



Mobilising *tofā sa'ili* for ECE leadership: A talanoa confronting dominant conceptualisations from a Pasifika perspective

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ABSTRACT

Leadership is about all of us, but dominant frames of leadership serve only a few. In this commentary, we challenge the dominance of Western notions of leadership as linear influence relationships in order to shift Pasifika engagement from the margins. For us, *ta'ita'i* (Pasifika leadership) is centred on serving, not the self, but the collective spirit. It is expansive, holistic, and grounded in reciprocal relationships between people, nature, the cosmos and those of the past, present, and future. Looking back to the teachings of our families and ancestors can guide us in leading communities with strength, unity, and connection. Rather than deny the legitimate place of Western notions of leadership or romanticise ideas of Pasifika leadership, through *talanoa* (open talk), we mobilise *tofā sa'ili* (a search for wisdom and meaning) by engaging with traditional Pasifika cultural values and philosophies that hold significance for leadership in early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand. In doing so, we hope to open up pathways of thinking that move us beyond individualistic framings of leadership, while honouring Pasifika ways of knowing and being in serving the collective.

KEYWORDS

Early childhood education; leadership; Pasifika; talanoa; Western

Dominant discourses of leadership in education have tended to immortalise leadership as an uncontested individualised, linear activity based on Western values. These discourses continue to exclude dimensions of diversity, thereby perpetuating the marginalisation of certain groups (Alvesson & Spicer, 2014). For example, in 2020, despite 2,089 teachers and 14,825 children in early childhood education (ECE) services in Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ) identifying as Pasifika peoples (Education Counts, 2021a, b), Pasifika ways of knowing and being are hardly evident in current discourses of leadership that inform practice and policy in ECE in Aotearoa NZ. For us, a one-size-fits-all approach to understanding and enacting leadership is problematic, as a universalised image may only serve 'to reproduce and reinforce dominant paradigms' (Fitzgerald, 2010, p. 100). To avoid relying on leadership ontologies that serve only a few, we mobilise Pasifika ways of knowing and being to understand leadership through an alternative lens.

We first position ourselves as authors. To honour the land of the Indigenous Māori peoples on which I stand as tangata tiriti, I, Maria, begin by sharing my Samoan and European genealogical connections through my *pēpeha* (Māori custom of introduction inclusive of specific ties to mountain, rivers, waters and tribes). No Samoa me Slovakia ahau, ko Sina me Tetry ngā maunga, ko Falefa me Belá ngā awa, ko Lufilufi me Dovalovo ngā hapū, i tupu ake ahau i tamaki makaurau, Ko Maria Cooper tōku ingoa, tēnā tatou katoa. I am a NZ-born Samoan-Slovakian, researching and teaching ECE and leadership from both Western and Pasifika perspectives.

I, Jacoba, start by introducing myself, and honouring the *vā* (relational space) by which I am entering, with you the reader I wish to share my *pēpeha*. The significance of geographical, ancestral, collective and genealogical ties is integral to who I am and constitute my way of being, thinking, connecting, and knowing the world. Ko Tiavi tōku maunga, ko e Loloa tōku awa, ko Samoa tōku iwi, ko Siumu tōku hapū, ko Jacoba Matapo tōku ingoa. I am a NZ-born Samoan and I intentionally share with you my *pēpeha*, honouring the *reo* (language) of the indigenous people of Aotearoa (the current lands in which I reside) as well as sharing my Samoan ancestral connection to people and place.

Our calling

As Samoan Pasifika scholars of ECE and leadership in Aotearoa NZ, we see it as our duty to unsettle the dominance of Eurocentric, individualistic ontologies that place Pasifika realities at the margins. We do this by interrogating current frames of leadership in ECE that dominate the profession. We acknowledge there are strengths that already exist in Pasifika worlds, which are based on an epistemological grounding engendered in collective ways of being. For example, Pasifika leaders must work within the constraints of their job title, but also navigate Western and their own cultural worlds and the relational responsibilities and commitments that come with that. To serve well in both worlds is important but demanding. Therefore, we engage with the Samoan Pasifika values of: the relational self, *tautua* (service), *alofa* (love and compassion), *fa'aaloalo* (respect) and *tofā sa'ili* (a search for wisdom and meaning), to generate alternative possibilities for contemplating leadership in ECE.

