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Margaret Flavell & Emma Cunningham

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Engaging in research with Pacific communities as a non-Pacific researcher: reflecting on lessons learnt

Margaret Flavell [a] and Emma Cunningham[b]

[a]School of Education, Victoria University of Wellington, Te Herenga Waka, Wellington, New Zealand; [b]Te Wānaga Toi Tangata - Division of Education, University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand

ABSTRACT

A key challenge for the cross-cultural researcher is how to maintain authenticity in the stories of participants, paying careful attention to any inherent power imbalances. In this article, we share our respective experiences of conducting research with Pacific students and their families in Aotearoa New Zealand as non-Pacific researchers. We discuss tensions we encountered regarding power and positionality, highlighting the importance of engaging with Pacific perspectives and methodologies to help counter these tensions. In our respective studies, we aimed to promote the voices of our participants and conduct research which prioritised Pacific values. We further appreciated that we must not let our own research agenda override the needs of our participants. We explain why we believe these ideas to be so important and draw tentative conclusions on ways to engage in research with Pacific families based on what we have learnt. The data presented from our respective studies highlight our approaches and present some of the challenges, as well as our efforts to engage in reciprocal, respectful relationships with our participants and their families. We hope that, in sharing our reflections, we may offer some useful insight to other researchers embarking on a similar journey to us.

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Pacific research; Pacific education; Pacific families; home-school relationships; cross cultural research

The concept for this article was conceived as a result of conversations between the two authors. Both of our studies involved Pacific students and families and we observed crossovers in our research questions and methodological approaches. The decision in both of our studies to examine issues related to Pacific families meant that the research needed to incorporate Pacific research methodologies to meet our relational responsibilities to Pacific communities. Central principles of Pacific research (Anae et al. 2001; Anae 2019) and principles of Teu le vā (Airini and Mila-Schaaf 2010) were embedded within the design of our studies to help facilitate research approaches. This article is intended to reflect on our experiences in the hope that it may be useful to other non-Pacific researchers engaging in research with Pacific communities. We explore how our engagement with methodological processes contributed to shifting positionings in cross-cultural research.

CONTACT Margaret Flavell maggieflavell@hotmail.com

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Key to both of our studies was the aspiration to amplify the voices of our participants throughout our research approaches. Conclusions from this article reflect on how our respective approaches facilitated the co-construction of knowledge through the development of meaningful relationships between participants and ourselves.

We begin with an overview of Pacific people in Aotearoa New Zealand, clarifying our understanding of 'Pacific' and emphasising why we believe this cohort of the New Zealand population deserve research attention. We then highlight the role of positionality and outline key issues relating to power in cross-cultural research, moving on to discuss Pacific methodologies and Pacific research principles. This is followed by a brief description of our individual studies. The paper concludes by reflecting on key learnings from our experiences as researchers, suggesting tentative implications for future research.

Pacific people of Aotearoa New Zealand

The Pacific population of New Zealand encompasses a wide diversity of peoples, incorporating those who have been born in, or culturally identify with, a Pacific Island country. These include Samoa, Cook Islands, Tonga, Niue, Tokelau, Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Tuvalu (Bruce Ferguson et al. 2008, p. 5). Pacific people may be first, second or third generation (Rimoni and Averill 2019) with six out of ten Pacific people now born in New Zealand (Pasifika Futures 2017), and where nearly a quarter identify with another ethnic group besides a Pacific one (Ministry of Pacific Peoples 2016). Rimoni and Averill (2019) emphasise the rich diversity of languages and identities within this population which challenges those of us not of Pacific heritage to sufficiently understand a Pacific person's cultural perspective. As non-Pacific researchers, we must be careful about making cultural assumptions and remember we are learners in this space. Nevertheless, while we are aware of the diversity in cultural perspectives amongst Pacific peoples, we also understand that unity in Pacific thinking stems from a shared history of migration, sea-faring and trading across Oceanic island countries (Hau'ofa 1999; Ka'ili and Māhina 2017).

Traditionally, the Ministry of Education has used the term Pasifika to describe this cohort of the New Zealand population because there is sufficient commonality to consider Pasifika learners as a distinct group deserving special attention (Gorinski and Fraser 2006). The risk of this umbrella term, however, is that identities are undermined by the impression that it is one homogenous group (Wendt Samu 2015). On the other hand, the term Pasifika helps illustrate how the identities of Pacific peoples are evolving as they find expression in their adopted country as a dynamic and adaptable group of people who can operate as a collective force (Wendt Samu 2015), and can challenge an education system which has been dominated by Eurocentric practices (Boon-Nana et al. 2022). In this article, we have chosen to adopt the term Pacific as its use helps clarify our discussion about how we, as non-Pacific researchers, have engaged with participants of Pacific heritage.

