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Relational Human Resource Development as Flourishing: Leadership Learning and Cultural Change in Pacific Education

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the contribution of human resource development to workplace cultural change through the concept of flourishing. Originally a leadership concept, flourishing, as employed here, provides a frame to hold together the emotive, social, and relational aspects of human resource development. Flourishing in this case is achieved through relationally oriented professional development and learning (PLD) in education. The context is Pacific education, the education in Aotearoa New Zealand of students with links to Pacific Island Nations. The example given is of in-service training that scaffolds school leaders to partner with Pacific communities. The study design is qualitative, taking an in-depth storied approach to interviews with three school leaders who are seeking to learn in their multicultural context from local Pacific community members. A range of aspects of flourishing emerge: the willingness to be vulnerable; awareness of the need to make space for others; and increased critical confidence to deal with opposition to positive change in Pacific education. In addition, links between flourishing, relational HR training and workplace cultural change are discussed. The findings indicate that leader flourishing operates at the individual level, shaping how leaders understand themselves and their roles. Workplace cultural change occurs at the organisational level, where these transformed perspectives influence policies, practices, and relationships within the institution. In context, this means disturbing the status quo by moving education towards meeting Pacific community aspirations. Implications for public service contexts beyond education are briefly explored.

Keywords: Human Resources; Flourishing; Workplace Culture; Education; Pacific Education; Democracy

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1. Introduction

Human resources (HR) deals with human resource management, employee training, and the positive development of workplace culture, factors shown to influence the behaviors and accomplishments of employees^[1]. Human resource development has been described by Swanson and Holden^[2] as dealing with “unleashing human expertise” (p. 4), organizational development and training to improve performance, centering on the way personal change is linked to institutional change. The person-to-institution dynamic is important here.

An ecological element is evident in some threads of HR. Human resources development has evolved to embrace culture and diversity as aspects of contextual complexity. For example, cultural groups may have different values, extending the scope of HR benefits beyond the immediate organization to embrace the arenas of community and nation^[3]. Where diverse cultural groups interface through an organization, and where cultural change in an institution has the potential to drive wider change, such as through the education system, this understanding is particularly valuable. Strategic HR may encompass national goals in alignment with institutional goals^[4] including in multi-cultural societies; and common good HR, the development of widely shared benefits through sustainable practice, embraces a relational focus and references motivations well beyond the economic^[4]. Sustainability as an element of HR integrates inclusiveness at the human level and concern for the environment as well as the social world^[5]. Such ecological developments emphasize the potential of HR in the world outside the workplace.

Distinctive aspects of HR in the public service stem from context. These include the fact that a single fiscal bottom line is too limited a contextual goal^[6]. In education, researchers^[7] have identified that relationships with students are goal-centered job resources. However, whether equal weight has been given to educators’ relationships with diverse communities is a moot point. Inclusivity is a further significant HR factor in the public service^[8]. The diversity of stakeholder voices available in a public service context can be an HR resource. However, inclusion in employment practices is required to ensure that diverse voices are present in the employee pool^[9]. Whether bounded by those served or by public servants themselves, inclusivity in public service

HR should embrace diverse communities, including migrant and ethnic communities, since much can be learned from multiple perspectives.

As a result of contextual complexity, investment in continuous employee development is important in the public service. This is especially true in dynamic workplaces where preservice training may struggle to keep pace with contextual change. In societies where demographic and cultural diversity are growing, public services can become anachronistic without effective staff development, with the result that the expectations and norms of long-established groups are sustained to the disadvantage of others.

School leaders are key public service employees who shape workplace culture in schools. Effective education is supported when school leaders benefit from training that challenges thinking, enlists passion, supports growth and, as a result, promotes wellbeing^[10] in the educational ecology. Training of this nature prioritizes the development of relationships between diverse people and groups is a pathway to inclusive education.

A significant gap exists in HRD literature regarding Pacific peoples’ experiences of flourishing, as current research remains dominated by Western frameworks that prioritize individual achievement and performance. This study addresses this omission by introducing Pacific perspectives that foreground relationality, reciprocity, and collective wellbeing—elements largely absent from mainstream HRD theory. By challenging individualistic conceptions of development, the research demonstrates that flourishing is a dynamic, relational process deeply shaped by cultural identity and community belonging. Ultimately, this study broadens HRD scholarship by offering a holistic, culturally responsive framework that integrates Pacific ways of knowing to better support learning and growth in increasingly diverse workplaces.

