERO, 2012). As Smith (2012) suggests, because of colonization, Western ideologies have determined what worldview, languages, and experiences are valued, and indigenous knowledge is diminished and disregarded to elevate and maintain their superiority. Systemic racism can be seen in the increased percentage of Māori learners being stood down, expelled, and streamed into lower-level classes (Blank et al., 2016; Bolton, 2017; Education Counts, 2019; Turner, 2015 as cited in Green, 2020). This issue is also found in Si'ilata's (2019) research with Pasifika learners. Kaiako recognised that they had existing assumptions around Pasifika tamariki language and literacy competencies which impacted on their teaching practice. Pasifika students indicated an awareness of their teachers' deficit attitudes towards them and their learning due to discourses of racism and ethnicity, such as being low achievers or 'dumb' (Webber et al., 2013). Systemic racism is a form of racism that is deeply entrenched in societal systems, legislation and policies, practices and attitudes that create and perpetuate unfair treatment and judgment of people of colour (Humpage, 2000). Systemic racism highlights the involvement of all systems and structures, including the education, criminal justice, health, political, economic and healthcare systems (Pack et al., 2016).

Schools and educational institutions provide an important context for learners' developing identities. Steele (1997) states that in order to succeed in school, learners must feel a sense of Mana Whenua (belonging and achievement). Disparities in schools and broader society in achievement often point to teachers' deficit attitudes toward diverse students, and teachers rarely reflect or question their teaching and assessment methods (Paris & Alim, 2017; Turner et al., 2015). Fletcher et al.'s (2011) research found that student-teacher relationships were critical to students' success, and part of building this relationship was demonstrating respect for their funds of knowledge and culture. Fletcher et al.'s (2006) study showed that out of 37 Pasifika learners from 11–14 years old, who were underachieving in reading and learning, nearly 50% expressed frustration at the absence of cultural and personal safety within their schools. While this research was done in primary and secondary schools, it still illustrates the importance of whānaungatanga between kaiako and students and the impact of kaiako values and beliefs on their practice.

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Stereotype threat can happen when individuals may feel at risk of confirming a negative stereotype linked to the group to which they identify (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Stereotype threat is defined as "the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype" (Steele, 2003, p.109). Stereotype threat often causes individuals to focus on the negative stereotypes assigned to their ethnic and cultural groups as opposed to their actual abilities, and this results in diminished performances (Smith & Hung, 2008). Simply an awareness of the negative stereotype impacts learners' confidence, test performances, and willingness to take risks in academic pursuits which may negatively impact their long-term academic learning (Steele & Aronson, 2004). Steele et al. (2002) also discussed the importance of understanding how a student's social identity could be at risk of stereotype threat in certain settings and that the knowledge of the devaluation of certain groups would likely result in the students' extra caution and lack of trust in the setting.

The Office of the Children's Commissioner (2018) found that many tamariki (children) and rangatahi (young people) experienced racism at school and were treated unfairly due to their culture. "If my teacher believes in me, sees potential in me and teaches me in the way I learn best, I will achieve more" (Secondary school student, undisclosed ethnicity, as cited in Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2018, p. 9). A clear theme throughout this report was that students wanted to be treated fairly by being included and respected, and they can become progressively less motivated to learn if they felt their kaiako did not believe in them or had low expectations.

Barriers for practice

Culture can be perceived in essentialist terms and understood as a fixed set of homogenous characteristics and practices that are highly racialised and assigned to all members of an ethnic group (May & Dam, 2020). When fixed values and worldviews are reinforced, it may lead to superficial and tokenistic ideas about how culture can be integrated into the curriculum. Eketone and Walker (2015) suggest that to move beyond tokenism, it is essential to develop basic competence in cultural values, language, customs, history and protocols. The diversity within the Pasifika community should be recognised without homogenising, which risks perpetuating stereotypes and essentialising identities. The term 'Pasifika' and 'Pasifika peoples' are used by the Ministry of Education to describe a diverse group of Pasifika islanders living in New Zealand who "continue to have family and cultural connections to Pacific Island nations" (MoE, 2018, p. 5) including Samoa, Tonga, Cook Islands, Fiji, Niue, Tokelau, Tuvalu and other Pasifika heritages. The increasing multi-ethnic heritages and diverse identities beyond ethnicities that teachers and leaders should respond to are also highlighted in *Tapasā* (MoE, 2018). Although it is stated that *Tapasā* (MoE, 2018) emerges from a framework recognising multiplicity and diversity within the Pasifika community, a limitation is identified by Averill and Rimoni (2019) that because the key values and competencies in *Tapasā* (MoE, 2018) are expressed in English, this can potentially lead to interpretations linked to Western Eurocentric worldviews and thus undervalue the depth and breadth of Pasifika values and beliefs. This may be a challenge for non-Pasifika kaiako to understand the culturally embedded and nuanced indicators and to demonstrate the competencies that are true to the aspirations of *Tapasā* (MoE, 2018).