If our research is to benefit Pacific learners, we must reflect Pacific participants' perspectives and acknowledge the historical injustices which Pacific people in New Zealand Aotearoa have faced and the contemporary challenges which they continue to face. Families were welcome migrants when they arrived in the 1960s to meet increasing

demands for semi-skilled labour but, in the 1980s, they endured hardship through a downturn in the economy and were subject to harrassment as 'overstayers' (Barcham et al. 2009; New Zealand Human Rights Commission 2020). For the older generation of Pacific people in New Zealand, the negative impact of the dawn raids on households by government officials at that time can still create mistrust in authority today (Thomsen et al. 2018; New Zealand Human Rights Commission 2020). Furthermore, social conditions continue to have a detrimental impact upon the wellbeing of Pacific people in New Zealand. For instance, Pacific workers are overrepresented in low-skilled, low-paid employment (Sorensen and Jensen 2017), prompting the Human Rights Commission to initiate a pay gap inquiry (New Zealand Human Rights Commission 2021). Pacific families also experience the highest level of crowding, with four out of ten Pacific people living in crowded houses (Stats NZ 2018); and Pacific children have the highest hospitalisation rates compared to other ethnic groups, often as the result of poor quality housing (Duncanson et al. 2018). The impact of Covid 19 has exacerbated conditions where lockdown and border closures have increased uncertainty of employment (Freeman et al. 2021). Pacific people (and Māori) are twice as likely to die from the disease than any other ethnic group and are particularly susceptible to its influence given crowded living conditions (Freeman et al. 2021). During lockdown, many Pacific learners found study at home difficult due to limited access to technology, restricted space, and additional household responsibilities; a repercussion of these lockdown experiences is the current concern over falling achievement rates (Education Review Office 2022).

We are conscious that social inequality for Pacific peoples is embedded in the fabric of New Zealand society (Mila 2013) and, as the Human Rights Commision's pay gap inquiry has done (New Zealand Human Rights Commission 2021), believe it is through the raising of Pacific voices that inequities can be heard in order that disparities are acknowledged.

Positionality

Researcher positionality is an important issue to acknowledge as life experiences, gender, ethnicity and age all play a part in shaping our perspectives. Merriam et al. (2001) highlight how positionality is determined by where one stands in relation to the community one wishes to learn from. Ponton (2018), a Samoan researcher, highlights that the way 'a researcher positions themselves in declaring their preconceived beliefs and expectations influences how research is designed and implemented, and the way data are collated (what is included or excluded)' (p. 4).

Within this context, our positionalities are influenced by several factors. Given our respective backgrounds, we appreciated the need to carefully consider how our positionality and experiences might influence participant relationships and interpretation of data if we were to honour our commitment to Pacific learners and their families. Clothier (1993) argues that indigenous oral traditions insist that researchers 'position yourself, letting the listener/s know from where you come and thereby reminding yourself from whence you came' (p. 10). Firstly, we are both teachers; one of us had existing relational connections to our participants through her teaching role. Neither of us have Pacific ancestry, and we do not claim to be experts in Pacific cultures. Emma was born in Aotearoa New Zealand and identifies as Pākehā (a Māori term used to refer to people

of European descent). She has a background in primary teaching, with 15 years spent working as a teacher. Maggie identifies as British; she immigrated to Aotearoa New Zealand in 2008 and has a background in teaching at secondary and tertiary level.

Secondly, we are both committed to meeting our obligations as culturally responsive educators to students and their families. The Statement of National and Learning Priorities (NELP) highlights the commitment to 'work with whānau (a Māori term for extended family) and Pacific families to identify and understand barriers that may prevent learners/ākonga from accessing, participating or remaining engaged in schooling, and work to address them' (Ministry of Education 2020b, p. 4). In support of this vision, we appreciate the emphasis on all educators to engage with Pacific communities in order to understand communities' perspectives on how their young people can best be supported (Ministry of Education 2020a).

Thirdly, an explicit belief that influenced our positionings was the importance of exploring the role of families in learning from a strength-based perspective (Hammond 2010). Fasavalu (2015) argues a strength-based approach is vital to research with Pacific communities because it intentionally dismantles a deficit perspective which may exist around family involvement of Pacific families in their children's learning. Such an approach highlights reciprocity between the researcher and their Pacific participants, recognising the importance of participant contributions to the generation of 'new knowledge and understandings' (Anae et al. 2001, p. 10). Both of our studies were designed to highlight and build upon the strengths of Pacific families and communities. For example, Maggie applied an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) lens to the exploration of home-school relationships. AI is a type of action research which draws on the multiple perspectives of stakeholders within a given context, recognising their capabilities and giving voice to their ideas (Cooperrider and Whitney 2000). The AI process, therefore, helped acknowledge Pacific participants' strengths in the search for solutions that enrich learning for Pacific students.

