

**Restor(y)ing Maui:  
Trickstering Time and Making Space for Other Worlds**

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**Abstract**

The article features a co-created conversation between the authors. The spark for the conversation was the desire to explore how the experiences and political-theoretical tools developed by/with working children’s organisations in Abya Yala could help us think through the phenomenon of working Polynesian school-age people in South Auckland (Aotearoa) beyond the damage-centred approaches reproduced in the media. In our discussion, we acknowledge the structural inequalities that push these young people to work earlier than the ‘norm,’ yet we also attend to their agency and worlding power. Drawing from the conceptual framework of political ontology, and thinking with Maui, a panpolynesian trickster deity, the chapter offers an alternative understanding of working school-age people that recognises their embeddedness and co-constitutedness with the *vā* of Pacific worldings—practices that are often at odds with the Modern/Colonial doings and institutions that regulate time and space. By attending to Polynesian working students without reducing them to normative discourses of childhood, lifespans, or education, we suggest that these young people sustain and recreate (Pacific) ways of weaving the world into being through other practices of community, education, time, the economy, and existence broadly. We are convinced that the doings of these young people have the potential to benefit everyone in Aotearoa: like powerful waves they surge against the walls of the Modern/Colonial stabilisation of possibilities, opening our imagination to other ways of being and relating in time, space and community.

**Keywords:** Political ontology, Pasifika education, Indigenous educations, arts education

*Kei aku nui, kei aku rahi, kua hui mai nei ki raro i te mana o te whare e tū nei, tēnā koutou katoa.*

This article begins in Te Reo Māori, the indigenous language of Aotearoa New Zealand, offering thanks and greetings to the readers, and acknowledging the embeddedness of this conversation and thinking in Aotearoa.

**Michelle:** The colonizers’ story is that Captain James Cook ‘discovered’ New Zealand in the 1700s. Named it. Claimed it. Framed it as his own. With him, he brought colonial notions of absolute time, to supersede indigenous concepts of time as relational. However, the FIRST story<sup>1</sup> of Aotearoa is about that ingenious trickster named Maui, who stowed away aboard his brothers’ boat, and using his grandmother’s jawbone, caught a great fish. His boat, and that fish, are the islands we now know as Aotearoa New Zealand – and Maui? Now, he is the trickster to learn from.

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<sup>1</sup> We use the word story while acknowledging that in indigenous worlds stories encapsulate collective onto-epistemologies, allowing for the pedagogical transmission of ways of knowing and bringing the world into being (Cooper, 2008).

In Aotearoa and across the Pacific Ocean, Maui is a beloved atua<sup>2</sup>, renowned for his crafty ingenuity, devious nature and penchant for mischief. The (mis)deeds of Maui include anything from stealing fire to venturing to the underworld and confronting the goddess of death.

One of my favourite childhood stories is of [Maui and Tamanuiterā](#) (the Sun). The story goes that young Maui (for the youngest is always the most mischievous), lived in a village with his brothers. Every day the brothers would get up at sunrise, toil away at their chores – cleaning, hunting, harvesting, preparing food – and every evening the sun would set too soon. Their chores incomplete, and feeling exhausted, at the end of the day the brothers would bemoan the fact that the days were too short, and they didn't have enough time to get things done. Then one day, Maui says “why should we be slaves to the sun? I am going to trap Tamanuiterā and teach it to move more slowly across the sky!” His brothers are incredulous and do not believe he can do such a thing. But Maui, determined to live up to his word, teaches the villagers to make ropes from flax. He says a special karakia<sup>3</sup> over the ropes, and then he and his brother's head off to the East, where the sun rises, to trap the fiery beast. Maui and his brothers lay the ropes across the pit from which the sun will rise, but then his brothers become afraid and so Maui alone, wielding the power of his grandmother's sacred jawbone, demands that the waking sun travel more slowly across the sky. A battle ensues between Maui and the Sun, but the trickster prevails and the weary Tamanuiterā eventually makes his way into the sky – moving slowly enough that the work of the day can be done.

In our current time of working too much and never feeling like there is enough time, it feels like we need to call on Maui and to conjure for ourselves that trickster spirit that will allow us to think and ‘be’ differently in space and time, and to challenge the frames that contain us.

**Alejandra:** Thank you for sharing such a great story of Maui. It is indeed a needed story if we are to engage in conversation about other possible doings of time (and space) in relation to education and work in young people's lives, particularly in a Polynesian context. In the last few months, tricksters keep appearing my way in readings, podcasts, stories and through the work of Nigerian scholar Bayo Akomolafe, who has inspired me a lot lately. Bayo (Akomolafe & James, 2023) talks about the need for trickster gods to crack the apparent inescapability of the Modern<sup>4</sup> present, particularly – he says – because our quests for justice have often ended up reinforcing the very structures that we are trying to leave behind. Many of us working for social justice have become so invested in reclaiming justice as citizens within the Modern/Colonial world design that we often forget about the possibilities for justice that may lie within different onto-epistemological commitments. The re-iteration of colonial patterns has stifled our memory and ability to imagine. This is what coloniality means in Bayo's beautiful redefinition of this concept as “a stabilization of possibilities”. It is from that understanding that Bayo invokes trickster gods as forces that can make appear “the multiplicities that have been closed by colonial capture” (Akomolafe & Jackson, 2022). With their playfulness, cheeky ways and defiance of the established morality, tricksters make available thinking and worlding possibilities that would not manifest without their

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<sup>2</sup> Gods, supernatural beings, deities, ancestors with continuing influence, demons.

<sup>3</sup> Prayer, ritual chant.

