

Notes from the Va'a: Navigating cultural currents on my journey towards embedding culturally responsive play-based pedagogies in a Sāmoan preschool.

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Abstract

This paper examines the complexities of working as a Western educator in a post-colonial setting. I have adopted an autoethnographic method to analyse my lived experiences and document the challenges faced while embedding play-based pedagogies in a Sāmoan preschool. I employ a reflective narrative to explore concepts of colonial reproduction, early childhood agency and the decolonisation of education in Sāmoa. Using a critical lens, I locate myself as a site of colonial reproduction and use critical pedagogy to analyse my role.

Nofo i lalo, nofo i lalo, ua ma luelue le va'a.

Nofo i lalo, nofo i lalo, ua ma luelue le va'a.

Nofo i lalo, nofo i lalo, ua ma luelue le va'a.

Nofo i lalo, ua ma luelue le va'a.

Nofo i lalo!

Keywords:

Teaching practices, colonialism, agency, thinking, early childhood, education, culture, Sāmoa, Western colonial education, play, play-based pedagogy.

This is the song we sing at our preschool to welcome children to sit and gather for a meeting. It is the literal translation of the English song *Sit Down, You're Rocking the Boat*. The va'a¹ in Sāmoa holds great cultural significance. These are the vessels originally used to inhabit the Islands of Sāmoa and the rest of Polynesia and they have been a part of Sāmoan culture since their arrival. They are not outdated historical artefacts; they are used for fishing and travel between the Islands. The va'a is deeply centered in Sāmoan culture and still today one can see adults and young children paddling their va'a out into the lagoons.

I have adopted the metaphor of the va'a to represent my mental and emotional journey as an early childhood education (ECE) teacher from Australia, working and living in Sāmoa. I use this metaphor to epitomise my on-going journey as a teacher-researcher, out in the blue crystalline oceans navigating the complexities of education and learning to work with the elements of nature and the world around me. Sometimes, unwittingly I stand up in my va'a and I rock it. Sometimes only slightly, causing a small wobble – I stay on course and my legs keep me balanced. Sometimes I fall over-board and I am thrown off course, taking in big gulps of salty water not knowing if and how I can steer my va'a back on course².

After the first time I fell off my va'a I decided it was time to apply a critical lens to the song we were singing to the children every day. During a quiet reflective moment with a child in my room, very softly, almost in a whisper she turned to me and asked, "*What happens if I rock the boat?*" I then asked myself: Am I reinforcing the notion of quiet obedience and oppression by telling these children not to rock the va'a? If the va'a is a deeply ingrained symbol of Sāmoan culture, am I reinforcing a historically colonial oppressive practice by telling the children to sit down and not rock it? When framed within a critical pedagogical lens, the English version of this song takes on a different contextual meaning. The tension arises as the underlying meaning of the song is transformed from one of deep cultural significance to one that places value on the colonisers' request to comply. This simple song became the starting point for deeper reflection into the Sāmoan

¹ Va'a are traditional Sāmoan outriggers. There are four types of va'a; the paopao – a small canoe made from a single log, va'a-alo – a small fishing canoe, la'au lima – larger single canoe and the va'a tele – the larger ocean faring canoe.

² It is important to note that prior to moving to Sāmoa, I had no knowledge of the va'a and its importance in Sāmoan culture. This is not part of my cultural heritage and I have borrowed the terminology as a metaphor for my journey. As a Western educator, I question my presence in the va'a and wonder what right I have to be occupying it at all?

educational system -the legacy left by Christian missionaries and German and New Zealand colonial practices - and how best to provide inclusive play-based pedagogies in a culturally responsive manner.

Reflecting on these questions enabled me to delve deeper into the complexities of post-colonial Sāmoa. Further questions arose surrounding my own position as a Western educator in Sāmoa; what is my right to cast judgments, to create change? How do I engage 'with' my Sāmoan colleagues in a way that avoids ontological superiority? Andreotti (2011) urges us to shift our lens as educators and deliberate on our European/Western epistemologies. If 'we' Westerners come in as 'authorities' and 'holders' of knowledge, we are merely re-enforcing and reproducing imperialist power relations, undermining agency.

