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The Criticality of Pacific Education – The Search for a Transformative Disciplinary Space

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a collective talatalanoa by early to senior career education researchers and scholars seeking to make sense of Pacific education and its trajectory as a critical and transformative sphere within the broader context of education and education research within Aotearoa New Zealand (Aotearoa NZ). The critical stance towards the education of diverse Pacific communities is well established in Aotearoa NZ and reflects ongoing settler-colonial negotiations within postcolonial schooling contexts. Our collaborative and ongoing conversational narratives through talatalanoa captures the potentiality of a Pacific Indigenous modality or form of communicative expression and articulation. The impact of engaging a critical discipline provides visibility and disruption, enabling the deconstruction and re-calibration of understanding centred in Indigenous Pacific concepts and frameworks enabling shifts to occur that are agentic and transformative within initial teacher education (ITE), classroom pedagogy and policymaking and implementation in Aotearoa NZ. As Moana scholars in Aotearoa NZ, we argue for Pacific education as critical transformative disciplinary work through the lens of transindigeneity and offer implications for practice, research and policy.

1 | Introduction

As initial teacher educators across tertiary institutions in Tamaki Makaurau (Auckland) Aotearoa New Zealand (Aotearoa NZ),¹ central to our collective responsibilities is engagement underpinned by va relationality. Drawing on earlier scholars of va/vā² (Mahina 2010; Wendt 1996; Tuagalu 2008) and more recent work of Pacific/Pasifika scholars of va relationality (see Anae 2016; Iosefo 2019; Koya-Vaka'uta 2017; Pacific Early Career Researchers Collective 2022; Suaalii-Sauni 2017; Ualesi 2024), we situate our interconnectedness with one another and the communities we hail from. Our shared mutual responsibility to initial teacher education (ITE) and our research communities at the interface of our engagement in academia calls for an interrogation of the criticality of Pacific education through talatalanoa (Fa'avae 2021). This paper engages the talatalanoa method, grounded in the talanoa

methodology (see Vaoleti 2013) to make explicit links between our current ideas of the criticality of Pacific education and its significance to ITE in Aotearoa NZ.

First, to introduce and provide context, we preface our paper and position ourselves as a group of educators, teacher educators and academics across the early childhood education (ECE), primary, secondary and higher education contexts. Those of us who are from ECE, primary and secondary contexts have taught ākonga (learners) with predominantly Pacific student populations. Our talatalanoa collective includes Pacific scholars who have ancestral roots to Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa, such as Samoa, Tonga, Tokelau and Niue, as well as our Pākehā (European) scholar from Aotearoa NZ. We acknowledge the diversity between our lenses both individually and collectively in pursuit of our understanding of the criticality of Pacific education. We draw on the strength of

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blending both diverse Pacific and Pākehā views in the context of Pacific education in Aotearoa NZ, which brings a rich and nuanced lens. Our Pākehā scholar has previously contributed to research involving Pacific/Pasifika students and shares a common passion for prioritising Pacific/Pasifika education within the ITE and higher education space. It is through this mutual aim that brings us together to share our talatalanoa insights.

We discuss educational policy and practice in Aotearoa NZ in the context of Oceania as scholars of Moana-nui-a-Kiwa over the past two decades through an Indigenous specific approach of talatalanoa. We acknowledge, recognise and honour the Indigenous peoples of Aotearoa NZ, tangata whenua and their pursuits to decolonise and indigenise education, where they have experienced many years of oppression, language and cultural loss. The revitalisation of Māori-led kaupapa in education has enabled Pacific communities' opportunities to mobilise their efforts in implementing Pacific-led education initiatives, such as the rise of the Kohanga Reo (Māori full immersion ECE) Movement, and the initiation of Pacific language nests (Pacific full immersion ECE) across Aotearoa NZ. As Tangata o le Moana (Pacific peoples) and Tangata te Tiriti (Treaty partners) in Aotearoa NZ, we align our talatalanoa with our tuakana Māori scholars in the spirit of cultural humility.

2 | Method and Analysis – Talatalanoa and Talanoa'i³

The talanoa research method is grounded predominantly within Indigenous Pacific thought and languages linked to Samoa, Fiji, Tuvalu, Tokelau and Tonga. When deconstructed for conceptual clarity, 'tala' means to talk or story and 'noa' means nothing, something or anything. Tongan scholar and regional education leader [Seu'ula Johansson-Fua \(2023\)](#) posits that talanoa is used for different purposes and in the context of the Kakala Research Framework,⁴ talanoa builds relationships as well as collecting information for data analysis.

As a pan-Pacific research approach, talanoa refers to conversations, chats, the sharing of ideas and talking with others. Talanoa is a term used by Tongans, Samoans and Fijians and can be both formal between elders, matai or chiefs and their nu'u or village (see [Vaiotei 2013](#)). Talanoa can also occur informally between friends over the sharing of kava or meals. In the context of research, talanoa has been a self-determining approach for Pacific researchers transmitting intergenerational experiences into one's research. Talanoa as research methodology has also come under scrutiny as lacking philosophical rationale and processual clarity creating ambiguity. Despite the critique, talanoa as a method has gained momentum for Pacific researchers to align their research projects with the decolonising and indigenising agenda.

