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Kanne Lobal: A conceptual framework relating education and leadership partnerships in the Marshall Islands

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## **Kanne Lobal: A conceptual framework relating education and leadership partnerships in the Marshall Islands**

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### **Abstract**

*Education in Oceania continues to reflect the embedded implicit and explicit colonial practices and processes from the past. This paper conceptualises a cultural approach to education and leadership appropriate and relevant to the Republic of the Marshall Islands. As elementary school leaders, we highlight Kanne Lobal, a traditional Marshallese navigation practice based on indigenous language, values and practices. We conceptualise and develop Kanne Lobal in this paper as a framework for understanding the usefulness of our indigenous knowledge in leadership and educational practices within formal education. Through bwebwenato, a method of talk story, our key learnings and reflexivities were captured. We argue that realising the value of Marshallese indigenous knowledge and practices for school leaders requires purposeful training of the ways in which our knowledge can be made useful in our professional educational responsibilities. Drawing from our Marshallese knowledge is an intentional effort to inspire, empower and express what education and leadership partnership means for Marshallese people, as articulated by Marshallese themselves.*

### **Keywords**

*Kanne Lobal; bwebwenato; indigenous knowledges; collaborative partnership; Graduate Certificate in School Leadership (GCSL)*

### **Introduction**

As noted in the call for papers within the Waikato Journal of Education (WJE) for this special issue, bodies of knowledge and histories in Oceania have long sustained generations across geographic boundaries to ensure cultural survival. For Marshallese people, we cannot really know ourselves “until we know how we came to be where we are today” (Walsh et al., 2012). *Jitdam Kapeel* is a popular Marshallese concept and ideal associated with inquiring into relationships within the family and community. The practice of relating is about connecting the present and future to the past. Education



and leadership partnerships are linked and we look back to the past, our history, to make sense and feel inspired to transform practices that will benefit our people. In this paper, and in light of our next generation, we reconnect with our navigation stories to inspire and empower education and leadership. *Kanne Lobal* is defined mainly from our navigation stories. It is a conceptual framework centred on Marshallese cultural practices, values and concepts that embrace collective partnerships. We further unpack *Kanne Lobal* throughout this paper.

Our link to this *talanoa vā* with others in this special issue is to attempt to make sense of connections given the global COVID-19 context by providing a Marshallese approach to addressing the physical and relational ‘distance’ between education and leadership partnerships in Oceania.

Like the majority of developing small island nations in Oceania, the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) has had its share of educational challenges through colonial legacies of the past that continue to drive education systems in the region (Heine, 2002). The historical administration and education in the RMI have been overtly shaped by colonisation. Successive administrations by the Spanish, German, Japanese, and US as a trust territory and post-independence, have resulted in education and learning that privileges western knowledge and forms of learning. This paper foregrounds understandings of education and learning as told by the voices of elementary school leaders from the RMI. The move to re-think education and leadership from Marshallese perspectives is an act of shifting the focus of *bwebwenato* or conversations that centre on Marshallese language and worldviews.

The concept of *jelalokjen* means education. *Jela* means to know, *lok* means more, and *ijen* refers to place (Kupferman, 2004, p. 42). *Jelalokjen* is sometimes used to mean traditional and informal education framed mainly within the community context. In the past, *jelalokjen* was practised and transmitted to the younger generation for cultural continuity and not binded to oral traditions only. During the arrival of colonial administrations into the RMI, *jelalokjen* was likened to the western notions of formal education or schooling (Kupferman, 2004). Today, the primary function of *jelalokjen*, as informal and formal education, is for “survival in a hostile [and challenging] environment” (Kupferman, 2004, p. 43). *Kanne Lobal* captures *jelalokjen* by drawing from the informal indigenous learning practices to make sense of formal education and schooling in the RMI.