<sup>4</sup> We capitalise Modernity and Modern as we use this term in reference to a set of onto-epistemological commitments and practices characteristic of the Modern era and entangled with European colonisation and imperialism from the XV century.

intervention. In one of my recent readings, I found a mention of Maui that encapsulates well the qualities of trickster gods Bayo talks about and their potential to bring forward new worlds: “the Maui traditions push and pull people into the unknown, into instability and new frontiers” (Cooper, 2008, p. 39).

**Michelle:** It sounds like Maui is one of Bayo’s trickster gods who have been appearing to you! If we consider what it might mean to “re-open” those multiplicities that have been “closed by colonial capture,” there are definite synergies to our Maui story. Maui refuses to accept what his brothers and the villagers know as Truth – that the sun can only move at a single speed and that they have no power to change this. However, Maui himself can see the other possibilities that might exist. With this in mind, he shatters the existing structures, firstly by drawing on other knowledges in the weaving of the flax. By teaching the villagers the weaving skills that he himself learned on a previous adventure to the Underworld, Maui manifests the other worlding that is necessary to create the change that is needed. Maui’s next task is to convince his brothers to go with him to confront the mighty Tamanuiterā. Perhaps our next task is to find and convince those who might journey with us to explore other possibilities?

**Alejandra:** You are right. I think it is also about turning the spotlight on and celebrating those who are always already keeping alive other worldings<sup>5</sup>, and learning how to journey with them. I am going to turn the spotlight on the great work you and your ‘village’ do in nurturing Pacific worldings and teaching the younger generations, who often face so much pressure to assimilate, how to navigate the colonial world without giving up their ancestral (yet always dynamic) ways of bringing the world into being. I am really thankful that I have been able to journey alongside you, and I am honored to be here now under the star of the demigod Maui, bringing a provocation for us to think with regarding working school-age people. I appreciate your generosity in this thinking together, and for being constantly a guide to me in spaces that I am only starting to learn how to navigate. When we first met in 2020, I had just arrived from Colombia to pursue my PhD in Aotearoa New Zealand. Due to the pandemic, the research that I intended to do with Latin American working children’s organisations became impossible. I tried to find something similar in Aotearoa, but I could not. Yet, I was struck by the strength of Pasifika<sup>6</sup> youth climate change activism. Given my interest in children and young people’s reclamation of the public sphere, I thought I could research that phenomenon instead. At that point, with the Western education and research training that I had received, I believed that I could start research from a research question... I was not aware of the fundamental role of sustained relationships for doing mana-upholding research, particularly when engaging with communities that have been over-researched and continually screwed by researchers (Smith, 2012). Thank god that I met you...

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<sup>5</sup> We use this worlding instead of world view to emphasize that worlds are not already there but being brought into being through their enactment (Escobar, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> People of Pacific heritage or ancestry living in Aotearoa New Zealand. From the 1950s to the 1970s the demands of New Zealand’s growing manufacturing sector resulted in policies that welcomed Pacific migration, a stance reversed during the 1976 economic crisis (Matapo, 2021). The term Pasifika excludes Māori, while the term Polynesian are inclusive of Māori.

**Michelle:** Thank Maui! I am grateful that you came to the work with our young people with the right heart! I run a theatre company in South Auckland<sup>7</sup> called the Black Friars<sup>8</sup>. We're a company of actors, activists, writers, warriors, storytellers and change-makers committed to re-storying Pasifika in the largest Polynesian city in the world, to activating indigenous knowledges, to growing future leaders and to holding courageous spaces for our young people to walk tall in all of their worlds. Too often I find myself standing between my community and outside researchers, acutely aware of any research that is conducted "without us and about us". Relationality, *teu le vā/tauhi va*<sup>9</sup>, and the importance of upholding and honouring reciprocal relationships have become paramount in any work with outsiders. In fact, often at odds with Western scholarship, indigenous ways of being determine that subject matter is inseparable from the author and that "the constructed nature of knowledge, highlight[s] multiple truths and realities and prove[s] that the researcher is not neutral or objective" (Te Wānanga o Aotearoa, 2021). We are committed to explicitly naming our positions, our whakapapa<sup>10</sup>, our relationality, and our "skin in the game" on any given story or project. In practice, this means that any outsiders coming to work with our communities must take the time to get to know us and must be open to serving first. There is a Samoan proverb that we live by: "O le ala i le pule o le tautua" (the path towards leadership is service). A practice to live by when going onto marae<sup>11</sup> is to go out into the kitchen and pick up a tea towel, before even thinking about knocking on the front door and asking for something. Our whole community loved the way that you came and worked on the *Brown Paper Bag* production – you became part of the village.

**Alejandra:** Through our relationship and my journey of learning along the wonderful Pasifika kids you work with, I've learnt that doing ethical research sometimes entails not doing the research... Showing up for the communities we want to learn with looks instead like doing what needs to be done, carrying the water, doing a report, or just being present... and showing up where and when we are needed. In that process, we are constantly learning, and in my case unlearning all the conditionings and the habits of the Western researcher, or simply, of the western subject: the need and desire for being in control, the instrumentalization of people to fulfill institutional agendas, and the 'I think therefore I am' kind of logic, the arrogance of the self-sustaining individual. It is thanks to my entanglement with Polynesian worlds (ways of being knowing and relating) in Aotearoa, but also sustained by Latin American scholars such as Arturo Escobar and Marisol de la Cadena, that I have learnt to cultivate some sort of critical... humbleness, yeah, critical humbleness.

**Michelle:** I love the idea of critical humbleness! There are strong connections to the idea of the Vā in Pacific cultures and the unspoken code of conduct which we must observe in our relationships with others. Preeminent Samoan scholar Mauaiavao Professor Albert Wendt defines

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<sup>7</sup> South Auckland is an area with a large population of Pasifika and Māori people. It has a bad reputation as it is associated with gangs, violence and crime and as a place of poverty and deprivation (Allen, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> An example of the work of the Black Friars with young people in South Auckland is the Southside Rise project. You can watch a snippet [here](#).

