



Lessons from a Va Relational Approach: Embedding Indigenous Constructs for Classroom Practice

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Abstract

There is increasing concern raised for youth not in education and employment or training (NEET). Subsequently there is an increased demand for both education and health services that support the development of positive youths' identities, socioemotional and cognitive developmental needs, through youth mentoring strategies (Rhodes & DuBois, *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 17(4):254–258, 2008). Youth mentoring programmes are largely underpinned by Eurocentric approaches lacking consideration of diverse cultural needs of multi-ethnic under-served youth (Larson & Ngo, *Journal of Adolescent Research* 32:3–10, 2017). This article draws on data from a participant observational study highlighting how youth mentoring practice underpinned by a range of key Indigenous psychological constructs can be nurtured to improve classroom practice for kaiako (teacher, instructor). The context of investigation is focused on a youth mentoring programme in a tertiary learning environment at a large urban city of Aotearoa New Zealand that explored culturally responsive, sustaining and safe youth mentoring practice for Māori and Pacific/Pasifika rangatahi excluded from mainstream compulsory education.

Keywords Va Relationality · Tausi · Tautua · Youth Mentoring · Positive Youth Development

Introduction

Alternative education is an education model in Aotearoa New Zealand that caters for students between 13 and 15 years of age who have been alienated from mainstream school. In 2018 of the 75,600 New Zealanders in youth not in education and employment or training (NEET), 11.6% were in the 15–24 year old age bracket. Nearly 18 per cent of Māori and Pacific/Pasifika youth were reported as NEET, nearly twice

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the recorded rate for non-Māori and Pacific youth (Apatov, 2019). Expulsion for Māori was reported as more than four times that of Pākehā youth and Māori and Pacific youth are disproportionately represented in alternative education (Education Counts, 2013). As a result of ongoing marginalisation and colonisation, reports continue to highlight Māori and Pacific/Pasifika youth as overrepresented in youth justice and offences (Ioane et al., 2014). Given the deficit nature of reports related to Māori and Pacific/Pasifika youth, there is a groundswell of interest in developing and implementing youth mentoring programmes that better respond to the needs of diverse youth.

This article reports on part of a larger study that utilised participant observation research into a youth mentoring programme in Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand. The study explored the role of race, ethnicity, culture and cultural processes that played a role in the positive development of youth involved in the programme. The larger study was underpinned by a va relational approach focussed on the question of what are the key ingredients of culturally responsive, sustaining and safe youth mentoring practice? (Ualesi, 2021). In this study the theoretical development of culturally responsive, sustaining and safe youth mentoring practice in the Aotearoa NZ context was underpinned by a transdisciplinary approach.

Key Indigenous constructs relevant to Pacific/Pasifika and Māori rangatahi/youth and ākonga/learners alongside Weiston-Serdan's (2017) seminal work in critical youth mentoring and adolescent development were woven together with key educational works of Gay (2010), Ladson-Billings (1995) and Paris (2012). Given the youth mentoring-relationship quality is a salient mechanism of effective mentoring (Deutsch & Spencer, 2009) the article's main focus is on key Indigenous psychological constructs within those relationships that may serve as insights for kaiako (teacher, instructor) and their ākonga (student, learner). The researcher is of Samoan, Tokelauan and Fijian descent, born in Aotearoa NZ with teacher experience in both Primary and higher education. She has vast experience in youth mentoring practice across schools in Auckland with predominantly Māori and Pacific/Pasifika ākonga/young people and their whānau and 'aiga.

This participant observational study was strengths-based in that it focussed on the importance of culturally safe space. Such a space supports development of positive social identities alongside Indigenous values that are important to 'aiga and whānau (immediate and extended family in Gagana Sama and Te Reo Māori) and gives a wider focus and consideration of positive developmental outcomes (Simmonds et al., 2014; Ware & Walsh-Tapiata, 2010). Although youth mentoring has been found to be a promising intervention in promoting a wide range of positive youth outcomes, effects have been modest (DuBois et al., 2011). In response to the literature this study focusses on the importance of understanding the processes that contribute to programmes' effectiveness and importantly, the role of racial, ethnic, and cultural processes related to mentoring relationship and quality outcomes (Sánchez et al., 2019). It is agreed that culture plays a vital role in enhancing youth development (Sánchez et al., 2014) yet there is little research that explores the ways in which culture, race and ethnicity influence programme effectiveness (Weiston-Serdan, 2017). In line with recent work in the context of schools in Aotearoa New Zealand by Highfield and Webber (2021) programmers within the tertiary context

who seek to meet the needs of youth who have been marginalised from mainstream education are encouraged to deliberately focus on how mentees might feel a sense of belonging and connection.

