

Pacific research in education: New directions

An Introduction

Eve Coxon & Tanya Wendt Samu

Abstract: This issue of MAI Review focuses on education policy and practice for Pasifika communities in Aotearoa New Zealand in the 21st century. It includes 11 papers which provide critically informed, evidence-grounded insights into Pacific Education; and many of the writers are optimistic in offering potential solutions to long-identified issues. The authors in this collection include a number of educators who are well-established as critical researchers and practitioners in the area of Pacific Education. It also includes papers from emerging researchers, who are characterised by an original and rigorous research approach and a topic of interest and importance.

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The motivation for gathering together these papers in one volume arose from our involvement in two research forums towards the end of 2007. The first was a workshop organised by Tanya Wendt Samu at the University of Auckland's Faculty of Education to build a 'community of research practice' with her Pasifika staff. Eve Coxon was invited to take the role of 'critical friend' and provide feedback on the papers they were developing for conference presentation in forthcoming months. The second forum in which we participated was a Pacific Education research symposium jointly organised by NZARE's Pasifika Caucus and the Ministry of Education. Most of the papers in this issue were presented at one or other of these events. From our involvement in producing a commissioned literature review on Pacific education research for the Ministry of Education (2002), we recognised that it was imperative to offer this collection of research on Pasifika education to a wider academic audience through publication.

Moreover, from our positions as co-directors of the Research Unit in Pacific Education we have been able to observe, reflect and comment on the emergence of a range of Pacific education issues over a quite long period, and we felt that many of the papers were exploring new approaches and directions not only in terms of education research topics, but also in research methodology. These papers showed a new optimism about and confidence in Pasifika peoples' ability to draw on their own cultural resources in determining strategies for moving towards solutions to old problems. We decided it was important to seek publication as a collection which would be accessible to a range of groups. Although the personal and professional demands that go with busy lives means the process of ensuring this collection of papers comes to publication has taken longer than expected, in recent months that process has been accelerated by the very supportive approach and efficient operations of the MAI Review editors, to whom we express our deepest appreciation.

Apart from the academic interest which we expect from the collection, we see this collection as helping to fulfil urgent needs that cut across social, economic, political as well as educational dimensions. Pacific learners continue to be identified by the Ministry of Education as a priority area of work because of Pacific peoples' distinctive demographic profile, and the need for specifically tailored approaches to education policy and practical interventions to address their educational needs. All papers in this publication have implications for Pacific Education policy and/or practice. Furthermore, collectively this issue

makes selected Pacific theoretical perspectives, paradigms and critical stances explicit, and recognises that multiple perspectives are important in diverse, regionally and globally interconnected, societies. Hence the inclusion of a range of perspectives, with each anchored in theory and tested in the practice of the researcher/educators who have written them.

The first paper, by Tanya Samu, sets the scene for much of what follows in taking an overarching approach to the conceptualisation of education for Pasifika peoples in the context of 21st-century New Zealand. The paper purposefully challenges Pacific educators and researchers to engage in a continuous process of self-review and critical reflection about education for their communities. Her title “Pacific education: An Oceanic perspective” indicates the locating of Pacific Education in New Zealand in a wider context, both geographically and theoretically. Samu draws on Pacific knowledge and imagery and the writings of established Pacific scholars in critically exploring several fundamental features of the discourses surrounding the education of Pasifika peoples. She argues that an Oceanic perspective to resolving 21st century issues regarding Pasifika education requires new forms of expression and identity.

Nane Rio and Maxine Stephenson’s contribution, “Agency and transformation: Pasifika teachers navigating the currents of change”, illuminates the theme of enhanced cultural diversity as a response to globalization and the effects of this in a local context. Their analysis of findings from a research study entitled ‘Voices from Manukau’ into a pre-service teacher education programme located in New Zealand’s most ethnically diverse city, includes discussion of the complexities of culture, identity and intercultural awareness, and the significance of context. By reading research participants’ responses through the theoretical lens of cultural globalisation the authors consider the potential of Pasifika teachers in making schools successful for Pasifika students and in bringing about wider transformations.

The relationship between culture and educational achievement is the topic of Karlo Milaschaaf and Elizabeth Robinson’s paper, ‘Polycultural’ capital and educational achievement among NZ-born Pacific peoples’. It takes a strengths-based, mixed-methods research approach in analysing two data sets: the first being a quantitative analysis of the Pacific findings from New Zealand’s first national secondary school student health and wellbeing survey; the second being a qualitative analysis of narrative interviews exploring the significant associations between culture and educational achievement suggested by the former. Bourdieu’s concepts of social space and cultural capital are adapted to produce the theoretical construct, ‘polycultural capital’. It is argued that this can be employed by Pacific learners to negotiate culturally dominant social spaces such as educational institutions to produce positive learning outcomes.

Adrian Schoone’s paper “Re-scripting life: New Zealand-born Tongan ‘youth-at-risk’ narratives of return migration” explores the experiences of a group of young Tongans sent to live with extended family members in Tonga. The assumption is that these ‘at-risk’ youth need to find their identity through immersion in *anga fakatonga* (Tonga ways of behaving). Also of interest in the paper is the narrative research approach taken, in which prevailing societal and cultural narratives were explored alongside the personal narratives of the youth participants and their families. Schoone argues that the macro-narrative, ‘youth-at-risk’, influences the construction of these young people’s personal narratives and largely contravenes Tongan cultural narratives. The research study demonstrated that the collective values embedded in the Tongan cultural narrative became the nexus of the youths’ educational achievement, relationships and identity.