This article deals with a relational HR problem (or opportunity) set in Aotearoa New Zealand. This involves the challenge of public education that stems from diverse understandings in a multicultural society. The article describes a relational intervention that seeks the common good of shared benefits of education. In this, Pacific community voices act as a resource in a relational and ecological approach to staff development. As depicted in **Figure 1**, the article links relational professional development and training (PLD), the flourishing of leaders, new leadership logic, changes in work-

place culture, and the outcome of an education that responds more to community. We discuss the flourishing of school leaders in the form of vulnerability, sharing space and critical confidence as outcomes of the PLD intervention by sharing school leaders' stories of how personal changes drive changes

in workplace culture. We discuss a relational intervention of a joint research/professional learning and development (PLD) endeavor of several years' span under the banner of the Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI) in the context of Pacific Education.



Figure 1. The process from PLD to outcome.

1.1. Democratic Education

Human resources challenges arise when the public service of education faces complexity due to diversity in multicultural societies. In modernity, digital revolutions, neo-liberalism, and migration at scale all ask questions of the goals of education, and of the kind of democracy to be encouraged through education. Dewey^[11] suggested democracy is “primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” (p. 101). The more societal groups communicate, the more democratic a society is. HR supports effective education in a democratic society when it enables “provision for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms” and “flexible adjustment of its institutions through interactions” (p. 115) to achieve positive communication.

Dewey^[11] realized that “[s]ociety is one word, but many things” (p. 94). Education is contextual and “[t]he conception of education as a social process and function has no definitive meaning until we define the kind of society we have in mind” (p. 112). Human resources challenges arise from such fluidity^[12]. Here we interrogate the value of personal growth as flourishing as professionals seek to deliver education that approaches Dewey’s democratic mandate.

1.2. Pacific Education in Aotearoa, New Zealand

Aotearoa New Zealand is an example of an increasingly multi-cultural society. Originally settled by Māori groups,

Europeans arrived from the early 1800s. In 1840, versions of a treaty were signed by representatives of the British Crown and Māori iwi (tribes). This has provided the basis for a bi-cultural partnership with which to organize society, although the reality has been far from equitable.

Within this framing, more recent migration has produced a multi-cultural context. One example account^[13] employs five umbrella terms to summarize ethnicity from the 2023 census, with Pacific at 8.9%. Thus, as in many jurisdictions, ethnicity is a salient marker of the effectiveness and fairness of public systems such as education. In Aotearoa New Zealand, the Ministry of Education^[14] claims, “We shape an education system that delivers equitable and excellent outcomes.” However, the outcomes of education and how they come to be regarded as excellent, and by whom, should not be accepted per se but be subject to debate, particularly in such a complex diverse context.

Pacific education is the education in Aotearoa New Zealand of learners with links to one or more Pacific Island nations^[15]. Although the term ‘Pacific’ masks geographic, cultural, and ethnic diversity, a collective approach has value when looking for equity and excellence as outcomes in public education. Pacific people have been poorly served in policy^[16], wellbeing^[17], and achievement^[18]. For example, a “Pacific student is awarded University Entrance at half the rate of other students. This inequity has remained unchanged for over ten years...”^[19]. Despite informative, community-consulted publications^[20], there is limited evi-

dence of wholesale change of provision. In this situation, the development of human resources to effect local change, and to provide a template for wider change, is valuable.

1.3. Human Resource Development as Flourishing

Wellbeing is a holy grail, a valuable ingredient of social situations. Wellbeing can refer “to the various areas of an individual’s life that intersect and combine to create connections, contentment, and a sense of purpose and of living well”^[21]. However, wellbeing has been understood in many ways. For instance, the PERMA model^[22] has taxonomic and process elements, linking personal transformation to growth when people have open minds and hearts^[23]. PERMA stands for Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationship, Meaning and Accomplishment, and suggests the value of optimism, a sense of agency, emotions that are valued, and activities that embody passion. Such activities are often relationally constructed. The PERMA model has been widely applied, including in tourism, language education^[24], and tertiary education^[25]. Another example, the Broaden-and-Build Model^[26] is also processual with four components: positive emotions leading to cheerfulness; a resultant broadened mind; the progressive building of resources—optimism, relationships, resilience and so on; and outcomes such as flourishing, satisfaction and mental health^[27]. Wellbeing has also been imagined as a family tree of related emotional, psychological, and social members^[28]. This formulation^[29] stresses positivity and the alignment of feelings, thinking and relationships.

In this study, flourishing is positioned as the central operative construct through which participants’ experiences are understood and interpreted. Rather than focusing solely on the absence of challenges or the attainment of individual success, flourishing encompasses holistic wellbeing, meaningful relationships, personal growth, and a sense of purpose within social and cultural contexts. This framing recognises flourishing as a dynamic and relational process that is shaped by connections to community, identity, and collective aspirations. The leadership concept of flourishing is apposite in HR in education because of its people-centeredness. In this, wellbeing is “about a search for human flourishing ... attending to our strengths in each of five areas of our lives: positive

emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement”^[30]. Leadership flourishing prioritizes capacities that promote life, passion—often expressed through engagement, creativity, and generativity^[12]. Scaffolding flourishing involves finding out what the employee “needs—to be, to do, and to take chances—”^[10] through collaborative culture^[31]. For example, one aspect of flourishing, critical confidence, is the ability to unpack complex situations to reveal their underpinning. Critical confidence can be developed through collective analytical strength animated by people working together on a shared goal through forward-looking adaption. When a leader flourishes, their wellbeing and that of others with whom they are in relation are enhanced. A sense of belonging, feeling cared for, safety in shared risks^[10], and the availability of informed reflective feedback are all strengths of a relational approach to wellbeing through HR as flourishing.