A Culture of Self-Determination

Self-determination in this study refers to programmes affording opportunities for youth to gain a sense of mastery in activities, to feel competent and efficacious, to feel a sense of relatedness, and to have some sense of autonomy in the structured programme (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In the Aotearoa New Zealand context, programmers have an obligation under Te Tiriti o Waitangi to ensure youth have a sense of meaning and control over their life. Pihama et al. (2002) referred to this as *tino rangatiratanga*, that is absolute chieftainship or leadership over one's life and cultural wellbeing. The capacity for adolescents to make intentional conscious choices for themselves is vital for adolescent development.

There is a sense of satisfaction and relatedness when one masters or becomes competent, which are key components of self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The innate psychological need for autonomy, competence and relatedness within a social context where youth are supported is important for quality of life for self-determining adolescents. The idea of having autonomy to determine one's actions is a powerful humanistic behaviour for youth to develop positively. From a Pacific/Pasifika and Māori lens, self-determination, as a psychological construct of positive youth development, is an essential aspect of youth mentoring (Ualesi, 2021).

Given that *rangatahi* (youth in Te Reo Māori) are embedded within social and cultural contexts unique to their multilayered identities, self-determination for Pacific/Pasifika and Māori youth comprises culturally nuanced understandings. Although self-determination might be viewed as a Western concept (Toki, 2017), self-determination for Māori *rangatahi* in the local context is understood as *tino rangatiratanga* (absolute chieftainship, leadership, or governance over oneself). The principle of *Tino Rangatiratanga* as a self-determination principle in Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Māori version of the Treaty of Waitangi) refers to having more meaningful control over one's life and cultural wellbeing (Pihama et al., 2002).

Similarly, for Pacific/Pasifika or, more specifically, Samoan youth, self-determination considers values of *tautua* where the pathway to leadership is through servanthood. In other words, individual choice or autonomy, and consideration of mastery and relatedness, might be relative when thinking of the needs of the collective. Given an individual's multilayered nature of identity is embedded within the wider collective, self-determination for Pacific/Pasifika and Māori youth includes consideration of sustaining youth heritage cultures. Additionally, diverse Māori and Pacific/Pasifika youth family backgrounds both in urban cities and rural Aotearoa NZ may also shape identity construction and self-determination in unique ways. Taking a *va* relational approach within youth mentoring programmes and higher education contexts enables flexibility for *kaiako* of *ākonga* to tailor and design teaching practice in nuanced ways.

A Va Relational Approach

A va relational approach refers to the all-encompassing act of serving as custodians, drawing on concepts of love and care, nurturing quality relationships. A va relational approach as theorised by Ualesi (2021) is a relational lens unique to a Pacific/Pasifika Moana approach exploring both Pacific/Pasifika and Māori understandings of va (relational space) together (Suaalii-Sauni, 2017). This approach draws on cultural constructs specific to fa'aSamoa (The Samoan Way) and close connections to Kaupapa Māori theory (see Smith, 1999; Smith; 2012) as a nuanced lens to view youth mentoring. Love and care through service or tautua is significant in nurturing relationships because it includes an act of alofa or love (Mo'a, 2015). Indeed, Mo'a (2015) pointed out that culture as a foundation of care is multidescriptive and often expressed as alofa whereas a noncaring approach is described as le alofa (without love), agaleaga (without kindness), tuulafoa'i (abandoned and neglected) and agavale (heartless and inhumane). It is interesting to note that Mo'a (2015) asserted the word care as connected to the nuanced word tausi, which translates to tausima'i or tausi-soifua. The two words tausi and alofa go hand in hand. Tausi is similar to kaitiakitanga and both can be translated to custodian.