Whilst these factors influenced our approach at the outset of our research, we wish to emphasise the fluid nature of positioning between participant and researcher (Tooke 2000). Both of us draw on aspects of critical autoethnography to reflect on our experiences researching with Pacific participants and share what we have learned. In critical ethnography the researcher is concerned with critique, through orienting self the researcher looks beyond the way things are – to the way things could be (Hagues 2021).

Cross-cultural research

The significant number of citizens who identify as Pacific in Aotearoa New Zealand (Statistics New Zealand 2018) signals the importance of educators and researchers engaging in research which aims to benefit Pacific communities. The need for such research to help educators develop a culturally responsive approach is highlighted by Cahill (2006) who states that 'teachers, who, particularly in Auckland, are increasingly challenged by the growing multicultural nature of classroom communities, need to be trained as inclusive communicators, culturally aware, genuinely relational in their attitudes to students, and enthusiastic, flexible and creative practitioners' (p. 69). In a multicultural nation like Aotearoa New Zealand, educational researchers will often engage in cross-cultural research involving individuals from a range of ethnicities in a bid to support

culturally-competent practices within the education system (see, for example, Ministry of Education 2018).

Spoonley (1999) describes cross-cultural research as any research taking place in a situation 'where the ethnicity of the researcher and that of the researched are different' (p. 52). He highlights that cross-cultural research involves a number of complexities, particularly as it can be driven by specific understandings of knowledge which can have important consequences for the communities involved. Some of these issues include whether the researchers treat or define culture appropriately in the development of their research questions, and whether they establish equivalence in their selection of samples, their administration of surveys, and in their operationalisation of constructs across different cultural groups. A significant implication for researchers is the importance of paying close attention to methodological issues common to cross-cultural research, or else risk reporting findings that are inaccurate or misleading (Schaffer and Riordan 2003).

Positionality and power in cross-cultural research

Both authors paid attention, in particular, to the effects of power dynamics in relationships as one way to help mitigate the risk of inaccurate findings. Methodological issues can arise from power relationships that exist through the course of the research process where institutional privilege as researchers always separates researchers from research participants, and is a particular factor in cross-cultural research (Britton 2020). As Rose (1997) conveys, 'I knew I shouldn't and couldn't pretend to be an all-seeing and all-knowing researcher; I knew instead, from some of those same critiques, that I should situate myself and my interpretations of those interviews by reflexively examining my positionality' (p. 305). Reflecting on the 'complex and nuanced engagements with positionality' is critical for researchers in order to consider how best to address the bias of power in relationships with participants (Kohl and McCutcheon 2015, p.752).

Continual reflexivity and awareness of the impact of our positionality held dual importance within our research both for addressing issues of power as well as creating opportunities for our participants to actively contribute (Coulter et al. 2007). Our approaches resonated with what Patel (2015) highlights in regard to relational responsibility that as researchers 'we should see ourselves as stewards not of specific pieces of knowledge but rather of productive and generative spaces that allow for finding knowledge' (p. 79). Researchers can take active steps towards redistributing power by employing specific research strategies such as the shared writing of texts (Mullings 1999), transparency around the collection of data and their analyses and sharing the research summaries with participants (Dyck 1993). In practice, we actively engaged in ongoing reflexivity through seeking guidance and advice from our Pacific supervisors and colleagues as we reflected on what we thought we were finding (Hagues 2021). We also conducted member checks with our participants to help clarify our understanding, working with them to co-construct and develop themes.

Nevertheless, power imbalances in cross-cultural research make their presence known in ways that may not be anticipated (Britton 2020). For example, Britton (2020) observes that participants, themselves, can feed into the power structure by looking to the

researcher for credence for their own ideas. Maggie found herself in this situation when she realised that Pacific participants looked to her as the messenger to convey their ideas to the school. Britton (2020) further notes how the researcher can be drawn into making stereotypical comments about a particular culture as a means of engaging the participant in talking. Stereotypical views essentialise cultural identity into generic characteristics, reinforcing the existing power structures that marginalise minority cultures (Gorski 2016). Retrospectively, Maggie realised that it might seem as though she had been colluding over assumptions about Pacific families when she connected with participant teachers as fellow professionals.

