

# Va'atele: Enabling Pasifika literacy success

## Rae Si'ilata

Ki te taha o toku matua, no Ngati Raukawa, no Tūhourangi, no Otaki ahau. Ki te taha o toku whaea, no Fiti, no Savusavu ahau. Ki te taha o toku tane me aku tamariki, kei te hono ahau ki Hamoa.

*On my father's side I come from Ngati Raukawa, Tūhourangi and Otaki. On my mother's side from Savusavu, Fiji. Through my husband and children I connect with Samoa.*

### Storying our land

A well known Hawaiian proverb states: 'A'ohe pau ka 'ike i ka hālau ho'okāhi: 'Not all knowledge is learned from one school'. The theme for the 2018 New Zealand (NZ) Literacy Association's conference in Papaioea/Palmerston North, Manawatu was 'Literacy Landscapes'. In my keynote address, I asked the question, 'What is the world view or prior knowledge that informs your understanding of this idea?' Styres (2019) states that:

Storying is essentially the ways we narratively describe ourselves as Indigenous peoples locally, nationally, and globally. Land is at once storied and relational informing the social, spiritual, and systemic norms and practices of a particular culture-sharing group in relationship to their places... Indigenous people exist in deeply intimate and sacred relationships with Land... it is the relationship with Land that comes before all

else.... Storied landscapes form spatial and temporal tracks left by our ancestors that can be read with as much care as one reads the narratives of classical history (p. 28).

It is appropriate to consider the question about worldview and prior knowledge in light of long term calls by tangata whenua (people of the land) to teach local tribal place-based histories, and more recently, a petition by the NZ History Teachers Association for the teaching of Māori and colonial history in schools: "The New Zealand History Teachers' Association believes too few Kiwis understand what brought the Crown and Māori together in the 1840 Treaty, or how their relationship developed over the decades since – partly because schools are not required to teach it" (Redmond, 2019). As I considered the idea of 'literacy landscapes', I was reminded of indigenous storying and literacies that possibly did not spring automatically to mind for most teachers and academics at the conference. Why? Because not all knowledge or histories of local landscapes are valued in the same way by New Zealand schools, or by NZ educators. Stories of landscape histories are often told through books; however for Māori and Pacific peoples, storying or storytelling was an important languaging practice, well before stories were written into books. It is often through storying and remembering stories that tikanga or cultural knowledge is shared. Frequently, storying also had embedded whakatauki or proverbial

sayings that spoke through metaphor, hidden truths about human behaviour, and ways of being that supported people to live through tikanga (correct customs or protocols) in pono or tika (true or right ways).

### Haunui-A-Nanaia

Māori history and stories relating to the landscapes of the Manawatu and Horowhenua tell the journeying story of one man: Haunui-a-Nanaia, “who was the ancestor of the Te Ati Hau a Paparangi people of the Whanganui region” (Rangitane, Education, 2015). Hau named many of the maunga (mountains) and the awa (rivers) on his journey across the motu (island) in pursuit of his errant wahine (woman) Wairaka, who had run off with a slave. Some say that he began his journey in Whanganui meaning Big Bay or Harbour, then moved on to Rangitikei: which had been a day (rangi) of striding (tikei) – and then to Turakina (to be felled, or thrown down) where he used a fallen log as a bridge. In his pursuit of Wairaka he came to the Manawatu River, where the water made his heart (manawa) stand still (tu) because it was so cold. He carried on and named the Ohau River after himself (the place of Hau). At Otaki he put his staff in the Otaki River to measure the depth (the place of the staff). Then to Waikanae – where he saw the silver flashing of the kanae (mullet) in the wai (water). Then he climbed up the hill (now known as Rimutaka) – naming it Remutaka (to sit down). As Haunui sat there, he looked toward Lake Wairarapa and the reflection of the sun caught his eyes and

made them water. It was this incident that led to the name – Wairarapa: the rarapa (flashing) of the wai (water). As Hau journeyed from there, he came to a river crossing where he sat and felt remorse. Looking into the water, he was sad as he saw Wairaka’s face reflected back at him –: Wai o Hine Wairaka (Water for his woman Wairaka) referring to the tears he shed. We know it today as ‘Waiohine’. Hau then carried on up the east coast on his way home (Rangitane Education, 2015). In this story of Haunui-A-Nanaia and his naming of the landscape, we find not only information about the environment – but also a Māori worldview or way of seeing the world, to do with time and place; deep connection to the land, to tupuna (ancestors), memorialised through the naming of landscapes that reveal both ancient history and the geographical features of those named places.

