

## Relational cultural identity and Pacific Language education

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*This article investigates how two Pacific language programmes in secondary schools outside of the broader region of Auckland, New Zealand, enabled an exploration, celebration, and deepening of vā (relational space) through language, and contributed to identity construction of students of Samoan and Tongan heritage. As the relational lens is rarely applied to language education, this study contributes to a new perspective of language education and identity research. It does so by looking at the complexity of vā in relation to language education and demonstrates how examining language education through the perspective of vā helps us to understand the relationship between language development and our physical, spiritual, cultural, and intellectual being. Findings show how Pacific language education can provide opportunities for students to develop relational Oceanic identities by strengthening connections in the vā between community, one's own language and other Oceanic peoples. In supporting construction of cultural identity, this small-scale study emphasizes benefits of providing heritage language programmes in secondary schools to promote culturally sustaining pedagogies which value and develop knowledges of home and school.*

*Keywords: Pacific language education, vā, cultural identity construction, relationality, culturally sustaining pedagogy*

### INTRODUCTION

In Aotearoa New Zealand, Pacific educational research and policy each advocate for teachers and school programs to draw on students' languages, cultures, and identities in supporting optimal student outcomes (Ministry of Education (MoE), 2019; Si'ilata, Samu, & Siteine, 2018). Recent research has introduced Pacific relational concepts such as *teu le va* (looking after and restoring the relational space) into discussions about developing positive teacher student relationships (Reynolds, 2017, D. Ostler-Malaulau, personal communication, 26 August 2019). However, the concept of relationality in Pacific language education and its contribution to identity construction has not been considered extensively in research. In this article, I report on a small-scale study based in a New Zealand city outside of Auckland, researching with teachers and students from two school communities. I argue that applying a relational lens to Pacific language education opens up opportunities for development, exploration, and construction of positive relational Oceanic cultural identities.

To begin, I outline my own positionality to provide the context of my research. I am connected with Pacific peoples through friendships, colleagues, students, and shared values. This research grew from my experience as a secondary school language teacher. New Zealand-born Pacific students I taught frequently expressed the desire to learn and

speaking their heritage languages. However, they were not able to learn these languages at school. The unfairness of a system which encourages learning status languages yet neglects Indigenous Pacific languages and cultures that students bring to school, frustrates me and resonates personally. My Welsh ancestors lost their Indigenous language through colonization. However, my mother reclaimed her Welsh language through immersion study in her 50s, an experience that greatly added to her sense of identity which she shared with her family. As a linguist, I speak multiple languages but not my own Welsh language. I acknowledge that, as a female Palangi teacher, I am part of the “white space”. I do not claim to be an expert on Pacific culture or speak for Pacific peoples. Rather, I am a teacher and linguist looking for solutions together with communities in order to see young people benefit from maintaining and learning their heritage languages.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

To understand the current study, it is useful to first define the term Pacific. I use the decolonized term *Pacific* (Vaai & Nabobo-Baba, 2017) to refer to all Pacific Island nations. In this understanding, Pacific people come from Oceania, the great “Sea of Islands” (Hau’ofa, 1993) interconnected and without boundaries and includes the global diaspora of Pacific peoples, acknowledging cultural and spiritual interconnections of the diverse extended Pacific family (Vaai & Nabobo-Baba, 2017, p. 8). I include Māori, the Indigenous people of New Zealand in this definition, *te reo Māori*, *te Ao Māori*, and *Matauranga Māori* (Māori language, worldview and knowledge of the universe) are integral to wider research implications beyond the scope of this article. However, as the Indigenous language of New Zealand, *te reo Māori* has a different status and treatment within the New Zealand education system. Therefore, I focus on other Pacific languages in New Zealand which do not have the same status within the curriculum as *te reo Māori*. In addition, Tongan spelling of Pacific terms, such as *Palangi* (people of European heritage), and *vā* (relational space) is used throughout because most participants are of Tongan heritage. I refer to the Samoan spelling of *va* when referring specifically to the Samoan concept of *teu le va* (looking after the relational space).