The Samoan concept of "tausi" means to care for, observe or keep command – a concept central to a va relational approach refers to "care" and is similar to teu le va in the context of research. The term tausi means to observe or keep command in the context of maintaining and keeping good relations within the village. Similar to alofa, tausi is found in concepts like tausi-soifua (custodian of life and wellbeing), tausi mavaega (custodian of inheritance) and tausi eleele (custodian of land) (Mo'a, 2015). Similar to manaakitanga and kaitiakitanga – Māori kupu (words) that refer to caring for others, showing hospitality and kindness towards others, as well as custodianship or guardianship – tausi refers to the alofa (love) care and guardianship for the whole person in relation to their physical, spiritual, emotional and relational wellbeing.

A Samoan worldview stipulates that a trusting, caring relationship is seen as a role of responsibility to, and for, another, through alofa and tautua (service). Tautua is a critical component of deep quality relationships in the context of mentoring. There is a well-known associated alagaupu, Samoan proverb, "O le ala i le pule o le tautua" – the pathway to leadership is through service (Fa'aea & Enari, 2021). In fa'aSamoa, the concept of tautua is a central value practised in everyday life at all levels of the collective 'aiga. Youth mentoring from a Samoan-specific lens is often seen as tautua or service to care for others through alofa and tausi or care for as custodians of one another. Tausi and tautua alongside manaakitanga and kaitiakitanga are key concepts in the context of this study of youth mentoring. Alofa, tausi and tautua in the context of va tapuia (sacred space) are important Samoan specific constructs when thinking about how mentors can show an ethic of care as custodians when serving the needs of mentees and from a transdisciplinary lens important in youth development and positive educational outcomes for Indigenous youth.

Research Context

Most of the structured activities within youth mentoring programmes are underpinned by positive youth development theories that are defined in terms of universal developmental needs (Simpkins et al., 2017). However, there is a dearth of research about how effective youth mentoring programmes work for diverse groups of youth, both nationally and internationally (Sánchez et al., 2014), utilising culturally responsive approaches that centre the voices of Indigenous and minoritised youth and their communities, that is, the very youth often targeted. Despite research in Aotearoa New Zealand by Keelan (2014) and Ware and Walsh-Tapiata (2010) who have contributed important knowledge in positive youth development from a uniquely Māori lens that drew on relevant Māori constructs and values, the results did not include Pacific/Pasifika or diverse mixed youth.

To contribute to the knowledge gap, this study explored the voices of both diverse Māori rangatahi, and Pacific/Pasifika youth including their mentors situated in a youth mentoring programme at a tertiary institution. The study contributes to understanding the importance of a relational approach that includes holistic approaches towards teaching and learning, particularly Indigenous relational theories that emphasise identity development within collectivist cultures drawing on Pacific/Pasifika and Māori constructs of wellbeing. Although there has been a convergence of literature from diverse areas such as ecological development psychology (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014) and socioemotional development (Durlak et al., 2011) there is a lack of research that considers the knowledge systems of diverse and minoritised ethnic groups in programmes.

The 12-week youth mentoring programme targeted at-risk youth outside of mainstream education, specifically youth aged 12–16 years old already in an alternative education service provider. The youth mentoring programme was embedded in an undergraduate service-learning course. Master's counselling students also attended the programme for placement hours towards their counselling degree. Students, mentors and counsellors met for 1 hour before the youth arrived as part of a flipped-classroom lecture.

Method

As a researcher, a key strength of participant observation is it gives a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon of culturally responsive, sustaining and safe practice as both “insider” and “outsider” (Pryce et al., 2020). As a qualitative method, naturalistic participant observation alongside tenets of ethnography, that is, a holistic approach was taken to fieldwork through participant observation and reflexive analysis (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019) enabled me to observe relationship behaviours as they unfolded naturally in the youth mentoring

programme in Aotearoa New Zealand context. Similarly, Deutsch and Spencer (2009) asserted a key strength of participant observational study is the ability to allow real-time data collection of both dyad and group relational processes. In this study the term dyad refers to the mentor-mentee dyad and triad refers to a mentor with two mentees.