Recently, talatalanoa has gained recognition in academic and research settings as a culturally robust method for exploring and understanding phenomena within the Pacific/Pasifika context (see [Fa'avae and Fonua 2020](#)). Talatalanoa is a derivative of talanoa. Within tala-talanoa, the tala or 'talking or storying' is repeated, therefore, symbolising discussion and conversations that are ongoing. Within the Tongan context of cultural engagement and practice, talatalanoa is used as a critical space and platform for people to discuss and story their thoughts, ideas and

experiences about a particular topic or issue of criticality to the community. In this paper, we used talatalanoa to provide a va relational space for us as co-authors to share and articulate openly our diverse views.

The analysis of our talatalanoa relies on va ethics, which are guided by faka'apa'apa (respect), loto toka'i (to care and show consideration) and loto fiefoaki (generosity). As described by [Vaiotei \(2013\)](#) in talanoa'i, the 'researcher is not a distant observer but is active in the talanoa process and in defining and redefining meanings in order to achieve the aim of what is being talanoa'i' (p. 203). We utilise talanoa'i within our ongoing conversations (talatalanoa) to 'engage in critical discussions' ([Fa'avae et al. 2016](#), p. 139) specifically about what makes education Pacific and its potential to empower and transform the work of the next generation of Pacific researchers. We are also cognisant of the nuances of each Pacific nation we hail from in the diaspora and take into consideration that these are constantly evolving.

In this paper, we used talatalanoa as a Pacific method to engage in critical discussions with one another focussed on exploring our thoughts on the criticality of Pacific education. Our talatalanoa centred on two key questions: 'What makes Pacific education a critical discipline?' and 'What does it mean to see Pacific in education?'. As mentioned above, our talatalanoa in response to the questions posed invoked va ethics practice where we exchanged collaborative thinking underpinned by faka'apa'apa, loto toka'i and loto fiefoaki. Drawing on [Mafile'o et al. \(2024\)](#), our collective analysis of our talatalanoa was conducted collaboratively where we identified common themes that emerged from the data of our talatalanoa in response to our two key focus questions. We acknowledge the seminal work by [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#) in relation to thematic analysis, however, our talatalanoa discussion is congruent with a Pacific-grounded approach to analysis as posited by [Mafile'o et al. \(2024\)](#) who assert '... a Pacific-Indigenous approach integrates lived experiences with intergenerational knowledge, embracing the non-linear, holistic, and spiritual essence of Pacific peoples, which becomes interwoven into the analysis itself' (p. 5). This Pacific-grounded approach to analysis enabled us to recount our 'lived' experiences as academics of and in the Pacific weaving our collective stories.

3 | Research Context

Māori scholar Wallie [Penetito \(2010, 2021\)](#) asked the question, 'What is Māori about Māori education?'. This question holds considerable importance as [Samu Wendt \(2021\)](#), a Senior Pacific scholar of Samoan and Māori ancestry, asked similar questions of Pacific. She questions, "What does it mean to be Pacific in education?". Such a provocation endures as the tendencies of education perpetuate its colonial histories including predilections for Eurocentric knowledge systems. Drawing upon the scholarly work of Pacific education pioneers, we recognise the significance of the Re-thinking Pacific Education Initiative by Pacific Peoples for Pacific Peoples (RPEIPP) inaugural symposium of 2000.

The RPEIPP inaugural symposium in 2000 noted 30 years prior that despite heavy investment into education by Pacific countries and donor organisations, there were still issues of struggle and challenge similar to those felt 50 years later (see [Otunuku et al. 2021](#)). In responding to Wendt's apt question, 'What does it mean to be Pacific in education?', this paper examines Pacific

education as a critical discipline in the context of ITE through talatalanoa. As Pacific/Pasifika educators with lived educational experiences in Aotearoa NZ, we offer our collective critical thoughts through ta-va or time and space (Mahina 2010) as tautua (service) through knowledge and sense-making. We aim to continue the legacy of our Pacific forebearers, including those who are non-Pacific allies doing important work in the Pacific. We collectively contribute to our understanding of the broader vision initiated 24 years ago to rethink Pacific education initiatives by Pacific peoples for Pacific peoples (Pene et al. 2002). We continue to tell our own stories as an integral practice as Moana-nui-a-Kiwa to build understanding. We reap the previous rethinking sown (Chu 2021) and continue advancing the philosophy of Pacific education and its criticality. In our talatalanoa, ask ourselves as educators what we think is Pacific about education?