Tatou Ta'aalo Faatasi – Let's play together, re-framing and re-contextualising 'play'

Play sits at the heart of Western early childhood education (Van Hoorn et al., 2011). It forms the foundations of pedagogical practices that have been facilitated within ECE frameworks and curriculums (Leaupepe, 2010; Van Hoorn et al., 2011). The Australian Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and the New Zealand Te Whāriki early childhood curriculum have at their cores, a holistic approach to education entrenched in play-based pedagogies (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009; Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017). Under the current revision of the Sāmoan early childhood curriculum by the Ministry of Education Sports and Culture (MESC) the theoretical underpinnings of the EYLF and the Te Whāriki have been adopted and are now being rolled out in all ECE centres around Sāmoa. However, what happens when the theoretical knowledge that an educator carries and the adopted framework are in direct contrast to the cultural context in which they find themselves? How do you navigate your va'a – your borrowed va'a – through the delicate and fragile reefs? To begin to answer these questions I had to look closely at my privilege as a white teacher and my role as an educator in reproducing hierarchical power relations and how the cultural landscape of Sāmoa has transformed over the years. I employ a post-structural framework and a critical race theory to disrupt the discursive narrative of centering Western knowledge and the privileging of my European-based education (Tilley-Lubbs, 2016). Using a narrative storytelling approach, I begin to unpack the complexities of my role in the preschool as both the subject and object of analysis, examining complex cultural perspectives and my racialised position within the educational site (Bourdieu, 2008; Reed-Danahay, 2017; Tilley-Lubbs, 2016). Through the re-telling/re-storying of experiences, multiple layers form and fold as theory is woven into the narrative process and divergent ways of knowing are created and

recreated through human interactions (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). When I started working at the preschool, it was akin to a new child starting at school. Located in a new place everything was different but a little bit familiar and as with all children who enter education, I carried with me a virtual backpack. In my backpack, I brought a vast amount of Western cultural capital and pedagogical practices based on Western theories of play (Thomson, 2002). What I did not have in my backpack was a Sāmoan perspective on play and education. I started the year eager to work with the team to develop a play-based programme that incorporated elements of the EYLF and the Te Whāriki, framed within the Sāmoan context in order to promote a Sāmoan style of play-based learning. My understanding of the importance of play was what I was asked to bring to the current discourse in the preschool. What I needed to learn was the complexities of Fa'a Sāmoa³; how that shaped our day-to-day interactions in the preschool, and how that impacted the teaching practices on a management level.

My studies and experiences have led me to view play as a powerful facilitator for learning. It allows children to explore and experiment with often challenging or risky scenarios in a safe and secure environment without fear of real-world consequences (Van Hoorn et al., 2011) . It offers children the opportunity to take different points of view and develop a sense of self through the exploration of the world around them (Van Hoorn et al., 2011). It is the foundation for developing mathematical concepts, scientific thinking, and critical and abstract thought. As children participate in play they tap into deeper abstract thinking, changing the meaning of objects and actions to project an imaginary scenario (Fleer, 2016). However, when we as educators speak of play, it is framed within a specific cultural point of view (Fleer, 2003). To provide a more inclusive learning environment for the children in our preschool, I had to challenge my understanding and usage of terminology when working with Sāmoan educators. What does 'play' mean to Sāmoan educators? As an advocate for play-based learning, it was this clash of teaching practices that led me to my first major fall off my va'a. The widely held view of depositing knowledge into children, using punitive measures as behaviour management strategies and results-based testing on the youngest of our children destabilised me. I had what could be described as *pedagogical/cultural shock*. I decided at that moment to stop my va'a and look deeply into the blue ocean in an attempt to reflect on my blindness as an educator.

Falling off my va'a opened a pathway for me to openly discuss my "taken for granted" beliefs of education with my colleagues. Opening dialogue in this way, enabled

³ Fa'a Sāmoa is the traditional customary system which governs the behaviours and responsibilities of each person in the community.

critical reflections into how our teaching practices are facilitated within the educational site. The classroom is not merely a space where the transference of academic knowledge occurs between subjects, it is a contested site whereby knowledge and power are facilitated through acceptable social norms enacted by the educator (Foucault, 1991; Foucault & Rabinow, 1984; Gore, 2016; Mac Naughton, 2005). It acts for and with power in which the educator themselves potentially maintain and uphold embedded power relations (Foucault, 1991; Gore, 2016; Reed-Danahay, 2017). As we spoke, I became increasingly aware of how little I knew about Sāmoan education and the role of the teacher. Conversations about my lack of knowledge gave my colleagues and I space and time to open-up and talk honestly about our experiences of education and how they have influenced the way we teach today. Some educators were very open about their view of the child as an empty vessel, where knowledge is deposited into the child and reinforced through repetition by an authority figure (Freire, 1970). This was their experience of education as children and how they felt comfortable in teaching their students. By disrupting the pedagogy in the room, I was challenging their teaching practices and their core beliefs in relation to the role of education, potentially excluding my colleagues from engaging with the children and myself in an authentic manner. Other Sāmoan educators, used this ‘safe’ space to talk honestly about this pedagogical approach and challenged that method of teaching in ECE within Sāmoa, arguing that the current form of didactic teaching methods employed by educators was ineffectual. I found myself sailing in challenging conditions. I endeavoured to delve deeper into the ‘how’. How did our projected realities play out in our pedagogical practices? In this instance we can see the multiple layers of realities and understandings; how they merge and break apart to create new realities influenced by interactions with colleagues over space and time (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Foucault & Rabinow, 1984). In moments of exchange there is a potential to create variations in the projected reality of educational purpose and co-construct other possibilities. It became apparent that my blind-spots connected to my cultural understanding of play was causing an uneasiness with educators and parents. I needed to understand how the term ‘play’ was facilitated within Sāmoan educational contexts and reconceptualise it using a Pasifika lens. Using a post-structural framework, I began to dis-assemble the discursive power placed on the Western word ‘play’ (Foucault & Rabinow, 1984; Mac Naughton, 2005; Youdell, 2006). The use of this term - so commonplace in Western discourse that it has become part of the common vernacular when discussing ECE - did not transfer within this context.

