**Fonua: Lands, languages, teaching and learning**

Language Politics in the ‘National Diploma in Teaching Early Childhood Education (Pasifika)’

(A work in progress)

Mere Kēpa

Linitā Manu’atu

m.kepa@auckland.ac.nz

linita.manuatu@aut.ac.nz

**Abstract**

In this paper the Indigenous/colonized Māori and Tongan writers question the development of the *National Diploma in Teaching Early Childhood Education (Pasifika)* offered by the Auckland University of Technology’s School of Education in Aotearoa-New Zealand. We argue that instrumental or technical education does not privilege Tongan, Samoan, Niue, Fijian, Tokelau and Kuki Airini Māori peoples’ languages and cultures in tertiary education. Rather, current technocratic approaches to teaching and learning symbolize the tenuous relationship the groups of people have in education institutions. The danger for Tongan, Samoan, Niue, Fijian, Tokelau and Kuki Airini Māori teachers and students in the tertiary institutions’ preference for instrumental pedagogy is that they may come to believe that there is one way of teaching and learning, one valid methodology, and one valid policy of knowing about how people relate to the educative environment. An equally important threat to them is that so immobile, rigid and powerful is the relationship between English language and its attendant practices that they could move into the position set aside for them in the higher education hierarchy. Sometimes teachers play an important part in establishing practices through which students are overwhelmed by the pedagogy.

The significant notion is that Tongan, Samoan, Niue, Fijian, Tokelau and Kuki Airini Māori or ‘Pasifika’ peoples could become better informed about their colonized position in education institutions when they draw upon the language and culture of their indigenous lands alongside their learning and education in Aotearoa-New Zealand. On the concept of *Fonua* Tongan people, for instance, can create and re-create their knowledge, their approaches to knowledge and their systems of knowing that are more desirable and worthy of support because of the perceived education and economic benefits that will be derived from such development. Specifically, the focus of the presentation is the colonization and decolonisation of Tongan people’s language and culture in the National Diploma. Hence, we conceptualize pedagogical possibilities that would enable Pasifika teachers and organizations to transform approaches to teaching and learning that dismiss Tongan language and culture in the Diploma, and thereby to offer practical solutions to privilege (advantage) Pasifika approaches to language learning and teaching.

**The Linguistic Landscape**

In his text *Pedagogy of Freedom*, Paulo Freire has contended that teachers concerned only with data alienated from the situations most people occupy, live in an idealized world, a world just of data (Freire, 1996). Further, not only does present day language teaching theory offer little critique of the alienation of a person’s or group’s intimate language and culture, but the field is amongst the biggest advocates of the tools and technologies emphasizing the alienation (Kepa, 2001: 36; see also Haworth, 2005:91-109; Taumoepeia, 2004:66-76; Manu’atu, 2000: 29; McLaren, 1995: 11-12; Bankston & Zhou, 1995;3; Deyhe, 1995: 254; Syme, 1995: 35; Harklau, 1994: 24; Giroux, 1983: 202-203).

Most important, the Indigenous Tongan academic, Melenaite Taumoepeia has taken the time to critically consider that “… many of our languages are declining. ... in New Zealand we need to be bilingual and the difficulty is how to become bilingual when there is overwhelming pressure to become monolingual in English” (Taumoepeia, 2004: 66). Thus, the writers have to ask ourselves if language teaching and learning, as they are being communicated in Aotearoa-New Zealand, leave ‘Pasifika’ peoples vulnerable and alienated in society. We have to ask ourselves if development refers to capacity building or strengthening the potential of ‘Pasifika’ students’ language and culture; rather than only sustaining English domination and instrumental virtuosity. Situated within the AUT University’s School of Education, we will discuss how the instrumental discourse grounded on the assumptions of individual success, competition and sovereignty sidelines languages and cultures that are embedded in a relationship between beings and place, society and culture, subjectivity and objectivity.