We begin with one of our more senior academics in the paper where he shared in his talatalanoa of what he thinks is Pacific about education:

When Pacific are able to succeed as Pacific and we are able to thrive and flourish within the schooling system in Aotearoa. Education is different for diverse ethnic groups and this can be seen as problematic in classroom learning, i.e., how do teachers effectively respond to Pacific diversity? (Talatalanoa Insight 1, Tongan-Samoan).

The act or ability to thrive and flourish may vary in meaning for a diverse group of Pacific/Pasifika peoples. We offer our collective Pacific and non-Pacific voices at this point of time and space as we look back to look forward. Similar to our Māori whanaunga, we see a Pacific perspective of time and space where the past, present and future are intertwined both holistic and cyclical (Bear 2000; Mahina 2010). We acknowledge we carry the aspirations of our ancestors, both in the spiritual and natural realm (Rameka 2016) in our collective drive to co-construct what it means to be Pacific in education. Furthermore, we have begun to build a response to the criticality of Pacific education as a transformative discipline. While acknowledging the groundwork laid by our senior Pacific pioneers and scholars, we continue to draw on Pacific Indigenous philosophies and associated key cultural concepts and practices that ground us in our talatalanoa in our theorisation and conceptualisation of Pacific perspectives. In our talatalanoa, we posit what is Pacific about education itself?

Pacific education is grounded upon Pacific epistemologies and collective cultural constructs of being. The position of Pacific education, unlike traditional Western education models, is not limited to the academic institution. Pacific education mobilises Pacific Indigenous thinking in and with the world, affirming collective responsibility and relational ontologies (Talatalanoa Insight 2, Samoan-Dutch).

The above offering in our talatalanoa shows how, over time, the development of Pacific education is a result of ongoing systematic theoretical work in the field of Pacific education (see Otunuku et al. 2021). Mobilisation through our talatalanoa offers insights drawing on our lived experiences with an understanding that our lens is time- and context-dependent, adding nuance and reflective of the past and present. Transindigeneity shapes how we might complicate our sense of Pacific relationality as we critically and collaboratively think about our positionality as a generation

from Pacific migrant settlers. The following quote demonstrates this:

What is Pacific about education in the 1980s to early 1990s through my lens as someone from a Samoan, Tokelauan and Fijian background born in New Zealand, is vastly different compared to my perspective in 2021. The former period triggers quite a negative response. The latter period reflects a more positive response. What is Pacific about education is the scholarly and political work by Pacific educators who continue to ensure our Pacific knowledge systems are visible, valued, and validated through research policy (Talatalanoa Insight 3, Samoan-Tokelauan-Fijian).

As products of the migrant dream, we, as ITE practitioners and researchers in higher education, are the essence of visibility, cognisant of our layered experiences intergenerationally. Charles Stanley (2022) claims that the standard of our measure is dependent on a deeper spiritual understanding of not only what matters to us but also an appreciation of the things that matter to others. This position is particularly pertinent to those who are unfamiliar with our worldviews. The standard of our measure as to whether Pacific education is a critical disciplinary space is linked to our understanding of what it means to theorise, conceptualise and practice teaching and learning through Pacific knowledge, worldviews and practices and in relation to ways that are different to our understanding of the world in its entirety. It is also about what it means to engage and enact practices as non-Indigenous to Aotearoa NZ. Additionally, it means to continue to engage in talatalanoa with non-Pacific researchers born in Aotearoa NZ as allies, including those born outside of Aotearoa NZ who come with their own unique experiences working with Pacific ākongā in ITE in Aotearoa NZ. The following quote demonstrates this from a non-Pacific educators' perspective:

When I think about what is Pacific about education, I think of my students and what I learned through them about how they saw education. I saw the role of parents and extended families all playing their part in ensuring their children's success, I saw high expectations, shared values, education being prioritised, story-telling and sacrifices. I saw students sharing their cultural knowledge with others, from this I learnt that what is Pacific about education is the importance of cultural knowledge and values being 'seen' and shared with others (Talatalanoa Insight 4, Palagi).

Are our Pacific cultural knowledge and values being 'seen' and shared enough to shift practitioners and importantly policy-makers to rethink the criticality of Pacific education and its place in ITE? Pacific education discourses have engaged and critically unpacked the relational positionality within and beyond the settler-colonial construct (Leenen-Young et al. 2021). Pacific scholars have explored the responsibilities of the Pacific within Te Tiriti o Waitangi in relation to our bi-cultural obligations to Māori, who are the people of the whenua (land) as well as recognising the shared enduring ties to Moana-nui-a-Kiwa (Pacific Ocean) (Fa'aea et al. 2020). To rethink, taking critical action,

as a Pacific approach, family and genealogy (to people and place) is an integral part of the positioning of what is Pacific about education.