<sup>9</sup> 'caring for the relationship' in Samoan and Tongan respectively.

<sup>10</sup> genealogy, heritage

<sup>11</sup> Marae are Māori traditional wooden carved meeting houses that serve for community purposes. Today, marae continue to be central for Māori communities to sustain their cultural traditions and ways of life in accordance with their values and terms.

the *vā* as “the space between, the between-ness, not empty space, not space that separates but space that relates, that holds separate entities and things together in the Unity-that-is-All, the space giving meaning to things” (Wendt, 1999, p. 402). Samoan scholar and philosopher, Professor Albert Refiti, likens the sacred Pasifika concept of the *Vā* to a set of invisible strings which connect people to each other. Like the strings of a guitar, sometimes these connections become out of tune and need attending to (Professor Albert Refiti, Personal Communication, October 6, 2022). This process is called “*teu le vā*” (Samoan) or “*tauhi vā*” (Tongan) – a vital Pasifika concept, affecting all interactions and relationships.

My work in theatre is about taking back the right to tell our stories and involves engaging with indigenous relational methodologies, counter-narratives and the Pacific concept of *vā*. Wilson (2008) discusses the relational nature of indigenous research arguing that “an indigenous paradigm comes from the fundamental belief that knowledge is relation. Knowledge is shared with all of creation...it goes beyond the individual’s knowledge to the concept of relational knowledge... you are answerable to all your relations when you are doing research” (p. 56). Indigenous concepts of relationality, reciprocity and responsibility are integral to collaboration and research. Pacific relationalities and responsibilities are understood best through the *vā*, with *Teu le vā* articulating the sacred, social and spiritual relationships central to Pacific ways of being in the world. *Teu le vā* is applied in the context of this research to the sharing of story and building relationships. When we *teu le vā*, we acknowledge that the space, or the *vā*, holds all shared experiences and stories that have passed between the stakeholders, and we abide by the unspoken rules that govern social and cultural spaces and interactions. Understanding the *vā* means that you can no longer think in terms of “I”, or “I think therefore I am” – there is only “we”, and the connections and relationships that define us.

**Alejandra:** I tautoko (support) your words. Your references trace somehow the path through which, in engaging with indigenous worlds in Aotearoa, I have come to learn critical humbleness. And I have to say it has not been an easy process as critical humbleness requires a deep repositioning: it is humbleness of an ontological sort. It requires the willingness to challenge the Modern ontology and its self-granted powers to define being, knowledge, politics, justice... Reality at large... And it is also humbleness of an epistemological sort: it requires questioning the attitude of entitlement to know about the other that is so prevalent in research, the desire of dissecting the other, and explaining their world in MY terms, that is, the dominant Modern/Colonial terms. I see critical humbleness as embracing the space of not knowing, as suspending the practice of making the other fit into the categories that I have for thinking and making sense. It is accepting that the Other’s world is incommensurable to my own understanding and resisting the habit of “canibalising everything that we cannot know” (de la Cadena & Hiner, 2020, p. 173). Critical humbleness also entails willingness, effort and time consecrated to relationships which may allow us to start learning from others in their own terms. Yet, remaining aware of the limits of our understanding is crucial to keep at bay the Modern/Colonial cannibal epistemology. It is precisely in recognizing my limits to understand and think-with Polynesian worlds that I am drawn to thinking in dialogue or in conversation with friends and mentors like you.

The institutions of western research make it really hard to cultivate critical humbleness with their time constraints and the emphasis on (PhD) researchers being sole authors of their work. Yet, it is a value desperately needed in these institutions profoundly implicated, past, present and ostensibly

future in advancing Modern/Colonial onto-epistemologies. As Stengers (2000) has studied, the consolidation of Modern science entailed the devaluation of all other forms of knowledge/knowledge production, and even more, the gaslighting of the sense of reality of indigenous, local and all other contending worldings (Stengers, 2018). A Modern/Colonial education has worked to convince indigenous and minoritised people that their knowledge systems are inferior, and that their realities (or beliefs, as anthropologists called them) are irrational, and often morally condemnable (Jackson, 2016). In the name of religion, moral and (still today) epistemological rightness, colonisation has been wedged. It has appeared under the guise of saving the ‘non-Moderns’ from heathenism, or, still today, as saving them from their own “ignorance”. Interestingly, it has often been in the name of children that Modernity imposes its “morally superior” agenda across the globe. For instance, Cannella and Viruru (2004) remind us that “[m]any extreme impositions of power (i.e., taking over other countries and reorganizing their ways of existing) have been legitimated in the name of children—to ensure a better future for them, to save their souls, to teach their parents how to live their lives” (p. 3). It was following the same logic and with the aim of educating children into the ‘superior’ Modern ways that so many indigenous children were taken away from their families and communities and put in residential schools in Turtle Island, Australia and Aotearoa. Framing the Other’s difference as inferiority is the Modern/Colonial way of erasing other world(ing)s where life, including children’s lives are not necessarily paced by colonial time nor centered around the Modern/Colonial values of individual freedoms, secularism, unbound progress and wealth accumulation.

