



Peer-reviewed paper

Authentic leadership: Experiences from a Pasifika early childhood education program in teacher education

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This paper presents ideas that are associated with authentic leadership. In addition, it is concerned with how aspects of authentic leadership have influenced the direction of the author in a Pasifika early childhood teacher education specialisation program. The concept of the 'third space' is introduced and employed to demonstrate the ways in which relationships and communication with those involved in the Pasifika program are enacted. Given Pacific cultures, languages and spirituality are at the core of the Pasifika early childhood specialisation program, the need to develop and sustain structures, processes and conditions for continued sustainability and retention become pertinent issues of concern.

Introduction

I have taken a narrative approach to sharing how I have understood the complexities that are associated with the term leadership. My experiences on a day-to-day basis with student teachers and staff in a Pasifika early childhood education (ECE) program provide insights to my encounters. The Bachelor of Education (Teaching) in Early Childhood Education Pasifika Specialisation [and from here on I will refer to the program as the Pasifika Specialisation], is a program that has been operating from the former Faculty of Education and now the current Faculty of Education and Social Work at The University of Auckland (Leaupepe & Sauni, 2014).

Since its inception in 2007 the Pasifika Specialisation has been an opportunity for both Pacific and non-Pacific people to gain a degree level qualification for those who desire to work predominantly with Pacific children, families and communities. Given Auckland has the highest Pacific population, such a qualification would provide our students with employment opportunities to work in either general and/or Pasifika ECE services (Airini, Leaupepe, Sauni, Tuafuti, & Amituanai-Toloa, 2009; Leaupepe & Sauni, 2014; Matapo & Leaupepe, 2016). Underpinning the Pasifika Specialisation are Pacific cultures, languages and spirituality. Courses pertaining to the Pasifika Specialisation draws on Pacific epistemology and ontology (Airini et al., 2010; Leaupepe & Sauni, 2014).

I believe that leadership in the 21st century requires those who dare to lead, be innovative, creative and bold. I view leadership as being a critical component to the success of any institution. In relation to initial teacher education, the conditions by which the survival of programs experiences rides on this notion. I consider the word 'fearless' which describes for me what a successful leader needs to possess and when used accordingly can reap positive outcomes. I believe to be fearless is to have courage, to contest the given and comes with the understanding that this can sometimes be a lonely journey, especially when you are the lone voice fighting for what you believe. In the words of William George (2007) this is "based on what is most important to you, your most cherished values, your passions and motivations, the sources of satisfaction in your life" (p. xxiii).

Drawing on the principles of self-awareness, internalised moral perspective, balanced processing or being fair-minded and relational transparency are incorporated to demonstrate how authentic leadership is enacted. The concept of the 'third space' is utilised to illustrate how relationships and communication are nurtured and maintained within the Pasifika Specialisation.



Paying tribute – inspirational leaders in my life

Before going any further I'd like to take this time to pay tribute to the many leaders who have been part of my own journey to getting to where I am today. So I say 'thank you' to members of my family. To my mother the late Tangi-Metua Taikoko (nee Daniel), who believed "that anyone was 'teachable' if only you were willing to teach" (Leauepepe, 2015, p. 20). Daniela Tarapi my late grandfather who was a well-respected man, full of wisdom and tolerance. My aunty Lee, the late Elizabeth Mauroa, a woman who loved me unconditionally - I am forever grateful. Teaueteina Beale my aunty, a beautiful woman with a beautiful soul and spirit. The late Taria Kingstone, my cousin who demonstrated an infectious love for learning. My sister, Pastor Rani Kiria for her spiritual insight and rigor and finally my brother, Taikoko Palmer Taikoko (uncle Tai to many), who has exhibited amazing courage in the face of challenging times. Meitaki atupaka, Maruru, Ko rab'a and 'Thank you' from my heart - I love you all. On a professional level, I would like to say 'thank you' to my colleagues.

I acknowledge that my getting here has been a journey. It is one that has had its fair share of *ups* and *downs*. A journey that has seen me make many mistakes (and I will continue to do so), but equally, a journey that has seen many successes and lessons learned (and continuing to learn). My journey is not a solo flight, but one where there have been many who have come alongside me, and have lead and guided me. At times there have been moments of stubbornness, isolation and complete liberation. With each destination there have been new goals, new boundaries and new horizons to seek and fulfil. And so I invite you to join me on this journey. As I explore authentic leadership and provide examples of how this has been enacted in the Pasifika Specialisation program.