**Pasifika: the ‘land’ of Linguistic Imperialism**

For the most part, the Ministry of Education’s developers of the ‘National Diploma in Teaching Early Childhood Education (Pasifika)’ seem to draw on pedagogical approaches that enhance aspects of English language and technical education to counter the language and culture of the Samoan, Tongan, Niue, Tokelau, Fijian and Cook Islands Māori city dwelling, low income students who, in the main, are mature women. It is important to note that the use of the term ‘Pasifika’ is consistent with the purposes of the Ministry of Education. That is, the terminology: "does not refer to a single ethnicity, nationality, gender or culture. The term is one of convenience used to encompass a diverse range of peoples from the South Pacific region and people residing in Aotearoa who have strong family and cultural connections to Pacific Island countries. Hence the use of the term Peoples rather than People. It is a collective term used to refer
to men, women and children of Cook Islands, Fijian, Niuean, Tokelauan, Samoan, Tongan and other Pasifika or mixed heritages. It includes a variety of combinations of ethnicities, recent migrants or 3rd, 4th or 5th generation New Zealand-born” (Terms of Reference, Te Kura Mātauranga, AUT’s School of Education, 17 February 2004)

The widespread appropriation of the name ‘Pasifika’, flanked by others such as ‘Pacific’, ‘Pacificans’ Pacific Islander’ or its abbreviated form PI, obscures the complexities and interests in which the ways of interacting by people from Tonga, Samoa, Niue, Tokelau, Fiji and the Cook Islands are produced. On this appropriation, the label is such a nebulous construction that educational institutions decline to point out that its usage often indicates simply that a person or group of people is not part of the privileged discourse or prevailing New Zealand European/Pālangi society. To make the issue even more complex, the terminology grounds the construction of a universalizing image with no consideration of the scope of linguistic, cultural, including political, regional, economic, religious, and spiritual ways that Pasifika peoples distinguish themselves and others. All too often, the peoples are homogenized or commodified as a single entity or ‘thing’ that allows the exercise of a subtle and insidious form of manipulation and exploitation; that is to say alienation of, and power over them. The pedagogy of homogeneity denies Pasifika students’ preparation to behold the political realities of being Tongan in the Diploma, for instance, to live with purpose and presence with others in Aotearoa-New Zealand, and to change the prevailing society’s exclusionary attitudes and practices towards them (Kēpa, 2001 see also, Balto, 2005; Hough & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2005; Meyer, 1998; Ladson-Billing, 1997; Murrel, 1997). Suffice to say that there is clear support from the literature for thinking and practice that are focused on beings-in-relation-with place or Fonua. (Manu’atu, 2005)

**Fonua: People, Placenta, Birth & Burial**

According to the Indigenous Māori academic, Mason Durie, “While there are important differences in the circumstances of Indigenous peoples in Aotearoa-New Zealand or in Tonga, or between Australian Aborigines and native Fijians, or between native Hawaiians and native Americans, or between the Nisga’a of Canada and the Saami of Norway, there are commonalities that serve to emphasize the practices shared by First Nations peoples in the so-called fourth world” (Durie, 2003, p. 271). So, just how should Tongan people encounter Durie’s notion? What pedagogical and philosophical ideas can be drawn from Tongan language and culture? In order to speculate about ways of thinking and communication, and approaches to language teaching and learning Fonua is taken as a metaphor to contextualize, to speak about, to question, to dialogue, and to conceptualize how Tongan people make sense of themselves and their development in the ‘worlds’ in which they live. Two inter-related notions or ‘worlds’ namely *tualifonua* (being indigenous) and *nofofonua* (residing permanently in another country) underpin the metaphor (Manu’atu, 2005:137). The speculative idea is that both worlds are intimately related in energy, spirit and life force. The pedagogical idea is that Tongan people living in Aotearoa-New Zealand can develop critical perspectives on indigeneity to inform their residency in the new place. To be precise, they are residing in a Fonua of which they are not indigenous but with the legal status of Resident. The significant notion is that Tongan people who reside in Aotearoa-New Zealand could become better informed about their alienated position in education institutions in both Aotearoa and Tonga when they draw upon the language and culture of their indigenous land alongside their learning and education in New Zealand. Importantly, Tongan people can create and re-create their knowledge, their approaches to knowledge and their systems of knowing that are more desirable and worthy of support because of the perceived education and economic benefits that will be derived from such development.