The focus on dyad and triad groups gives insight to the relational processes and interactions between mentors and their mentees, useful for kaiako when thinking about ākongā and classroom practice that responds and sustains the culture and language of youth as well as providing culturally safe space. This overt approach facilitates the researcher to become part of the study group as an insider and gain an in-depth view of human realities of those participating in the programme. Direct observational methods such as participant observation are appropriate for site and group based mentoring programmes where researcher visits can focus on observation dyads engaged in activities in a location (Pryce et al., 2020).

The observational study was conducted at Week 1 (W1) gauging a more general overview of the moment-to-moment running of the programme. From W6 (midway) through to W12, a systematic observation of whānau groups and mentor-mentee dyad and triads was made observing different components of the programme where possible. Researchers must have a sense of epistemological awareness and instantiation of methods in qualitative projects assists understanding the access and justification of appropriate tools to answer one's research question or explore phenomena (Koro-Ljungberg et al., 2009). The ultimate goal was to ensure methodological congruence (Morse & Richards, 2002) where the Indigenous theories and my epistemological position as a Pasifika researcher were aligned with the purpose statements and research questions. Additionally, it was important to ensure the process of data collection and analysis are interrelated and serve the epistemological goals of Indigenous knowledge theories (Greckhamer & Koro-Ljungberg, 2005), in this case, a va relational approach. The needs of mentees were important considerations in determining how the observation was conducted. Their comfort and interest in my fuller participation was more important from a va relational lens where fa'aaloalo (respect) and manaaki (care and hospitality) was crucial in maintaining research relationships.

A note-taking narrative approach using a journal, noting incidences of culturally responsive, sustaining, and safe practice, and drawing on cultural constructs, was therefore more appropriate and practical. The original study design was to conduct observations at the beginning, middle and end of the programme. However, to allow time for the youth and mentors to settle and to connect in this new programme, combined with challenges associated with obtaining youth consent and assent, changes were made to the observation schedule. In Week 1, only programme-level activities and mentors were observed reviewing the more general processes of the programme environment and really to allow for the youth to settle in.

Observations at programme level and within whānau and dyad level of youth who consented with their mentors began in Week 6 and concluded in W12. The rationale behind this was because the youth mentoring programme advised that consent forms were sporadically coming in for youth, particularly those under 16 requiring both consent and assent forms. The process to identify participants for observation was guided by the programmer's giving confirmation of who returned consent and assent

forms and their attendance on a week-by-week basis. Given the uncertainty around attendance and check-in (counselling sessions) for youth, the ability to observe in a planned systematic manner was challenging.

Participants

A total of 22 youth (youth in alternative education = AEY) participated in the youth mentoring programme in Aotearoa New Zealand; however, only 11 returned consent and assent forms (under 16 years of age). There were 12 youth in total which included 3 female and 9 male youth at the time the study was conducted to participate in the research. Of the 25 mentors who participated in the programme, 14 returned consent forms and 11 were not included in the study as they either declined to participate in the research or their mentee did not consent to participate in the research study. Participants include 14 mentors; 10 were mentors (MT) and 4 were mentor coaches (MC) and as mentor coaches supported multiple whānau groups (whānau groups = WG).

Analysis

The data collected in this study were analysed using a reflexive thematic approach. Reflexive thematic analysis utilises a six-phase process, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), and allows flexibility to actively engage in reviewing coded data, generating themes and then considering provisional themes (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Active engagement with data field notes included notebook entries, detailed journal entries and initial reflexive thoughts after conversations with participants, including mentees, mentors, mentor coaches, tutors from alternative education present at the programme. After several rereading's with the field notes taken, data were systematically coded, and I made notes about my initial thoughts. A recursive approach of actively reviewing and generating themes from the initial provisional themes is consistent with reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2020).