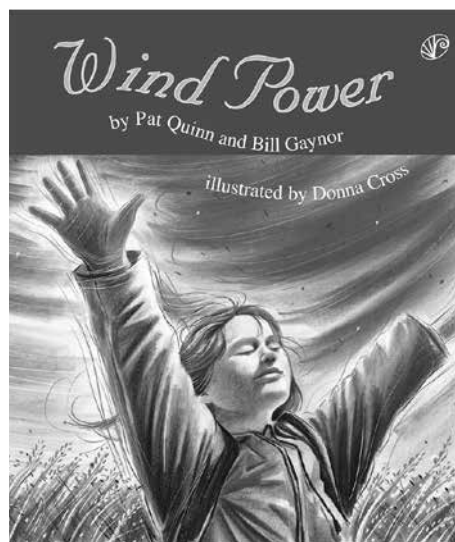
### Connecting with children’s prior linguistic and world knowledge

In considering some of the modern landscape features of Papaioea/ Palmerston North, the conference committee selected the wind turbines of





the Manawatu as a key image connecting with the ‘Literacy Landscapes’ theme and gifted all participants a rock painting of wind turbines and hills. A text titled “Wind Power” (Quinn & Gaynor, 1995) was used in New Zealand classrooms for a number of



years, as a guided reading text to support inquiries into the use of wind turbines to generate electricity. In the teacher’s notes for this text, suggested questions for introducing the text included:

“How would you get power from the wind?” and “What is the girl doing?” My colleague once told me a story of being in a class with Pasifika children, where a teacher introduced this book by showing the front cover image of a girl with raised hands, and by asking the question, “What do you think the book is about?” Some of the Pacific children in that class responded with, ‘It’s about praising the Lord.’ They were drawing on their funds of knowledge, connecting to the image, to make an inference that the book was about praising God, rather than about the power of the wind to generate electricity. It would have been more helpful if the teacher had initially supported those children to make prior knowledge connections to the schema or underlying theme of the book.

When considering text choice, writing foci and class inquiries, we need to not only think about the stories behind ancient landscapes, but also reflect on the ‘reo-scape’ of NZ’s changing demographics. The specific prior linguistic, literacy and world knowledge systems held by children in many linguistically diverse classrooms in Aotearoa NZ need to be explored

and validated to enable meaningful connection making between children's existing funds of knowledge and text knowledge. A few years ago, a teacher in one of my Bilingual Education classes told me that one of her Pasifika children when writing an asTTLe writing assessment titled, 'The Belle at the Ball', wrote, "The bell ring. I pick up my ball and go inside." Obviously his 'kete of prior knowledge' for 'belles and balls' did not connect with the assessment writer's schema!

## **Responding to NZ's linguistically diverse student population**

The Ministry of Education's ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) funding allocation to schools for the period 2 funding round in August 2018 was for 47,807 students in 1,485 schools. These students represent 176 different ethnic groups, 175 different countries of birth, and 135 different languages. Within the 1,485 schools, numbers vary greatly with three schools having 300+ funded students, 12 schools with 200-299 students, and at the lower end: 580 schools with 1-9 students (Ministry of Education, 2018). These ESOL funded totals represent only a portion of the linguistically diverse or emergent bilingual student population currently at school in NZ, as not all bilingual students are funded by the ministry, due, either, to having completed their funding allocation, or, to not meeting the funding criteria.

The (2018) Education Review Office (ERO) report on responding to linguistic diversity in Auckland

found that there was an overall need for early learning services and schools to improve their response to 'culturally and linguistically diverse learners', and to support their acquisition of the English language. Auckland is New Zealand's most culturally diverse city, with over 100 ethnicities and more than 150 languages spoken on a daily basis. Most services and schools knew who these learners were and had, to some extent, taken steps to respond to their language and culture. However, "only 37 percent of services and 58 percent of schools intentionally promoted learning by using a home language or cultural lens to support the learners' acquisition of English, and to promote engagement with the learner, their parents and communities" (p. 5). Although ERO's report focused on Auckland schools, it is likely that other regions in NZ face similar challenges regarding the need for teachers to learn how to validate, normalise and utilise the full linguistic repertoire of emergent bilinguals at school.