If we put our own research agenda first, we magnify the power structures that are already weighted in the favour of the dominant culture. We share these examples of power balances in cross-cultural research to illustrate the pervasiveness of how power structures influence the research process even when every effort is made not to exercise privilege. We realise we must never let our need to complete the study override the needs of our participants (Anae 2019). When conducting qualitative research, Schwandt et al. (2007) emphasise the moral obligation to work for positive outcomes; the research is to 'facilitate and stimulate action' (p.23). We may not always be able to prevent the way power manifests itself during the research process. However, we can be clear in our intentions: our research role is one of service in the hope that our efforts make a positive contribution to Pacific students' learning experiences.

Pacific research methodologies

To help us in our role as cross-cultural researchers, we relied on Pacific methodologies so that we might undertake research that aligned with the approaches and values of Pacific research principles. Pacific methodologies have arisen to meet the need for research that enriches the lives of Pacific peoples (Sanga and Reynolds 2017). The use of these methodologies reflects the desire to respond to the diversity of cultures and contexts in which Pacific peoples are situated, countering a Western lens that has dominated institutional spaces (Sanga and Reynolds 2017) and marginalised Pacific perspectives (Johansson Fua 2009; Nabobo-Baba 2009). They are part of a much wider movement to challenge Eurocentric educational practices that erode indigenous knowledge through misrepresentation, misunderstanding or deficit framing (Naepi 2019; Smith 2021). Consequently, we wanted to use Pacific methodologies in our research to help us build relationships and better understand the perspectives of Pacific learners and their families.

Given that we are not of Pacific heritage, we needed to consider how we might successfully apply Pacific methodology to our research. For example, Maggie drew on aspects of *talanoa* which is a Pacific way of conducting reciprocal, open and honest dialogue throughout the research process (Vaioleti 2006). From a Tongan perspective, Vaioleti (2014) has helped clarify how to understand talanoa by comparing it with phenomenology. Both phenomenology and *talanoa* require a heartfelt engagement in interactions between participants where emotions are shared to create empathetic and mutual understandings (Vaioleti 2014). However, Suaalii-Sauni and Fulu-Aiolupotea (2014) believe that any such comparison weakens a Pacific methodology because it then only appears to have credibility when seen through a Western lens. As non-Pacific researchers, there was a risk of exacerbating this tension by interpreting Pacific methodologies in a

way that made sense to us. Tunufa'i (2016), who acknowledges the growth in use of Pacific methodologies by Pacific and non-Pacific researchers alike, is concerned about the way researchers sometimes apply them. For example, he notes that the significance of *talanoa* is often lost when it is used to describe conventional activities like 'discussion' or 'interview' (Tunufa'i 2016, p. 235). We did not want to marginalise the voices of our Pacific participants by superficial attention to a Pacific methodology, disregarding the epistemology and values upon which the methodology is constructed. The result would be to contribute to the history of research practices that has subjugated Pacific knowledge (Naepi 2019; Smith 2021). For us, this has meant a genuine engagement in and commitment to learning about Pacific worldviews and the values contained therein.

A Pacific worldview encompasses the notion of vā, the metaphorical space that connects all aspects of life, both animate and inanimate (Wendt 1999); it is spiritual in nature since all that exists stems from the Creator (Tamasese Ta'Isi Efi 2009). The Samoan concept of 'teu le vā' means to 'value, cherish, nurture, and take care of the vā' (Anae 2010, p. 2). Teu le vā acknowledges the interconnectedness of all aspects of human life and the importance of protecting these connections in order that everyone's wellbeing is protected. The focus is to achieve harmonious relations so that positive outcomes result (Anae 2016). Teu le vā is an aspirational principle in that the aim is to work towards harmony in relationships where qualities such as collaboration, reciprocity and respect lead to solutions that enhance our environment. It is fundamental to the conduct of all research with Pacific peoples regardless of the methodological approach (Anae 2019). When individuals engage in talanoa, where they give time to listen to one another and openly share thoughts, they are paying attention to the relational space of vā (Vaioleti 2014).

Whilst we acknowledge diversity in Pacific perspectives and cultures, we believe that the core idea of teu le vā can guide us in our work with Pacific communities. In fact, we believe that teu le vā offers sound advice to Pacific and non-Pacific alike, especially in research involving home-school partnerships where collaboration and reciprocity are key qualities for developing partnerships that effectively support learning (Bull et al. 2008; Smith 2021). We resonate with Came's (2013) stance in relation to indigenous Māori epistemologies where she acknowledges her lack of 'sufficient cultural competencies' (p. 65) and her reliance on senior Māori researchers' 'expertise of what is ethical practice for working with Māori' (p. 65). Likewise, we do not assume expert knowledge but can only say that we are greatly influenced by what we have learnt. In discussions for this article, we agreed wholeheartedly with each other that our respective learning about Pacific ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies are ongoing.