Despite Pacific/Pasifika peoples' ancestral connection with Māori in Moana-nui-a-Kiwa (Pacific Ocean), the settler-colonial construct ensures that we, as settlers on tangata whenua land, honour them, their knowledge and aspirations for their language and their next generation. Our aspirations for Pacific to succeed as Pacific is twofold, grounded within the settler-colonial construct as a reminder of our responsibilities to Te Tiriti o Waitangi and acknowledging the deep whakapapa (genealogy) Māori share with tangata Moana (Pacific peoples). Within *vā-va-wa*⁵ (space between), the critical nature of Pacific education intimately and critically embraces theorisation and praxis that confront as well as mediate being-becoming-seeing-doing teaching and learning through Pacific ways and worldviews. This must include the collective 'aiga or family as emphasised by our talatalanoa:

The idea of gaining knowledge is what is Pacific about education. Pacific peoples value knowledge and being able to demonstrate that knowledge, that reflects on family (Talatalanoa Insight 5, Samoan).

Analysis of Pacific education in Aotearoa NZ requires deconstruction and reconstruction (Va'ai and Nabobo-Baba 2017) of education grounded in praxis that acknowledge the temporal and spatial nature of diverse Pacific identities, similarities and specificities inherent in Pacific learners. Pacific learners are framed within the context of the collective, that is, their extended families within a village ecosystem including the non-traditional village makeup of those who are now third- to fourth-generation Aotearoa NZ-born and raised. In recent years, several research models and/or methods have demonstrated the holistic collective nature of identity within the ecosystem of aiga/famili/fanau/family through well-established Pacific theorists (see Pulu-Endemann 2001; Kupa 2009; Maua-Hodges 2016).

Similarly, our approach is grounded in the context of the collective and familial, that is, we consider the wider context of community and our *va/vā/wa* relational sensibilities. Relational theory is the way in which Indigenous Pacific scholars have framed their understanding of themselves, their knowledge and all things in the world as being intimately interconnected and interdependent (Matapo and McFall-McCaffery 2022). For example, *va* is a central concept in Polynesia predominantly and looks at socio-relational and socio-temporal interconnections. Hufanga 'Okusitino Māhina and his team developed *tā-vā* as a way to understand time and space metaphysics – understandings of reality.

Two key documents inform our sense-making of what we believe grounds our capacity to embrace diversity and unpack it within the context of critical Pacific education in Aotearoa NZ. Te Tiriti o Waitangi and second, the Education Council's our code, our standards: Code of professional responsibility and standards for the teaching profession (Education Council 2017). Despite the current climate in Aotearoa NZ where the principles of partnership, participation and protection are being debated politically and socially, its values determine how we, as Pacific/Pasifika communities, mediate our *va* with Māori and in ways that honour our Indigenous presence together rather than perpetuate colonial practices. Both documents continue to inform

and guide our practice to ensure that we maintain our relational praxis within our communities of teaching and learning.

4 | Transindigeneity Through Notions of *vā-va-wa-ka* – Enabling a Critical Space for Pacific Education

Transindigeneity is a framework developed by Indigenous Pacific scholars within the Pacific studies discipline to critically unpack diaspora theory within migration and movement, which was rooted in Western constructions and theoretical development (Diaz 2019; Prendergast 2023). In the context of Aotearoa NZ diaspora, Pacific peoples now represent 8.9% of the total population and are made up of Samoan 48.1%, Tongan 22.1%, Cook Islands Māori 21.3%, Niuean 7.9%, Fijian 5.7%, Tokelauan 2.2% and Tuvaluan 1.5% (NZ Stats 2023). The concept of diaspora, traditionally linked to Jewish and Christian migration narratives, has evolved beyond rigid definitions of migration to encompass broader, more fluid interpretations. It emphasises the enduring connections between people, spanning economic, political and cultural engagements with their countries of origin (Kenny 2013). Unlike the concept of diaspora, the critical nature of transindigeneity is in its deliberate positioning and prioritising of Indigeneity/Indigenous knowledge in understanding Pacific peoples' migratory patterns. For Pacific peoples, this literally means the Ocean or Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa is home (Teaiwa 2006). This includes how Indigenous concepts, histories and knowledge move fluidly across multiple sites or locations beyond the ancestral homeland (Diaz 2019). In our talatalanoa, we assert transindigeneity as both a social science framework and a critical educational tool that is already shaping Pacific educational praxis in Aotearoa NZ.

While transindigeneity enables us to understand the movement of Indigenous Pacific knowledge across sites, it is important to distinguish this framework from homogenising or pan-Pacific approaches. Rather than assuming cultural sameness, transindigeneity is grounded in the specificity of Indigenous relationships, genealogies and obligations across Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa. Its critical orientation lies in maintaining the distinctiveness of each Pacific nation while recognising the relational spaces – *vā*, *va*, *wa* and *ka* – that shape how knowledge and identity circulate. In Aotearoa NZ, this requires careful attention to our positionality as Pacific peoples living on Māori land (Leenen-Young et al. 2021), ensuring that our educational practices and theorising uphold Māori sovereignty and do not replicate flattening or collectivising tendencies. Thus, transindigeneity functions not as a pan-Pacific identity but as a relational, place-aware method that highlights responsibility, interconnectedness and Indigenous continuity across multiple sites.