In Tongan language, Fonua literally refers to the people, the placenta, the place of birth and burial. As a pedagogical concept, therefore, Fonua speaks a holistic, not in the universal sense, understanding of teaching and learning embedded in relations of living and dying. These relations are both physical and spiritual. This means the linguistic and political relationships that Tongan people form, experience and develop can be spoken about entirely through the concept of Fonua. In consequence, Fonua provides a ‘frame’ to speak Tongan beliefs and knowledge on say Human Development in the Diploma’s coursework and by extension relational pedagogy to overcome what Hough and Skutnabb-Kangas have called, “... the legacy and consequences of linguistic and cultural genocide and, in the process, create new and liberating histories for us all” (Hough & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2005: 115).

Fonua is distinguished by distinctive relations and approaches to language teaching and learning. The most salient of these are: (a) the historical context of Fonua, living and dying; (b) the focus on a culturally alienated group in New Zealand society, Tongan people; (c) the specific relationship of Tongan scholars, researchers, and academics to Tongan language and culture; (d) a greater trust in multi-disciplinary approaches; (e) a greater trust in intercultural and transcultural approaches and (f) a greater confidence in orality and talanoa within the education community to overcome the imbalance in narrating coursework created by primary reliance on written text. The last feature is particularly important in the case of Fonua: because Tongan like most Pasifika languages was exclusively oral, written documentation tells only one side of a two-pronged story of cultural relationships. When Tongan students can learn to use Tongan language in a more specialized way their capacity for communication, but only to other members of the cultural group, will be enlarged. And, when all the teachers and students in the Diploma, for example,
learn to understand the subtle distinctions their capacity
to understand and respect what some others have to
contribute to education will be enlarged. They must
never lose sight, though of the fact that language is for
communication and that to depart from the prevailing
English language is liable to lead to the failure of both
teaching and learning. In summary, a Tongan concept
of Fonua is distinguished by distinctive relations
between language, teaching and learning.

**Intercultural, Transcultural, &
Multidisciplinary Approaches**

For the writers, March 2003 was the beginning of a
whole, collective and relational approach to language
learning and teaching in the National Diploma in
Teaching Early Childhood Education (Pasifika). As
the title ‘Fonua: Lands, Languages, Learning and
Teaching’ suggests, the Tongan academic in the
School, the Tongan academics from other institutions
and the Tongan teachers in the Tongan community in
relation with non-Tongan colleagues from inside and
outside the School confronted the task of ending
selfishness and individualism and focused on linguistic
and cultural complexity, solidarity, mutual support, and
wealth creation. To do so a Development Team was
established in 3 parts all through 2003; the Pasifika
Consultative Group (PCG) and the associated Pasifika
ECE Sub-Group, and the Pasifika Educators Network
(PEN). We shall first consider the Pasifika
Consultative Group and then the Sub-Group and finally
the Pasifika Educators Network. The point to be
highlighted is that the groups are inter-related and we
cannot single out a primary force of development in the
collective pedagogy in the Diploma.

Two pedagogical considerations underscored the PCG
initiative. The first is that ‘Pasifika’ education, in the
sense of Fonua, was absent in the prevailing
approaches to teaching practice. And, the PCG was the
creation to contextualize and speak about the
coursework contained in the Diploma, the peoples'
education and qualifications, and their own languages
and cultures in a ‘new’ form of Pasifika Education. As
well, a political consideration required speaking to by
the Group because the Ministry of Education
compelled the School to consult with Pasifika Peoples,
internally and externally, throughout the development
of the Diploma. That is why the membership of the
PCG was drawn from across the Early Childhood
Education, Primary, Secondary and Tertiary Education
system, the business sector and the Pasifika cultural
communities. In fact, the PCG consisted in
representatives of the School’s academic and allied
staff, other academic institutions, Pasifika
communities, the Indigenous Māori people in the
university, the Early Childhood, Primary, Secondary
and Tertiary sectors: Where appropriate members
could be nominated from relevant National Standard
Bodies. It is important to acknowledge the bi-lingual,
bi-cultural knowledge and skills; the expertise and
academic qualifications of the Pasifika membership of
the PCG.