Theoretical framework: Pacific research principles

In order to progress with our research, we followed the guidance of Pacific scholars on how to incorporate Pacific research principles into our design (Anae 2019). There are a variety of different resources available to guide researchers on how to conduct research with appropriate protocols that align with the perspectives of Pacific participants. See those recommended by McFall-McCaffery (2010), for example. Maggie elected to draw on the advice of the framework '*Teu Le vā* – relationships across research and policy in Pasifika education' by Airini and Mila-Schaaf (2010). Emma drew on key principles

from the 'Pasifika Education Research Guidelines' from Anae et al. (2001). There is a similarity of ideas in both resources, illustrating the shared values and principles that underpin the approaches (Bennett et al. 2013).

An important principle in both *Teu le vā* and Pasifika Education Research Guidelines is that the whole research process should align with Pacific values (Anae 2019). Whilst researchers need to respect and allow for variances in cultures and contexts (Anae et al. 2001; Bennett et al. 2013), adherence to Pacific values like respect, reciprocity, service and humility are critical to building trusting relationships with Pacific participants (Anae et al. 2001; Airini and Mila-Schaaf 2010). *Teu le vā* guidance emphasises the value of inclusivity in relationships, allowing all relevant parties to be heard (Airini and Mila-Schaaf 2010). Taking time to understand conceptual ideas around vā has helped us, as cross-cultural researchers, to deepen our understanding of the importance of nurturing relationships with our participants. It has helped us understand that certain protocols, like thanking participants for their time with a gift or with food, are not to be dismissed as perfunctory exercises but that they are a genuine reflection of respect and love (Anae et al. 2001). Both of us, it turns out, engaged in home baking as one way of bringing warmth to the relationships with our participants.

As these values suggest, another important principle to both *Teu le vā* and the Pasifika Education Research Guidelines is that of collaboration in research partnerships (Anae et al. 2001; Airini and Mila-Schaaf 2010). Ensuring collaboration with Pacific families and communities is pivotal to the generation of knowledge which can then positively influence the direction of policies to improve educational opportunities for Pacific families (Airini and Mila-Schaaf 2010). Communication between the researcher and the Pacific community is to be two-way where the process is 'dynamic and flexible' (Anae et al. 2001). This approach acknowledges the expertise that exists within Pacific communities (Taleni et al. 2018) so that Pacific peoples can actively participate in the discourse of researchers and policy makers (Airini and Mila-Schaaf 2010, p. 14). These guidelines affirm that, if the research is to provide opportunity for transformation, it has to address inequity in power relations by raising the voices of Pacific families (Airini and Mila-Schaaf 2010).

Description of the individual studies

Both studies were conducted within the parameters of doctoral research projects. The authors chose to explore issues related to Pacific communities due to their experiences as teachers within Aotearoa New Zealand. Embedded within the Pacific research guidelines (Anae 2019) is advice on how to conduct research so that these principles can be achieved. The authors now discuss how they drew on the advice given so that they could incorporate these principles in their studies and honour the voices of Pacific participants as best as they could. Emma focuses on the protocols she used to nurture existing relationships with participants at a school where she was already known as a teacher. Maggie conducted her study in a town where she was not known. Her account focuses on the steps she took to build relationships with participants in the local Pacific communities as an outsider.

Study 1

Study One, a doctoral research project, was conducted in Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand and involved ten Pacific youth and their parents. My masters study had explored ways that schools could be more intentional about bridging literacy practices prioritised at school and those used at home with families (Cunningham 2012). My doctoral study took that a step further and explored the ways that parents supported their children's learning at home across the transition from intermediate to high school (Year Eight to Year Nine). It aimed to illuminate influences that shaped Pacific families' value for education, and explored uniquely Pacific forms of parental engagement as parents supported their children across the transition to high school.

Five parents identified as Samoan, four parents identified as Tongan and one parent identified as Niuean. Interviews were conducted three times over a one-year period as the youth transitioned from intermediate to high school. My interest in the transition between intermediate and high school drew from my experiences as an intermediate (middle school) teacher in a multicultural school community working with families to support children's learning, and from my curiosity about parental engagement during this particular transition. Results of the study highlighted that cultural knowledge embedded within the Pacific families served as a significant contributor towards their children's academic success (Cunningham 2022).