### Language, cultural identity and *vā*

Indigenous Pacific scholars describe formation of Oceanic cultural identity as relational rather than individualistic (Vaai & Nabobo-Baba, 2017). Cultural identity is constructed around relationships and spaces between people, and their spiritual and physical environment (Anae, 2016). Though Pacific languages have their own nuanced understanding of this relational concept of space, or *vā*, there is a shared pan-Pacific understanding that living in harmony with these *vā* requires reciprocity and respect (Airini et al., 2010). *Vā* is a “space that relates”, provides context, and holds “separate entities ... together in unity” (Mila-Schaaf, 2006, p. 8; Wendt, cited in Refiti, 2002, p. 209). Language and communication are essential tools which enable *vā* between people and their environment to be nurtured, strengthened, and restored. *Vā* also exists between a person and their language. A respectful and reciprocal relationship within this sacred *vā* between a person and their Indigenous or heritage language, enriches the linguistic experience and deepens one’s sense of cultural identity (V. Lui, personal communication, 28 February 2019). For Pacific peoples connected by Oceanic genealogies, histories, and knowledges (Hau’ofa, 1993; Lopesi, 2018), the ability to understand and communicate

using Indigenous Pacific languages enables exploration, celebration, and deepening of *vā* through which cultural identity is constructed strengthening connections both within the home community and the large, diverse Pacific extended family (Vaai & Nabobo-Baba, 2017).

Relational connection to community and cultural identity through language, provides a crucial foundation for overall wellbeing by increasing self-confidence and sense of belonging (Mila-Schaaf, 2006; Milne, 2017). Disconnection from community and cultural identity has the opposite effect and “increases the risk for every kind of stress-related disease, from depression to heart attack” (Fullilove, 2004, p. 14). Mila-Schaaf (2011) highlights challenges young New Zealand-born Pacific people encounter in negotiating their identity without Pacific language proficiency, whereby not speaking a Pacific language was linked with “in-authenticity . . . and a basis for exclusion” (p. 26). Given achieved, positive cultural identities are key to wellbeing, education is an important platform for linguistic and cultural identities to be valued and developed. The need to search and develop one’s identity intensifies during adolescence. Adolescents gauge how they are perceived and valued by others as well as how or if they can see themselves represented culturally at school and in the world they live (Paris, 2012; Seals & Kreeft-Peyton, 2016). Secondary schools are highly influential places for adolescents as they negotiate their cultural identity (Milne, 2017).

### **Language, culture, and identity in New Zealand education**

Valuing languages, cultures, and identities of all students is recognized as part of the core values and principles guiding implementation of the New Zealand Curriculum (NZC), (MoE, 2007, pp. 9–10). *The code of professional responsibility and standards for the teaching profession* (Education Council, 2017) requires teachers “to promote and protect principles of . . . sustainability . . . social justice” (p. 12) and respect all students’ heritage, language, identity and culture (p. 10). With respect to Pacific education, *Tapasā* (MoE, 2019), a framework for teachers and schools to effectively support Pacific learners and communities, makes teacher awareness of Pacific students’ identities, languages and cultures the focus of its first *Turu* (Competency) (MoE, 2019, p. 8). Professional development and teacher education promote in-service and pre-service teachers’ understanding and use of culturally sustaining pedagogies that connect home and school worldviews and knowledges including language and culture (Berryman & Bishop, 2016; Chu, Glasgow, Rimoni, Hodis, & Meyer, 2013; Si’ilata et al., 2018). Recent discussion of enacting culturally sustaining pedagogies now includes understanding and embracing Pacific relational concepts such as *teu le va* (looking after the *vā*) and *tauhi vā* (nurturing and maintaining relational connections) in supporting development of positive and strong relationships with Pacific students and families (Reynolds, 2017; Fa’avae, 2017).

Policy documents such as the NZC (MoE, 2007), *The code of professional responsibility standards for the teaching profession* (Education Council, 2017), and *Tapasā* (MoE, 2019) and Pacific educational research (Chu et al., 2013) outline the benefits of nurturing Pacific languages, cultures, and identities. Yet, Indigenous Pacific scholars argue that, in many New Zealand schools, Pacific potential remains unrealized as Pacific students are unable to see themselves reflected in school (Salesa, 2017). This is particularly true for Pacific language education in secondary schools. Within the NZC, Pacific languages fit into the learning languages curriculum area where the focus is learning a new language rather than heritage language maintenance. Though the NZC states Pacific languages

have a “special place” because of “New Zealand’s close relationship with” Pacific Peoples (MoE, 2007, p. 24), the reality is that most schools prioritize the learning of status languages such as French or Mandarin (Si’ilata et al., 2018). Considering New Zealand’s location in the Pacific; the emphasis on valuing heritage language, culture, and identity in research and policy; and that Pacific peoples have the highest proportion of school-aged children, it is surprising that, in 2018, of over 2,500 secondary schools nationwide, only ten offered some form of Pacific medium education and 38 schools offered a Pacific language as a separate subject (Education Counts, 2018; MoE, 2019). Perhaps because there are so few schools supporting Pacific language maintenance, focus on how school programs can specifically support the development of language proficiency and positive cultural identities has received little attention from research—with some important exceptions (see McCaffery & McFall, 2010; Milne, 2017; Si’ilata et al., 2018).