Inside the PCG, the Tongan, Samoan, Niue, Cook
Islands Māori and Indigenous Māori educators,
researchers, scholars, the New Zealand European
lecturers, and the private education providers and
consultants began to listen to each other think about
how to transform the instrumental approaches to
teaching and learning that is concentrated amongst a
few non-Pasifika and non-Indigenous hands. In this
round-table, the assembly of academics and business
people discussed, questioned and advised the staff on
matters regarding Pasifika Education in the School and
the Pasifika communities and vice versa. The members
attended to the development of the Diploma and
established relationships with Pasifika educators,
academics, scholars, teachers and researchers in
national and international entities. They advised the
staff in the development of ‘new’ coursework and
programmes and suggested curriculum change. On a
final note, the PCG advised on industry and community
demand for graduates, including future and potential
areas for training. This is the great task that the people
in the University, Pasifika and Indigenous cultural
communities must face together.

In September 2003, the Pasifika Early Childhood sub-
Group of the Pasifika Consultative Group was set up to
meet the specific task of reviewing the First Year
papers of the National Diploma from diverse cultural
perspectives. The five highly qualified members
represented the Samoan, Niue, Cook Islands Māori,
Fijian and Tongan cultural communities. Through the
ECE sub-group the School spoke to specific issues in
Early Years Education and commenced the 3-fold
relationship serving all the sectors of education and a
range of Pasifika communities. In the School, the
Pasifika ECE sub-group and the Pasifika Educators
Network met for three hours, fortnightly, to discuss
feedback, staffing issues and complexities that arose
from the coursework. Both the written feedback and
verbal discussions have proven invaluable and useful in
reviewing the content and outcomes of the Papers
offered in the Diploma to ensure that the students’
languages and cultures are sustained.

To meet the Ministry’s requirement to consult with
Pasifika communities, the Pasifika Educators Network
(PEN) consisting in not only Academic and Allied staff
members in the School but staff from across the
Auckland University of Technology was introduced in
November 2003. As a network PEN works closely
with the School contributing to their relationship of
consultation with Pasifika peoples and their communities
regarding the Diploma. The consultative
innovations included institutions such as the Fono or
ceremonial meeting with each cultural community and
the separate Samoan, Niue, Cook Islands Māori, Fijian,
Tongan and Tokelau Early Childhood Associations.
In the Tongan sense, a Fono is a town or village meeting
that is officially convened (Churchward, 1959: 194).
In this strict and solemn context, direction is provided
the community by their officials and then debated until
a consensus is reached. What is more, the Fono could
take place with a specific ECE Association present at the same time as the community and that could include prospective students.

The *Fono* raises an interesting question that touches on the differences between the Ministry’s approach to consultation and Pasifika peoples’ ability to articulate themselves on difficult yet vital issues of importance in education. When customs such as oratory, prayer, sacred songs, and hospitality are practiced, does this mean that *Fono* is a more primitive form of consultation than has been developed by the Ministry? Of course, the belief is that a better approach to consultation with the Pasifika ECE Associations could be met in the *Fono*, rather than a Meeting merely for the ‘experts’ to present a list of facts to the Associations in the absence of the community. In the *Fono*, a real sociality – philosophy, history, leadership, direction, debate, cuisine, music, warmth, joy, humour, generosity and kindness - is spoken into the Diploma’s consultation process and this piece of information illuminates the ‘truth’ that people are social beings. We are here far beyond the idea of the Pasifika communities desperately out of reach of the University and the Ministry of Education.

External Moderation of the Diploma is a requirement of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority, the New Zealand Teachers’ Council and the Ministry of Education. In the view of the PCG, the present set of technologies for monitoring did not allow for the languages and cultures underpinning the curriculum for the Pasifika constituent of the Diploma to be scrutinized. So, falling out of the cultural institution called *Fono* was the recommendation from the Group to the School and its associated bodies to make plans for a collaborative approach to moderate the Diploma externally; the Pasifika module, in particular. The innovative idea for the collective approach to the moderation of the Diploma was developed in the PCG on July 22, 2005. In brief, the PCG’s Tongan academic and community representative, the Indigenous Māori representative, the Niue and Samoan business consultants, the Fijian educator, 2 non-Pasifika teachers and the Ministry’s appointed Monitor met on 29 November 2005 to moderate the Pasifika component in the Diploma wherein the inseparable forms of Research, Knowledge Generation, Cultural Sustainability, Policy advice and Curriculum innovation were discussed at length.