2. Materials and Methods

The research context is group of schools allied to a mainstream Christian denomination, known as a Kāhui Ako (KA) or Community of Learning, in a town in the South Island of Aotearoa New Zealand. It comprises one secondary and several primary schools. The researchers initially approached the KA leadership through relationships with local Pacific community members. Following negotiations, a joint PLD/research program was developed over several years.

The PLD aspect had a deliberately relational orientation, prioritizing the development of relationships between professionals, largely of European background, and members of Pacific communities, mainly parents of students in the KA. The program structured an iterative sequence of fono (consultative meetings) between school leaders and Pacific parents. Consultations initially took place through mediated dialogue^[32], whereby information is passed from one group to another through the mediation of researchers, an approach that recognizes the potentially silencing effect of flows of power in such situations.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure rich insights into flourishing, in alignment with Pacific research principles. Selection prioritized individuals across three case sites with the knowledge and willingness to engage in meaningful dialogue about the relational, cul-

tural, and organizational factors supporting wellbeing. By prioritizing depth of understanding over statistical representativeness, the study generated contextually grounded insights consistent with its exploratory and interpretive nature.

In the initial phase, Pacific community members were then asked at a fono what they wanted educators to know about their children, cultures, and education. Themes that emerged included: the significance of including Pacific cultures in everyday school contexts; well-configured relationships as a significant driver of education for Pacific people; the need for high expectations of Pacific children and the means in school to support these; and Pacific parents' desire to be authentic partners with educators. School leaders discussed and responded to these themes in a series of hourly PLD sessions facilitated by the researchers. This process acknowledged Pacific community members as experts in their cultures, goals and aspirations, and educators as experts in pedagogy and people management. Subsequently, school leaders formed consultative arrangements with Pacific parents in their own schools and curated opportunities for wider direct consultation at events such as Pacific performance evenings and Pacific role models mornings. The stated intent of the program was to provide school leaders with the information needed to reshape education to align more closely with Pacific community aspirations. Further aspects of the process are discussed elsewhere^[25, 26].

Over a five-year period, around 12 school leaders were directly involved. The research team was led by Cherie, an activist member of Pacific communities, born in Aotearoa New Zealand of Tahitian and Chinese descent and based in higher education but involved in Pacific education as a parent and educator; and Martyn an Anglo-Welsh researcher with long experience as a teacher and in the development of in-school PLD. The work was covered by institutional ethics through Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington, and Pacific relational ethics^[15]. In this account, Pacific voices sit behind the data discussed, acknowledged as the foundation of the overall relational approach of the TLRI.

This article discusses HR development as flourishing through case studies. The data are drawn from one-hour video interviews conducted by a researcher with three KA school leader PLD program members, structured around three prompts. These interrogated what the leader thought

was significant in their learning; dared to do as a result; and any changes they created. Restricting the interviews to three participants, inspired by Pacific narrative-focused practices^[33], privileged depth through storytelling. Storytelling of this nature is constructed relationally, acknowledges the positionality of the researcher as an active dialogic partner, embraces collective subjectivity, and emphasizes learning as the responsibility of participants and researchers alike^[34]. As a result, the actions and motivations of individual school leaders emerged, framed by their understandings of their own actions and perceptions. The sample was constructed by inviting the school leader, who acted as a broker to participate. They initiated a snowball process to recruit others.

Each interview, transcribed and member-checked was subject to thematic analysis. A hybrid deductive-inductive approach was employed, drawing from Informed Grounded Theory^[35, 36]. Initial codes paid attention to actions and emotions. These broad fields were developed through secondary coding to establish specific feelings and actions within each story and to interrogate the links between emotions and outcomes. The data analysis was guided by Pacific research principles that privilege relationality, reciprocity, and collective meaning-making. Following transcription, the research team engaged in repeated readings of the data to become familiar with participants' narratives and experiences. The research team inductively generated initial codes from the data, paying attention to recurring ideas, cultural values, relationships, and expressions of flourishing. The researchers then grouped these codes into broader thematic categories through collaborative discussion, allowing themes to emerge organically while remaining grounded in participants' voices.