Si’ilata et al. (2018) and Milne (2017) build on an international body of Indigenous and heritage language education research, which provides empirical evidence that the development of simultaneous bi- or multi-lingualism and literacy strengthens student metacognitive abilities, academic confidence, and cultural identity enabling students to move comfortably between languages and cultures (Seals & Kreeft-Peyton, 2016). Si’ilata et al. (2018) show how mainstream English-medium primary school teachers effectively integrate meaningful use of Pacific languages throughout the school day, bilingual texts, and linguistic sharing and comparison to celebrate, normalize, and develop bilingualism and biliteracy. In secondary education, Milne’s (2017) *Colouring in the white spaces*, emphasizes the power of placing development of secure, conscientized, cultural identity at the heart of schools in positively determining overall educational success. Milne (2017), for example, shows how three South Auckland schools increase overall community, cultural, and academic outcomes by enabling Māori and Pacific students to be immersed in Māori and Pacific languages and cultures to live, learn, and develop as Māori or as Tongan throughout the school day.

Though Pacific language education research draws on language, culture, and identity in supporting student success (McCaffery & McFall, 2010; Milne, 2017; Si’ilata et al., 2018), Oceanic relationality - an integral part of Pacific identity construction - has not yet been explicitly explored in research. Pacific language-related research has tended to focus on Pacific language maintenance in connection with English literacy development in early childhood education and primary schools. At secondary school level, with the exception of Milne (2017), opportunities for Pacific identity construction through language education are not well understood. Furthermore, research thus far is generally based in the Auckland region where the largest Pacific population in the world resides. The large number of Pacific peoples living in Auckland allow young Pacific peoples more exposure to Pacific languages and culture as they construct cultural identity. Opportunities for young Pacific people to construct identity through language and culture are unexplored in schools outside of Auckland where there are smaller but not insignificant Pacific populations.

This study builds on the cross-disciplinary understanding that inclusion of students’ languages, cultures, and identities in schools is paramount to overall equitable outcomes. It also draws on the understanding that, for Pacific peoples, positive achieved cultural identities are relational. Therefore, the study asks:

*How do secondary school Pacific language-focused programmes contribute to Oceanic cultural identity construction?*

By focusing on how Pacific language education can contribute to construction of relational Oceanic cultural identity, this article explores connections between language, identity, and relationality, and the role of this interconnection in educational programmes. This article further builds on prior research by working with school communities outside of the Auckland region, thus focusing on a previously underexplored geographic region.

## METHODOLOGY

### Social justice framework

Tuhiwai Smith (2012) recommends a social justice framework for research with Indigenous peoples and minority groups in order to render the research more “respectful, ethical, sympathetic, and useful” (p. 9). Research within a social justice framework seeks to decolonize traditional Western research methodologies which have harmed in the past and requires “a radical compassion . . . that seeks collaboration” (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012, p. xii) and redistributes and equalizes knowledge hierarchies (Keane, Khupe, & Seehawer, 2017). From a social justice perspective on quality education, institutions need to focus on increasing the inter-related dimensions of inclusivity, equity, relevance, and democracy (Tikly & Barret, 2011). Inclusive and relevant education systems allow all students to develop “key capabilities that individuals, communities, and society . . . have reason to value” (Tikly & Barret, 2011, p. 3). This includes Indigenous knowledges conveyed through language and culture. A social justice framework includes communities in decision-making processes throughout. Researchers should be accountable to all involved. Knowledge generated in the research “should relate back to the lives of those who contributed to the research” (Keane et al., 2017, p. 22).