On the whole, the *Fono* held for the Moderation process was valuable and educational since the culturally appropriate context provided the power or strength for a group of committed people from diverse cultures and interests, to debate important aspects of the Diploma. The debate related to issues of access, utilization and cultural appropriateness of the approaches to teaching and learning as well as ensuring the programme’s relationship to the regulations (Te Whariki and the Ministry of Education). The members agreed that, in spite of some major conceptual issues held by some of the teachers requiring attention, the Pasifika constituent has the potential to put into practice all the aspirations and requirements demanded of a high quality Early Childhood education programme for Pasifika children in Aotearoa-New Zealand. The coursework in the First year provides the underpinning for teaching and learning within Pasifika Early Childhood Centres (see Minutes, 29 November, 2005). The overall significance of the *Fono* as an External Moderation process is the spirit, energy and life force of collective pedagogy. In other words the power of collective pedagogy is a process of transformation that is about engendering anew.

The development of the Diploma necessarily required the imposition of economic value as the paramount value, and of the economic itself as an autonomous sphere, a ‘play’ of signs devoid of Pasifika languages and cultures. We understand this play to signify the virulent and relentless practice of alienation, of rendering Tongan, Samoan, Fijian, Niue, Tokelau and Cook Islands Māori people aliens in their indigenous homelands and the new land of Residency, and a world now fully infused with the floating logic of economic value. Looking back for a moment, though, the Diploma was endorsed by the Ministry of Education in July 2004. The first cohort of 15 students will complete the programme in 2006. The second cohort of 30 students was enrolled in August 2005. 40 students commenced the programme in 2006. In November 2005, the first whole, collaborative and relational External Moderation *Fono* took place. In these ways Pasifika cultural relations, Pasifika intellectuals, Pasifika teachers and private providers joined together to change the prevailing approaches to teaching and learning in the Diploma.

Following their intimate cultural approaches to teaching and learning as more desirable and worthy of support the writers are challenged then to endorse the view that: “The inability of Third World societies to reflect on their own experience and to invent appropriate solutions to their own problems does not come from their congenital inferiority nor from a backwardness, but results from the destruction by the West of their own coherence. The only superiority of the West is, indeed not that it has been able to control its environment (we know it is not the case and that we are perhaps heading towards ecological catastrophe) but that it has invented destructive material forms capable of ensuring domination over every other society and finally to impose on them its supreme value: economic development” (Latouche, cited in Arnoux, 2004: 142).

It has been very important to organize and mobilize the Development Team grounded on what we have called *Fona* and on respect, dignity, integrity and responsibility over the approaches to language teaching and learning in the Diploma. And it has been important not only to organize but also to unite. Here we are now, united academics, teachers, researchers, business people in defense of our own languages and cultures. Importantly, we ought to/ should have not
only unity amongst Pasifika cultural groups, but also that we must coordinate with the non-Pasifika and non-Indigenous staff. Every gathering, every event is a great lesson that allows us to exchange experiences and to keep strengthening Pasifika peoples and community-based early childhood centres. Culture, that is to say subjectivity and objectivity, is at the heart of Tongan people, Pasifika peoples and Indigenous peoples speaking our ‘voices’ in the National Diploma.

To be clear, we must return to ask ourselves if language teaching and learning, as they are being communicated in Aotearoa-New Zealand, leave ‘Pasifika’ peoples vulnerable and alienated in society. And, we must ask ourselves if development refers to capacity building or strengthening the potential of ‘Pasifika’ students’ language and culture; rather than only sustaining English domination and technical virtuosity. Fortunately, we can put forward the idea that Fonua is a metaphor to develop and then advance Tongan and Pasifika people’s understanding of our alienation in the education system. As a final point, we can say that culture has the power or strength to transform the instrumental relationship between education, research, knowledge transfer, development and wealth creation.

References