**Michelle:** When you speak about other worlding, Ale, I often think of my worlds that are always overlaid and superimposed upon each other in my life. Sometimes I can see them very clearly, and can see Bayo’s multiplicities, hiding in plain sight. I’ve recently done some research on policies in education and the arts concerning Pacific Peoples and the contradictions are fascinating – there is a myriad of policies targeted at Pasifika youth in Aotearoa, issued by the many arms of New Zealand’s colonial government. From the Ministry for Pacific Peoples, where “Pacific communities are recognised for the diversity they bring, the knowledge they impart and the contribution they make to the uniqueness of Aotearoa” (Sio, 2018, p. 5), to Auckland Council, who promise to “celebrate [their] uniqueness and achievements” (Auckland Council, 2020, p. 23). However, beyond these broad, sweeping public statements, there is also an understanding that “in New Zealand socio-economic disadvantage has a large overlap with ethnicity ... which affects Māori and Pacific students disproportionately” (The Southern Initiative et al., 2020, p. 17) and that there continue to be “disparities in access to education and health services for Māori and Pacific children and their families; and [a] disproportionate number of Māori and Pacific People in poverty and material hardship” (New Zealand Government, 2019, p. 12). This double-messaging promotes the overall perception that while Aotearoa loves her Pacific Peoples and their cultures, is proud of them and wants them to do well – for some (mysterious) reason they keep popping up at the bottom end of all the statistics. On the one hand, government policies might be understood as the benevolent practice of addressing the problem of an ‘inherently inferior’ Pacific population. On the other hand, government policies might be better understood as the patronising practice of maintaining power and dominance over a growing portion of the population that it deliberately, consistently and systematically fails in each and every way.

**Alejandra:** What is often most problematic about targeted interventions to disenfranchised communities is that they are invested in directing those communities towards a normative model and a Modern/Colonial vision of success and achievement that does not necessarily reflect the

values and aspirations of those communities. We are tricked into thinking that the only way of achieving social and economic well-being and a dignified/good/successful life is by achieving on indicators that abide by Modern/Colonial values. I am thinking of areas such as education. When we are all measured by Modern/Colonial/Capitalist standards of achievement it is obvious that those communities who center more-than-Modern values such as the collective, redistribution and spirituality, to name a few, are going to be less achieving. If we were to change the markers of achievement to incorporate those values the outcomes would drastically change. We may agree that Pasifika communities have been penalized in education for holding onto other (more collective) ways of knowledge-making and transmission that decenter individual success (Jones, 1991; Thaman, 2008) and give great importance to spirituality. In a Modern, secular and individualistic market-driven world those values are not rewarded, and this is reflected in the education system.

Children and young people are one of the most intensely governed, controlled and measured groups in society with many policies and institutions consecrated to policing them and assessing their progress (Duhn, 2006). However, such institutions and policies, with schooling as a case in point, are tributaries to the normative child and often disregard the values, relationships, and singularity that underpin the worldings of many children and their communities. Under the assumptions of a one-world ontology (there is only one reality) such policies further the erasure of more-than-Modern worlds.

A very interesting phenomenon I have studied in Abya Yala (Latin America) is the interventions by NGOs and International agencies targeting working children with ‘development’ agendas. When a normative model of childhood taken from the Global North is imposed in our local contexts, it ends up producing a narrative of the Global South as teeming with “children without childhood” (Liebel, 2016, p. 79). Within the hegemonic model, childhood appears as a time of innocence, play and school, free of ‘adult’ responsibilities (Duhn, 2006; Liebel, 2016). Children whose lives lie outside of those narrow parameters of normality and desirability appear as victims to be pitied and saved, their families and communities marked as underdeveloped and in need of white/Modern fixing. Targeted by such discourses and practices, communities and families start to believe they are failing their children because they cannot offer them the Disneyfied childhood that Global North narratives portray as norm and ideal. And even children themselves start internalizing a sense of inadequacy and inferiority (Liebel, 2016). Instead of recognizing the diversity, richness and positive aspects of childhoods that respond to each local context, development policies and interventions often advance a hegemonic childhood outside of which children’s doings are rendered problematic. What working children organisations<sup>12</sup> have been doing for over 40 years in that space is of great value, as they have challenged and refused the abnormalisation of their childhoods.

**Michelle:** I think a lot about the important role of ‘carer’ in Pacific communities. This is a way to describe the essential role that is usually taken up by young and often unmarried girls to care for their younger siblings, nieces, nephews and the elderly. In the village, it is perfectly normal for a

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<sup>12</sup> Working children organisations emerged in Latin America during the 1970s with the aim of improving the living conditions of working children and enhancing their societal and political participation. Today working children organisations are present in at least 10 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, with [MOLACNNATS](#) as a transnational organisation articulating the work of all local branches.

ten-year-old girl to have charge of her baby nephew. The village is set up to support this. She is fully responsible for the caring, feeding, changing and putting to sleep of the baby. If anything should go wrong, adults are close by to help. However, in Aotearoa, outside of the village and in our segregated, small houses, I have been horrified to discover my young female relatives left home alone with the baby. What if something were to go wrong? Who would come and help? Our modern lives, for all of their appliances and conveniences, are not set up to support communal responsibilities and collective manaakitanga<sup>13</sup>.

**Alejandra:** I really like this account you share as it highlights that every childhood needs to be understood in its own context. Your account also makes visible how the apparatus of Modernisation, which touches on all aspects of life, renders certain childhoods impossible within the current structures that govern life (working, housing, education, community). It is evident that Modern ways of living put pressure on those worldings of which other doings of childhood are part, such as the worlds defined by collective manaakitanga. Under the constraints of the Modern world and its push for assimilation, collective manaakitanga becomes harder to enact. Not that the pressure fully achieves its purpose: we know Pasifika communities have continued to find ways to express manaakitanga even in a world that penalises it, and children are part of that silent resistance.