### *Teu le va*

As the relational concept of *vā* is central to this study and a social justice framework places the worldview and needs of the relevant communities at the centre of the research (Ponton, 2018), I use *teu le va* methodology (Airini et al., 2010). *Teu le va* is a Pacific-designed approach, advocated for use in Pacific educational research (Chu et al., 2013). Using the Samoan word *teu* (to look after) and encompassing the concept of *vā*, *teu le va* aims to identify, cultivate, and nurture the *vā* or spaces and relationships between stakeholders in Pacific educational research. *Teu le va*, as a methodology, draws on traditional Samoan relational ethic, *teu le va* (Anae, 2016). Traditionally, *teu le va* demonstrates how to care for sacred relational arrangements (Anae, 2016). If a problem occurs within the *va*, *teu le va* insists that “direct action” must be taken to “correct the relationship” (Anae, 2016, p. 121). Correcting and reconciling a break in the *va* will improve outcomes for all involved. When relational and ethical space is nurtured and respected, each person involved has “power that is fundamental to human development” (Anae, 2016, p. 127). Applying Indigenous understanding to this research methodology, means researchers must continuously expose, understand, and reconcile *vā* between different communities involved. In looking after relationships, collectively and collaboratively generated new knowledge is more likely to be transferred across these *vā* to achieve optimal outcomes and action for Pacific education (Airini et al., 2010, p. 10). Furthermore, *teu le va* methodology explicitly demands constructive outcomes for learners from the research, and the positionality of the researcher must be transparent (Ponton, 2018).

In applying *teu le va* methodology to this research, I regularly communicate with, and seek advice from, Pacific leaders, colleagues, and friends from the communities involved. My involvement with schools and community leaders on language-related projects is ongoing. I attend community meetings and celebrations, and engage with relevant government agencies regarding language-related matters.

### Methods

This research received ethical approval from Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. This study was conducted in two secondary school communities outside of Auckland, New Zealand. The first school has around 50 students of a total school roll of 1,000 who identify as having Pacific heritage. In this school, Pasifika studies is a cross-curricular, cross-year level option subject available for students in Years 10 to 13 (ages 14 to 18). With the support of community language teachers and one facilitating teacher, Pasifika Studies enables students to develop home language and Indigenous Pacific knowledge as part of their national qualifications in languages, social sciences, and performing arts. The second school community is the Tongan language cluster, which included local educators and Tongan students from different schools. It meets after school on Fridays in Terms 2 and 3 of the New Zealand school year in a centrally located host school. Participation in the cluster enables Tongan language development to be included as part of national qualifications.

The facilitating teachers of the two different Pacific language programmes (Pasifika studies and the Tongan language cluster) were invited to participate in this study. These teachers then invited interested students and community language teachers to participate in an interview or focus group discussion. The four participating teachers were interviewed individually. Six students from each school community participated in a focus group discussion held during their respective class times. The focus group discussions lasted between 40 to 45 minutes. Tables 1 and 2 provide further information about these participants:

**Table 1: Overview of participants from Pasifika Studies**

Student participants	Teacher participants
4 Tongan students (1 Tongan-born, 3 NZ-born), aged 16–18, varying degrees of language proficiency	1 Samoan teacher, Samoan-born
2 Samoan students (1 Samoan-born, 1 NZ-born), aged 16–18, varying degrees of language proficiency	1 NZ European teacher who facilitates NCEA assessment in different Pacific languages, Pacific studies research, Pacific performing arts and community tutors

**Table 2: Overview of participants from the Tongan language cluster**

Student participants	Teacher participants
6 NZ-born Tongan students, aged 16 - 18, varying degrees of language proficiency	1 Tongan teacher, Tongan-born



	1 NZ European teacher who facilitates Tongan Language NCEA assessment, community tutors and relationships between the Tongan language cluster and secondary schools of students attending the cluster
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The methods that were selected for data collection considered the needs of the school communities, my positionality as a Palangi teacher-researcher, and the logistics of classroom-based research. Four semi-structured interviews were conducted with participating teachers. In addition, two student focus groups (one in each school community) were conducted with 12 students in total. I was a participant observer of one class in each school setting, enabling me to talk and work with students and support the teacher if required. All methods were chosen as interactive, relationship-focused data collection methods to suit best the schedules of the participants. Funding restricted me to one classroom visit with students and prevented me from easily returning the focus group transcripts to students for further comments. Audio recordings of the semi-structured interviews and focus groups were transcribed and transcripts were made available to the participating teachers for comment and review. Pseudonyms were used for all participants' names and data from the interviews, focus groups and participant observations were analysed using grounded theory described by Charmaz (2014). By sorting, reviewing, and further refining patterns and connections emerging in the data, events of significance were identified and analysed, using interactional sociolinguistics and critical discourse analysis approaches to discourse analysis.