Relationship building

Ponton (2018) states that 'the ways in which relationships or connections are made with Pacific people is crucial to build a trusting and lasting rapport' (p. 4). A key factor that I was mindful of was the importance of building a relationship of warmth and trust with participants. As I am not of Pacific heritage and therefore an 'outsider' in a cultural sense, our connections between one another were embedded within relational ties as a past teacher of their children and a member of the school community. Mila-Schaaf (2006) explains that the relational space of vā involves deliberate focus on intentions and actions which influence the nature of relationships, and requires ongoing attention. For me, enacting that principle meant taking care to nurture the existing relationships that I had with my participants in the different roles I had with the parents and students. An example of care that I used throughout the research was to bake a cake and to bring it with me to each interview. The baking was an expression of my appreciation for the families' time and for what they shared.

Reciprocity

My study explored ways that the Pacific families utilised their resources in terms of language, cultural knowledge and home family practices to the advantage of their children's education. Hague (2021) writes that critical ethnographers 'see him – or herself as a learner and collaborator' (p. 439). From the outset, I viewed the parent participants as my teachers; they were the expert holders of knowledge, my role was to nurture our relationship and listen to what they shared. It was the parents' home practices that I was interested in learning more about, as well as the ways that the parents passed on messages about the importance of education to their children.

I sought to enact the principle of reciprocity within the relationships I held with my participants. Anae (2019) writes that 'Pacific Research Methods perspectives suggest that if one views all reciprocal relationships with others as sacred, then the relationship will be more valued and more closely nurtured' (p. 9). To continue to build the relationships between the participating families and myself, I prioritised face to face meetings with participants and limited interactions over phone and email. I was intentional and collaborative when co-constructing the findings with participants, so that the participants were included as part of the research process. Whilst their generosity was critical in the study, I sought to reciprocate and value the stories they shared by ensuring that they were consistently involved and by prioritising the co-construction of findings together.

Study 2

The second study was also a doctoral project. It too followed on from a master's study where, as a school teacher, I appreciated the need to better understand Pacific families' perceptions over the way home and school communicated. Recognising that Pacific families can feel marginalised by the education system (Fletcher et al. 2009; Gorski 2016), I wanted to adopt a strength-based approach in my doctoral study to capture any good practice where parents believe they have opportunities to work in genuine partnership with teachers. My doctoral research was centred on two high schools in a rural town in the North Island of Aotearoa New Zealand. There were 60 participants, divided into three groups: Pacific parents; Pacific students; and teachers (including teacher aides). Over three terms of the school year, I discovered perceptions of participants through interviews which were conducted individually, in pairs or in groups. Appreciative Inquiry influenced the way interviews were conducted so participants could share what they perceived to be successful about the way school and families communicated, and what they perceived might strengthen relationships (Flavell 2021).

In the fourth term, I used a reflective journal to process how a report, which was co-constructed with Pacific expertise, could support communication between home and school to improve mutual understandings. With the support of my cultural advisor, I presented this report to both schools.

Gaining permission

This study would not have been possible without the support and approval from Pacific people in the town. I was able to conduct this study after seeking permission from the Pacific committee which serves the interests of Pacific peoples within the town. I was introduced to the chair of the committee by a friend who accompanied me to a committee meeting. When it was my turn to speak, I was listened to with the utmost respect. The chair responded by inviting me to conduct the study and, subsequently, initiated contact with one of the schools so that I could proceed. Permission to conduct the research was essential if collaboration and partnership with Pacific stakeholders were to be prioritised (Airini and Mila-Schaaf 2010).

I learnt a lot from this first meeting. I noticed the mutual respect between my friend and the chair which indicated he would likely trust her judgement in recommending me as a researcher. I noticed how introductions established connections and shared histories

(‘Otunuku 2011) with space for people to tell their stories without fear of interruption (Vaioleti 2006). I saw how the committee conducted proceedings, prioritising ‘mutual respect’ (Thaman 2008, p. 465) which engendered warmth. I saw how face-to-face interactions helped nurture the relationship space.

There are take-away lessons from this meeting which help those of us who are unfamiliar with Pacific protocols. Effective practice in Pacific research includes introductions by respected individuals, opportunities to meet face-to-face, opportunities to introduce oneself, a willingness to listen, and endorsement by those in leadership positions.

Valuing relationships

The study would also not have progressed without a commitment to build and value relationships with Pacific communities in the town. Paying attention to vā through time spent nurturing relationships is crucial to the whole research process, helping establish trust so participants feel they can speak openly and honestly (Vaioleti 2014). I attended church services, student cultural performing art rehearsals and celebratory events, appreciating the spiritual significance of relationality for Pacific people (Tamasese Ta’Isi Efi 2009), and that both church and performing art celebrations support cultural continuity for Pacific families living in New Zealand (Fairbairn-Dunlop 2014). I also accompanied some of the parents on a fundraising expedition. In effect, I took time to form respectful relationships, enabling me to learn about issues of concern and find out who to speak with (Airini and Mila-Schaaf 2010).