The narrative that frames working children as ‘children without a childhood’, who are to be pitied and saved, and their communities as needing fixing, is not endemic to Latin America. I have recently come across similar narratives in the media here in Aotearoa, targeting in particular Pasifika high school students who work. While this phenomenon is not new it was exacerbated by the pandemic (Mutch, 2021). Many of the news articles on this topic are well-meaning: they emphasize poverty and social inequalities as the drive of the phenomenon and call for immediate solutions to put students back at school. And yet, when reading them I cannot help but think about Tuck’s (2009) warning against damage-centered approaches to BIPOC and disenfranchised communities. She says that even when portraying damage to claim for restitutions in a social justice effort, damage-centered approaches (which also tend to downplay the agency of those to be pitied) end up reinforcing the idea of brokenness that communities internalize coming to see themselves as utterly damaged. Ultimately this diminishes their sense of hope and their capacity to respond to the world in which they live.

Now, let me go back to working children organisations in Latin America. I guess that what I admire most in them is their rejection of damage-centered approaches. While they recognize poverty and social inequalities as factors that drive them to work, they see dignified work as their agentic response to the world in which they live and as a way of pursuing their aspirations. In their organising and collective struggle working children highlight the worth, value and agency in their work, reclaiming themselves as important social, political and economic actors while also advocating for systems that support their continued education alongside work (Pasley & Jaramillo-Aristizabal, 2023). What their activism also makes evident for me is that a plurality of contexts, communities, and worldings is necessarily accompanied by a plurality of enactments of childhood. And yet the education system is ill-equipped to respond to this, as it is tributary of colonial time and the normative (white/middle class) child. For instance, schooling assumes a child that does not have caring responsibilities within the family or in any case, a child that can attend to their

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<sup>13</sup> hospitality, act of caring, upholding someone’s mana or prestige

family responsibilities outside of school hours. The expectation is that children should be at school during school hours, and this normative doing if childhood is naturalised to the point that it appears unquestionable. Yet, in the face of the stabilization of possibilities that is schooling, it is worth revisiting Maui to remember that the current organisation of children's lives around school is not the sole or the best alternative. It is, in fact, an arrangement heavily influenced by economic purposes (Nichols, 2016). What if, instead of assuming that children should not do caring (or other) jobs during school time, we dared to reimagine school and in ways that allowed Pasifika children to uphold their responsibilities within the Vā while still have equal opportunities to learn and advance their education?

**Michelle:** I remember very clearly the night before my son's year 13 Chemistry exam. Chemistry was by far his weakest subject in school, and he needed the exam credits for University Entrance. That same night, there was a big funeral in our family. At around 10 pm both of his grandmothers came to him and asked him to drive them to the āpō (last night of the funeral) and if he would carry their mats for them. This is a very culturally significant responsibility for Tongan people. My son looked at his Chemistry notes and then looked at his grandmothers, and of course, not having Maui's power to slow the sun, he chose his family. I hope for a time when our children are not forced to make those binary choices!

**Alejandra:** Amen! One thing we tend to forget when we are locked in the current hegemonic model of childhood (a stabilisation of possibilities) is that children have historically participated in economic (including caring) activities alongside other community members and have learnt and become competent through such doings. This is not only true for what we now call the Global South but also for Europe (Aries, 1962). In her work on pre-hispanic Inca society, Dean (2002) states that "the individual's physical abilities and corresponding duties were the basis of the categories used by Inka census takers" (Dean, 2002, p. 41). The life stage partitions we take for granted today meant little in a different context where (physical) abilities, not age, defined social expectations and economic responsibilities.

In the Western/Modern world, it was wider shifts in the modes of economic production and social relationships that rendered working children problematic. This shift was precipitated by industrialization whereby economic activities were taken away from the family or community sphere leading to the growth of cities and the consolidation of a capitalist economy (Pihama, 2019; Lesko, 2012). With community members no longer available to guide or oversee the economic responsibilities children contribute to, and with the demand for the workforce increasingly in sites such as factories, children's work becomes a matter of concern. Worries around children's welfare mark the reframing of children from active community members to a group needing care and protection. "Laws prohibiting child labour, though not effecting many changes before 1910, provided another kind of support for children and youth defined as needing protection and nurture, not responsibility" (Lesko, 2012, p. 54). The institution of public and mandatory schooling would emerge in response to this discursive move, but also to the wider shifts in the economic and social landscapes.

**Michelle:** The idea that children or youth are not defined by age, nor are the responsibilities of family or community members is relevant in the Pacific context:

*"For Pasifika peoples, 'youth' is a category that is sometimes synonymous with 'unmarried' and therefore may apply to people into their early 30s. At the other end of the*

*spectrum, those under 16 or 18 years of age may still be considered children. The phenomenon of the wide age range of Pasifika youth may be witnessed at church events, where any single ‘youth group’ might include parishioners from 12 to 30 years old” (Johansson, 2023).*

It is also useful to consider that it is not so much your age that defines your role and responsibilities in the family, but rather your position in the birth order. For example, the oldest sister is always going to carry a lot of responsibilities; she is expected to know things and to do things and to be the carer for the little ones, regardless of how old they are themselves. The youngest sister might usually be the one expected to stay behind and look after the parents as they age. Your role is also dependent on the current context in which you find yourself. Sometimes this can change from moment to moment, depending on who is in the room, and it requires a sophisticated understanding of the *vā* to know how to behave correctly. From a young age, children learn to sense the *vā* and to navigate its ever-fluid, relational ways.

**Alejandra:** I love that you are mentioning this. Particularly because when we are used to the narratives that portray Polynesian students, including those working, as in deficit and being problematic, we become less capable of seeing the refined knowledges and the alternative worldings that are being weaved behind what appears as a problem. As you spoke about roles and responsibilities in Pasifika communities it became evident that there is another worlding of ‘life stages’, that is less fixed than in the partition of life-stages according to age. In their endurance, these non-normative childhoods (that are also other worldings) remind us of the many alternative weavings of life that continue being weaved often from the margins.