We posit that transindigeneity through notions of *vā-va-wa-ka* supports the fluid relational context of space and time. Indigenous ways of knowing and being include multiple perspectives of histories between places and ancestral homeland key to enabling a critical space for Pacific education. The perspective on transindigeneity has important implications for Pacific education as it acknowledges and foregrounds Indigenous intergenerational knowledge and wisdom of our forebearers of educational practices. Consequently, Pacific ITE students who are grounded in their cultural roots while also navigating contemporary challenges and opportunities are well positioned for success.

Conversely, those ITE students who are disconnected from their cultural roots who may face challenges in a settler-colonial nation, in this case Aotearoa NZ, require support from well-equipped lecturing staff. Simultaneously, through embedding and enacting cultural competency frameworks in ITE for non-Pacific students (see [Ministry of Education 2017](#)), we argue inter-generational knowledge systems that underpin transindigeneity, poses potential for learner student success. These issues are intensified in ITE, where Pacific perspectives have historically been marginal to curriculum design.

Despite policy shifts such as Tapasā ([MoE 2017](#)), research shows that Pacific student teachers frequently encounter monocultural pedagogies, Western-centric assessment frameworks and limited access to mentors who share linguistic or cultural knowledge ([Samu 2021](#); [Chu et al. 2013](#)). As a result, Pacific ITE students often shoulder the dual burden of navigating a Pākehā-dominant tertiary education system while also being expected to represent their communities. Embedding talatalanoa and transindigeneity within ITE, therefore, becomes a strategic response to these structural inequities – offering relational, culturally centred methods that challenge the epistemic norms of teacher training. Therefore, transindigeneity provides a method for ensuring collaborations between Indigenous peoples to create productive sites of meaning, both historically and into the future within the context of ITE. As scholars in the field, we resonate in our talatalanoa and had varied ideas of what this may look like to “be or become Pacific” in education:

Being Pacific in education could be viewed as a processual experience; learning to navigate one’s own cultural identity and learning ways to affirm indigenous knowledge systems against the Eurocentric frameworks that are entrenched in education institutions. Being Pacific in education requires an openness to critique one’s own positionality and subjectivity (Talatalanoa Insight 6, Tongan-Dutch).

To recognise your inherent value as a Pacific person in an institution originally geared to make you question your own identity, value and place in New Zealand. It’s an awakening of the spirit. Being and becoming Pacific in education involves an un-doing, un-knowing to re-do and re-know who you “are” and “meant to be” and this involves understanding that you have a wealth of inter-generational measina within to be the change (Talatalanoa Insight 7, Samoan-Tokelauan-Fijian).

For me, being or becoming Pacific in education means that you are valued and accepted for who you are, where you stand, and who you stand with. You know who you are and are connected to a range of people (Talatalanoa Insight 8, Tongan-Palagi).

Being able to see your Pacific values and ways of being, way of learning reflected back to you by the teacher, so that the learning process is actually reciprocal (Talatalanoa Insight 9, Samoan).

Drawing on the work of Prendergrast (2023), as initial teacher educators, we acknowledge the accountability of our own Pacific

nation identities in the diaspora, that is, in the context of Aotearoa NZ. We often question what it means for us ‘to make lives on other peoples’ lands’ (p. 57), having some of our parents settled in Aotearoa NZ well over 60 years ago. Our critical reflections are crucial when posturing our position of the criticality of Pacific education while ensuring that we maintain our responsibility towards the safety of enduring Māori sovereignty. Our commitment as Tangata Tiriti, alongside our professional responsibility ([Ministry of Education 2017](#)), ensures and reminds us to prioritise the sovereignty of tangata whenua first. We are, therefore, constantly alert to ensure that Māori and Pacific/Pasifika are not in competition with one another. Rather, we are integrated organically into our practice with an understanding of our kinship and tuakana-teina relationships ([Samu 2021](#)) predicated on our historical Oceania ties.

Our talatalanoa above indicates that we collectively understood that despite hailing from diverse backgrounds and cultural upbringing in Aotearoa NZ, we inherently drew on our inter-generational and historical connectedness and relationality. Additionally, there was a sense of constant flux where we critically understood the journey travelled by those before us and our position to ensure ongoing work in our institutions to move beyond just being “visible”.

Through our collaborative talatalanoa in this paper, we asked two key questions: ‘What makes education Pacific?’ and ‘What makes Pacific education critical?’. We acknowledge that our early career researchers, Pacific scholars, have attempted to disrupt education in Aotearoa NZ largely through educators’ master and doctoral theses. There are government-funded education projects by the Ministry of Education that aspire to change the way education is done within schooling. However, as a critical disciplinary space in higher education, further momentum is needed for transformative change. Our aspiration as early career educators and researchers is to build on work by our Pacific predecessors by deliberately making visible critical Pacific education discourses that can inspire and transform systems and institutions.