What is authentic leadership?

Like most English words, their meanings can be traced back to Greek history. The same holds for the word authenticity and refers to the idea of 'knowing thyself' and being in control of one's life. It is concerned with an individual as the master of his or her own domain (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). Socrates made reference to the need to focus on self-inquiry and went further to argue that an 'unexamined' life is not worth living. Aristotle emphasised a pursuit of the 'higher good' achieved through self-realisation. Responding to one's happiness and pleasures were deemed as reflecting one's true calling (Luthans & Avolio, 2003).

In the 1960s authentic leadership was gaining popularity. It was used to describe how an organisation reflects itself authentically through leadership (Gardner, Coglisser, Davis & Dickens, 2011). An organisation could act authentically through being responsible, responding to uncertainty, and being creative (Rome & Rome, 1967 as cited in Gardner et al., 2011). Authentic leadership is concerned with how leaders are defined by their role within an organisation. This involves being self-aware and acting in accordance with one's true self by expressing what one genuinely thinks and believes (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). One's self-image and identity are intricately embodied within these constructs (Seeman, 1966). I have deliberately used Melvin Seeman's seminal work and believe that what he said back then is still relevant for today.

It would be useful to note at this point that the opposite of authenticity is inauthenticity. As proposed by Seeman (1966) inauthenticity can lead to self-estrangement. He suggests the extent to which leaders are authentic is established by their capacity to perform and to lessen contradiction and ambivalence concerning their leadership role. Self-estrangement with regards to society is fundamentally being something less than what one might ideally be if the circumstances in society were different. And as such is concerned with being insecure and conforming to society's expectations in all aspects of oneself. This is an important consideration as Seeman (1966) points out self-estrangement can lead to the alienation of a person. This in turn can lead to loss of pride and satisfaction from doing their work and therefore feeling alienated.

Authentic leadership is a growing area of study in academic research. Such an approach to leadership places a strong emphasis on building the leader's genuineness and acceptability through honest relationships with



followers (Gardner, Avolio & Walumbwa, 2005). This fabricates on the value that both the leader and follower's input are built on an ethical foundation. It has been said that authentic leaders are generally positive people. They acquire truthful self-concepts, which further promote openness. By building trust and engendering enthusiastic support from their followers and/or subordinates, it is said that authentic leaders are able to improve individual and team performance (George, 2003).

I will briefly introduce the concept of the 'third space' and principles of authentic leadership. My associated experiences will be weaved throughout the next section.

The concept of the 'third space'

The concept of the 'third space' is something I came across when reading the book *Learning from the bumps in the road. Insights from early childhood leaders* (Bruno, Gonzalez-Mena, Hernandez & Sullivan, 2013). I was familiar with the term and like Janet Gonzalez-Mena, one of the contributing authors of the book, had an understanding of it. I liked how Gonzalez-Mena draws on the following explanation to this important space:

...change the word problem to bump. It may be a cultural bump or just a regular one. That doesn't really matter. The important thing is to suspend judgement and seek to understand...perspective on the matter. I have to put aside ideas about determining the one right way. This doesn't mean that all ways are fine...but it does mean that I need to open up my mind and remind myself that there is always more to learn (Bruno et al., 2013, p. 3).

The 'third space' involves moving from dualistic thinking that takes a holistic approach to thinking in the face of what seems to be a contradiction or a paradox. If a disagreement arises it's possible that I may have a blind spot. My blind spot can lead me to consider differing views as problematic. In such cases, what do I do? According to Gonzalez-Mena (2001) "When we leave dualistic thinking, we move away from dichotomies such as right/wrong, good/bad, appropriate/inappropriate. Thinking holistically lets us approach differences in ways that open the possibilities for solutions that do not show themselves otherwise" (p. 340).

An example that comes to mind is an event that we hold every year to celebrate the achievements of each cohort. Our Pasifika graduation celebrations are a wonderful time of celebration. Each cohort has an item and the class representative shares words of encouragement. There is a particular focus on our Year 3 students who are given the opportunity to invite their families to be part of the celebrations. At one particular event I had said something that was received as being offensive to a family. At the time, I could not see the wrong in what I had said, especially when I believed that the relationships that I had with the students were based on mutual respect, openness and integrity. Three things I needed to do:

1. Believe that it exists
2. Accept that there are multiple realities
3. Dialogue with the person instead of arguing (Bruno et al., 2013, p. 4).