Challenges to successful policy implementation are complicated both by the limited number of Pasifika kaiako, and non-Pasifika kaiako with limited or no experience of teaching Pasifika learners and understanding their worldviews or their cultural contexts. *Reports from Teaching staff: Information on teaching staff in schools from 2004-2017*

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(Education Counts, 2019) shows that kaiako with Pacific heritage account for just 3% of teachers, which suggests a lack of cultural knowledge and expertise to support Pasifika learners. Allen and Robertson (2009), Chu et al. (2013), Ferguson et al. (2008), Rimoni (2016), and Spiller (2012) suggest that non-Pasifika kaiako need a deep understanding and knowledge of Pasifika students in order to teach in culturally responsive and appropriate ways. This was confirmed in Hunter et al.'s (2016) study that found that kaiako need support to understand Pasifika values and how they can be woven into educational practices to lift and enhance Pasifika learner success. Without this understanding, kaiako may slip into what May and Dam (2020) call liberal multiculturalism's 'ready' response to diversity, which neglects to recognise and address power relations within society and centres 'whiteness' as the norm.

Green (2020) asserts that Māori language and culture are protective factors in achieving academic success and suggests strategies. For example, the Government could support the development of a large cohort of new Māori kaiako/teachers, link cultural competencies and culturally responsive teaching to teacher appraisals and mandate culturally responsive professional learning for all kaiako/teachers to achieve this. This focus on language can be seen in *The Pacific Languages Strategy 2022-2032* (Ministry of Pacific Peoples, 2022), which also actively works to ensure that Pacific languages thrive in Aotearoa. Its three key objectives are to recognise the value of Pacific languages, strengthen pathways and resources for learning Pacific languages, and create environments for Pacific languages to be used and heard more often (Ministry of Pacific Peoples, 2022).

The successful implementation of *Tapasā* (MoE, 2018*)* depends on strong leadership within the school and a robust focus on supporting Pasifika learners in the school's strategic plan. Salahshour's (2021) research showed that the low number of schools with the highest success rate in establishing solid and successful relationships with Māori and Pasifika parents were those with strong leadership and commitment to refining and improving their practices. Averill and Rimoni (2021) propose that policy can only enhance practice if it is scaffolded and brought to life through shared understanding, genuine intent, continuous development, and action. *Best Practice for Teaching Pacific Learners* (MoE, 2020a) asserts that educational leaders have a powerful influence on the children's learning journey through their leadership of kaiako professional learning and development and establishing effective professional learning communities. The *Ngāue Fakataha ki he Ako 'a e Fānau* research project affirmed that strong governance and leadership were critical for schools, parents and whānau/families to support and increase Pasifika learner engagement and achievement (Tongati'o, Tuimauga &-Kennedy, 2016, as cited in MoE, 2020a). *Talanoa Ako Cycle's* (MoE, 2016b) first guiding principle is successful Pasifika students who are secure in their identities, languages and cultures. One of the suggested key actions is "valuing and incorporating identities, languages and cultures as contexts for learning" (MoE, 2021, p.1). The *Talanoa Ako Cycle* also provides an overview of the teacher's role and the first role is designing a culturally responsive curriculum. Lastly, Education Review Office (2016) created the document, *School Evaluation Indicators* which identifies important markers of strong governance and leadership and what that might look like in practice.

Strategies for practice

This next section will examine strategies to overcome the barriers and challenges discussed so far. The discussion on the strategies will also explore *Tapasā* (2018) and other key Ministry of Education documents and offer kaiako practical suggestions that they can incorporate into their everyday practice. These strategies focus on strengthening

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kaiako understanding of learners' cultural identities, languages and funds of knowledge to provide a strong foundation for robust relationships with learners, parents and whānau.