Our desire is to equip our next generation of diverse and multi-ethnic Pacific teachers, educators and researchers to continue to disrupt and interrogate teaching and learning across sectors and in their communities by embracing Indigenous Pacific concepts and approaches together alongside Western ideas and theories to deliberately and strategically interrogate thinking and praxis, conducive to Pacific succeeding as Pacific. This will require them to bravely engage regularly with the discomforts of theory and praxis grapple with Western and Indigenous knowledge – its frustrations and potentialities within research contexts. In our talatalanoa, we postulate ...

What makes a critical discipline Pacific? Indeed the discipline is underpinned by critical theory, including seeking social justice and challenging dominant power structures. However, since time immemorial our ancestors engaged in relational practices and rituals that are still to this day relevant in our education system and probably more appropriate and authentic to achieve the same goal (Talatalanoa Insight 10, Samoan-Tokelauan-Fijian).

Pacific learners are multi-ethnic and diversity is becoming multifaceted in Aotearoa NZ. Pacific learners in ITE programmes

across our respective institutions carry their Māori and Pacific ethnic heritages with them. Across the motu (land) of Aotearoa NZ, Māori and Pacific learners also navigate their academic selves in relation to whom they belong to, that is, interwoven with where they belong to. The potentialities in assessing how to best enact and enable multi-sited and multifaceted Indigenous Pacific teachings and learnings will come from learners and ourselves as having traversed ITE. Through our shared va (relational space) and heterogeneity, we are able to share from our experiences. Our responsibility is to nurture and enable critical Pacific education space that is generative to such diverse discourses in genuine and authentic ways, particularly for those who are non-Pacific (Flavell and Cunningham 2023).

5 | Past and Current Pacific Education Policy

Si'ilata and fellow researchers (Si'ilata 2014) posit that the initial phase of Pacific/Pasifika education in Aotearoa NZ spanned from the mid-1990s to the late 1990s. This phase was driven by the challenges faced by underperforming schools situated in what Thrupp (1998, p. 198) describes as '... two of Aotearoa NZ's most entrenched areas of urban socioeconomic disadvantage and white/middle class flight'. In Aotearoa NZ, universities are institutions with foundations embedded in the perspectives and worldviews of those from the dominant Pākehā culture (Hutchings and Lee-Morgan 2016). This presents challenges when creating spaces in education that prioritise Pacific knowledge and ways of being. Twenty years later, it is now of utmost importance, following the inception of the initial 5-year Pasifika Education Plan (PEP) in 2001, that today and in the future, we hold account universities 'acknowledge both the lived experiences of Pasifika individuals and the Pacific worldviews that lead to success' (Uasike et al. 2022, p. 9) but also to reevaluate the effectiveness of current strategies and identify areas requiring further enhancement.

As ITE practitioners across the ECE, primary and the tertiary education context we are aware of the proliferation of Pacific research approaches and theoretical frameworks developed and used within the Aotearoa NZ and Australian region Taulaulelei and McFall-McCaffrey (2019). Within our talatalanoa, regarding the importance of Pacific knowledge being incorporated organically into higher education, we ask ourselves what it might mean to see Pacific in education. This quote demonstrates what visibility of Pacific in education might look like:

Visibility of Pacific interests, not only Pacific peoples represented from a strength-based position, but also valuing Pacific Indigenous knowledge systems as valid, and rigorous within education. I believe it is about more than an "equity" based position. Pacific Indigenous knowledge offers more than participation and/or a social justice interest for engagement (Talatalanoa Insight 11, Samoan-Dutch).

Research shows that many Aotearoa NZ educators lack a deep understanding of Pacific cultural knowledge and values (Averill et al. 2020). Additionally, decades of research and educational policy demonstrate that the effects of postcolonialism and its disregard for Indigenous knowledge is still largely evident in academic institutions. Institutional commitment requires strong

and genuine engagement with the Pacific community, Pacific role models and strong leadership (Chu et al. 2013; Taleni et al. 2018). Our talatalanoa amplifies the need for institutional commitment to take a mirror-on-society approach enabling our Pacific/Pasifika students to see themselves as one participant shared 'To "see" it is to recognise yourself in education'. This also includes through academic staff who are able to draw on their communities as another participant shared:

Representation. Having members of the Pacific community involved in all levels of education. Having leadership advocating for our people and for our needs at government level. Having our writers, poets, scientists and a range of other experts and knowledge included and centralised within our programmes (Talatalanoa Insight 12, Tongan-Palagi).

Our talatalanoa describes a village approach, where the criticality of Pacific education is central to thriving in greater numbers of staff at all levels, particularly at professorial level. This is necessary for a mirror-on-society approach relevant to the criticality of Pacific education, as demonstrated by the following quote:

To make visible to the naked eye a reflection of 'self'. If our students can't see it how can they be it. Yes our students right through ECE, Primary and Tertiary need to see themselves reflected in staff, however, they also need to see Pacific at Professorial level in greater numbers working collaboratively closely on the ground with aiga and community - village styles! (Talatalanoa Insight 13, Samoan-Tokelauan-Fijian).