Throughout the analytic process, the researchers engaged in ongoing reflexive dialogue to examine how their own cultural identities, experiences, values, and assumptions might shape interpretation. Rather than seeking researcher neutrality, the study acknowledged positionality as an integral component of Pacific research. In Pacific research, knowledge is co-constructed through relationships between researchers and participants. Researchers collectively revisited emerging interpretations to ensure that themes reflected participants' intended meanings and experiences, thereby enhancing the credibility, cultural integrity, and trustworthiness of the findings. The reliability of this study was determined by the qualitative assessment criteria, including credibility,

transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Continuous interaction with participants and meticulous consideration of the validity of their lived experiences and narratives bolstered credibility. The provision of comprehensive, contextual explanations that allow readers to assess the relevance of the findings to alternative contexts facilitated transferability. Focusing on three specific educational case studies, this research prioritizes contextualized insights over broad generalizations. To facilitate transferability, the study provides detailed descriptions of participants and settings, enabling readers to assess the findings' relevance to their own contexts. Dependability is ensured through transparent methodological recording, while confirmability is maintained by grounding interpretations in participant stories rather than researcher assumptions. These criteria establish rigor and trustworthiness by acknowledging the relational and contextual nature of the research.

3. Results

Results are drawn from the three case studies. Each case study is identified with a pseudonym and begins with demographic information before dealing with a focus that illustrates an aspect of flourishing: humility; making space for others and critical confidence. Following this, an analytical discussion that relates flourishing, relational HR training and workplace cultural change is staged.

3.1. Case Study 1: Valuing Vulnerability

Eve is a primary school principal of many years standing, responsible for a multicultural school of around 180 students, 15 teachers, plus an administration team. Eve's story centers on flourishing in the form of valuing vulnerability. This can be seen in the way she rethinks her leadership and manages guardedness, discomfort, and reciprocity.

Eve recognized guardedness, a defensive posture that averts closeness, as a habitual trait of leadership:

I think as school leaders, we're used to people listening to us, trusting us ... And then when it doesn't happen, you know, we can get all on our high horse ... I've seen it in other leaders. I've done it myself.

The guardedness of leaders preserves the status quo

because it entrenches power in the leader, their values and their discourse.

However, the TLRI aimed to amplify the voices of Pacific community members, inviting school leaders to adjust accordingly. According to Eve, her early PLD encounters with Pacific community members challenged her leadership position:

As a leader, that's sort of uncomfortable to do, to let go, when you have a group of people, and you feel like you should be directing, but where you're listening, it's a bit uncomfortable at first...

Eve's discomfort was gradually moderated by the quality of her learning from Pacific community members. She recognized the vulnerability inherent in information they were offering at consultation sessions, and grew in her appreciation of her responsibility to respond:

I feel that's a real treasure, the gift of that experience ... how moving it is in terms of what [the Pacific community] people share about ... that's sort of personal to them and you feel quite privileged and quite emotional ... it just constantly reminds you how important [what they are telling you] is, I think.

Eve came to value her vulnerability, recognizing that managing her discomfort was a step towards enhanced relational closeness with significant potential for mutual understanding. She also began to recognize the part unfamiliar cultural protocols played in how she felt:

[I was learning] to be vulnerable ... to go along and sit in the space, and not feel uncomfortable, but ... recognise it for what it is, that [Pacific community members] want to share with you and [you want to] be confident to ask more questions, that beforehand, you might have thought, 'Oh, that's silly, I should know that already' ... or ... 'It might be offending to ask'. What I used to think was confronting was actually ... part of what happens. I guess that's cultural knowledge.

Through this shift in leadership logic, Eve came to see that rejecting leadership that centres hierarchical relation-

ships involves the vulnerability that comes with reciprocal relationships.

Working through reciprocity required Eve to be persistent, to continue working on relationships where she would previously have retreated into guardedness, replacing telling with asking. Reflecting on a conflict with a Pacific parent, she explained:

Listening to other people ... it's actually saying, 'I didn't do that as well as I could have'—acknowledging it. And what I did was sort of be a bit humble ... I acknowledged my mistake, but I had to go further, I think. I went and asked, "What can I do more and better to un-fracture ... get that relationship back on track? ... It's not a good feeling when it's fractured..." And I needed help [from other members of the PLD group] to understand the other [Pacific] perspective, so I could change my perspective.

By valuing her vulnerability, Eve came to understand that the apparent confidence that drives guardedness can be a form of weakness because openness is significant when trying to remodel a public service to meet the needs of diverse groups. Using this incident as an example, Eve was able to articulate the long-term value of openness, explaining that humility and being open to listening, traits that make one vulnerable, require their own kinds of confidence:

I would say it [this incident] dented my confidence. But probably in the long term it's made me more, in some ways, more confident, so that I wouldn't [need to] look so confident [in the future].

Eve's account shows how an employee such as a school leader can flourish by rethinking the workplace culture of leadership, rejecting guardedness and valuing vulnerability. Such change is supported by opportunities to hear the perspectives of others, in this case, Pacific community members.