In this case the disagreement did not come directly to me as this would have been culturally inappropriate on the parent's part as a Samoan woman and leader in her respective community. Rather, this came about through the form of another colleague who was also Samoan. I realise now that the 'third space' would have been ideal in this situation as it is concerned with accepting that there are multiple realities. At the time, I had taken a dualistic approach rather than engage in holistic thinking. "If we can accept that there is always a larger picture, once we see it, we find we can generate a number of alternative solutions" (Gonzalez-Mena, 2001, p. 340). These experiences have taught me to always be open and mindful that there are multiple ways of seeing the same thing.



Before going to the principles of authentic leadership, I want to briefly touch on the dimensions.

Essential dimensions of authentic leadership

Authentic leadership is the work of William George, former chairman and chief executive officer of Medtronic. In his book *Authentic leadership: Rediscovering the secrets to creating lasting value*, he proposes five essential dimensions of authentic leadership - purpose, values, heart, relationships and self-discipline. As an advocate to this approach of authentic leadership, George (2003) strongly urges that:

We need authentic leaders, committed to building enduring organizations...who have a deep sense of purpose and are true to their core values...leaders who have courage to build their companies to meet the needs of all their stakeholders, and who recognize the importance of their service to society (p. 5).

His discussions with aspiring leaders have often led to a journey of self-discovery as they seek answers to questions that require openness and honesty. For example; What's the purpose of my leadership? Do I really want to devote my talents to business? Do I have to check my values at the office door? How can I stay true to my values when there is so much pressure to compromise? How do I balance the conflicting needs of my customers and my employees with the requirement to make the bottom-line numbers? And yes, I am reminded that this is very much a business model. I also believe that there is much that we can learn from such a model. George (2003) further asserts that leaders need to lead with 'heart and compassion'. I am only too familiar with this and fully embrace this statement.

Principles of authentic leadership and associated experiences

Authentic leadership is underpinned by four principles (Gardner, Avolio & Walumbwa, 2005).

1. *Self-awareness*: an understanding of your own strengths and limitations and the multi-faceted nature of the self. This includes developing an insight into the self, through exposure to others and being aware of one's impact on others. The idea of 'know thyself' - entails knowing what you stand for and what you value (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). In addition, this involves "being aware of their own and others' values/moral perspective, knowledge, and strengths; aware of the context in which they operate; and who are confident, hopeful, resilient, and of high moral character" (Avolio, Luthans & Walumbwa, 2004, p. 4).

This is also concerned with being aware of improvements as well. Being aware of self has a positive flow-on effect for others and "contributes to their well-being and the attainment of sustainable and veritable performance" (Avolio & Gardner, 2006, p. 317). However, improvements also involve being willing to make changes and having the courage do so where necessary.

Pasifika early childhood education specialisation

The Epsom campus, formerly the Auckland College of Education (ACE), to the Faculty of Education (FoE) and now currently the Faculty of Education and Social Work (FoESW), has been home to the various Pasifika programs that have existed over the last three decades. In the 1990s under the leadership of the then ACE principal Dennis McGrath, the Pacific Islands Early Childhood Council of Aotearoa (PIECCA) Diploma of Teaching was approved and delivered. I was a student in the 1996-1997 cohort. The Pacific Islands Early Childhood Education (PIECE) Diploma of Teaching was introduced in 2000 with Dr John Langley being appointed Dean of FoE. At present I hold the program leadership role for the Pasifika Specialisation, which has recently had changes with reporting lines from the Director of Initial Teacher Education [who is Pakeha] to



the Associate Dean Pasifika [who is Samoan]. Associate Professor Graeme Aitken [who is Pakeha] is currently the Faculty Dean. This is an important note for consideration. Working with Pacific communities, especially for leaders, can be a difficult space to negotiate. It requires the skill of those involved in the negotiations having the cultural nuances to manoeuvre between space and time with confidence and ease. Such a space is referred to as the *va* in Samoan. Toso (2011) explains the following:

Va is the “space between those in communication, not space that separates, but space that creates relatedness. It is the space which gives meaning to things and meanings change as the relationships and context change.” The Samoan usage of the expression ‘*teu le va*’ is about cherishing and encouragement of the *va*/ relationships (p. 130).

This is often not well understood by non-Pacific people and if compromised can have consequences that can lead to a ‘falling out’ with Pacific people.