Weaving students' cultural capital through the curriculum

Tapasā (MoE, 2018) provides a framework for kaiako and education providers to effectively support Pasifika learners and communities, and strengthen and deepen kaiako awareness of Pasifika students' identities, languages, and cultures. This focus is evident in its first Turu and the Pacific research models referred to in *Tapasā* (MoE, 2018), including Kakala, introduced by Thaman (1988) and Talanoa by Vaioleti (2006) for kaiako to explore and deepen their understanding of Pacific-based pedagogical and research models and frameworks. *Tapasā* (MoE, 2018*)* strives to make meaningful and systemic changes that address discrimination, social justice, and equity. Fletcher et al.'s (2005, 2006) research reiterates that Pasifika learners want to read and write about experiences that are culturally responsive and relevant to their own funds of knowledge. Furthermore, Pasifika students who were successful in reading and writing at school experienced a positive and respectful attitude to their cultures, ways of being, and knowing in the classroom.

Culturally responsive practice is making learning relevant and effective for learners by drawing on children's funds of knowledge (Education Hub, 2019). Culturally responsive practice validates the diverse knowledge and practice of learners, weaves through learners' different experiences and ways of learning, and is a transformative and empowering process (Education Hub, 2019). *Best Practice for Teaching Pacific Learners* (2020a) highlighted culturally responsive pedagogy as a key strategy for lifting Pacific learner achievement and the importance of recognising learners as culturally located. To ensure culturally responsive pedagogy, kaiako should know the learners' specific ethnic backgrounds, recognise the learners' funds of knowledge, use culturally relevant materials and concepts, provide opportunities for collaborative learning, and explicitly teach critical thinking skills. Kaiako can use storybooks that reflect a range of ethnicities, languages and experiences that learners can connect to their personal experiences as they see and hear themselves represented in the stories. Kaiako could extend upon this story further and ask learners to bring storybooks from home or share favourite pese (song) from their cultures or in their home languages to bridge the gap between home and centre.

Positive identity construction

Tuafuti and McCaffery (2005) assert that in order to raise Pasifika learners' self-esteem and positive self-identity, Pasifika cultural values, beliefs, and languages need to be present in all facets of their education. Maintaining a strong cultural identity has proven to be a challenge for many Pasifika learners (Hunter et al., 2016). *Tapasā* (MoE, 2018) explicitly advocates for kaiako to critically reflect on their own identity and culture in their practice in order to support students' cultural identity, language, values, and beliefs. This can be seen in *Tapasā* (MoE, 2018) in the *Knowing yourself* section. It asks non-Pasifika kaiako to recognise their "inbuilt assumptions" and emphasises that knowing oneself is critical to acknowledging and understanding one's own privileges and biases (MoE, 2018, p. 7).

The under-theorisation of identity, or not understanding the multifaceted aspects of identity, may be problematic for non-Pasifika kaiako to strengthen and deepen their understanding of Pasifika students and education. Reynolds

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(2019) suggests that *Tapasā* (MoE, 2018) needs to function to support kaiako to recognise and negotiate with fixed understandings of identity and ethnicity. Kaiako need to avoid essentialising Pasifika learner identities and acknowledge the multiple identities that exist within the continuum of identities. Salahshour (2021) adds that the complexity of this challenge is further complicated by the diversity in and among Pasifika groups, and Pasifika learners increasingly identifying themselves with more than one Pasifika heritage.

Partnerships with learners and whānau

Tapasā (MoE, 2018) disrupts the individuality that Western liberal democracy favours and centres relationships that reflect Pasifika collective values. Reynolds (2018) states in *Tapasā* (MoE, 2018) that relationships can be seen in the focus on interactions between student/teacher and education systems. Demonstrating respect for Pasifika students is a crucial part of effective student-teacher relationship (Averill & Clark, 2012; Hill & Hawk, 2000; Spiller, 2012). Research from Hawk et al., (2002) and Samu (2006) shows that respectful relationships with Pasifika students help kaiako to learn about their students' unique values and experiences, and foster kaiako understanding of Pasifika students individually and holistically. The relational lens corresponds to some of the key insights in the *Education Matters to Me* (Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2018) report in which tamariki and rangatahi highlighted the significance of relationships in enabling them to achieve. The report advised that many learners felt that they could not begin to learn without a trusted relationship with their kaiako/teacher, and the quality of the relationship between kaiako/teacher and student mattered.