Because colonial approaches to learning in the RMI have not always resulted in positive outcomes for those engaged within the education system, as school leaders who value our cultural knowledge and practices and aspire to maintain our language with the next generation, we turn to *Kanne Lobal*, a practice embedded in Marshallese navigation stories, collective aspirations and leadership. The significance of the development of *Kanne Lobal* as a relevant framework for education and leadership resulted in us coming together and working together. Not only were we able to share our leadership concerns, the engagement strengthened our connections with each other as school leaders, our communities and the Public Schooling System (PSS). Prior to that, many of us were in competition for resources.

### Educational leadership: IQBE and GCSL

Leadership is a valued practice in the RMI. Until recently, the majority of school leaders on the main island of Majuro had not engaged in collaborative partnerships with each other. Our main educational purpose was to achieve accreditation from the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), an accreditation commission for schools in the United States. The WASC accreditation dictated our work and relationships and many school leaders on Majuro felt the pressure of competition against each other.

Additionally, there has historically been no formal training in place for elementary school leaders. School principals and vice principals were appointed primarily on their academic merit through having an undergraduate qualification. However, in 2019 as part of the first cohort of 15 school leaders, we

engaged in the professional training programme, the Graduate Certificate in School Leadership (GCSL). Through the Improving Quality Basic Education (IQBE) initiative, largely funded by the Asia Development Bank (ADB) and in partnership with the RMI Public School System (PSS), GCSL was chosen and adapted to our context after its initial development in the Solomon Islands. The GCSL course modules were coordinated by the Institute of Education (IOE) and overseen by the University of the South Pacific (USP), RMI director at the time Dr Irene Taafaki, coordinator Yolanda McKay, and administrators.

Through the provision of GCSL, as school leaders we were encouraged to re-think and draw from our own cultural repository and connect to our ancestral knowledge that has always provided strength for us. This kind of thinking and practice had previously been encouraged by our educational leaders (Heine, 2002). In this article, we share our collective *bwebwenato*, highlighting our school leadership experiences and how we gained strength from our own ancestral knowledge to empower ‘us’, to collaborate with each other, our teachers, communities as well as with PSS; a collaborative partnership we had not realised in the past. The paucity of literature that captures *Kajin Majel* (Marshallese language) and education in general in the RMI is what we intend to contribute to by sharing our reflections and experiences. To move our educational practices forward we highlight *Kanne Lobal*, a cultural approach that focuses on our strengths, collective social responsibilities and wellbeing.

We argue that a culturally-affirming and culturally-contextual framework that reflects the lived experiences of Marshallese people is much needed and enables the disruption of inherent colonial processes left behind by Western and Eastern administrations which have influenced our education system in the RMI (Heine, 2002). *Kanne Lobal*, an approach utilising a traditional navigation, has warranted its need to provide solutions for today’s educational challenges for us in the RMI.

## Education in the Pacific

Education in the Pacific cannot be understood without contextualising it in its history and culture. It is the same for us in the RMI (Heine, 2002; Walsh et al., 2012). The RMI is located in the Pacific Ocean and is part of Micronesia. It was named after a British captain, John Marshall, in the 1700s. The atolls in the RMI were explored by the Spanish in the 16th century. Germany unsuccessfully attempted to colonise the islands in 1885. Japan took control in 1914, but after several battles during World War II, the US seized the RMI from them. In 1947, the United Nations made the island group, along with the Mariana and Caroline archipelagos, a US trust territory (Walsh et al., 2012). Education in the RMI reflects the colonial administrations of Germany, Japan and the US. Although RMI is now politically independent, its education system continues to be influenced by the US because of the Compact of Free Association (COFA) agreement (Jetnil-Kijiner, 2014). Under COFA, RMI is protected and financially supported by the US.