A most significant relationship formed was with a principal of a kindergarten school, a Samoan lady who works tirelessly to advocate for the Pacific individuals in the community. A strong focus on service drives many Pacific people to support the wellbeing of others in their community, frequently in an unpaid capacity (New Zealand Human Rights Commission 2020). She became my cultural advisor and, despite her busy schedule of commitments to Pacific students and families, supported me throughout the research process. She helped me find participants, check my interpretation of findings and she played a major role in the construction and delivery of the report to the schools.

Through working with my advisor and other participants, I appreciate how time given by me to understand the participants’ worlds is reciprocated in time and support given to me for the research. As a way of reciprocating the time and support I received, I relayed the message to the schools for a co-ordinator which I knew Pacific participants wanted. It may suggest that I was endorsing power structures in favour of me, the researcher, by acting as the participants’ spokesperson (Britton 2020). However, my aim was to act as a knowledge broker, helping shift important knowledge between Pacific families and educational institutions (Anae et al. 2001). Thus, as participants gave their service to me, I could reciprocate by serving their interests too. From a Samoan perspective, Fa’aea and Enari (2021) emphasise the role of service as an intergenerational facet of Samoan culture, explaining how it is an underpinning quality in leadership where an important aim is to hold families and communities together.

As an acknowledgement of service given, my advisor gifted her father’s own Samoan proverb to the report. This was a tremendous honour since my advisor’s father was a matai (Samoan chief), and a respected leader both in Samoa and his adopted town in

New Zealand. I may not fully appreciate the depth of this honour but I am deeply grateful for her commitment and belief in me.

My advisor and participants taught me two important values to foster in the research process. Through first-hand experience, I realise how the values of reciprocity and of service underpin relationships in research with Pacific peoples (Anae et al. 2001).

Challenges we encountered

In our conversations with each other, we also discussed the challenges we encountered in our respective studies and what we learnt from them.

Study 1

For me, keeping a research diary assisted with my processes of reflexivity and self-observation. A research diary is a place where researchers can record 'thoughts, emotions, decisions and discussions between the self and others' (Mosurka 2022, p. 51). Keeping a research diary is useful as it is where researchers can actively engage in self-reflexivity to explore how their personal agendas, beliefs, emotional responses and fears can influence research practices (Li 2017). At the conclusion of each interview, I reflected on how it had gone in my research diary. I would record my observations such as what was said, how I felt about what seemed to go well and how I felt about what did not go so well. I now make reference to an interview where I felt I had not done particularly well. I had wanted to discuss the themes I had identified with her to get her input and thoughts. However, before taking time to talk I launched into the research questions, rather than listening and responding to her cues. The personal example of this for me is as follows:

> … I began by referring to my notes and showing her the themes I had identified, and she did no more than nod or say yes when I launched into a summary of what she had told me about her childhood. Looking back now, I can see this was the wrong way to begin, and came as a result of a lack of preparation on that particular day as well as not letting our time together be led by her. Once she took the lead, she was very comfortable and happy to share with me about the changes that followed once her daughter started high school.

Datta (2018) highlights that it is the researcher's responsibility to respond to participants' cues and ensure they feel at ease; on reflection I could see in that circumstance I did neither. Aktinson and Hammersley (1998) highlight that the interviewer must actively listen to one's participants, in order to identify how and when what is being said relates to the focus of the research. I learned from that experience to wait and to listen, to respond to cues rather than arriving at a participant's home with a pre-planned agenda of what I wanted to achieve. In alignment with Pacific research principles, building of the relationship between us had to be paramount (Anae 2019), and greater attention to self-reflection became part of how I prepared for future interviews.

Study 2

A challenge I encountered related to the focus of a research design that adopted a strength-based perspective where I sought stories of success from participants in a bid

to discover what positive values Pacific families and teachers bring to the building of home-school relationships. Often, when I asked for stories of success, participants preferred to report difficulties instead. For instance, some parents did not like the way decisions were made at school about their children without consultation with family members. These parents already felt distanced from decision-making processes and, given historical mistrust with authority (Thomsen et al. 2018; New Zealand Human Rights Commission 2020), it was important that the research process did not exacerbate feelings of marginalisation by ignoring their perspectives. An important aim of Appreciative Inquiry is to encompass the views of those who might not normally be heard within an organisational structure (Grant and Humphries 2006). It is by paying attention to stories that counter the dominant narrative where positive, strength-based solutions can be found (Alvesson and Deetz 2000; Dematteo and Reeves 2011). Therefore, I needed to accept what participants wanted to tell me, appreciating that responsibility for the research project does not equate to control of the research agenda. Like Emma, it was important to focus on listening to those who understand the needs of their communities (Airini and Mila-Schaaf 2010; Ministry of Education 2020a).