As we worked together to unpack the complexities of children’s learning, two challenges to providing culturally responsive programming were coming to light. Firstly, how to work with other educators to build a truly Sāmoan play-based learning programme and secondly, how to provide learning opportunities that reflected the lived realities of

Sāmoan children in an authentic manner. I had to reflect on how best to provide a culturally responsive early years programme that both honoured and respected the child's voice, allowing for agency and authority over learning, and honoured Sāmoan perspectives while challenging my role in unintentionally maintaining the European/colonial narrative. It was imperative that I teased apart the assumptions made by myself, colleagues and parents that ultimately placed higher value on Western knowledge which in effect, pushed local knowledge to the fringes (Foucault & Rabinow, 1984; Mac Naughton, 2005; Tuia, 2013, 2019; Tuia & Schoeffel, 2016).

Leaupepe (2011) contends there has been little research addressing the socio-cultural perceptions of play within the Pacific and how these perceptions have influenced teaching practices in ECE in the region. Within the Pacific, play is conceptualised in a different light. It is often seen as time spent away from adults where children are distracted from important tasks such as chores, or time away from proper learning (Leaupepe, 2010). This social understanding of play has, therefore, had a great effect on the teaching practices within the ECE sector in Sāmoa. Framing the language of play through a Pasifika lens needed to start with understanding the role of education in Sāmoa pre-colonisation and the form in which it took, predominantly observation and experience based (Tuia, 2013; Tuia & Schoeffel, 2016). Teaching practices have been shaped by Christian missionaries and Western colonial educational systems from the 1800s. It is important as educators we acknowledge that education does not occur within a vacuum; it is historically and culturally situated and often a contested site (Hooks, 1994). Bearing this in mind, I was acutely aware of the way in which education has been shaped and re-woven by Christian missionaries and Western colonial practices. Andrew and Fane (2019) argue that the process of colonisation leaves a legacy that impacts both the colonisers and the colonised. The ongoing effects of colonisation are often written into the governing structures of a country and even though a country may well be post-colonial, these structures maintain practices that were used to oppress. However, we also must be aware that the colonisation of a country can have a mixture of effects because "it is often destructive of the cultures being colonised, but can produce unique hybrid cultures, valued by their citizens" (pp. 117-118). As with all countries and cultures that have been colonised, Sāmoa has been irrevocably transformed by colonisation (Tuia & Schoeffel, 2016). One aspect of contestation I encounter is the common response by educators to my enquiries concerning teaching practices and educational values. I am often told: *this is the Sāmoan way*. When probed as to what the Sāmoan way was pre-colonisation, I have observed a sense of uneasiness and what could almost be a sense of embarrassment linked to a Western framing of pre-colonial Sāmoan

culture as *unenlightened*, as Christian beliefs had not been present at that time. Working within a post-colonial context, I am engaged in a space that draws on and re-enforces colonial practices. Spivak (as cited in Andreotti, 2014) talks of sanctioned ignorance, whereby we forget the ways in which imperialism occurred. Through forgetting we naturally continue the belief that the West is superior, othering those which fall out of this context and labelling them as ‘behind’ – in deficit.

For Spivak, the epistemic violence of colonialism (where colonialism affects the coloniser’s capacity to know their situation of real exploitation) makes this sanctioned ignorance work both ways with complementary results: the First World believes in its supremacy and the Third World forgets about the worlding and ‘wants’ to be civilised/catch up with the West (Andreotti, 2014 p. 27).

The transformation of Sāmoan culture through the process of enculturation beginning with Western missionary education has not only changed the method of education in Sāmoa, it privileges the acquisition of a Western education over the ‘other’ (Tuia, 2019; Tuia & Schoeffel, 2016). As an actor of and with unearned white privilege, my work in this site is problematic. Continuing the division between European and non-European ontological practices (Andreotti, 2014). Santo (2007) refers to this abstract division as ‘abyssal thinking’, in which the West renders invisible that which lies on the other side of the line.