In Modern/Colonial contexts such as school, biological age is the primary factor in defining civil rights and responsibilities. It also determines developmental expectations for children’s achievements at school and the milestones associated with specific life stages. Notions such as ‘lagging behind’ exist within these narratives of human progress whereby ‘normality’ is defined according to biological age, and so are the opportunities for learning and educational achievement. These narratives/practices are damaging to the self-belief of students who for any reason do not achieve a certain knowledge or assessment by the age they are supposed to, a harm that discourages many of them from staying in or pursuing further education (Jones, 1991).

And I want to go back here to the news reports I mentioned about Pasifika working school students. I appreciate how they make an urgent call to address the economic inequalities that underpin this phenomenon. Yet, I am wary that the current discourses on school age working children in Aotearoa are solely focused on finding ways to put working children back at school, as if schooling had not historically failed (and continues to do so) Māori and Pasifika students actively contributing to a two-tiered society (Jones, 1991; Walker, 2016).

The extensive report on working children that was recently launched by New Zealand Child Poverty Action Group (Shi, 2024), highlights that school disengagement could be one of the factors driving kids into work and ultimately school drop-out (or pushout, as reconceptualized by Tuck, 2012). While the correlation of student work with academic underachievement is clear, the report says it is hard to establish the causal relation between them or which one might occur first. An insight from a young person quoted in one of the news articles exemplifies the complexities of this correlation. The student expressed they felt a sense of relief and found purpose in contributing

to their family through work, seeing it as “a better option than potentially failing at school” (Mayron et al., 2022).

My sense is that what current approaches fail to see in the phenomenon of Pasifika working young people is that **not only** children/young people working because their families are struggling economically, **but also** they are enacting collective responsibilities that exceed the individualistic and normative child/student/person that is hegemonic in society. In that regard, this phenomenon not only compels us to tackle economic inequalities, but also to rethink schooling and reimagine with young people what education could be.

If we are to advocate for social justice for Pasifika students in mainstream education, we need to see what often remains invisible under a Modern/Colonial One-world imaginary. Concepts like Vā and manaakitanga which you have alluded to earlier attest that young Pasifika people live worlds where more-than-Modern ontological commitments are being enacted, which come with specific relationalities and responsibilities that young people must and/or want to uphold. These responsibilities and relationalities, which might include paid work, caring for or accompanying family members (such as in funerals) are often at odds with the rigid times and demands for succeeding in schooling as it is structured today. The Modern mandate that governs schools continues to penalise those children and so what could be compatible spheres of life becomes an alternative that some of these kids have to choose from.

**Michelle:** I often wonder what an education system might look like if we assessed children when they are ready. Imagine the possibilities if we acknowledged that all of us have areas of strength where we might be ahead of our chronological “school age”, and we should not be confined or defined by our adherence to these chronological “norms”. Even in Kura Kaupapa Māori which do such a phenomenal job at fostering education that is “fit” for their students and operate within indigenous notions of time and development, kura (schools) are still bound by NZQA’s rules and colonial timings when it comes to assessment in the senior curriculum. Yet, this high-stakes testing is at odds with holistic learning as understood within te ao Māori in terms of “gaining knowledge through being attuned to the environment and universal flow” (Hindle & Trinnick, 2018).

**Alejandra:** Freeman (2010) coins the term *chrononormativity* for those expectations and doings of time that privilege ways of being in the world enthralled with Modern capitalist progress. Schooling, with its age-grading is a vivid example of chrononormativity and Lesko’s (2012) work is quite poignant in highlighting the origin and entanglement of age-grading with fears of racial degeneracy in the making of the white nation in the nineteenth century, particularly in the U.S. context. Lesko develops the concept of panoptical time suggesting that age-grading is part of a technology of vigilance that is attentive to precocity or retardation. These opposing yet ‘abnormal’ forms of development-in-time must be avoided, as they are predictors of ‘degeneracy’. A “slow, steady coming-of-age” (p. 54) is mandated as the formula to ensure the white boy and with him the white race advancement towards further progress. The moral panics around young people not being at school which have created widespread tropes such as youth delinquency, truancy and more recently school dropouts are entangled with a colonial racial science and its fears of degeneracy or contamination by non-white races (Lesko, 2012; Meyerhoff, 2019; Varga, 2020). When these notions are exported to the rest of the world via Modernisation/Colonisation (international agencies and policies, NGOs) they produce the abnormalisation of childhoods that were previously acceptable within those communities, such as children’s economic contributions.

**Michelle:** My Mum grew up in a small village in the island nation of Tonga called Fatai. One of her favourite stories is about how, as a child, her job was to bike her older sister to school. She is one of 15 children, and her oldest sister got a job as a teacher when my Mum was about 10 or 11. Mum talks about how her sister balanced on her handlebars, all dressed up for work, and my mum would be the person who ‘drove’ her to school, every day and picked her up every day after school... And now, here in South Auckland, where a lot of our Pasifika kids live, Kia Aroha College adjusted their start and finish times to give time for older siblings to take the younger ones to school and then arrive at school themselves. This was post-COVID. The tumuaki<sup>14</sup> looked at the starting times of the local primary school the younger siblings attend, and they built a 15-minute window into their start and finish times for the pickups and drop-offs. It seems such a small thing, but it is such a revolutionary thing for a school to do! I think about how much easier this makes the lives of those families – no one has to worry about getting in trouble because they’ve had to do the ‘school run’. Parents can stop feeling guilty about causing their older children to be late to school, and stop worrying about their younger children waiting to be picked up afterwards.

**Alejandra:** That is beautiful. The narratives that make school and work/caring jobs a binary correspond to an education system (and a worlding) that fails to accommodate children that are not the ‘normative’ white middle-class subject that school takes for granted. The assumption is that students can and should focus primarily on succeeding academically at all times. But that is not the life of many children in your community, is it?