Such programs were able to meet government aspirations and the demands of Pacific community groups for more qualified teachers to work within Pasifika ECE settings (Leaupepe & Sauni, 2014). As a result of government policy targeting Pacific children participation to 98%, there are an increasing number of Pacific children enrolling in services that are not just Pasifika ECE (Ministry of Education, 2013). This also comes with the realisation that most of our Pacific children are spread across the various ECE services indicating the need for teachers to specialise in things that are important to Pacific families and communities (Matapo & Leaupepe, 2016). Our programs are very family-orientated. Pacific languages, cultures and spirituality are at the heart of the Pasifika Specialisation (Arini et al., 2010; Leaupepe & Sauni, 2014). We begin and finish our day with a prayer.

With the appointment of our newest member to the team, we began the interview process with a prayer. This might have come across to others on the interview panel as usual. I wasn’t seeking for approval, rather stated my intentions and reiterated that this was a practice implemented in the program. Even in our interviews for potential students we begin and finish with a prayer.

2. *Internalised moral perspective*: self-regulation that is based on internalised moral values (as opposed to those imposed by the group, organisation or society); this is expressed in ethical decision-making and ethical behaviour. This involves being honest and straightforward in dealing with others. An authentic leader does not play games or have a hidden agenda. You know where you stand with an authentic leader (George, 2003).

As program leader, my interest in getting as many of our Pacific people into our institution and those who see themselves working with and alongside our Pacific children, their families and communities was and still is a priority. Those who were committed and had the potential to do well came. Many with the passion to be ECE teachers also came. However, passion alone was not going to be enough. The ability to demonstrate academic proficiency was equally important. The program had been renowned for attracting mature students. However, according to Ravlich (2016) “there appears to be a steady increase of school leavers and young adults, adding to the dynamics of this particular programme” (p. 4). Many of our students who came into the program had English as a second, and in some cases, a third language. Compounded by the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) required for higher education posed many challenges. Despite numerous attempts to address these concerns through submissions to the former New Zealand Teachers Council and current Education Council, to exempt Pacific nations whose education system and curriculum design have been heavily influenced by Aotearoa/New Zealand. There is certainly no shortage of interest in the Pasifika Specialisation, but IELTS has impacted entry requirements. The last two intakes have certainly been a reflection of this. This has meant looking at alternative arrangements. I have approached Pacific leaders and academics in the community to consider developing programs to prepare Pacific people for IELTS and there appears to be some interest.



3. *Balanced processing: (Being fair-minded)* - objective evaluation of information before making a decision, including encouraging others to question or challenge one's values. An effective authentic leader solicits opposing viewpoints and considers all options before choosing a course of action. There is no *impulsive* action - plans are well thought out and openly discussed.

Previous leaders in the Pasifika early childhood education specialisation

I have often played a supporting role in the leadership of the Pasifika Specialisation. At one stage I was called the 'shadow' for Vaitulu Pua [of Samoan descent] who was the program leader from 2007-2010. It was preparation for me to fulfil an 'acting' role until someone had been appointed to the position. Vaitulu is a woman motivated by issues of social justice and equity. She represented the program with passion and commitment to ensuring matters concerning Pasifika ECE and the program were the core business of those she engaged with. While we were sad to see her go as she responded to a further calling, we welcomed another remarkable leader, Dr Diane Mara. She was the program leader from 2011 until June 2014. At the time Diane [of Tahitian and Pakeha heritage] took up the role of both the program leader and the Associate Dean Pasifika. Her wealth of experience, academic aptitude and *mana*, comes with her tireless work for quality education and care that ranges from research projects to analysing policies that directly impact women, young children and people with disabilities. She has been my mentor since taking up the roles at FoESW. Both women demonstrated fervour to matters concerning the Pasifika Specialisation, its staff and students. They are remembered for their fierce debates and relentless pressure to pursue things important to Pasifika.

In 2014, seven Pacific academic staff members either took voluntary severance, early retirement, or did not have their contracts renewed due to institutional restructuring of the faculty. Of the seven, four were directly involved with the Pasifika Specialisation. These were three senior lecturers, with one staff member holding the Pasifika Specialisation practicum co-ordinator and student mentor positions. Another staff member at a professorial level had been at the beginning of the PIECE program and the Pasifika Specialisation (Leaupepe & Sauni, 2014). The loss of cultural knowledge and expertise, experience with supervision of masters and doctoral students and studies, institutional knowledge, discipline research areas, specific subject content knowledge and the impact on curriculum and teaching were severely compromised. Change had occurred and as can be expected was a difficult process. This is intensified when there is very little support in the transitioning of such change. As there were only two remaining staff members from the Pasifika Specialisation, one was at the time on research and study leave, I was 'the last one standing' so to speak. As a consequence, I had shared my experiences in a recent publication (Matapo & Leaupepe, 2016):

"I have stepped into a programme leadership role in a default position. After a huge exodus of senior Pacific academics, my understandings of leadership were concerned with knowing policies, regulations, infrastructures, the structure of the faculty that would either support or be a hindrance to my work with and alongside our students." (p. 56).