## FINDINGS

Findings suggest that Pacific language education provides an effective platform for construction of multiple relational identities in numerous ways: by building bridges, providing opportunities for students to discover and nurture *vā* among themselves and their language, and by exploring relational Oceanic identity through language. The examples provided below focus on three participants with supporting evidence from other participating students and teachers. These examples are illustrative of a much larger pattern occurring within an extensive data set.

### Bridge building

Data indicate that Pacific language education within the mainstream secondary school curriculum helps build bridges between and within the home, school, and community.

Below, Isileli, a Year 13 New Zealand-born Tongan student in Pasifika Studies, discusses why he enjoys this class in an interview:

What I enjoy it is . . . you get to express yourself in your own language so . . . you can . . . ask Grandma and ask Mum and Dad to help because they would understand more of your language . . . it is . . . something that you can bring forward instead of than hiding it away . . . instead of making it background . . . it is . . . a way to learn more of your language than learning English, so you have that as well which will help a lot in your future jobs, and stuff where you have to understand other people where you can understand because you can understand languages and stuff like that.

Isileli discussed how in Pasifika Studies he can “bring forward” his identity rather than “hiding it” as language connected and related his home and school worlds. As his parents

and grandparents are fluent Tongan speakers, they can support his learning of Tongan at school. Value placed on home language development by home and school enables a bridge to be built, thus strengthening the home-school *vā*. Isileli saw further value in how his ability to use Tongan interweaves relationally with different aspects of his life. Language connected him with his own family but he also saw that being bilingual has cultural capital, possibly helping with “future jobs” as it facilitates understanding “other people” and languages. Through language, his family, school, and future career formed part of his relational identity rather than being compartmentalised.

For Kapo, 16, and Sione, 18, two New Zealand-born students studying with the Tongan language cluster, learning Tongan enables them to more deeply understand and appreciate their Tongan heritage and perspectives of elders within their own communities.

I think sometimes the things we learn here will sometimes surprise us . . . because . . . we haven't been brought up in Tonga . . . our teacher is Tongan, so he . . . understands a lot more about the way THEY live in Tonga than we do . . . So, to have . . . a first-hand experience from him provides us with insight to how their lives were compared to how our lives are here. (Kapo)

I like listening, to stories, especially around culture . . . I like the history and stuff . . . There are some things that we have never heard of before . . . the economy . . . as a Tongan person growing up in NZ, you'd think that the economy doesn't affect Tonga, and . . . that Tongan people are real freelance . . . go with the flow but actually Tonga is really structured! (Sione)

Kapo emphasizes two distinct groups within his community “we . . . us . . . our lives . . . here”, meaning New Zealand-born Tongan students, and “they . . . their lives”, Tongan-born parents and teachers. Sione makes similar distinctions between groups in mentioning “things that we have never heard of before”. Though not explicitly stated here, this separation of Island-born and New Zealand-born groups within communities highlights a disconnect between the two groups. The broader data set from this research and academic literature provide convincing evidence that this disconnect is reality for many Pacific communities. Language education provides a different platform whereby students can gain “first-hand experience” and “insight”, listen to “stories . . . around history and culture” of Tongan culture. This allows New Zealand and Tongan-born Tongans to compare, discuss, and reflect together. In the reflection process, students unpack how they make sense of traditional Indigenous values in relation to Western values they experience going to school in New Zealand, which then allows them to comprehend, negotiate, and appreciate this *vā*. This is illustrated in Sione's reflection on the economy, how Tonga is much more “structured” and less “freelance” than he previously assumed. Later Sione discusses how initially Tongan traditional knowledge “doesn't make any sense . . . in terms of what we grew up with” but with an open mind “everything . . . clicks in . . . makes sense”. The sense making of two different worldviews happening in the language class provides a way of nurturing the *vā*, developing relational identity between the community elders or those born in Tonga and the younger New Zealand-born Tongans. A bridge has been built between “they” and “us” within communities.

### ***Vā* between language and self**

In analysing why Isileli enjoys taking Pasifika studies and what helps him to learn, we can explore how nurturing *vā* between a person and their heritage language can deepen one's sense of cultural identity.