3.2. Case Study 2: Sharing Space

Ruth is a mid-career primary school principal with a team of about 10 teachers and a full complement of support staff. Her school has a roll of approximately 160 students,

of whom around 7% are of Pacific origin. Among the forms of flourishing experienced by Ruth through her time in the PLD program is sharing space with others, a process that involved self-recognition, working towards partnership with Pacific parents, and consequent changes in school culture.

Echoing Eve, Ruth initially experienced discomfort when trying to establish authentic partnerships with Pacific community members. She recalls:

I like lists. I like agendas. I like things in boxes ... The letting go is definitely uncomfortable for my nature—the first time I went to the [consultative meeting] and the parents were leading it, I sat there awkwardly, not knowing where my role was ... "Am I doing the right thing by just letting it go the way they [Pacific community members] want to go?" ... But, yes, I think I'm more into it now.

Ruth had previously been comfortable structuring time and space when dealing with Pacific parents, making assumptions, and taking a one-size-fits-all approach informed by her own cultural and educational backgrounds. She explains:

I've always done consultations the way that I thought that they had to be ... and that the parents wanted all this data about achievement ... giving them the facts and figures when they just wanted a chance to get together, to talk, to be heard.

Through her previous behaviour, Ruth had made sure her voice had been heard, unknowingly silencing Pacific community voices as a result. She realised she needed to change the logic she was using.

To share space so that Pacific community members' voices, values and aspirations could be heard, Ruth had to become aware of her own tendencies and deliberately step back. This was a complex and emotional process that benefited from the development of warm relationships with Pacific community members. She comments:

Admitting that you don't know it all is really hard ... getting rid of some of those assumptions ... or biases that you don't know that you have ... that takes quite a bit to peel those layers away, you know, when you're in this

leadership management position, just to kind of let things go ... and to be in the moment with people instead of trying to control it ... “If I do say something, am I stepping over onto their space?” So, there’s still a lot of that working out. But I think ... we’ve definitely built some really good connections ... [This has been] a real 360 for me in my journey.

Thus, Ruth shifted from leading to enabling, “walking alongside ... listening and learning and putting yourself in others’ shoes”. This enabled her to better know her limitations as well as to appreciate the contributions of Pacific community members, their values and aspirations:

I hadn’t really thought about what they told us, especially the fear and those barriers that I didn’t realise that we were putting up ... I thought I knew what they needed. I thought I knew what their children needed, but I didn’t really, not until I started listening. I’ve done a lot more with my Pacific parents of walking alongside and ... them doing the leading ... I would say that what their aim is—is to build a family within our [school] family.

Sharing space with her school’s Pacific community meant Ruth accepting criticism. As an example, Ruth was challenged on the place of Pacific cultures in school. She was able to welcome the opportunity to reflect and to learn from this, subsequently implementing a monitoring strategy:

One of Pacific parents suggested that we do more than celebrate culture during culture weeks—that Pacific culture becomes learning all year. And that was a real eye-opener ... We probably only gave it a good burst now and again instead of trying to make it an everyday thing. [As a result of this critique], we’ve done cultural audits within ourselves ... making sure that we are thinking about this lens all the time ... Our Pacific families run a morning once a week for all who want to learn Pacific culture, language and dance.

Ruth also learned from other schools involved in the PLD programme, thinking “if they’re having a go in doing

it [innovating in response to Pacific parents], then maybe I can branch out”; and from an ongoing partnership with key Pacific parents in her own school. She realised that “having that relationship with them has given me confidence ... with the relationships with the other [minority group] parents as well.”

Learning to share space through the consultative PLD process encouraged what Ruth calls a “a more open school culture”. This involved Ruth encouraging her teaching team to attend to the ideas and experiences of Pacific children in order to challenge teachers’ assumptions:

[I value] the understanding of the voice of our Pacific children, knowing that they’ve actually got more to say and more to give than what I assumed—because when I was doing surveys with them, I could hear and see much more and I’ve now made that a regular thing [across the school]—to listen to the children, to hear the children and to make sure that they have their voice.

A further shift in school culture led to Ruth encouraging the teaching-learning relationship to be more of a reciprocal partnership:

We’ve had Pacific children teaching teachers, which is really cool in classrooms. And the teachers doing a little bit like me and letting go of that control and letting the children be empowered. So, we’ve had them teaching [us] new songs and new prayers [in Pacific languages] and that sort of thing in class as well.

Ruth’s account points to the power of engagement to stimulate flourishing in the form of sharing space, changing school practice as a result.

3.3. Case Study 3: Critical Confidence

Sarah is a high school principal responsible for a multicultural school of over 780 students, including approximately 50 Pacific students, 60 teaching staff, and an extensive administration team. She has been a principal for more than ten years, half of that in her current school. Sarah’s story centers on flourishing in the form of enhanced critical confidence, the ability to unpack complex situations to reveal their

underpinning. This can be seen in the way she destabilizes assumptions, advocates for progressive school decisions, recognizes the way culture and history affect her role, and welcomes the critical engagement of others.