Results

An important aspect of the findings is how a culture of self-determination was fostered at the programme level, whānau and dyad level. To understand the content and nature of culturally responsive, sustaining and safe youth mentoring, key programme elements and mentor interactions with mentees were analysed and aligned with aspects where young people's cultural and linguistic backgrounds were responded to and/or sustained throughout the programme. Selected examples from the many observation points over the programme are given below to exemplify where work towards a culture of self-determination was evident.

The results show the programme environment where youth mentoring related practices were culturally responsive and sustaining at dyad, whānau group (multiple

dyads) and programme level (Deutsch & Spencer, 2009). A multiple level lens of interactions of mentors and their practice that are effective and worthy of sustaining, may be useful for kaiako and ākonga particularly in the tertiary context with learners who have had negative educational experiences.

Programme Level Results

At a programme level, observations were initially focussed at the beginning (Wk1) and the end of the programme (Wk12). Some elements of culturally responsive and sustaining practice were incorporated, that particularly showed sensitivity to the cultural values of Māori rangatahi. Consistent with scholarship conceptualising culturally responsive and culturally relevant practice (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995), it was observed that the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of Māori rangatahi were taken into consideration and incorporated throughout the programme. One example was the inclusion of aspects of tikanga (custom or protocol), for example use of the faculty marae as a site for programme delivery where pōwhiri (formal welcome), poroporoaki (formal closing), karakia (ritual, chant, prayer or incantations) and waiata (song, chant or song) were visible. Pōwhiri is a relatively normalised practice in Aotearoa New Zealand, giving effect to bicultural obligations as Treaty partners. In addition, programmers used te reo Māori (the Indigenous and one of two official languages of Aotearoa New Zealand) within the programme discourse.

Throughout the 12-week programme, specifically in the pre-brief briefing programme component with mentors and mentor coaches I observed a time was set aside for reflection, reciting whakataukī (proverbs) and opening the floor for discussion. However, there was no reference to alagaupu (Samoan proverb) or other Pacific/Pasifika references. A vital moment missed by programmers to support mentors or mentor coaches with Pacific/Pasifika ancestry to enact key constructs and values of alofa, tautua, and to tausi the va tapuia to aid development of mentees with Pacific or mixed heritage. Nor did I witness a detailed explanation of the whakataukī cited as part of the programme of the social, cultural and historical significance, which seemed a lost opportunity for teaching and learning from a tuakana-teina (elder brother/sister/cousin or someone more senior – to the younger brother/sister/cousin or junior in the family) lens. Further, there was little dialogue between mentor coaches and mentors on the significance or relevance of the whakataukī. Although the inclusion and use of whakataukī was a possible attempt at culturally relevant practice and well-intentioned, the action fell short of being “for Māori by Māori” through a Kaupapa Māori lens (Pihama et al., 2002).

Engagement with whānau and community as follow-up to encourage rangatahi to engage further and support positive youth development is a vital step to improving educational outcomes for Māori rangatahi. Notably the female mentees were observed to readily enjoy the challenge of learning mau rākau (performing art of weaponry). The male mentees on the other hand were less inclined and their body language and facial expressions exhibited signs of apprehension. After some time had passed, the male mentees took courage from other female mentee participants and from the instructor who took time to manaaki (support, take care of or protect)

all participants. All rangatahi who signed up for this activity did so by their own volition reinforcing their right as Māori to participate in a self-determining way meaningfully (Smith, 1997).

The pro-social activity to design a cultural mural in Wk10 was another purposeful activity to foster strengths-based outcomes and a positive ethnic identity. Mentees were encouraged to think about an image or express themselves creatively by designing tiles. MC2 and MC3 (MC = Mentor Coach) encouraged all mentees present, especially Māori rangatahi, to incorporate their culture and language within their designs. The use of resources at the university appeared to be appreciated by mentees and from their respective service providers. During the activity, a key observation was mentees and tutors were excited to experience a university class environment where self-expression and building positive ethnic identities were encouraged. The results at programme level suggest learnings to draw on a va relational approach, that is, to use the resources available that tap into both Māori and Pacific/Pasifika youth interests which should be considered by programmers for kaiako in tertiary settings to support their practice.