**Michelle:** Not at all. I mean, kids in my community are certainly capable of succeeding academically! They are also, like Maui, incredibly capable world-walkers – learning to navigate multiple ways of being in multiple worlds that exist simultaneously and hold them to different and often conflicting rules. It is already a complicated mess to try and navigate, and then we compound those worlds with the binary, linear narrative that means that if you’re not ready to undertake NCEA<sup>15</sup> level one by the time you’re 15, then you are already a failure. And our colonial systems add the narrative that if you are the one who stays home to look after your aging grandma, then you have chosen an inferior pathway and you will be left behind.

**Alejandra:** The lack of flexibility of schooling means that many children and young people are not given the possibility to engage with learning at times and ways that work for them. In the one-size fits all model that schooling is, despite its best attempts of ‘inclusion’, there is little regard for the constraints and responsibilities that constitute the worlds of many children and young people. This lack of consideration and support weighs heavier on kids that already come from challenging economic situations, furthering their disadvantage and making it harder for them to succeed academically, which is often a Modern/Colonial standard of success anyway. The demoralising blow comes when students in disadvantaged circumstances are made to feel responsible for what is a systemic failure, with consequences in their self-perception and confidence (Jones, 1991). In Aotearoa, we are lucky enough to have the model of Kura Kaupapa Māori or Māori medium education as a refusal to the ongoing screwing of Māori in education (Walker, 2016). Kura Kaupapa Māori reclaims a space of self-determination for Māori to define their educational agendas and aspirations. Yet, there is only a proportion of Māori students who attend Māori

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<sup>14</sup> principal

<sup>15</sup> The National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) is the main school leaving qualification in Aotearoa New Zealand.

medium education with many still in mainstream education. And even those within Kura Kaupapa Māori, as you said earlier, have to deal with assessments that continue to reproduce colonial hierarchies (Walker, 2016), not to talk about having to defend their project and the value of matauranga Māori from unrelenting colonial attacks...

Thinking about the work we do at Māia<sup>16</sup>, I see [Brave Learning](#) as both challenging the idea that school is always the best place to be for everyone under 18, and also challenging the binary thinking that puts work (including caring responsibilities) at odds with education. Isn't Brave Learning about life-long learning and offering young people support to pursue learning alongside family and work responsibilities and aspirations?

**Michelle:** Brave Learning is designed for kids who had to leave school because of COVID in one shape or form, whether that's to support their families, or because school wasn't a place to be, or for whatever reason the school was not working. What it really is, is a reimagining of education and what it could possibly be and how we might create villages that grow our kids.

**Alejandra:** I can feel Maui's presence in that initiative. Where school has become the only possible space/time for under 18s, Maui pushes against the stabilisation of possibilities making other possibilities emerge... Kasey, one of the kids that we have at Brave Research, another of Māia's programmes, shared with me a very interesting reflection about being a young person who works. I've asked his permission to share here:

*“One of the kids in the intermediate where we do research asked us if we had experienced racism in high school. I said “yes, because I'm Māori there's a conception that all young Māori who work are working for the sake of their family and last year, I told my dean I was working and she told me. ‘Ohh is that why you haven't been at school? Because you have to help your family provide and get a job?’ This was really offensive and very stereotypical because my dean thought because I was Māori my family was poor when in reality I didn't want to financially depend so much on my parents and earn money for myself and spend it on what I want.”*

I guess this is part of what that often remain unheard under the noise of damage, deficit and brokenness stories: the narratives that account for the agency of young people and in doing so allow for more nuance discussions that go beyond the call to put children back at school. What I love in this story is the statement he makes: it is not your perceived deficit that defines the work I do, it's my agency to be more independent... and I guess that 'deficit' is the perspective that primes whenever the working kid is brown or from an area like South Auckland. For white/normative kids the perception of work is often different, it is perceived to be a sign of industry or entrepreneurial spirit, and it is often praised...

**Michelle:** “Good on you for getting a job”. It's funny how when a brown kid gets a job, it's assumed that their family is poor and that they themselves will be unable to balance study and work. But when a white kid gets a job, it's a good thing, because they are showing independence

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<sup>16</sup> Michelle is the co-founder of Māia Centre for Social Justice and Education, and Alejandra currently works for Māia Centre leading their Brave Research Internship Programme.

and of course, they will be able to succeed at school as well. It is part of the deficit framing around all brown kids – they are both dangerous and endangered.

**Alejandra:** While there might be socio-economic injustices in the lives of many Pasifika working students that does not make their decision to work less agentic. At least not when understanding agency as the capacity to respond to the world and the entanglements in which we find ourselves (Pasley & Jaramillo-Aristizabal, 2023).

Along with recognizing the structural inequalities that are part of the lives of Pasifika kids, we can also make visible the desire and agency of those who work including caring jobs. This will help eschew the damage-centred narratives that target disenfranchised communities and that are part of a cycle of self-fulfilling prophecies (Tuck, 2009). Equally, by highlighting that the current model of education is part of the problem forcing students out of school, we can start thinking of dropouts as something other than failures: acts of refusal and resistance to an institution that presents itself as a social leveler while being fundamentally underpinned by hierarchies where European knowledges and ways sit at the top and those of Māori and Pasifika communities at the bottom.

And yes, the question remains for us of how to find ways of reopening for these kids the doors that having dropped out of school might have closed for them. This involves re-imagining education beyond the school apparatus as we are trying to do with Brave Learning and Brave Research.

Lastly, it also seems important to celebrate the initiatives aiming to transform mainstream education in ways that uphold differences, such as the example of Kia Aroha College. Such examples provide a model for other institutions trying to build mana-upholding relationships with kids that sustain more-than-Modern worlds with their daily living. In Kia Aroha's case, it started by acknowledging that the kids at their school were not the white middle-class kid that schooling takes for granted and attending instead to the worlds their children are a part of, worlds of collective responsibilities towards their families and siblings. This example makes evident that a small change can make, quite literally, a world of difference, by sustaining alternative practices of worlding the world into being. I find this very hopeful!