A further lesson came from the challenge of negotiating interactions with participants who lead very busy lives. For instance, at a key time when I hoped for advice from my cultural advisor, I could not get in touch with her. Two months later, she re-engaged to explain how she had needed to step back from many of her commitments and refocus on her own family. She had over stretched herself. I realise the immense pressure that must exist for some Pacific people who, as proficient brokers between worlds (Airini and Mila-Schaaf 2010), work hard to build bridges. Where notions of self are inextricably tied to enhancing relationships with others (Anae 2016) and subject to cultural taxation (Cleveland et al. 2018), the demands on personal time must be immense. Cultural taxation is the extra work staff take on being the ethnic representative of their workplaces and institutions. Examples include expectation of leadership, serving as representatives on specific cultural groups and additional positions of service and responsibility (Cleveland et al. 2018). When individuals undertake extra commitments in the workplace or give time to support others in their community, their unpaid service contributes to the picture of Pacific people in New Zealand as underpaid and undervalued workers (New Zealand Human Rights Commission 2020).

The need for collaborative partnerships with Pacific stakeholders in an educational arena puts pressure on individuals who work hard on behalf of their community. The words from a participant social worker (attached to one of the schools in my study) illustrates underlying tension: 'We end up pulling these [Pacific] people out of their jobs and then they do it out of the kindness of their heart'.

I am grateful that my advisor gave priority to me which would have necessitated forfeiting time elsewhere. However, I do wonder how often educators take for granted the support they receive from Pacific communities whilst assuming they are participating in genuine, equitable collaboration.

Reflecting on our journey

In this article, we aimed to reflect on how each of us enacted our methodological approaches, where we prioritised meaningful and reciprocal relationships that valued

the perspectives of Pacific participants. It is through the process of reflexivity that we best consider how we nurtured the relationship space between researcher and participant in order to generate valuable knowledge (Patel 2015). Reflecting on our positionality is key since power is inherent in the researcher's role (Britton 2020), and positioning shifts between researcher and participant as relationships evolve (Tooke 2000). These relationships evolve as the researcher fosters trust with the participant, blurring any notion of a researcher's fixed identity as insider or outsider (Rose 1997). One way we built trust was to acknowledge Pacific expertise and cultural knowledge in line with our commitment to Pacific research principles (Anae et al. 2001; Airini and Mila-Schaaf 2010).

By giving ourselves space to learn about Pacific expertise and cultural knowledge, we could encourage reciprocity in the relationships and counter tensions around power. Fasavalu and Reynolds (2019) recommend that researchers who engage with Pacific peoples should respond flexibly to events and interactions as they unfold in the research process, maintaining a willingness to learn. We learnt to prioritise listening so that we could be responsive to our participants and forgo the need to control the research agenda according to our own expectations. We learnt that listening and learning were signs of respect which helped acknowledge the time that participants gifted to us. Paying attention to time, argues Māhina (2008) from a Tongan perspective, allows harmony to flourish in social interactions. We were, therefore, deliberate in our intentions to respectfully listen and demonstrate our appreciation for the time and energy that participants gave to us.

Moreover, we realise that the gift of participant time necessitates reciprocal action on the researcher's part to work towards the educational advancement of Pacific peoples. This awareness helped cement our commitment to co-construct themes with participants in order that Pacific voices and solutions are prioritised, and affirm our willingness to be guided by those with Pacific expertise like our cultural advisors and supervisors. Our recommendation is to involve Pacific communities wherever possible so that the expertise and knowledge of these communities can positively influence the research journey. We appreciate that we cannot always mitigate against power imbalances that favour the researcher, and that we will have made mistakes. However, we argue that non-Pacific researchers can conduct research with Pacific peoples provided they are deeply mindful and reflective on how to proceed, taking care how they exercise any privileges of power. As educators, we acknowledge we are on a continual journey to learn more. This article is part of that journey to help us reflect on how to develop our expertise. There is one thing, however, about which we are clear: our research role is one of service in the hope that our efforts make a positive contribution to Pacific students' success.

Disclosure statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

ORCID

Margaret Flavell http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1053-1070

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