Sarah dealt with the common assumption amongst educators in Aotearoa New Zealand that attendance at parent-teacher interviews predicts commitment to education. Her critique illustrates the confidence to seek the explanatory background to school realities:

If we did an ethnicity breakdown of who attends parent-teacher interviews, Pacific families would not be very high ... And yet, school achievement in education and doing the right thing at school ... they [Pacific parents] are probably stronger on what they believe should happen ... On first look, you could assume that they [Pacific families] are not as invested in the school as others ... It's just a different way of getting there...

She accounts for her critical confidence in this matter to having engaged with Pacific community members through the PLD:

The only way we can change those assumptions is to actually hear what is important to other people by having those open questions and really encouraging the dialogue to come from our families rather than from us ... being completely open to actually the way that they see the world ... Even though you feel like you've been growled at [by a Pacific parent] ... you've got to take it as positive ... Sometimes you've got to have those hard conversations before anything [moves] forward.

Sarah's account of creating a specific Pacific space within her school displays confidence to critique cultural assumptions in a context where decisions can be contested; recent local examples of inclusion and equity in educational contexts have been cast as racist discrimination^[37, 38]. Sarah explains her action thus:

It definitely was easier to make that decision and to back that after being involved in the [PLD programme] ... knowing they [Pacific

students] want to feel that they can see themselves in the school, be in a safe space, see themselves reflected ... People did mention that at that stage, "We are keeping those students separate from everybody else. Shouldn't we be integrating everybody?" But I think after doing some of that [PLD] work ... I realised it wasn't separatism ... It's separatism if we're asking Pacific students to always come into our space in a white space...

These comments unpack the logic that, by default education spaces are neutral, ignoring the way that traditions, cultural values, and relationships are encoded in space in an education system introduced as an element of colonial expansion.

Under Sarah's leadership, specific provision for Pacific students was extended to offering a homeroom class to Pacific students, informed by priorities expressed by Pacific parents.

We gave the students the opportunity to leave their normal pastoral classes, and all come together. So, learning [from Pacific parents] about that sense of community and how important the family was ... [led to] giving them the opportunity to be that [extended family] within school as well.

Again, this decision met some opposition based on accusations of separatism, but Sarah had confidence based on "hearing from the parents and their aspirations" and "trying to accommodate the priorities that are coming in their families first" to reshape the logic the school was applying in critical, innovative, principled, culturally informed ways.

A third assumption subject to Sarah's critical confidence involved her own role. Sarah combined the reactions of Pacific community members with what she learned through fono to understand that Pacific families imbued her role with a distinct form of power. She explained:

For our Pacific families, as soon as I'm involved in conversations ... if it's about something that maybe isn't positive, it becomes a very, very negative and a very punitive situation ... and similarly, at the other end, if I'm involved in the positives, it raises the way that

that is seen quite a long way so that it becomes incredibly important and then that needs to be shared amongst the community...

Sarah's explanation for this form of power includes the racism and related school failure experienced by many Pacific parents and grandparents:

Among the Pacific community for very good reasons ... school wasn't necessarily a good place for the parent generation, and we need to be a lot more considerate of ... that history ... Trust is still not as good as it could be, not with us [school leaders]. It's just a generational situation.

Sarah had the confidence not to discount or disown the power ascribed to her. Instead, she sought to protect the interests of Pacific students and parents within their view of her role.

One of the things that we have done around senior leadership is with our Pacific students, if there is an issue that could potentially be a negative one to discuss with parents, the parents have asked us at a consultation we had last year, they want our Pacific dean to do the communication in the first place, to prepare the way. They don't want to receive phone calls directly from us [senior leaders]. They want to know that they've also got somebody in their child's corner.

Sarah's willingness to embrace this creative solution indicates willingness to respect and respond to the realities of members of the wider school community, in this case, Pacific parents.

In summary, Sarah explains:

My confidence would be in being able to think beyond my normal, beyond my experience, is to now think about more so what they [Pacific community members] could be thinking. I would never dare to say that I know what they're thinking or how they would see this play out. But I now consider it more and it's not something that is as foreign as it used to be.

This account of three case studies has drawn out aspects of the flourishing of school leaders: valuing vulnerability, sharing space with community and the development of critical confidence. We now discuss some of the implications of the three cases.