Before the turn of the century, formal education in the Pacific reflected western values, practices and standards. Prior to that, education was informal and not bound to formal learning institutions (Thaman, 1997) and oral traditions were used as the medium for transmitting learning about customs and practices across generations. As alluded to by Kabua (2004), any “discussion about education is necessarily a discussion of culture, and any policy on education is also a policy of culture” (p. 181). It is impossible to promote one without the other, and it is not logical to understand one without the other. Re-thinking what education should look like, the pedagogical strategies that are relevant in our classrooms, the ways to engage with our parents and communities—such re-thinking sits within our cultural approaches and frameworks. Our collective attempts to provide a cultural framework that is relevant and appropriate for education in our context, sits within the political endeavour to decolonise education in the RMI. This means that what we are providing will not only be useful, but it can be used as a tool to question and identify whether current educational practices restrict and prevent our culture

or whether they promote and foreground cultural ideas and concepts, a significant discussion of culture linked to education (Kabua, 2004).

Donor funded development aid programmes have been provided to support the challenges within education systems. Concerned with the persistent low educational outcomes of Pacific students, despite the prevalence of aid programmes in the region, in 2000, Pacific educators and leaders, with support from New Zealand Aid (NZ Aid), decided to intervene (Heine, 2002; Taufe‘ulungaki, 2014). In April 2001, a group of Pacific educators and leaders across the region were invited to a colloquium funded by the New Zealand Overseas Development Agency, held in Suva Fiji at the University of the South Pacific. The main purpose of the colloquium was to enable “Pacific educators to re-think the values, assumptions and beliefs underlying [formal] schooling in Oceania” (Benson, 2002).

Leadership, in general, is a valued practice in the RMI (Heine, 2002). Despite education leadership being identified as a significant factor in school improvement (Sanga & Chu, 2009), limited access to formal training opportunities of school principals in the region was a persistent concern. As part of an Asia Development Bank (ADB) funded project, the Improve Quality Basic Education (IQBE) intervention was developed and implemented in the RMI in 2017.

## Indigenous knowledges and education research

According to Dr Hilda Heine, the relationship between education and leadership is about understanding Marshallese history and culture. It is about sharing indigenous knowledge and histories that “details for future generations a story of survival and resilience and the pride we possess as a people” (Walsh et al., 2012, p. v). This paper is fuelled by postcolonial aspirations and is grounded in Pacific indigenous research. This means that our intentions are driven by postcolonial pursuits and discourses linked to challenging the colonial systems and schooling in the Pacific region that privileges western knowledge and learning and marginalises the education practices and processes of local people (Thiong’o, 1986). A point of difference and orientation from postcolonialism is a desire to foreground indigenous Pacific language, specifically *Kajin Majel*, through Marshallese concepts. Our collective *bwebwenato* and conversation honours and values *kautiej* (respect), *jouj eo mour eo* (reciprocity), and *jouj* (kindness) (Taafaki & Fowler, 2019).

Pacific leaders developed the Rethinking Pacific Education Initiative for and by Pacific People (RPEIPP) in 2002 to take control of the ways in which education research was conducted by donor funded organisations (Taufe‘ulungaki, 2014). Our former president, Dr Hilda Heine, was part of the group of leaders who sought to counter the ways in which our educational and leadership stories were controlled and told by non-Marshallese (Heine, 2002). As a former minister of education in the RMI, Dr Hilda Heine continues to inspire and encourage the next generation of educators, school leaders and researchers to re-think and de-construct the way learning and education is conceptualised for Marshallese people. The conceptualisation of *Kanne Lobal* acknowledges its origin, grounded in Marshallese navigation knowledge and practice. Our decision to unpack and deconstruct *Kanne Lobal* within the context of formal education and leadership responds to the need to not only draw from indigenous Marshallese ideas and practice, but also to recognise that otherwise the next generation will continue to be educated using western processes and initiatives, particularly from the US where we get a lot of our funding from.