What most fundamentally characterizes abyssal thinking is thus the impossibility of the co-presence of the two sides of the line. To the extent that it prevails, this side of the line only prevails by exhausting the field of relevant reality. Beyond it, there is only nonexistence, invisibility, non-dialectical absence. (Santo, 2007)

The hybridisation of culture, the ‘forgetting’ of the colonial past is often framed in the language of development and the advancement of economy through participation on the global stage along with the civilising of culture through Western education. (Andreotti, 2014; Spivak & Harasym, 1990; Tuia, 2013). Keeping this at the forefront of my mind, I am aware that reflective practice is key to forging a path through the complexities of post-colonial frameworks in “imagining knowledge and learning beyond Eurocentric paradigms” (Andreotti, 2011 p. 393). Nxumalo & Cedillo (2017) raise pertinent issues when addressing non-Indigenous educators located in colonial settler settings. While Sāmoa is post-colonial, gaining independence from New Zealand in 1962, I draw on Nxumalo’s theoretical framework of decolonising ECE to problematise the educator by questioning how non-Indigenous educators can respectfully create culturally responsive learning spaces in an authentic manner without co-opting traditional knowledges or indeed performing colonial erasure (Nxumalo, 2016, 2020). This reflects the problematic role of

the white Western educator (myself) in Sāmoa, either intentionally or unintentionally reproducing and creating marginalization by enacting ontological superiority.

O au o Matua Fanau – Children are our Treasures

O au o matua fanau is a powerfully symbolic Sāmoan proverb. The literal translation is *the children are beloved of their parents* – within Sāmoan culture this translates to a deep connection to the importance of children in the community - *they are why we live, they are treasures, our lives are for them*. What I discovered is that despite our taken for granted beliefs on education, the differing pedagogical approaches to teaching in the early years of education, we all had the best interests of the child at the centre of our teaching practices. No matter how differently we viewed the role of the educator it all came to the same point. We all care for our children deeply which was clearly demonstrated in the close connections each educator had with their group of children. I learned to be more open with the children as I discovered it was culturally acceptable for the educators to show physical affection in the form of hugging. Educators will often sit at the end of the day, gently caressing children who are tired from a long day at preschool, quietly plaiting hair as they sing traditional Sāmoan songs.

I became attuned to the role humour played in Sāmoan culture, an important way in which educators connect with children. On many occasions, I observed my colleagues in fits of laughter with the children as they teased each other about something silly that had happened, or at my attempts to learn a Sāmoan siva⁴ during music time.

Authentically embedding Sāmoan cultural perspectives into the new curriculum approach meant that I had to allow myself to become vulnerable and comfortable with not knowing or understanding. It forced me to analyse the role in which I take, not only as an educator in the early years setting, but as a problematised site of imperialist hegemonic reproduction. This has allowed me to co-construct knowledge with the children and educators, as we learned alongside each other. As a contested site, I take these moments to disrupt colonial discourses, challenging European understandings and knowledge production. While these moments are often messy and difficult to untangle, it offers an opportunity for a new knowledge production, one that creates solidarity (Santos, 2007). This brings me back to the song *nofo i lalo, ua ma luelue le va'a* – this song, simple, yet powerful,

⁴ Siva Sāmoa is a traditional dance performed by both women and men.

viewed through a critical pedagogical lens, allows me to disrupt my status-quo. To re-imagine and co-construct new ways of being within the setting, one that crosses ‘abyssal thinking’ and moves into ‘post-abyssal thinking’ (Santos, 2007). Whereby I neither step back altogether, nor impose what I believe is the ‘right’ way to teach. This is a messy and uncomfortable space to inhabit, but possibly a more ethical position of my being, in disrupting imperial reproduction.

Fausia se ‘Aiga Malosi – building a strong family

The journey on my va’a has not always been smooth sailing, in fact it could be said that I have hit many squalls out at sea. However, I have not been alone in my journey, as teaching is about building a community of practice, and especially in early childhood, we view our community of teachers and children as family. There is an old Sāmoan proverb: *O le tele o sulu e manua ai figota, e mama se avega pe a ta amo fa’atasi* which translates to *My strength does not come from me alone, but many*. This proverb rings true for me, as I would not be able to continue my journey without building a strong ‘aiga⁵. As my va’a sails, my journey is ever continuing as a teacher, researcher, colleague, and student. It can be daunting out on those sometimes-rough seas, however being open to one’s own vulnerabilities can be a road to understanding and sharing knowledge toward a path to empowerment.

⁵ ‘Aiga is the Sāmoan word for family, however it is more than mere blood relatives, your ‘aiga is your village and broader community connections.

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