Talanoa

As Samoan scholars, we engaged in *talanoa* to conceptualise leadership tensions in the context of ECE. In the Samoan lexicon, *tala* refers to talk, or conversation between two or more people. The word *noa* denotes potentiality as it refers to both 'nothing in particular', unlimited or endless. *Noa* also refers to the void in creation cosmogonies; a void for which all things come into being (Matapo, 2021b). *Talanoa* has been framed as a dialogic form of communication immersed in expression and the telling of stories and allegories between Pasifika peoples (Matapo & Enari, 2021; Vaioleti, 2006). *Talanoa* also reflects an interactive encounter based on listening and learning and taking care of the *vā* between those involved.

Our methodological application of *talanoa* was both intentional and experimental as we challenged universal notions of 'self' and the impact of this upon leadership praxis in ECE. Our *talanoa* was a generative and critical exercise to illuminate Samoan concepts of leadership in reconceptualising leadership and service within ECE. The idea of relational-self, embedded in collective understandings of Samoan personhood is highlighted (Vaai, 2017), to contest ECE leadership discourses that privilege individualist ontologies. This commentary is our way of talking back to the marginalising effect of dominant conceptualisations of leadership on Pasifika engagement.

Resistant frames of leadership: What have we inherited?

Formal attempts to interrogate meanings of leadership can be traced back over two millennia ago; yet today, we are hardly any closer to achieving consensus on what leadership means (Grint et al., 2017). What has been constant over time is the myth that leadership is a heroic act performed single-handedly by a visionary individual (Sinclair, 2006). This linear, largely unattainable, and often exploitive idea of leading alone from an elevated position reflects a discourse that privileges individualistic ontologies and obscures the potential of more inclusive, relational ways of being.

A heroic perspective assumes that leadership resides within one great individual who has God-like power over others. Metaphorically, this view positions the leader at the top of the Great Chain of Being, an ideological thought that dominated Western thinking for centuries and continues to dominate humanist discourse (Braidotti, 2019). The Chain of Being was said to provide a social order where all matter and life were positioned on a fixed hierarchical structure and arranged in a linear sequence according to levels of perfection (Nee, 2005). God as the culmination of creation was at the top, followed by angels, humankind, then animals, followed by plants, rocks and minerals (Nee, 2005). In contrast, a Samoan ontology positions the relationship between all living things as equal and complementary; ‘man is no less powerful or greater than the heavens, the trees, the fish’, however, ‘while man is equal to all living things, God, not man, is the absolute’ (Tui Atua, 2005, p. 2). Due to the relational lenses we brought to our *talanoa*, we were perturbed by the similarities between current discourses of leadership and the Chain of Being ideology. For example, leading based on a chain of command assumes the individual leader—who is revered and indulged by his followers—is the higher being, and followers—who serve and are subservient to their leader—are the lower being.

Existing frames of leadership in ECE: What have we constructed?

Leadership in ECE has not escaped the influence of individualistic ontologies, despite an earlier suggestion by international scholars to do so. More than two decades ago, Kagan and Bowman (1997) attempted to consolidate ideas about leadership for coherence across the diverse ECE sector, arguing for leadership in ECE to be more collaborative than competitive. Yet in current practice, leadership hierarchies still pervade practice (Cooper, 2018). The diverse arrangements of ECE services also assume different approaches to leadership. In some, including Pasifika ECE, leadership commonly mirrors a hierarchical structure where individuals are positioned at different levels in ‘the Chain’, for example, the organisation leader/owner is higher than centre managers, who are higher than head teachers and teachers. In others, the approach is more democratic, whereby teams have collective agency to make shared decisions for the group. Yet, despite these intentions for unity and collectivity, our experience tells us there is nearly always one individual with a delegated leader role who has ultimate responsibility for overall functioning and maintaining this approach.