Such experiences have led to questions that have remained with me since, and within the capacity of an authentic leader and in my attempts to resolve. How do we recover from such a loss? How do our Pasifika communities perceive what has happened, and the impact of those perceptions?

4. *Relational transparency*: being true to one's values and expressing this to others. This involves the open sharing of information about one's thoughts and feelings (Gardner, Avolio & Walumbwa, 2005).

Advocacy in relationships

With reference to relational transparency, this has helped me think about the ways in which I interact with students. The language I use, being able to read the body language, facial expressions and gestures. All such things are giving me clues and insight while at the same time being open. The third space is not about who is



right or wrong or trying to convince the other person, otherwise it “does not resolve the issue; rather, it changes the arena within which that situation is addressed by increasing the probability of respectful, responsive, and reciprocal interactions” (Bruno et al., 2013, p. 4). It’s about being open. To bear in mind that all perspectives are important and about what I can learn from those perceptions. I take into consideration student world views and what they bring with them to the Pasifika Specialisation, recognising this as valuable and that it counts.

Authentic leadership recognises the need to uphold one’s value and beliefs system. Other examples have included being transparent in class and establishing common ground rules. I have always encouraged our students to share in their lecture/tutorial classes their ideas, concepts and their understandings in the language that they feel is their most proficient. Often this is in a Pacific language. This was not just pertaining to the Pasifika courses and classes within the Pasifika Specialisation, but to all their courses. The need to recognise and value this as a cultural tool within the classroom is important. In doing so, they have established a strong self-identity and respect for other cultures and languages.

Currently we have Peta Ravlich who is the student mentor for the Pasifika Specialisation. Peta had been a graduate of the program and is now mentoring our student teachers in the Pasifika Specialisation. Her research (Ravlich, 2016), revealed that those more inclined to be technologically advance and proficient with computer literacy were the school leavers and those under 25 years. On the other hand, she noted that the mature students were holders of ethnic specific cultural knowledge, tradition, values and protocols. Many of the mature students were leaders from their respective communities. The notion of the ‘third space’ had to regularly be implemented - although sometimes not always easy to do. Culturally it was inappropriate for younger students to have a voice and express themselves, this was challenging but not impossible to achieve.

Food for thought

I think about numerous meetings I have attended advocating for our students and staff. The need to be able to choose my battles carefully and knowing when and where to assert the kind of energy that would have positive outcomes. The ability to be true to oneself and not compromise personal values or undermine the integrity of the Pasifika Specialisation. Each encounter that has challenged me have been opportunities for further growth, more learning and a deepening of understanding. To lead carries with it the responsibilities of being the voice for those you represent. At times this has been difficult, especially if you are the lone voice in some circumstances. Decisions that are made are rarely in isolation. I have always had someone to talk too and consult with – this I am truly grateful for. I am blessed to be part of a very unique team who ‘keep it real’ – Fa’afetai lava to Dr Tanya Wendt Samu, Vaovasamanea Meripa Toso and Jacoba Matapo for your continued support and dedication to the Pasifika Specialisation.

Where to from here?

My presentation at the 2016 Annual Symposium for New Zealand Tertiary College -‘ECE leadership in our times’ I have interpreted as a call for those involved in the ECE sector to respond to the ways in which ideas that are associated with the concept of leadership has been understood and experienced. I presented my paper entitled – *Exploring notions of authentic leadership and values: What does this mean?* It was such an honour and a humbling experience. I was excited after receiving an invitation, to have shared my ideas and to hear what others had to say. I had the opportunity to meet with the keynote speaker Luis Antonio Hernandez. His flare and zeal for life will remain with me. I came away feeling inspired. So publicly I say, ‘thank you’ to the organisers of the Symposium. Thank you for the opportunity to share my story. There is so much that we can learn when we share our stories. To those who are in positions of leadership - may you lead well, with heart and compassion, kia manuia.



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