## **Remembering NZ's literacy teaching history**

In order to enable linguistically diverse learners within NZ's classrooms to experience schooling in culturally sustaining (Paris, 2012) or culturally revitalising ways, it is helpful to remember the legacy of one of the historical figures of NZ's literacy teaching past. Sylvia Ashton Warner left a legacy focused on the essential value placed on the beliefs, languages, and cultures of the child at school. Her pedagogy in rural schools with Māori

children used the words the children themselves brought to school (their ‘key vocabulary’). Her students learned to read their own words. Ashton-Warner supported her students to write books that valued and maintained their cultures and beliefs, whilst also providing a pathway to reading in English. Ashton-Warner stated in her seminal text, *Teacher*: “First books must be made of the stuff of the child” (Ashton-Warner, 1963, p. 34) (Si‘ilata, Gaffney & Stephenson, in press).

### **The Pasifika Early Literacy Project**

Since 2014, the Ministry of Education has contracted a team of researchers and

such as Franken, May & McComish (2005, 2007) and Si‘ilata (2006, 2007, 2014, 2017). Cummins argued that the boundaries between languages/dialects are fluid and socially constructed, and that as emergent bilinguals gain access to their two languages, these languages become fused into a single system (the common underlying proficiency (Cummins, 2008). He found that creative translation activities and “translanguaging” have a role to play to enable learners to create multimedia texts that communicate in authentic ways in both L1 and L2 [the first language and second language]” (Cummins, 2008, p. 65). “Translanguaging” originated with Williams (1996, 2000), who used it

*“...they had not previously valued or utilised the linguistic resources that Pasifika learners were bringing with them to school.”*

professional learning and development (PLD) facilitators from the University of Auckland to work with teachers of Pasifika children in Tāmaki/Auckland schools to support them to draw on their own linguistic repertoires, as Ashton Warner did: Through bilingual storying; through the writing and reading of their own bilingual stories; and through the reading of Pasifika dual-language texts that provide windows into their own and other’s worlds (Si‘ilata, Gaffney, Stephenson & McCaffery, 2015). This work built on the international work of bilingual writers and researchers such as Baker (2011) and Cummins (1986, 2007, 2008) as well as local researchers

in Welsh-medium education to name a pedagogical practice that switches between language modes – for example, reading is done in one language and writing in another. In essence, it teaches students to receive curriculum content input in one language and output it in another mode or genre in another language (Si‘ilata, 2014, p. 22). Teachers realised through the PLD project that they held existing beliefs about their children’s language and literacy capabilities. Often, they had not previously valued or utilised the linguistic resources that Pasifika learners were bringing with them to school. One teacher reflected deeply on how her

changed beliefs and pedagogical actions had impacted her students:

*The bottom line is I failed this child and I have changed. Now I am really emotional about this because if I failed him how many other children have I? And I've noticed that every single one of my children are now moving... And this has all taken part in the last month or so... It's happened... And often we think we know it all. Actually, we don't. I used to think I was a damn good teacher and you woke me up on that day. I had to have a really good check of myself and my teaching practices and what was working and what wasn't, and how I could change it and to this day it has affected me so greatly... The year 0-1's shouldn't be at level two yet. See all those names up there? See how he has changed in his writing? Oh, my goodness, did you listen to those children? Did you hear the confidence? They are teaching me so much. Their language, their lifestyle is being acknowledged and accepted in our classroom and I've actually got goose bumps just thinking about it, because it has changed them... And it has changed me.*

## **The Va'atele Framework**

The Va'atele Framework was utilised in the Pasifika Early Literacy Project as a framework on which to strengthen teacher practice. It was developed in my doctoral work (Si'ilata, 2014) which focused on Pasifika learner success, and demonstrated accelerated literacy achievement (Si'ilata, Dreaver, Parr, Timperley & Meissel, 2012), through the work of effective teachers,

improvement teachers, principals and PLD facilitators who supported Pasifika children to succeed and to become literate in linguistically and culturally sustaining ways.

The Va'atele Framework uses the metaphor of the double hulled deep sea canoe in relation to Pasifika learners and their experiences at school. The double hulls and the voyaging of the deep-sea canoe are compared with Pasifika learners' passage or journey through the schooling system as bilingual/bicultural people. Ideally these Pasifika learners would be in school settings that support the development of their bilingualism, biliteracy and biculturalism, enabling success not only in the world of school, but also in the world of home and community. One hull may be seen to represent the language, literacy, culture, and worldview of home, while the second hull is representative of the language, literacy, culture and worldview of school. As with a va'atele, both hulls/ va'a (or languages, literacies, and cultures) should work in unity to ensure the safe passage of the people on board. The platform/fata built over the two hulls is a bridge that helps to hold the whole va'atele together, thus enabling the hulls/ va'a to move through the water as one vessel, while also providing the stability needed to sail through any storm (Si'ilata, 2014, p. 251).