Individualistic ontologies also underpin leadership discourse in policy documents relevant to ECE. One such document, our national ECE curriculum *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2017), encourages individual kaiako/teachers to consider and take on leadership responsibilities. However, this idea is troubled by the suggestion that kaiako/teachers are not leaders as it is individual ‘educational leaders’ who support the learning and development of individual kaiako/teachers (MOE, 2017, p. 48). We are hopeful that *Tapasā*, the cultural competencies framework for teachers of Pasifika learners across all sectors (MOE, 2018) can help build cultural leadership capacity across the profession by encouraging leaders to be responsive to Pasifika identities, languages, and cultures (Turu 1) and to promote strong connections with Pacific learners, parents, families and communities (Turu 2). However, these competencies are structured as a hierarchy that places ‘A student teacher’ at one end and ‘A leader’ at the other, suggesting that the individual leader is in the upper echelon of the Chain.

The Teaching Council of Aotearoa NZ, which supports teacher certification, has developed a Leadership Strategy for the profession, including ECE (Education Council, 2018). Leadership is narrowly defined in the Strategy in terms of influencing and supporting others. Moreover, it is the individual who is expected to evidence the stated leadership capabilities as part of their individual certification process. Despite calls for the sector to move towards more diverse, democratic, and collective approaches to leadership (e.g., Cooper, 2018; Kagan & Bowman, 1997), the dominant discourses of leadership presented in policy documents maintain an individualistic ontology, which assumes that the individual leader is the *only* source of leadership.

The collective versus individual: Why does this ontological position matter in leadership?

From a Samoan perspective, our places and cultures are collective in nature, not individualistic. Collective for Samoan peoples ties social relationships and culture with non-human worlds (Matapo, 2021a). This means that collective for Samoan peoples extends beyond social relations to worlded relations (we are kin with world) and that ancestral ties are bound together with place. Tamasese et al. (2005) describe the Samoan concept of self as ‘having meaning only in relationship with other people, not as an individual’ (p. 303). The relational-self (Vaai, 2017) is flexible and there is an ecological flexibility or fluidity in how new networks of relations are made and remade. If we are to think about collective as inclusive of history, social relations and worlded ontologies then leadership as an individual praxis seems somewhat inadequate. The positioning of ‘self’ as first collective in nature brings us into conversation about the strengths of Pasifika ECE leadership and ways in which collective commitment and aspirations endure through hardships and ongoing tensions in the sector.

Decolonising dominant norms: Which Pasifika values do we bring to the fore?

In the spirit of social justice, decolonising dominant discourses of leadership by contesting their assumptions has allowed us to open spaces for greater diversity in leadership (Sinclair, 2006). This has meant giving time and space in our talanoa to honour traditional ways of our families and ancestors and engage with the strengths of Samoan values systems. We acknowledge that many of these values are embedded in Pasifika languages, systems, and concepts. While much of this knowledge is embodied and held by the elders as respected carriers of knowledge, only some of it has been documented and shared in texts, such as the ones we have drawn on here. By bringing these cultural values to the fore, we potentially expand and enrich leadership frames of reference for diverse ECE communities, including Pasifika.

Tautua: Leadership as service

Sayings, proverbs, or Samoan alaga’upu offer insights into the history, culture, and the everyday lives of the Samoan people. One well-known Samoan proverb used to guide us on the path to leadership is: *O le ala i le pule o le tautua - the road to leadership is through service*. For Tui Atua (2018), *tautua* to the family and community is the ‘main qualification for leadership’ (p. 71). In Pasifika tradition, one is expected to serve the *aiga* (family) before a *matai* (chiefly title) can be bestowed on them (Talení et al., 2018). Importantly, the right to lead through title ‘emphasises service or merit’ more than genealogy, although the latter is still important (Tui Atua, 2018, p. 210). This message is encapsulated in the Samoan proverb: *‘O le faiva o le tamālii o le gase— it is the mark of the chief and the progeny of chief to perform or serve well’* (p. 148).