4. Discussion

In this section, we discuss HR as flourishing through relational HR development to encourage workplace cultural shift. A summary of the case studies is provided in **Table 1**. The findings of this study suggest the need to broaden traditional understandings of Human Resource Development (HRD) by recognising flourishing as a central outcome of development. Here, flourishing as HRD refers to a holistic conception of human development that encompasses wellbeing, purpose, belonging, meaningful contribution, and personal growth. Rather than focusing solely on performance, productivity, or career advancement, flourishing acknowledges the social, cultural, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of human thriving. For Pacific participants, flourishing is deeply connected to relationships, cultural identity, collective wellbeing, and the ability to contribute positively to family, community, and workplace contexts.

Table 1. Summary of the case studies.

Case	Role	Key Learning	Form of Flourishing	Workplace/Cultural Change
Eve	Primary principal	Vulnerability	Letting go of guarded leadership	More reciprocal engagement
Ruth	Primary principal	Sharing space	Allowing Pacific parents/children to lead	More open school culture
Sarah	High school principal	Critical confidence	Challenging assumptions about inclusion	Pacific space and pastoral support

The findings also contribute to an emerging understanding of relational HRD. Relational HRD recognises that learning, development, and wellbeing occur through and within relationships. From a Pacific perspective, development is not

an individual endeavour but is shaped by connections with others, obligations to community, and the nurturing of the *vā*—the relational spaces that connect people. Participants frequently described the importance of supportive relation-

ships, trust, reciprocity, and a sense of belonging in enabling their growth and wellbeing. These findings suggest that we can strengthen HRD theory by paying greater attention to the relational conditions that support learning and flourishing.

Finally, the study introduces the concept of critical confidence. Critical confidence extends beyond self-belief or individual efficacy to encompass the capacity to navigate complex organisational environments while remaining grounded in cultural identity, values, and community. It involves developing the confidence to exercise agency, challenge inequitable structures, and advocate for oneself and others, while maintaining an awareness of the broader social and organisational forces that shape experience. For Pacific participants, confidence was often developed through relationships, mentorship, cultural affirmation, and collective support rather than through individual achievement alone.

4.1. HR as Flourishing

The concept of flourishing addresses what the employee needs “to be” as well as “to do” in order “to take chances”^[10]. The notion of being centers the flourishing of the employee as a person. As illustrated by all three cases studies, engagement in HR development and consequent personal change is supported when the emotions of employees are engaged. The case studies show school leaders in the PLD experiencing emotions including discomfort, humility, vulnerability, and confidence. These emotions support personal changes such as the erosion of habitual logics of workplace leadership and the recognition of unhelpful assumptions when engaging with Pacific people.

By contrast, the notion of doing centers action. Through action, the flourishing of a school leader can lead to change in the lives of others. Organizational changes supported by the PLD experiences of school leaders include adopting protocols to amplify community voices in consultation and making institutional progress towards achieving community aspirations such as the creation of a Pacific space in school.

There is clear alignment between the personal flourishing of lead employees and adaptations within institutions. New logics developed by school leaders can influence workplace culture. For example, the development of a leader’s humility, supported by hearing and appreciating Pacific parents’ stories, logically aligns with a policy of seeking Pacific

students’ voices in classroom. Similarly, leaders’ experiences of sharing consultative space with Pacific parents align with encouraging teachers to develop more reciprocal relationships with their Pacific students.

4.2. Relational HR Development

Relational HR development is represented in this study by a collective and consultative PLD program. A relational approach that privileges inter-group engagement is particularly relevant in workplace ecologies that involve multiple stakeholders, such as public services. Flourishing as HR in public education led to workplace change through two key sets of relationships. First, school leaders developed significant relationships with other professionals through the collective PLD program. For example, Eve’s persistence was supported by other members of the group. Similarly, Ruth was inspired to “branch out” into new directions by the risk-taking of other KA schools. These examples show the importance to flourishing of collective strength animated by working on a shared goal. A sense of belonging, feeling cared for and safety in shared risks^[10] are all collective strengths of a relational approach to HR development as flourishing.

A second set of significant relationships grew consequent on the initial mediated consultative phase of the PLD. As the school leaders flourished, their learning and confidence generated opportunities for the wider community to participate and thrive. School leaders forged relationships with Pacific community members in their own schools. For example, Ruth built opportunities for “walking alongside” Pacific parents with “them doing the leading”. Sarah came to appreciate that being “growled at” by a Pacific parent can indicate engagement and therefore offer a way forward.

4.3. Workplace Cultural Shift

Investment in continuous employee development is important in dynamic workplaces where preservice training may struggle to keep pace with contextual change. In this research, workplace cultural change in the form of pursuing Deweyan democratic ideals in education was encouraged by HR training that challenged thinking, enlisted passion, and supported growth. Challenge came in the form of school leaders engaging with Pacific communities, feeling “uncomfortable ... to let go” and learning about “barriers that I didn’t

realize that we were putting up”. Eve gives an example of passion when she speaks of the “gift” given by Pacific people of experiences that were “personal to them” so that she felt “quite privileged and quite emotional”. A key area of growth shown in the case studies is the facility to rethink habitual logics. Eve realized the need to keep trying where before she may have retreated into guardedness; Sarah learned to “think beyond my normal, beyond my experience.”