Mentor Whānau Level Results

At the mentor whānau level of the youth mentoring programme, participant observations were focussed on key aspects of culturally responsive, sustaining and safe practice between groups of up to four pairs/triads. In general, the mentor coaches and mentors participated fully in the course programme content. At the mentor whānau group level, I observed the interactions between whānau members specifically in relation to the culturally translated activities. A notable observation was the diversity of matched pairs or dyads (mentor–mentee). In some cases, whānau groups included teams that were triads (mentor – x2 mentees) who were diverse in relation to their racial–ethnic identity.

Drawing on the conceptualisation of culturally responsive, sustaining and safe practice literature and theories a key point of observation at the whānau group level were the interactions of cultural responsiveness and sustaining practice where a mentee's cultural and linguistic background was taken into consideration. Also noted was when mentees' holistic health and wellbeing were considered, attending to their taha wairua (Durie, 1998; Pere, 1991) or spiritual health (Pulotu-Endemann, 2001), emotional/mental and physical wellbeing. Drawing on tenets of a cultural safety lens, notes and reflective journal entries were taken weekly of instances where assumptions, biases and values, and any power imbalances, were considered, to support the development of self-determining mentees.

In Wk11, Pro-Social Activity 1 was a spoken-word session. Focussed participant observation noted how Whānau Group [WG] Toru B worked collectively during the session. Below is an excerpt of notes taken immediately after a session, noting the interaction between, a mentor (MT6) and her mentee (AEY14) and myself as a participant observer.

AEY14 “I’m not feeling the slam poetry. It’s out of my comfort zone” AEY14 looked disengaged at this point. He shares his slam poetry with a peer AEY1.

AEY14 shares his poetry NOT with his mentor or myself but with a fellow peer AEY11. He says, “Because he’s my uso [brother]” Jokingly, we both reply, “oh it’s like that, is it?” and all we laugh. (Wk11, WG 3).

The activity was designed to foster positive identities where the recognition of the mana (prestige, influence or spiritual power) of their name was a priority. Notably, the whānau group also worked collectively and intuitively together with a respect and understanding of the va tapuia (sacredness) in sharing their creative pieces with each other as peers. Mentees experienced autonomy in creating poetry how they saw fit, and a challenge from which they experienced competence or mastery. In addition, their ability to have each other’s backs indicated a sense of relatedness which is a key component of self-determination.

In terms of alofa and tautua, the mentor was able to utilise her own Polycultural capital (Mila-Schaaf, 2011), knowledge, local humour and express herself in a way that signalled to her mentee that he was perfectly fine to share with his peers and not herself as a mentor. Polycultural capital is an inherent asset for rangatahi who are able to exercise a sense of agency and ability to efficiently reference more than one knowledge tradition (Mila-Schaaf, 2011). In other words, rangatahi choose selectively and respond effectively dependent on context and purpose. As participant observer of Pacific/Pasifika descent, I also was able to engage in culturally distinctive ways with rangatahi and recognise that youth don’t always need to share with adults or mentors in the room. Rather youth can be self-determining of who they choose to invite into their va relationships at different times. As this affirms the richness of Indigenous ways of being and knowing and how to tausi le va (care and nurture the relationship) from a relational approach in the youth mentoring context. Indeed, this is tautua enacted underpinning the identity, socioemotional and cognitive development to support self-determination.

Dyad Level Results

Similarly, at the dyad level, I observed incidents that were focussed on key aspects of practice that were responsive, sustaining and culturally safe. An example is in Wk8 during Supporting School Success where I noted the cultural and linguistic background of a mentee was considered, drawn on and utilised to support a culture of self-determination. This incident is an example of a dyad working together where the mentor has come to the session prepared and has critically thought about how she can support strengthening her mentee as a young Māori woman through learning te reo Māori both at the youth mentoring programme and as an extension to her current alternative education service provider learning.