In class we get assigned work . . . we have a Tongan teacher . . . which helps tells me that my words are too basic. So, I go home and start talking to grandma . . . Grandma is like “these are the type of words . . . they are not informal”, because the main Tongan language is . . . informal sometimes. But if you learn more about your Tongan language, you can see the words, how to make it much more formal than normal talking, so that is what I have been working on in my formal writing in Tongan . . . I ask my grandma for help and she gives me some words. I write it down, I got . . . a little list of Tongan words and I write the meaning of each word . . . Pasifika studies is . . . a good place to really talk your language and just improve on it, more than just learning but improve . . . I don’t wanna just know the basics I wanna know MORE than just the basics. (Isileli)

Being able to learn Tongan in Pasifika studies at school is a positive experience for Isileli. He wants to “improve . . . know MORE than just the basics”. He recognizes that deepening his knowledge of Tongan requires effort and investment of his time and himself. However, he appreciates that this effort is rewarding as it provides deeper insight. The “assigned work” in Pasifika Studies requires him to speak, read, write, and listen in Tongan, providing Isileli with a platform to develop a deeper knowledge and understanding of his language. The Tongan teacher shows Isileli where his vocabulary is “too basic” prompting him to ask his Grandma about different levels of formal registers in Tongan. When discussing language, Grandma is able to instil Tongan cultural and family values expressed through formal and informal language registers that are less familiar to young Tongans growing up in New Zealand.

Through Isileli’s investment of time, interest, and study, he is showing respect to his language, which enables him to experience reciprocity within this *vā*. In nurturing this *vā* between self and language, Isileli can “see more” of his language strengthening his sense of Tongan identity. Further student discourse strengthens evidence of how Pacific language education at school might support students to develop respectful and reciprocal *vā* with their languages. Isileli’s classmates recognize that improving language ability means “we have to . . . challenge ourselves” (Samoan student), but that in investing in their languages they see benefits such as “good grades”, being bilingual, having “good communication with your family” and being able to help your family with translation (Samoan and Tongan students, Pasifika Studies).

This reciprocal experience of *vā* with one’s language supports construction of a relational identity and may also strengthen multiple *vā* within one’s life. Isileli’s investment in improving his Tongan shows respect for and can be tied to his family’s input because they help him to develop and understand *vā* with his language, culture, family, community, and environment. This relationality extends to his relational Oceanic identity.

### **Relational Oceanic identity through language**

Pasifika Studies enables students from different Pacific language backgrounds to study both their own and each other’s languages together. Interviews and observations indicate that this multilingual approach enables students with opportunities to connect relationally through language and strengthen a connected Oceanic identity. Isileli describes class language learning and language use: “Usually we are all together as a class trying to speak each other’s languages”. Each lesson begins with “do now” activities involving translation of an English sentence into the different languages spoken by students. Students help each other to translate correctly, then the class compares linguistic similarities and differences. The regular, on-going nature of this activity now sees students enjoy trying to predict, translate, and speak other languages in the class. Students

do not sit in language-based groups in class rather “all together”, though community language experts employed by the school are able to support the language learning process of individual language groups at set times during the week. Below, the Pasifika Studies teacher discusses how this comparative multilingual approach supports student awareness of their own relationality and connectedness through language.

[M]y job is actually to make them aware of . . . similarities between the languages but also raise their consciousness of where it relates to English as well . . . what . . . often happens now is that the Tongan student will say “oh Miss, can I read the Fijian?” or the Fijian student “Oh can I read the Samoan” so they . . . are very aware of the Pacific realm . . . that they are part of something bigger, and that is where their strength is.

Student and teacher perspectives from Pasifika Studies show an educational context which can teach and reinforce the need for New Zealand-born students to understand themselves as having an Indigenous Oceanic identity (Vaai & Nabobo-Baba, 2017) and benefits this brings. For New Zealand-born Pacific students, experiencing linguistic connections with different languages is a powerful tool in establishing an understanding of the Pacific as an interrelated great “sea of islands” (Hau’ofa, 1993) interconnecting “land, sea, skies, and people” (Vaai & Nabobo-Baba, 2017, p. 7). In Pasifika Studies, the cross-curricular approach of multilingual education social science-focused research projects, and Pacific performing arts further contributes to student and teacher understanding of being “part of something bigger” (Pasifika studies teacher).

## **DISCUSSION**

This article argued that Pacific language education in secondary schools can enable Pacific students to explore and construct relational Oceanic cultural identities. Discourse analysis provided a rich, multilayered description of students and teachers constructing cultural identity through linguistic discussion and comparison enabling exploration of multiple *vā* between languages, cultures and worldviews. Though the study is set in the New Zealand context, the findings and following considerations may have implications for other national education systems seeking to support the languages, cultures, and identities of multicultural student populations.