**Michelle:** It is very heartening. There are some other schools doing some really cool things. Like Tangaroa College, where the tumuaki knows that they have kids who are working. For those kids, I've heard they run a timetable Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday so that the students can work full-time Thursday to Sunday if they need to. This is quite amazing for a mainstream school.

Manurewa High School has done extraordinary things since COVID. They really did seize the opportunity to reset, and have continued some of their COVID practices. They shifted their whole timetable, which is now called the 'Vā', and they have designated Wednesdays as wānanga days, so the kids can pursue their passions. They invite initiatives like Brave Learning in to do things with kids who are otherwise disenfranchised. They are the largest decile 1<sup>17</sup> school in the country. And if they can do it, anyone can.

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<sup>17</sup> Decile 1 schools are the 10% of schools with the highest proportion of students from low socio-economic communities. The decile system was replaced in 2022 for an equity index model, but deciles continue to be part of the collective imaginariy around schools shaping their reputation and perception.

**Alejandra:** I have come into this conversation inspired by Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s (2012) suggestion that “the spiritual, creative and political resources that indigenous peoples can draw on from each other provide alternatives for each other” (p. 109). Extending these to disenfranchised communities worldwide whether they claim or not the label of indigeneity, I had wondered to what extent the concepts and struggles that Latin American children have developed in their work over forty years could give us hints or avenues to think about young people who work in contexts like South Auckland... We will keep reflecting on this. But the reciprocal nature of this korero means that I am being offered (together with our readers) stories from South Auckland that give me a lot of hope. I hope these stories will also fuel others trying to reimagine education and those looking for ways in which schools could uphold plural worlds. The stories we have shared with each other reveal that the Pluriverse – defined by Zapatistas as a world made up of many worlds – is always already here. And it is heartening that some schools are starting to realise their role in nurturing the multiple worldings that their students sustain. Instead of making those worldings at odds with school, these initiatives support or at least avoid getting in the way of the ontological rewilding, challenging the Modern/Colonial ontological unicity. I wonder what pushed these schools in Aotearoa to embark on that journey.

**Michelle:** The way in which the pandemic brought everything to a screaming halt was terrible and traumatic. However, what a chance to pause and take stock! Dr. Anne Milne (Milne, 2023) reflects on this time as a wasted opportunity, where Aotearoa could really have stopped and changed the way education and schooling works. A time where we could have created a new education system that might work for all our tamariki<sup>18</sup> – many of whom have been failed by education for generations.

**Alejandra:** You reminded me of something that Arundhati Roy (2020) wrote during COVID: “Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it”. And it speaks exactly to what you are talking about, that portal of possibilities that was opened by COVID...

**Michelle:** It was a moment in time that allowed a reframing to be possible in a way that seemed reasonable to adults.

**Alejandra:** Maybe COVID is the trickster manifesting itself?

**Michelle:** Maybe! I remember what you said about the Hero and Trickster archetype. With the current state of the world, the time of the Hero has passed. It’s definitely time to bring back Maui!

**Alejandra:** Yes, it is Bayo Akomolafe (2023) who suggests that the hero is the archetype for settlements: he can only do heroic things in the context of stability. Moments of flow, loss or transition require the trickster to birth the new ways of being that are pulsing to emerge. Similar ideas are present in Cooper’s analysis of the traditions that encompass the demigods Tāwhaki and Maui, which he relates to the safeguarding of stability and the advancement of new frontiers, respectively. Cooper (2008) suggests that “[t]hese traditions anchor social practices in the known

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<sup>18</sup> children

and stable while also making space and allowing new frontiers to be established, through destabilising the known to discover new grounds in the unknown, which, in turn will become the new known and stable” p. 37. Following this, it is not too far-fetched to suggest that the Polynesian young people we have talked about are the embodiment of Maui: a destabilising force that challenges what we take for granted about the space/times of and for children and young people in society, a challenge to chrononormative expectations.

**Michelle:** I think that Pacific youth and communities have a big role in defying chrononormativity. The phrase “island time” has been commonly used to describe a general lack of punctuality by Pacific peoples. As in “oh, she’s late again, must be running on Island Time”. At its worst, this phrase has been weaponised to position Pacific peoples as disrespectful and unable to manage the discipline necessary to get to places on time. In recent times, this phrase has been taken back by our communities. Examples from my hood include Damon Salesa’s (2017) book “Island Time – New Zealand’s Pacific Futures” and a song “Island Time” written by the Black Friars for our *Southside Rise* project. By reframing the narrative of Island Time, Pacific people are participating in some other worlding. Instead of viewing Pacific peoples as ‘always late’ or ‘running on Island time’, the new narratives of Island Time defy the established doings of time and space. Yith all of the playfulness and audacity of Maui, we are refusing to accept the way things are and daring to reimagine time and space for us all.

**Alejandra:** What you just said takes me again to Cooper’s (2008) approach to the Maui traditions, which he draws from to make sense of the achievement gap affecting Māori and Pasifika in education. Cooper (2008) highlights that while Maui’s actions such as slowing down the sun, transgress the social norms and the realm of what is known, they ultimately bring a benefit for all people: “When Māui was challenging norms, wider society frowned upon him as he was challenging the “known”, or tradition. However, ultimately what he was doing was showing a pathway forward that would benefit all people, just at the time not everybody could see it” (p. 41). This is why we need to follow young people in their un-normative doings of space and time rather than rushing to confine them back into the school-box. Ebbing the tide of chrononormativity will ultimately benefit all people.

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