In Supporting School Success. Mentor (MT8) and her mentee (AEY7) are engaged. I can see her facial expression and tone appropriate to mentee, smiling and laughing all the way through. MT8 and AEY7 quieten down together working on goals. They are working on a find-a-word in te reo Māori. MT8 is fluent in te reo and speaks and teaches AEY7 key words and phrases. AEY7 tells me she enjoys learning te reo on a weekly basis. This is good for AEY7

as it flows from with her alternative education tutors back at (alternative education service provider) who both speak the reo. AEY7 tells me “I attempt to pronounce a word. Sometimes it’s incorrect but she doesn’t care” AEY7 has MT8’s complete attention. Watching her body language, she bends down low and crouches at same level or lower than AEY7. MT8 seems cautious of body position and placement and what this might mean for power sharing? (Wk8, WG3)

These observations suggest that the mentor has a clear goal to tautua and mentor her mentee in culturally responsive and sustaining ways. That is, she is drawing on the Polycultural capital of not only herself but that of her mentee to achieve a course learning outcome. Specifically, she is mentoring in a way that shows her consciousness of the importance of culture, self-efficacy and identity by prioritising language acquisition and development in the mentee’s learning, in this case te reo Māori. Consistent with Webber (2012), this directly influences a stronger sense of racial–ethnic identity where Māori rangatahi are able to “repel negative stereotypes and accommodate other positive attributes, such as academic achievement, into their Māori identity” (p. 26). Furthermore, the mentor is exhibiting a critical consciousness of power imbalance and adjusts her body language, accordingly, meeting her mentee at a neutral level. The mentor’s intention in this interaction is to show alofa – to foster and build relational trust to further support a sense of belongingness and relatedness. Drawing on culturally responsive practice in education where success for Māori and Pacific/Pasifika students has been well documented as having strong positive student–teacher relations, the data are consistent with such ideas that culturally responsive pedagogies develop relationships (Bishop et al., 2009).

Discussion

The results in this study show the merits of exploring and enacting key cultural constructs in adolescent development. Self-determination and giving ākongā ample opportunity to gain a sense of competence, mastery and relatedness is necessary (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The environment planned activities and interactions are key aspects. As Paris (2012) has suggested, it is not enough to be sensitive to students and their families’ cultural values, rather more effective practice would be to protect the cultural values of students to help sustain their heritage culture. The examination of culturally responsive, sustaining and safe practice invokes the question raised almost 20 years ago by Pihama et al. (2002): “can real Tino Rangatiranga be achieved in existing Pākehā-dominated institutional structures?” (p. 34). In this light, how might Pacific/Pasifika ways of self-determination also be incorporated by referencing Pacific/Pasifika knowledge systems and values such as alofa, tautua and to tausi or care for through a va relational approach? Given ākongā are diverse often traversing multiple worlds, a va relational approach provides both Pacific/Pasifika and Māori ākongā an opportunity to respond and engage in unique ways of knowing and being where their cultures are sustained.

One way of doing this, would be to strategically ensure the role of whānau/’aiga is considered (Durie, 1998; Pere, 1991; Pulotu-Endemann, 2001). Involvement of Kaumātua, as respected knowledge holders (Kupa, 2009), and members of whānau are considered essential to the development of programmes seeking to work alongside Māori or Pacific/Pasifika youth. This approach aligns with Weiston-Serdan’s (2017) critical mentoring theoretical approach concerning mentoring marginalised or under-served youth. A youth-centric approach from a localised lens would mean including their communities to build bridges between students’ homes and youth mentoring programme experiences. As a result, self-determination, including a sense of competence, autonomy and relatedness, as framed by Deci and Ryan (2000), may be developed. A localised culturally informed lens of fostering self-determination requires an analysis of unequal power relations that considers the oversight of referencing knowledge systems to safeguard youths’ heritage culture and language.

Additionally, fostering self-determination from a Māori or Pacific/Pasifika lens needs to go beyond ensuring cultural activities and specific values are centred. Activities like karakia, whakataukī and kapa haka (Māori group dance) are useful; however, deeper engagement with the collective strengths and abilities of the youth is required, referencing and drawing on the multiple knowledge systems and languages they bring to the programme. Emphasis on youth collaboratively planning activities based on their interests and cultural and linguistic backgrounds might have been an empowering mechanism to establish high levels of competence, mastery and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Other learnings taken from the current study would be that although Māori rangatahi and Pacific/Pasifika youth were exposed to key activities such as kapa haka taught in one session during W10, the focus was specifically on mau rākau (performing art of weaponry). Future iterations could perhaps include a follow-up for rangatahi interested by coordinating links to their own communities for continued kapa haka experiences. Certainly, kapa haka includes other elements important to te ao Māori (Māori worldview) and is asserted as an Indigenous-based inclusive pedagogy (Whitinui, 2014).