According to indigenous researchers Bessarab and Ng’andu (2010), doing research that considers “culturally appropriate processes to engage with indigenous groups and individuals is particularly pertinent in today’s research environment” (p. 37). Pacific indigenous educators and researchers have turned to their own ancestral knowledge and practices for inspiration and empowerment. Within western research contexts, the often-stringent ideals and processes are not always encouraging of indigenous methods and practices. However, some Pacific researchers have been able to ground and articulate their



use of indigenous methods as being relevant and appropriate to capturing the realities of their communities (Nabobo-Baba, 2008; Sualii-Sauni & Fulu-Aiolupotea, 2014; Thaman, 1997). Additionally, utilising Pacific indigenous methods and approaches has enabled research engagement with their communities that honoured and respected them and their communities. For example, Tongan, Samoan and Fijian researchers have used the *talanoa* method as a way to capture the stories, lived realities and worldviews of their communities within education in the diaspora (Fa'avae et al., 2016; Nabobo-Baba, 2008; Sualii-Sauni & Aiolupotea, 2014; Vaioleti, 2006). *Tok stori* was used by Solomon Island educators and school leaders to highlight the unique circles of conversational practice and storytelling that leads to more positive engagement with their community members, capturing rich and meaningful narratives as a result (Sanga & Houma, 2004). The Indigenous Aborigine in Australia utilise yarning as a “relaxed discussion through which both the researcher and participant journey together visiting places and topics of interest relevant” (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010, p. 38).

In addition to the diverse forms of discussions and storytelling by indigenous peoples, of significance are the cultural protocols, ethics and language for conducting and guiding the engagement (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010; Nabobo-Baba, 2008; Sualii-Sauni & Aiolupotea, 2014). Pacific indigenous ethics, cultural values, protocols and language are what makes indigenous methods or frameworks unique when compared with western methods like in-depth interviews or semi-structured interviews. *Bwebwenato* honours relational connections that are bound by *jouj* (kindness, love), *kautiej* (respect), and *jouj eo mour eo* (reciprocity). Compared to semi-structured interviews, therefore, *bwebwenato* honours being present, knowing when not to speak, prioritising feelings and honouring the shared space between people engaged in conversation. This is why it is important for us as Marshallese educators to frame, ground and articulate how our own methods and frameworks of learning could be realised in western education (Heine, 2002; Jetnil-Kijiner, 2014). In this paper, we utilise *bwebwenato* as an appropriate method linked to “talk story”, capturing our collective stories and experiences during GCSL and how we sought to build partnerships and collaboration with each other, our communities and the PSS.

### ***Bwebwenato and drawing from Kajin Majel***

Legends and stories that reflect Marshallese society and our cultural values have survived through our oral traditions. The practice of weaving also holds knowledge about our “valuable and earliest sources of knowledge” (Taafaki & Fowler, 2019, p. 2). The skilful navigation of Marshallese wayfarers on the *walap* (large canoes) in the ocean is testament of their leadership and the value they place on ensuring the survival and continuity of Marshallese people (Taafaki & Fowler, 2019; Walsh et al., 2012). During her graduate study in 2014, Jetnil-Kijiner conceptualised *bwebwenato* as being the most “well-known form of Marshallese orality” (p. 38). The Marshallese-English dictionary defines *bwebwenato* as talk, conversation, story, history, article, episode, lore, myth, or tale (cited in Jetnil Kijiner, 2014). Three years later, in 2017, *bwebwenato* was utilised in a doctoral project by Nimmer (2017) as a research method to gather “talk stories” about the experiences of 10 Marshallese experts in knowledge and skills ranging from sewing to linguistics, canoe-making and business.

Our collective *bwebwenato* in this paper centres on Marshallese ideas and language. The philosophy of Marshallese knowledge is rooted in our *Kajin Majel*, or Marshallese language. It is shared and transmitted through our oral traditions, for example, through our historical stories and myths. Marshallese philosophy, that is, the knowledge systems inherent in our beliefs, values, customs and practices, are shared. They are inherently relational, meaning that knowledge systems and philosophies within our world are connected in mind, body and spirit (Jetnil-Kijiner, 2014; Nimmer, 2017). Some Marshallese believe that our knowledge is disappearing as more and more elders pass away, and it is therefore important to work together and learn from each other about the knowledges shared, not only

by the living but through their lamentations and stories of those who are no longer with us (Jetnil-Kijiner, 2014).

