



“Good leadership is like the Sun – it shines on everyone and every place – it is impartial, illuminating, warming, nurturing, and provides growth”.

APPRECIATING PACIFIC UNDERSTANDINGS OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP:

SOLOMON ISLANDS, TONGA AND MARSHALL ISLANDS

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KEY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

- In the Pacific Islands, getting to grips with the ‘context behind the context’ is paramount. This means understanding the domain of indigenous cultures and kastom, the domain of religion, and the institutional domain.
- Not only do these domains need to be understood, but the relationship between them – both in terms of commonalities and differences – needs to be properly appreciated. This requires deep listening to communities and building on local expertise.
- Preliminary research findings provide helpful guidance for external actors looking to implement policy or developmental programmes – including how they might acknowledge the importance of flux and the changing demands on leaders.
- An approach that privileges indigenous concepts to educational development and leadership will be more likely to succeed.

There are two key questions posed by the researchers for policy makers to consider:

- How can indigenous concepts and practices become the privileged lens through which policy development and structural adjustment of education systems can take place?
- How can Pacific leadership practices be used to shift and transform the narratives that inform policy development and implementation?

WHY RELATIONALITY MATTERS FOR EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

One of the four main research questions the Developmental Leadership Program asks is how leadership is understood in different contexts.

For the Pacific Islands, and the educators within them, this is key. There has been growing concern about Pacific people's ownership of education in their own countries as more and more outside actors have introduced new, and sometimes conflicting, modes of thinking around leadership and education.

In order to properly consider context, researchers and other outside actors need to know how to listen in context. That means adopting a more open-minded approach and, for example, appreciating the

value of truly deep listening; with ears, sense, heart and spirit.

Studies in Tonga, for example, point to the importance of relationships as central to any understanding of leadership. Here, identity is first defined by kāinga, the extended family people belong to, the people they serve and the community and the relationships they hold. Identity is also strongly informed by lotu – someone's religion, faith and worldview.

Digging deeper into that contextual relationality between kāinga and lotu allows researchers and other actors to better understand Tongan people and what is valuable to them. Applying a similar approach to listening across the Pacific Islands will allow for a stronger appreciation of the commonalities and divergences that exist in concepts of leadership across small island nations.

Using Pacific methodologies and embracing indigenous ways of thinking and listening is paramount, helping to define leadership from a Pacific perspective and inform developmental initiatives that are both effective and appropriate.

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READ MORE



Click on the links below to find out more about talanoa, tok stori and kakala research frameworks.

[Talanoa research methodology – A developing position on Pacific Research](#) (Vaioleti 2006)

[Talking about tok stori – A DLP blog by Kabini Sanga and Martyn Reynolds](#)

[Kakala Research Framework: A Garland in Celebration of a Decade of Rethinking Education](#) (Fua, 2014)



THE CONTEXT BEHIND THE CONTEXT

Whether in leadership or education, there are three features to how context is generally explained:

- 1) By looking at the institutionalised organisational setting and trying to read, or make sense of context, through observation.
- 2) By considering material aspects – in education this might be textbooks, curricula or teachers. It is quite a partial view that promotes the material world ahead of other dimensions of a complex world, including the spiritual.
- 3) By focusing on peoples or schools' wants and needs rather than their existing capabilities and relationships.

This approach to contextualising research fails to properly consider the three

domains of social relationships in Pacific settings. Although it is a generalisation (because domains differ between islands and cultures), an alternative framework may consider a domain-centric view:

- 1) The domain of indigenous cultures and kastom. Within this there are complex sets of relationships, complex prioritisation and values, and multiple communities to negotiate – communities that differ linguistically, culturally or otherwise.
- 2) The domain of church/religion. There are multiple communities, denominations and rules of engagements within this domain, even within individual clans or tribes. Appreciating this complexity is key for understanding leadership in a school context.

3) The institutionalised domain. In modern Pacific nation states, while this domain – which includes governments, economic systems, education, organisations and schools – is generally the focus of research and development attention, this is a secondary domain and sits on the previous two.

This is where the 'context behind the context' comes to the fore. All three domains are active and alive within Pacific contexts, although the domain of kastom trumps the other two in significance for understanding context.

Fundamental to this is the role of Indigenous people as experts. Embracing their expertise allows for truly relational research, in which conversations take place in context and in a manner that is informed by indigenous practice.



PACIFIC CONCEPTS OF LEADERSHIPS: PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

The early findings of the research, presented by Dr Seu'ula Johansson-Fua, Prof Kabini Sanga, Dr Martyn Reynolds, Mr Richard Robyns, Mr Danny Jim and Dr David Fa'avae, highlight the differing nature and understanding of leadership between three contexts.

In each case, leaders were asked to consider what leadership means to them, particularly in an educational setting.

SOLOMON ISLANDS

School leaders in the Solomon Islands painted a picture of educational leadership 'in flux', primarily due to outside influences.

The training provided by the Graduate Certificate of School Leadership (GCSL) of the Institute of Education (IOE) at The University of the South Pacific (USP) has sparked new conversations about the role of leaders, and their practices.

For example, one school leader explained how holism has shifted their perspective to one of teacher welfare as well as student welfare. Others spoke to the importance of mentoring staff and senior students as a new leadership activity. Education was also considered significant as an element in, and means to, positional leadership.