Issues of identity are again given prominence in Alexis Siteine’s contribution “The allocation of Pasifika identity in New Zealand classrooms”, which is based on a qualitative research study involving a group of Year 7 and 8 teachers. The author first outlines the dilemma for these teachers in responding to Ministry directives to positive affirm their students’ identities,

in particular the National Curriculum's goal of culturally responsive education. Siteine argues that teachers allocate rather than affirm a form of identity to their students and has developed from teacher voices a typology of identity allocation that seeks to make teacher choices and their implications explicit. In exploring the implications for Pasifika students, Siteine concludes that ideological understandings of Pasifika identity and deficit views held by teachers can promote fixed, unrealistic and fragmented identities. Furthermore, that the allocation of a singular identity does not allow for students with multiple, fluid identities.

“‘Be true to one's self': Learning to be leaders in Pasifika education strategy”, is introduced by its author, Airini, with a strong rationale for her focus on strategy implementation. With reference to a government strategy outlined in 2008 for improvement in education outcomes by Pacific peoples of New Zealand, links are made with social, cultural, economic and health benefits for the whole country. Her paper investigates strategic change in Pasifika education and how to grow the leaders to help make that happen. ‘Strategy implementation’ is of particular concern and refers to large-scale, future-oriented plans for optimising achievement of an organisation's mission and objectives. Six categories and 23 sub-categories are identified and presented as a description of the core competencies for leaders of strategy implementation for Pasifika advancement, and for strategy implementation in education. This paper highlights ways in which leadership in education might be usefully informed and expanded by Pasifika perspectives on strategy implementation.

The next two articles are both concerned with bilingual education in New Zealand classrooms. Meaola Amituanai-Toloa reports on the findings of a sub-study focused on Samoan bilingual learners within a four-year multi-site project aimed at improved literacy in general and Pasifika bilingual education in particular. The sub-study undertaken by the author was focused on Samoan bilingual contexts and had the specific aims of exploring the effectiveness of teaching and learning in Samoan and English and how the Samoan concepts *iloa* (know or knowing) and *malamalama* (enlightened or understanding) can be used to enhance reading comprehension. The sub-study showed that while it is possible to develop more effective teaching that impacts directly on the reading comprehension achievement for bilingual students, there is a need for more intensive exploration and examination of how bilingual students develop in their two languages. The author draws on the research findings to identify the critical components essential to a policy–research–practice collaboration aimed at long-term changes in Pasifika education outcomes.

In her paper “Additive bilingual education: Unlocking the culture of silence”, Patisepa Tuafuti addresses research issues and challenges involved in empowering Pasifika parents and their children to become active participants in their educational journeys. Her initial concern is to investigate why Pasifika parents who attend education consultations do not challenge the dominant discourses of New Zealand education and the constructions of their identities in those discourses. The author explores some theoretical perspectives on why these parents do not speak out, and reveals a Samoan perspective on “the culture of silence” and its relationship to education. She then models how an additive bilingual education programme, structured within a collaborative empowerment process of partnership with parents and communities, enabled the employment of Pasifika voices in challenging educators to in challenging educators to support the unlocking process of their silence and silencing.

In the first of two contributions exploring the preparation of early childhood teachers, Seiuli Luama Sauni and Meripa Toso use a Pasifika cultural metaphor ‘The strengthened sinnet’ to shape their discussion of a model of practice aimed at meeting the diverse needs of adult Pasifika learners. The metaphor suggests that it is the strength and quality of the relationships which encourage effective delivery and enhanced learning. The writers contend that the model presented provides an example of culturally appropriate and interactive pedagogy that involved the purposeful engagement of a group in learning and acting collectively for an agreed greater social goal. Students were taught how to analyse their social histories, issues,

problems and experiences. These learning engagements enabled students to find their own voices, to contextualise issues from multiple cultural perspectives, to engage in more ways of knowing and thinking, and to become more active participants in shaping their own learning.

Pasifika early childhood student teachers' perceptions of play are examined by Manutai Leaupepe in her article which first explores the emerging literature on cultural ideas of play and their implications for Pasifika early childhood teachers. The research undertaken with Pasifika student teachers then draws attention to how their perceptions of the value of play are influenced by childhood play experiences, cultural influences, parental attitudes, course content, and debates regarding contested policies in the area. By sharing their stories and memories the research participants were able to better understand theories of play and early childhood education policies promoting play. During the period of the research study significant changes were noted in the students' understanding of the term 'play'. The study suggests that using critical reflection in conjunction with developing their theoretical knowledge and understanding enabled the student teachers to better understand the importance of play in early childhood settings.

This brings us to our most substantial contribution, “‘Teu le va’: making a difference for Pacific learners through education research”, by Melani Anae. This comprehensive and challenging paper addresses some key issues regarding research that can address inequities in educational access, participation and outcomes for Pasifika learners. It argues that the tendency of much research on Pacific communities in New Zealand to gloss their multi-ethnic and intra-ethnic complexities limits the possibility of transformative change for these marginalised communities. The author offers *teu le va*, a Pacific indigenous conceptual framework as a philosophical and methodological turning point in education research praxis. *Teu le va* is aligned with a cultural ecology research approach in its focus on the significance of context in understanding the domains of social relationships for all stakeholders in Pacific education research. Various relational contexts in which *teu le va* should be valued and acted on, are identified. By reconciling connections within and between these contexts, it is maintained, the possibility of a transformative education agenda for Pacific communities will be advanced.

Along with the two research notes and the workshop articles, these papers form a special collection that spans the past, the present and that looks into the future of Pacific research in education. We commend this issue to readers.

Reference

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