As a Marshallese practice, weaving has been passed-down from generation to generation. Although the art of weaving is no longer as common as it used to be, artefacts such as the *jaki-ed* (clothing mats) continue to embody significant Marshallese values and traditions. For our weavers, the *jouj* is the centre of the mat, and it is where the weaving starts. When the *jouj* is correct and woven well, the remainder and every other part of the mat will be right. The *jouj* is symbolic of the “heart” and if the heart is prepared well, trained well, then life or all other parts of the body will be well (Taafaki & Fowler, 2019). The mat is also constructed with male and female parts, bound together with the *bokwoj* (to connect or hug). This also links to the description of the male and female parts of the canoe (see the next section). We have applied the same belief to this paper. Conceptualising and drawing from cultural practices that are close and dear to our hearts embodies a significant ontological attempt to prioritise our own knowledge and language, representing who we are and what we believe education should be like for us and the next generation.

The application of the phrase *Majolizing* was used by the Ministry of Education when Dr Hilda Heine was minister, to weave cultural ideas and language into the way that teachers understand the curriculum, develop lesson plans and execute them in the classroom. Despite this, there were still concerns with the embedded colonised practices where teachers defaulted to Eurocentric methods of doing things, like the strategies provided in the textbooks given to us. In some ways, our education was slow to adjust to the *Majolizing* intention by our former minister. In this paper, we provide *Kanne Lobal* as a way to contribute to the “*Majolizing* intention” and support ongoing change, as we are collectively responsible to all involved in education.

### ***Kajin Wa and Kanne Lobal***

*Wa* is the Marshallese word for canoe. *Kajin wa*, as in canoe language, has a lot of symbolic meaning linked to deeply-held Marshallese values and practices. Canoeing was and is a foundational practice that supports the livelihood of harsh atoll island living and reflects the Marshallese social world. The experts of *Kajin wa* often refer to *wa* as being the vessel of life, a means and source of sustaining life (Kelen, 2009). *Jouj* means kindness and is also the lower part of the main hull of the canoe. It is often referred to by some canoe builders in the RMI as the heart of the canoe and is linked to love. The *jouj* is one of the first parts of the canoe that is built and is “used to do all other measurements, and then the rest of the canoe is built on top of it” (Miller, 2010, p. 67). The significance of the *jouj* is that when the canoe is in the water, the *jouj* is the part of the hull that is underwater and ensures that all the cargo and passengers are safe. For Marshallese, *jouj* or kindness is what living is about and is associated with selflessly carrying the responsibility of keeping the family and community safe.

Other parts of the canoe also reflect Marshallese culture, legend, family, lineage and kinship. They embody social responsibilities that guide, direct and sustain Marshallese families’ wellbeing, from atoll to atoll. For example, the *rojak* (boom), *rojak maan* (upper boom) and *rojak kōrā* (lower boom) support the edges of the *ujelā/ujele* (sail) (see Figure 1). The literal meaning of *rojak maan* is male boom and *rojak kōrā* means female boom. Together they strengthen the sail and ensure the canoe propels forward in a strong yet safe way. Figuratively, the *rojak maan* and *rojak kōrā* symbolise the mother and father relationship which, when strong through the *jouj* (kindness and love), can strengthen families and sustain them into the future.

From a socio-cultural, communal and leadership view, the canoe (*wa*) provides understanding of the relationships required to inspire and sustain Marshallese peoples’ education and learning. We draw from *Kajin wa* because it provides cultural ideas and practices that enable understanding of education and leadership necessary for sustaining Marshallese people and realities in Oceania. When building a

canoe, the women are tasked with the weaving of the *ujelā/ujele* (sail) to ensure that it is strong enough to withstand long journeys and the fierce winds and waters of the ocean.

The *Kanne Lobal* relates to the front part of the *ujelā/ujele* (sail) where the *rojak maan* and *rojak kōrā* meet and connect (see bold lines in Figure 1). *Kanne Lobal* is linked to the strategic use of the *ujelā/ujele* by navigators, when there is no north wind to propel them forward, to find ways to capture the winds so that their journey can continue. As a proverbial saying, *Kanne Lobal* is used to ignite thinking and inspire and transform practice, particularly when the journey is rough and tough. In this paper we draw from *Kanne Lobal* to ignite, inspire and transform our educational and leadership practices, a move to explore what has always been meaningful to Marshallese people when we are faced with challenges. The *Kanne Lobal* utilises our language, cultural practices and values by sourcing from the concepts of *jouj* (kindness, love), *kautiej* (respect) and *jouj eo mour eo* (reciprocity).