Partnerships relate to an important cultural concept, *Va*, that is present in many Pacific cultures. The term Va is defined as the "distance, space between two places, things or people" (Milner, 2003, p. 307). Tuagalu (2008) describes the Samoan conceptualisation of Va as the social and spiritual relations between people. Fa'avae (2018) aligns with this view and recognises the Va as essential to how Tongans and Samoans construct and deconstruct their multiple identities. Wendt (1999) highlights the importance of Va in maintaining and nurturing the relationship. Mila-Schaaf and Hudson (2009) assert that the Va needs to be continuously maintained to counter colonial positions of power that have historically dismissed indigenous knowledge and values in favour of Western knowledge systems. Smith (2021) also supports the forefronting of indigenous theory through decolonisation. In order to cultivate relationships with parents and whānau, kaiako should make time to kōrero regularly with Pasifika parents and whānau and solicit their input meaningfully in their centre's curriculum. Kaiako could sing Pacific language songs in hui time and for transitioning periods. Kaiako could also ask parents and whānau if they have a karakia they use and would like to share.

Creating a culturally safe environment

Another strategy to enable and enhance Pasifika students' participation and achievement is by creating a culturally safe environment (Walton & Spencer, 2009). The educational environment may have contextual cues of negative stereotypes that prompt stereotype threat. Kaiako and schools can address this by having diversity and inclusion valued in their school policies and visual representation in their learning environment in culturally appropriate ways (Cheryan et al., 2009; Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008). These are crucial steps in supporting Pasifika learners as they are susceptible to feeling out of place due to being a minority and the effects of stereotype threat (Schmader & Hall,

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2014). This can be overcome by reinforcing Va connections within the school. Kaiako and education systems need to strengthen and deepen their understanding of Pasifika learners and their approaches through their reflective practice and professional development. Reworking the curriculum to ensure a culturally responsive practice and utilising funds of knowledge of tamariki through their programs are necessary.

Best Practice for Teaching Pacific Learners (MoE, 2020a) found that services that had very effective practices for Pacific tamariki/children provided a culturally rich environment, implemented a culturally appropriate curriculum and celebrated cultural events. Tamariki in these services demonstrated a strong sense of pride and were knowledgeable of their cultures (ERO, 2013). This is one of the three key objectives of the *Pacific Languages Strategy 2022-2032* (Ministry for Pacific People, 2022), and to create environments where Pacific languages can be used and heard more often and in more spaces. This report asserts that Pacific people who are strong in their languages have a strong sense of identity and wellbeing and are better equipped to succeed in their education and careers.

Kaiako can meaningfully weave through culturally responsive experiences such as using Cook Island wooden tokere (slit drums) in music making sessions or creating opportunities for tamariki to engage in traditional arts such as printing Samoan tapa cloth designs. Kaiako can ask parents for keywords or phrases in their home language and start building a word bank of useful words and phrases to support their child. These experiences can be developed into wall displays for Pasifika tamariki and whānau to see themselves, their culture and their language represented in the centre.

Ongoing professional development

Ongoing professional development helps to deepen teachers' understanding and reflective practice. Nicholas and Fletcher (2017) propose that professional learning and development are instrumental in achieving change for Pacific learners and developing a culturally responsive curriculum. Learning about Pasifika pedagogical frameworks such as Si'ilata's (2014) Va'a Tele model in *Tapasā* (MoE, 2018) can support kaiako in seeing the connections between existing practice and practices. This model includes knowledge and expectations of Pasifika learners, knowledge of Pasifika languages and second language acquisition, instructional strategies, connections with Pasifika languages, texts, worldviews, and literacy, and partnership with Pasifika families and communities (Si'ilata, 2014). The model encourages kaiako to see education from a Pasifika perspective and how the Pasifika metaphor of Va'a Tele can be used as a framework to deepen and strengthen their understanding. Si'ilata et al.'s (2018) work covers topics such as essentialising identities, systemic racism, biased beliefs, biliteracy development, and how kaiako can reframe Pasifika success in English medium education. These are provocative and possibly controversial points for kaiako to consider in their practice. They may prompt reflection into their own practice to critically assess their values and beliefs and how that informs their practice.

This article has examined some of the barriers that Pasifika learners face in their educational learning journeys and for kaiako practice. The later part of the article has explained and discussed some practical strategies for kaiako to overcome these barriers in their everyday practice. Part of the professional responsibilities of being a kaiako as outlined in *Our Code, Our Standards* (Teaching Council of Aotearoa, 2017) is a commitment to learners and whānau which include promoting the wellbeing of learners, respecting learners' cultural diversity, language and heritage; and

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a commitment to professional learning. This article endeavors to support kaiako to do so through deepening their understanding in using the curriculum document, *Tapasā* (MoE, 2018) and fortify their practice to better understand and engage with Pacific learners and their whānau.

E vave taunu'u le malaga pe a tatou alo va'a fa'atasi

Our destiny is within sight when we paddle our canoe together.

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