Dimensions and indicators of effective practice for Pasifika learners were developed from the literature and from the research findings, and were used to analyse teacher practice. The dimensions included:

- Knowledge of Pasifika learners
- Expectations of Pasifika learners
- Knowledge of Pasifika bilingualism, second language acquisition and literacy learning
- Instructional strategies, including Pasifika languages as resources for learning
- Pasifika connections with texts, world, language, and literacy knowledge
- Partnerships with Pasifika families/aiga and community knowledge holders

This set of six dimensions of effective classroom practice for Pasifika learners, each elucidated by two indicators, were used to consider all of the evidence collected, and were then applied to the Va'atele Framework. The description of effective teacher practice described in the dimensions and elucidated through the indicators was developed primarily through a top down process informed largely by the relevant research literature. However, these indicators were checked in a more bottom-up process against the practices of the effective teachers, who were known to be successful in promoting accelerated student achievement in literacy. The original six 'dimensions of effective practice' for learners in general, are described in *Effective Literacy Practice in Years 1–4* (see Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 12). The six dimensions of effective literacy practice were modified to make them more specific to Pasifika learners and to validate the utilisation of their linguistic and cultural resources within the New Zealand education space (see Table pp. 20-21). These

Pasifika-specific dimensions were used as the overarching framework for the analysis of teaching practice, and form the lens through which the data from teachers and the observations of their practice were analysed and the results articulated.

#### **Dimension 4: Use of instructional strategies including Pasifika languages as resources for learning**

In the initial project pilot (Si'ilata et al. 2015), a number of (non-Samoan) teachers read Samoan texts with their students, by using digital sound files of the texts that provided models of correct pronunciation. Some teachers asserted that they were now more open to utilising children's total language resources, as well as family and cultural knowledge and experiences in the classroom. Other teachers said that they had developed greater awareness about their children's bilingualism, and were now viewing it as a resource rather than a problem. Teachers supported their learners to connect their own funds of knowledge with the schema in the book, and enabled them to utilise the text structure to tell and write their own bilingual digital stories using iPads. The transcript below illustrates *Dimension 4a: Teachers explicitly teach English language and vocabulary by building on Pasifika home languages and oral practices*. It is an example of 'digital translanguaging' (students using both receptive and productive bilingual modes to create their own bilingual digital books, using a Samoan dual language reading book as a catalyst and model:

Table 1:  
Dimensions of Effective Practice for Pasifika Learners applied to the Va'atele Framework  
(Si'ilata, 2014)

Dimension	Indicators	Representative part of the va'atele
Knowledge of Pasifika learners	1a) Teachers analyse and use English language and literacy data in their practice. 1b) Teachers analyse and use Pasifika home language data and family/cultural funds of knowledge.	The hull/va'a of the va'atele as the foundation of the vessel – the uniqueness of the canoe is specific to the hulls and the knowledge of the builder to craft it according to the conditions in which it will travel.
Expectations of Pasifika learners	2a) Teachers set high, informed expectations for student learning which build on Pasifika learners' aspirations and values. 2b) Teachers build effective teacher-student relationships that focus on learning and build Pasifika learner agency.	The mast/tila that connects the hulls/va'a with the sail/la, enabling it to withstand the strength of the wind and to act as a solid base from which to furl the sail.
Knowledge of Pasifika bilingualism, second language acquisition, and literacy learning	3a) Teachers know about Pasifika bilingualism, second language acquisition, and literacy learning. 3b) Teachers use evidence from student data and from practice to design learning sequences, and monitor progress in relation to Pasifika learners' language and literacy needs.	The sail/la that enables the va'a to catch the wind – combining the strength of the hulls/va'a and mast/tila, with the height of the sail, and the power of the wind to enable greater speed and success toward the journey's end.