For Pasifika, *tautua* enhances leadership, because as you serve others, you enact an ethic of care. In ECE in Aotearoa NZ, *tautua* is about being open to understanding children and families and

the situations and tensions they must navigate in dual worlds. *Tautua* is also what frames a Pasifika leader's identity. It is what brings credibility to the leader role as well as knowing who you are, where you come from, and being grounded in stories of self in the context of one's *aiga* and *nu'u* (village) (Tui Atua, 2018). Serving others, therefore, is entangled in the very ways of being in the collective, the self in the collective, and the collective self. In ECE practice and policy, where is the commitment to serve others without expecting anything in return? When linear influence relationships define leadership, who reflects on where the power lies and how the influence is being applied? How do leaders' actions and words show they are committed to the collective beyond themselves?

Leading with alofa (love and compassion) and fa'aaloalo (respect)

What does it mean to lead others and how is this done? Pasifika leadership is inspired by stories of traditional leaders who, through sacrifice, love, service, and perseverance, have fought to sustain themselves, their families and communities (Talení et al., 2018). This idea reflects *alofa* and *fa'aaloalo* for the well-being of, and the sacred relations between, people in the collective. For Tui Atua (2018), *alofa* and *fetausia'i* (reciprocity) keep Pasifika culture alive; they are what sustain *fa'a Samoa* (the Samoan way of life). If there are disharmonies in the collective, then these are addressed by bringing *alofa*, *aiga*, remorse and forgiveness to the fore (Tui Atua, 2018).

Learning to lead through tofā sa'ili (a search for wisdom and meaning)

Do leaders always know where they are going? Can leadership also be about reflecting on where things are at, thinking about how the community is being served, or looking to the legacies of others for wise guidance? As Pasifika, we look to the teachings gifted to us by our families, elders, and ancestors to guide our present situations. Tui Atua (2018) explains the spiritual significance of this search for wisdom and meaning: '*Tofā sa'ili* is man reaching out for wisdom, knowledge, prudence, insight, judgement, through reflection, meditation, prayer, dialogue, experiment, practice, performance and observance' (p. 205), where *tofā* is 'wisdom' and *sa'ili* is to 'search'. For us, this spiritual dimension of Pasifika leadership (*ta'ita'i*) acknowledges the relational connections between all things living and non-living, from the past, in the present, and of the future. Hence, wisdom affirms the lived and embodied connection to people and context, not only privileging knowledge for the sake of knowing. The search for wisdom is constant and ongoing and with relational ontologies at its core, generates knowledge beyond static notions. In the context of leadership, this means the value of *tofā sa'ili* is grounded in the ways that wisdom elevates or serves the collective. The value of wisdom is therefore enacted as a dynamic, collective ethic.

Mobilising *tofā sa'ili* for ECE leadership

The individualistic discourses of leadership we see at play in ECE can be devoid of *alofa* and *fa'aaloalo*—values that are fundamental to the Samoan culture (Tui Atua, 2018). While national policy presents leadership as linear influence relationships, these relationships are not always positive or desired, as they can create disharmony in the collective, disempower others, or be rejected by the very individuals being influenced (Cooper, 2018). Applying the idea of *tofā sa'ili* to ECE leadership would mean bringing multiple worlds together, where all parts of the collective self, as the past, present, and future are embedded in us. It would also mean being accountable to the equivalent of 'the collective face of family, village and ancestors' beyond the private self (Tui Atua, 2018, p. 93). This relationality aligns with the way that Samoan people, like other Pasifika communities, 'live not as individuated beings but as beings integrally linked to their cosmos, sharing divinity with ancestors, land, seas and skies' (Tui Atua, 2018, p. 206). In ECE practice and policy, how and when are leaders encouraged to come together to *tofā sa'ili* or search for wisdom and meaning, so that they may walk the right path *with* and *as* the collective?

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