Rethinking everyday situations by applying new logic is important in workplace cultural change. Where a public service aims to reflect the values and aspirations of an increasingly diverse population, engagement with community is essential. Evidence of workplace cultural change was reflected in shifts that extended beyond individual learning to influence organisational practices and relationships. Across the case studies, school leaders reported changes in how they engaged with Pacific communities, including more collaborative approaches to consultation, increased responsiveness to community aspirations, and the creation of culturally affirming spaces within schools. These changes suggest movement towards more inclusive and relational organisational cultures. While the study does not claim widespread institutional transformation, the findings indicate that leaders’ new understandings were translated into tangible actions that began to reshape workplace practices and strengthen connections between schools and Pacific communities.

Examples from case studies include rethinking the concepts of separatism and consultation. Sarah realized that the status quo was producing “separatism if we’re asking Pacific students to always come into our space in a white space”, and honored Pacific students’ desire to “see themselves in the school, be in a safe space” by creating such a Pacific space in her school. Ruth handed control of consultation to Pacific parents, “letting it go the way they [Pacific community members] want to go” and learned that “they just wanted a chance to get together, to talk, to be heard” rather than to hear statistics from her. In each case, the change prioritized community aspirations. Flourishing, relational HR development and workplace cultural change are linked because behind these changes sits the flourishing of school leaders to be able to take chances, spurred on by re-configured relationships between school and community. The resultant workplace cultural changes have moved the KA towards the inclusive, just and fair democratic educa-

tion envisaged by Dewey through “conjoint communicated experience”^[11].

In summary, the nexus of flourishing, relational HR development and workplace cultural shift illustrates the potential of links between emotional, cognitive, and cultural matters in HR. The cement between these aspects of workplace training is the quality of interpersonal relationships in and through which key employees develop new logics, re-understand everyday situations, and enact positive change.

5. Conclusions

This article has used a research base set in Pacific education in Aotearoa, New Zealand. The flourishing of leading employees involves personal change, which is supported by situations that engage their emotions, including the discomfort of critiquing their own leadership and negotiating new ways of understanding their roles. Relational HR training encourages flourishing through social means, including the development of supportive and informative relationships, in this case with colleagues and community members, so that new logics applicable to the workplace develop. The use of such logic can result in workplace cultural change that reflects community aspirations.

The article has extended aspects of flourishing from leadership studies into HR, drawing attention to the role of emotions such as discomfort, humility, vulnerability, and confidence in challenging the workplace status quo. We have suggested positive relationships between relational PLD and inclusivity in workplace culture, specifically in the public service in pursuit of the common good of shared benefits. Links between emotional development, cultural responsiveness, and organizational change have been surfaced as sites for HR to investigate further. Finally, the article has provided an HR development perspective from Pacific education in Aotearoa New Zealand. This points to the value of diversity in thought and approach in HR in multicultural contexts.

Limitations exist in terms of the small sample involved, a consequence of privileging contextually appropriate Pacific-inspired storytelling approaches to research. Self-reported storytelling data should be valued for what it is —personal accounts of feelings, actions and learning that indicate fields and processes relevant to HR research. The data provide a specific leadership flourishing window on

the joint research/PLD process driven by Pacific community voices. The highly contextual nature of the setting may limit transfer. However, attention is drawn to contextuality as an important aspect of HR research. Further research might develop storied approaches to complex HR problems, investigate further the affordances of flourishing as an HR research tool, and develop further links between relational PLD interventions, leadership flourishing and workplace cultural change, particularly in public services.

Constructing support for public services to reflect modern realities in multicultural societies poses difficult HR problems. However, leveraging the leadership development concept of flourishing as HR and supporting this by devising collective and consultative HR development opportunities can aid the navigation of such problems. Flourishing as HR frames the use of emotional, cognitive, and cultural resources in support of positive change. In societies experiencing demographic shifts, the public good is served when services such as education are inclusive. When attempts to be inclusive are successful, the holy grail of enhanced wellbeing, both individual and collective, is a worthwhile reward.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, C.C.-F. and M.R.; methodology, M.R.; software, C.C.-F.; validation, M.R. and C.C.-F.; formal analysis, M.R.; investigation, M.R.; resources, C.C.-F.; data curation, M.R.; writing—original draft preparation, M.R.; writing—review and editing, C.C.-F.; visualization, C.C.-F.; supervision, C.C.-F.; project administration, M.R.; funding acquisition, C.C.-F. Both authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Ethics Committee of Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington (#0000031549; 03/05/2024).

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

Data is unavailable due to privacy.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

AI Use Statement

During the preparation of this work, the authors used TurboScribe in order to produce a rough transcription. After using this tool/service, the authors and participants reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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