Relationality is not commonly applied to language education. Yet, language education can support students to understand the existence and reciprocal nature of *vā* between people, their language(s) and their construction of identity is essential to achieve positive cultural identities. As young Pacific peoples in New Zealand increasingly identify with multiple cultural heritages (Salesa, 2017; Si’ilata et al, 2018) negotiating cultural identity and navigating multiple cultural *vā* becomes complex (Mila-Schaaf, 2011). Tongan scholar, Taumoefolau (2017), reiterates the complexities of cultural tensions for bilingual Tongan-English women negotiating traditional and Western identities around multiple *vā*. Tensions described by Tongan students in this study mirror how identity construction is viewed in applied linguistics as “multiple, changing, and a site of struggle” (Darvin & Norton, 2015, p. 36) but discussion and reflection enable movement beyond the struggle to see how identities hold possibilities for the future. Mila-Schaaf (2011, p. 44) suggests the need to “renegotiate the *va*” (p. 44) or to seek a “new kind of *va* . . . mak[ing] relations from tensions . . . in a shared space” (Refiti, 2010, p. 1). Pacific language education, as found in Pasifika studies and the Tongan language cluster provides a platform for renegotiating the multiple *vā*. Isileli, Kapo, and Sione were able to explore and resolve

tensions existing between traditional and Western values expressed through culture and language such as formal structures and language registers.

Additionally, a relational lens applied to languages and language education is a useful tool for language teachers, students, and communities. Nurturing *vā* between self and language embodies the investment and care required in learning and maintaining all languages but also the educational and emotional benefits from nurturing heritage or additional language competence. Enabling students such as those in Pasifika studies to see that investing time in improving heritage languages can help better “understand cultural identity”, communicate well with family or “get good grades” can increase student confidence and wellbeing: educational goals of the NZC. Teachers and communities (as seen in the Tongan language cluster) who are aware of, understand, and support the nurturing of *vā* between language and self by encouraging young people to “have a go” at using the language rather than expecting native-like proficiency, may also help to break down linguistic and cultural barriers between Island and New Zealand-born peoples (Mila-Schaaf, 2011). Though the scope of this article is not able to examine language maintenance and revitalization within these programmes, it is possible that the concept of *vā* between language and self also carries implications for Pacific language maintenance and revitalization.

Furthermore, the study shows that in learning multiple languages together students and teachers find joy in discovering relational interconnection of different Pacific languages providing students with tangible evidence of how Oceanic identities are “part of something bigger”, strengthening cultural identity and sense of belonging to the “great sea of Islands” (Hau’ofa, 1993). A relational approach to language education in general would help students of all heritages to more deeply understand their own identities and those of others. Thus, understanding how we are all connected (Hereniko, 2018).

Programmes discussed in this article show enactment of valuing and developing relational, cultural identities through language. This meant students could see and be themselves in the classrooms. However, in the picture of New Zealand secondary education, such programmes are limited (McCafferey & McFall, 2010; Salesa, 2017). In addition, the concept of relationality and its role in positive identity construction is not well understood within mainstream education. The two programmes discussed here function at the margins of mainstream education and rely on individual teacher agency rather than whole school systems. Mainstream secondary schools genuinely seeking to enact culturally sustaining pedagogies can learn from and build on the model of both programmes, factoring in the time and resourcing required within school budgets and programming.

## CONCLUSION

This article argued that Pacific language education can contribute to positive construction of relational Oceanic cultural identities. Though I actively sought advice from Pacific advisors, this research would benefit from having an Indigenous co-researcher perspective to counterbalance unintentional Western bias I bring to the research, for example by using Pacific data collection and analysis methods. In spite of its limitations, the study shows the importance of relationality and of how language supports navigation of identity construction. The study provides practical examples for teachers and schools wishing to apply a relational lens to genuinely embed culturally sustaining programmes

and examples of the resourcing required to implement current educational policies such as *Tapasā* (MoE, 2019). Further research could consider a wider number of school programmes and languages and how such programmes might contribute to language maintenance and revitalization. Language education through the perspective of *vā* has huge potential to further interconnect Oceania the great “Sea of Islands” (Hau’ofa, 1993) in our modern world.

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### **BIOGRAPHY**

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