In some circumstances, education has become a qualification for leadership – notably for women in school leadership, church leadership and community leadership.

Indeed, kastom leadership and gender are intertwined according to local context. In some contexts, women and men do not occupy the same domains and spaces, a factor that affects leadership opportunities.

One female school leader referencing kastom, suggested "only men take up the chiefly roles in the community and at the tribe level of leadership. However, there is opportunity for educated women to become a secretary of the chief's committee."

One respondent also pointed to the changing nature of leadership requirements. In the past, they said, cultural literacy was sufficient for a chief to conduct all leadership activities. At times now, written literacy is seen to be equally useful to help navigate changed circumstances. Not all chiefs possess both cultural and written literacy, and consequently education (or access to educated people) is becoming increasingly significant as a component in leadership matters.

PACIFIC CONCEPTS OF LEADERSHIPS: PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

TONGA

In Tonga, positional leadership still exists but is interpreted in a different way – often alongside visionary leadership. Leaders often mediate their understanding via a deep connection between what is happening now, what went before, and what is yet to come.

Respondents described leadership as ‘wise discernment’, something that goes beyond policy. Indeed, educational policy was seen to rarely make sense in terms of practice and community.

This speaks to a broader tension as leaders try to reconcile indigenous values within formal schooling.

Some spoke of the need to be multi-skilled in order to bridge the contextual and cultural differences – both between and within communities, and between policy and practice. Where some actors expect instant results, patience is a key requirement for leaders. Intergenerational leadership, for example, depends on a deep consideration of what has happened before and the future of the community.

With the shifting demands, leaders spoke of the need for an array of leadership strategies – *mohu founda*. Many of these strategies were developed in post, that is, after people had become leaders. That is important to consider when understanding the progression of leadership in the context of schooling.



PACIFIC CONCEPTS OF LEADERSHIPS: PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

MARSHALL ISLANDS

In the Marshall Islands respondents pointed to dynamic understandings of leadership, whereby one concept can mean multiple things to different people. That difference in understanding is often shaped by status – a person’s role and identity within a community.

Two key concepts provide overarching context for how leadership is viewed:

- Kajin wa – a means and source of sustaining life
- Kanne lobal – which ignites inspiration, empowerment and transformation

These speak to the varied leadership characteristics identified by the respondents. One referred to the importance of having ‘the

heart to withstand the journey for the success of the community’, whereas an elementary school leader spoke about key values of honesty and virtue.

A head of clan from an outer island pointed towards broader, more collaborative, aspects of leadership. He saw everyone under his network as his responsibility – and considered a leader to be a facilitator who seeks to ‘address unnecessary doings’ and ensure alignment between parties so leaders can support one another in their shared goal of improving the school.

The findings also highlighted subtle differences between leadership practices and understanding between the main island (Majuro) and the outer islands.



PACIFIC CONCEPTS OF LEADERSHIPS: IMPLICATIONS

Often external concepts can assume a certain way of leadership, but Pacific contexts change how certain connotations are perceived and understood.

These preliminary research findings provide some guidance for those who make, and shape, policy:

- Leadership policy aims need to take account of flux and the way this is seen as a positive or negative force.
- Locally appropriate training can produce understandings that are additive to leadership practice
- Leadership is responsive to changing circumstances. As a result, new areas of significance emerge in relation to leadership, in this case in relation to education.

There are two key questions posed by the researchers for policy makers to consider:

1) How can indigenous concepts and practices become the privileged lens through which policy development and structural adjustment of education systems can take place?

This is particularly important for sustained improvements in:

- Children's access to and retention within the system (e.g. inclusive education policy, systems and practices)
- Quality of provision (recognised knowledge and knowledge systems, pedagogy, assessment, curriculum, language of instruction and learning)
- School management (governance, school improvement, professional standards)
- Teachers' attendance

2) How can Pacific leadership practices be used to shift and transform the narratives that inform policy development and implementation?

- Shifting the locus of input, development and control
- Repositioning the base from which the legitimacy and authority of policy comes

Further, the research provides guidance for how any external actor might go about supporting local education reform in the Pacific. Notably, successful implementation requires an appreciation of local expertise and spending time within each context, prioritising the information given by local leaders and communities over that found in the international literature.



BRINGING CONTEXT TO EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

A metaphor, provided by a school leader, reflects the varied nature of contextual leadership. To paraphrase, "Good leadership is like the Sun – it shines on everyone and every place – it is impartial, illuminating, warming, nurturing, and provides growth".

This speaks to leadership as being about relationships, and not just roles. That holistic approach, to consider leadership as 'shining on everyone and every place', is often hard to implement in an institutional domain though, where it can be disturbed by the hierarchies and theories of leadership that append themselves to schooling. More effective leadership programmes will seek to avoid the pitfalls of parachuting into contexts with preconceived concepts and take more time to consider how they meld the global and local, the general and specific, and appreciate what it actually means for communities and their leaders.

This goes from the initial design of a programme that needs to be rooted in an understanding of the interrelationships and tensions between domains, through to the evaluation of a programme – whereby measurements should reflect what is truly valuable in context. The privileging of indigenous concepts and expertise can guide this process and support effective, appropriate education reform.

This report is a summary of the DLP webinar 'Appreciating Pacific understandings of school leadership' that took place on 28 October 2021. We would like to thank the panellists for their contributions and to all those who engaged with the event.

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