Implications

In recent years, Aotearoa New Zealand schools have done much work to embed culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies into their practice for Māori and Pacific/Pasifika ākonga. This study highlighted the need for a va relational approach for youth programmes in the tertiary context that seek to serve Māori and Pacific/Pasifika ākonga, particularly those ākonga that are not in employment, education or training (NEET). This study also showed how key Indigenous constructs within a va relational approach could be drawn on by programmers to ensure Māori and Pacific/Pasifika ākonga have their cultural and linguistic backgrounds honoured and affirmed when they engage in youth mentoring programmes within a tertiary context.

Given a key aim of the cultural translation of the youth mentoring programme in Aotearoa New Zealand was to meet the diverse needs of Pacific/Pasifika and

Māori rangatahi, by providing a wrap-around support mechanism of therapy in the moment, this study showed how youth mentoring programmes in tertiary contexts might take learnings from a *va* relational approach, that is, drawing on key Indigenous constructs for Māori and Pacific/Pasifika ākonga and their communities, particularly when training student mentors as part of service learning course programmes. In this study observation notes showed scholarship across counselling, human services and social work regarding positive youth development and youth mentoring however there was an imbalance of visibility of Pacific/Pasifika and Māori theories or references. Although Pacific/Pasifika and Māori theories were not observed during the 12-week observation, models were briefly covered in the training prior to the programme commencement which included culturally responsive, sustaining and safe practice drawing on well-established education and health and wellbeing models such as Whare Tapa Whā (Durie, 1998), Fonofale model (Pulotu-Endemann, 2001), Te Wheke (Pere, 1991) and Te Vaka Atafaga (Kupa, 2009).

At programme level, I observed a key aspect of *ako* (teaching and learning) missing, that is the use of knowledge holders within Pacific/Pasifika communities. An invaluable strategy to complement a culturally responsive, sustaining and safe environment and practice would be to invite guest experts from Pacific communities with experience and knowledge of working with youth and how they enact *tautua*. Additionally, designing activities for goal planning must go beyond the promotion of conscientising and critically thinking about the social and cultural contexts from which their mentees come (Weiston-Serdan, 2017) and instead explicitly engage in including self-determination from a Māori or Pacific/Pasifika lens. An example of this is the inclusion of knowledge holders who can transmit intergenerational knowledge systems through practices such as *tuakana-teina* and *tautua* in culturally appropriate and sustaining ways. Additionally, further attention to embedding a *va* relational approach that recognises the heterogeneity of cultural identities of youth may have enhanced culturally responsive, sustaining and safe practice would mean creating a *va* (relational and social space) where a weaving of both the Western and Indigenous knowledge systems of the youth was visible and centred.

An environment that is culturally responsive and sustains the heritage, languages and cultures of youth is vital when considering safe and purposeful activities. Further, when responding to diverse Māori and Pacific/Pasifika mentees or ākonga indigenous constructs such as *alofa*, *tautua* and *tausi* and *va tapuia* are vital to developing identity, socioemotional and cognitive needs are important. Activities that enable rangatahi, including those with mixed ancestry, to develop in self-determined ways build their self-concept and directly have an impact on enhancing their *mana*. In the current study, the design of activities that are culturally responsive, sustaining and promoted culturally safe practice across the initial 12 weeks was an important starting point or baseline to foster the strengths of youth. The next step from a critical theoretical lens might be to go beyond supporting engagement throughout for all and addressing systemic and structural levels of unequal power relations to further unpack elements of race, ethnicity and culture in deeper and more meaningful ways that strategically include collaboration with *whānau* and community members.

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Data availability The data referred to in this study is available at <https://hdl.handle.net/2292/57825>.

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