<p>Use of instructional strategies including Pasifika languages as resources for learning</p>	<p>4a) Teachers explicitly teach English language and vocabulary by building on Pasifika home languages and oral practices.</p> <p>4b) Teachers explicitly teach strategies for written language, including use of Pasifika literacy practices.</p>	<p>The paddles/foe that are used by the paddlers to advance the va'a when there is no wind, and that use the water to generate the motion through which the va'a sails.</p>
<p>Supporting Pasifika connections with text, world, language, and literacy knowledge</p>	<p>5a) Teachers support Pasifika learners to make meaningful connections with Pasifika cultures, experiences, languages, literacies, texts and worldviews.</p> <p>5b) Teachers provide opportunities for Pasifika learners to transfer knowledge, languages and literacies from one context to another.</p>	<p>The platform/fata that connects the two hulls so that they sail as one vessel, enabling the progress made with one hull to benefit the other hull.</p>
<p>Partnerships with Pasifika families/ aiga and community knowledge holders</p>	<p>6a) Teachers collaborate with Pasifika families/aiga in identifying student learning needs and valued outcomes.</p> <p>6b) Teachers build reciprocal relationships with Pasifika families/aiga and community experts to utilise their knowledge at school.</p>	<p>The keel/ta'ele running from stern to bow, which helps the va'a maintain its stability and straight movement despite the conditions – keeping the va'a 'grounded' and secure.</p>



[Teacher with new entrant five-year-olds creating their own digital stories about themselves using the dual language Samoan text as a structure]:

Teacher: *Off you go, you guys carry on.*

Children: *Yay! (Reading the story they have written on their ipad): 'O la'u 'ato ā'oga lea. Here is my school bag.*

Teacher: *Okay do you maybe need to record that one again if you can't really hear it?*

Child 1: *You need to delete it.*

Teacher: *Okay so delete that one. You guys have another go at the sound file.*

Teacher & child together: *'O la'u 'ato ā'oga lea. (Here is my school bag).*

Teacher: *Wanna play it and see what it sounds like?*

Children play their sound recording: *'O la'u 'ato ā'oga lea. Here is my school bag. 'O la'u pusa mea'ai lea. Here is my lunch box. 'O la'u tusi lea. Here is my book.*

Teacher: *Let's see if they've got their sound file (plays the file). Awesome. You guys are way ahead. Let's read it together (uses the digital text on the interactive whiteboard to read with students):*

Teacher & children: *What's this one? We can read this one; we're clever. 'O la'u tusi lea. And what does that one mean? Here is my book.*

Child: *How do you know how to do it?*

Teacher: *Because Mrs Roberts has been practising at home!*

Child: *Are you Samoan?*

Teacher: *No sweetie, but I'm learning.*

Child 2: *She's English. She's from England...*

Teacher: *Yes, cos even though I'm a teacher, I never stop learning either. I have to go home and do homework too.*

Child: *Cos you're a English. You're from England.*

Teacher: *I am from England, yes.*

It was evident that the teacher's willingness to put herself in the position of the learner, to privilege the linguistic knowledge of the children, and to create opportunities for them to connect their Samoan linguistic and conceptual knowledge with their English language and literacy acquisition had a major impact on the children's willingness to utilise their linguistic resources at school. The use of those linguistic resources had a direct impact on their English language acquisition and on their biliteracy development. They were also prompted to consider their teacher's and their own linguistic and cultural identities as a result of reading dual language texts together.

## Concluding thoughts

For Pasifika learners at school in Aotearoa New Zealand, enacting the metaphorical double-hulled canoe, (or linguistically and culturally sustaining environment that privileges bilingual and biliterate goals over monolingual ones), is more likely to elicit effective outcomes than an 'English only' approach. In order for Pasifika learners to be successful at home and at school, they need to strengthen and build capacity and capability in both. We need

to transform our schools by challenging the hegemonic agenda that still privileges western knowledge over indigenous and minority language group knowledge systems. English-medium classroom teachers need to normalise and utilise community languages, multiliteracies, family and cultural knowledges within the valued knowledges and pedagogies of schooling, making them central to the educational endeavour. Pasifika, and other linguistically diverse learners can be highly successful at school. Their utilisation of their language, biliteracy and cultural resources is fundamental to that success. Teachers can learn how to teach Pasifika learners effectively, and in particular ways that connect with and build on their languages, cultures, and identities, so that they can learn through a curriculum that both teaches their worlds, and provides windows to other worlds. Only then, will these children and their families understand that success at school does not require their languages and cultures to be left at the school gate.

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## Author



**Rae Si'ilata** is a lecturer in Bilingual-Pasifika at the University of Auckland in the Faculty of Education and Social Work. Her work focuses on bilingualism and Bilingual Education, Maori education, Pasifika education, second language acquisition, reciprocal whānau-school partnerships. She directs two Ministry of Education projects: the Pasifika Early Literacy Project and the Pasifika Teacher Aide Project, and has been a consultant to Talking Matters. Rae is interested in bilingual/biliterate academic outcomes, and is committed to teacher professional development in bilingualism/biliteracy. She supports teachers to critically examine notions of power and success, and to value and utilise the language and cultural resources of whānau/aiga within classroom learning.