With its young and fast-growing population and a socioeconomic location at the lower end of most indices, the Pacific population has been the focus of five targeted national education strategies over the last two decades (Hunter et al. 2024). The latest is the 10-year Action Plan for Pacific Education (Ministry of Education 2020). Despite the emphases on attention to Pacific learners and their cultures across educational sectors and policy, long-standing disparity in educational experience and achievement continues between Aotearoa NZ students of Pacific and non-Pacific heritage (Mara 2017). This reinforces the urgency for improvement in all teachers' understandings of how to maximise educational opportunities for Pacific learners, across educational institutions.

Returning to our earlier argument for the criticality of Pacific education, for over 30 years, many Pacific scholars have been expressing the advantages of rightfully positioning Pacific Indigenous knowledge systems within education and higher education systems (Si'ilata 2014). Such earlier researchers undertook critical work in educational research and policy within the field of Pacific education. The development of RPEIPP in 2001 was one response to decades of failed educational projects (initiatives) in the region where Pacific academics initiated a meeting in Suva where they gathered to rethink education for and by Pacific people.

In the Aotearoa NZ context, the va'atele framework (Si'ilata 2014) developed by Rae Si'ilata has been pivotal in highlighting the importance of partnerships between Pasifika families/aiga and community knowledge holders to support instructional strategies by including Pasifika languages as resources for learning.

This work was instrumental in foregrounding the development of the *Tapasā Cultural Competencies Framework for Teachers of Pacific Learners*, released in 2017 in draft form for stakeholder feedback, and finalised in August 2018 (Samu 2020). Other important work advancing the criticality of Pacific education emphasised the importance of the student–teacher relationship (see Allen and Robertson 2009) and the onus of teacher understanding of Pacific students and their lived realities.

Other important work such as the first iteration of the PEP developed in 2007 provided the Ministry of Education with strategic direction for improving educational outcomes for Pacific people in Aotearoa NZ. Essentially, the PEP is part of what has been described as the Ministry’s national policy framework for Pasifika education, a framework which crosses all sectors. The fact that it includes the Tertiary Education Strategy establishes its clear connections to the National Education Guidelines (Samu 2020). While the Teaching Council appears to be ensuring that engaging with Tapasā and the PEP is not just an option for schools, centres and teacher education providers, it is difficult to know whether implementation has direct impact on outcomes.

6 | Critical Disciplinary Conversations – Pacific Concepts and Frameworks

As Pacific and non-Pacific early career researchers working in tertiary within the context of ITE, part of our ongoing talatalanoa have been the reflections on the impact on learner outcomes from Pacific research and successive Pacific Education Plans and now Tapasā. Recently, Baice and Samu (2023) showed the distinctive field of Pacific research over the past five decades as a reflection of the increase in Pacific graduates and scholars publishing academic work informing both research and practice. Anecdotally, we know there have been inroads made particularly in our own communities where schools are seriously tackling and attempting to indigenise the local curriculum in meaningful ways that reflect the aiga of learners. Through the talatalanoa of Pacific Principals and school leaders (see Uasike et al. 2022) at grassroots level, we see multiple ways in which learners’ heterogeneity are visible. Their cultural identities, backgrounds and languages are supported through practice that is culturally responsive, sustaining and safe (Ualesi 2024). The actions taken by such leaders at the coal face tell stories in their own words of how they are putting into action the aspirational goals outlined in documents such as the Action Plan for Pacific Education 2020–2030 (Ministry of Education 2020).

Yet prior to the Action Plan for Pacific Education 2020–2030 (Ministry of Education 2020), there was little agency for Pacific/Pasifika peoples to actively engage and have direct influence. As Samu (2020) aptly argued, ‘Pasifika/Pacific peoples have oft-times in the past been positioned as advisory, which often has little to do with effecting change’ (p. 204). Despite successive attempts of the Government’s commitment to Pacific learners and families aiming to transform outcomes in previous PEPs (see Ministry of Education 2001, 2006, 2008, 2009), the social, historical and political climate in which these were developed and administered has meant some positive impact on Pacific/Pasifika learners, their families and wider communities. Consistent with Samu (2020), we argue that key to the current position of Pasifika/Pacific education is the increased attentiveness and

responsiveness of the Ministry of Education to community voice. We further contend that it is only through Pacific/Pasifika communities themselves that positive shift in the education system can occur for Pacific/Pasifika learners.

As mentioned earlier, the question of what it means to be Pacific in education requires continuous robust critique and revisiting in a fast-changing Aotearoa NZ. Projections show a youthful Aotearoa NZ with multi-layered ethnic identities (Ministry for Pacific Peoples 2020). Clearly, successive documents attempting to respond to the educational outcomes of Pacific learners coupled with recent Pacific principals’ and school leaders’ lived experiences show the criticality of Pacific education. Given the ongoing work required over the next decade, meaningful shifts require a continued disruption of historically held ideas that Pacific education might need rescuing by non-Pacific for Pacific. So, what developments have been made over the last two decades that have led to small shifts?

There have been key shifts in thinking around the decolonisation and the indigenisation of education research since the seminal work of Linda Tuhiwai Smith and others in the late 1990s (see Smith 2012) that has reached notable international status. More recently, scholars in the ITE field argued the utility of indigenisation of the academy and related institutions as a more useful strategy that ‘... offers more hopeful possibilities for Aotearoa NZ universities’ (p. 305, Hoskins and Jones 2022) when thinking about our relationship as Pacific/Pasifika educators and our commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Pacific/Pasifika research has since been able to take courage from kaupapa Māori researchers who have modelled self-determination for and by Māori to advocate for and lead educational aspirations for learners including their iwi and hapu. In our talatalanoa, we consider this and continue as Pacific researchers to create robust pathways:

Critical education philosophies are useful in positioning Pasifika interests within the various contexts of education. Systematically questioning and interrogating education contexts, curricula, and pedagogy are important for early career researchers and teachers. Critical research practices seek to understand the tensions of education to transform and shift pedagogy and engagement away from marginalisation and oppression. There are however, limits to the critical tradition in following its genesis and positionality of a humanist-centric agenda (Talatalanoa Insight 14, Samoan-Dutch).

As educators and researchers, we continue to seek, analyse and refine through a critical lens how we are shifting our practice and engagement. In higher education, specifically in ITE, we began to acknowledge the ongoing need to rethink and persist through our robust talatalanoa and interrogate in line with Taufe’ulungaki:

... the values, assumptions, and beliefs underlying formal education and development, to share, debate, and reflect on what ... believed to be the main issues and challenges in Pacific education at that time and to begin the exploration of new directions and alternatives in education and development, which might prove more meaningful to Pacific peoples (Taufe’ulungaki in ‘Otunuku et al. 2021, p. 4).

7 | Conclusion

Pacific education as a critical discipline enables the deconstruction of understanding, centred on prioritising Indigenous Pacific concepts and frameworks. Centring Pasifika Indigenous knowledge systems and methodologies in Eurocentric institutions requires humility, skill and dexterity. Searching for a critical Pacific transformative disciplinary space within education and academia is a precarious endeavour. Within this paper, we have explored the important work of previous Moana educational scholars who started this imperative action of decolonising education with the purpose of normalising Pacific epistemology and ontology. In this paper through our own transformative ways of talanoa and talanoai' inclusive of va ethics, we can see ourselves continuing this work as active agents of Pasifika transindigeneity and transformational change within the Aotearoa NZ ITE education system. Through our talatalanoa, we highlight transindigeneity as a dual-purpose framework, both social scientific and educationally critical actively shaping Pacific educational praxis in Aotearoa NZ and informing the search for a transformative disciplinary space as explored in this paper.

The findings of our talatalanoa in relation to the criticality of Pacific education as transformative space highlight the strength in ongoing critical dialogue collectively for further work to be done in ITE. The impact of this reflective work informs classroom pedagogy, policymaking in support of continuous curriculum changes in Aotearoa NZ. Our talatalanoa highlighted the importance of our continued reflexivity to stay accountable and remain committed to prioritising agency for Pacific learners. Importantly, we undertook our ongoing talatalanoa with aspirations to support the robust nature of Pacific-led impact for ākongā in Aotearoa NZ. We looked back to walk forward. Through our sharing of stories, experiences and knowledge from multiple perspectives, in the context of our shared vā-va-wa-ka, we collectively probed and examined the status of Pacific education as a critical discipline. Pacific education as a critical discipline is a method of examination and co-construction from a Pacific lens across Moana-nui-a-Kiwa. We share our talatalanoa responses that embodied not just ourselves but also those of our parents, grandparents and great grandparents and ancestors. Educators face ongoing pressure to adapt to major policy changes in today's educational and political climate.

The criticality of Pacific education, as a vital discipline, must continue to be actively centred, prominent and visible. As Moana scholars in Aotearoa NZ, we invoke Pacific education as critical, transformative disciplinary work informed by talatalanoa and transindigeneity. This positioning foregrounds the intergenerational knowledge and wisdom of our forebearers while responding to the contemporary realities faced by Pacific learners and educators. In doing so, this paper offers implications for practice, research and policy that strengthen Pacific-led approaches within ITE and beyond.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Endnotes

- ¹Talatalanoa is a Tongan method of ongoing collaborative conversation (see Fa'avae 2021).
- ²Va/vā is both a Samoan and Tongan construct that refers to social and relational space.
- ³See Vaioleti (2013).
- ⁴Kakala Research Framework see Thaman (1997); Johansson-Fua (2023).
- ⁵Vā-va-wa refers to the Tongan, Samoan and Māori space between (see Wendt 1996).

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