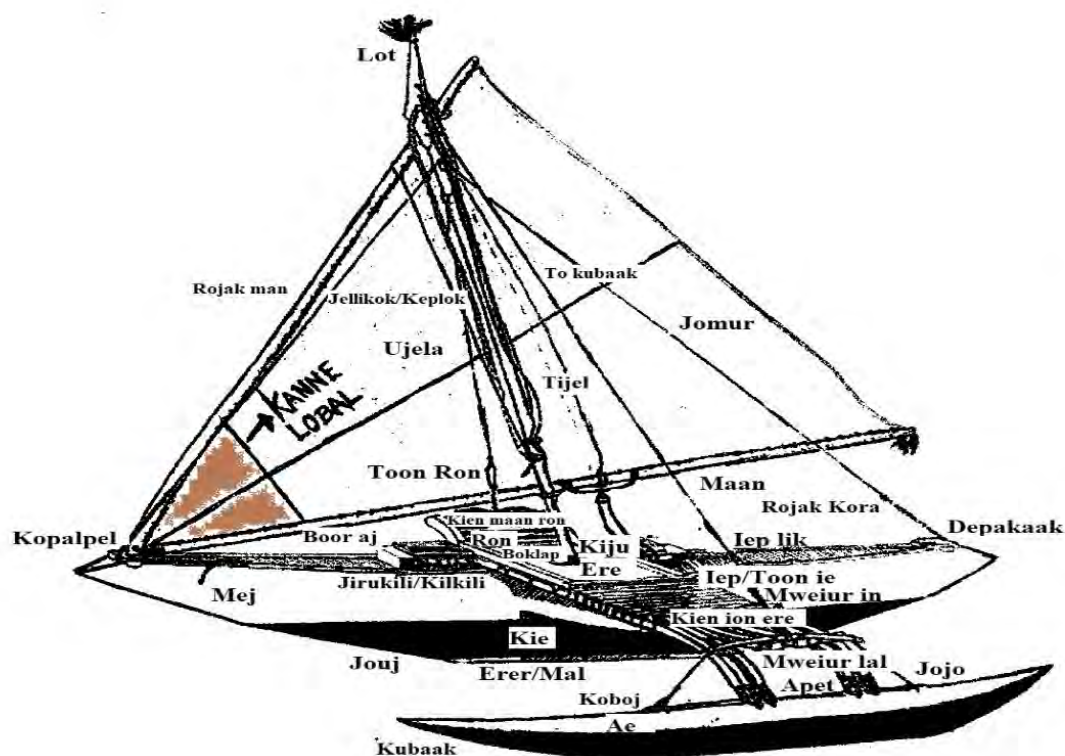


Figure 1. Parts of the canoe. (Drawn by the authors)

A key Marshallese proverb, *Enra bwe jen lale rara*, is the cultural practice where families enact compassion through the sharing of food in all occurrences. The term *enra* is a small basket woven from the coconut leaves and often used by Marshallese as a plate to share and distribute food amongst each other. *Bwe-jen-lale-rara* is about noticing and providing for the needs of others, and *enra*, the basket, will help support and provide for all that are in need. *Enra-bwe-jen-lale-rara* is symbolic of cultural exchange and reciprocity and the cultural values associated with building and maintaining relationships and constantly honouring each other.

Another proverb, *wa kuk wa jimor*, relates to having one canoe. Despite its capacity to feed and provide for the individual, others can also benefit from what it can provide. In the same way, we provide in this paper a cultural framework that will benefit all educators. It is a framework that is far-reaching and relevant to the lived realities of Marshallese people today. *Kumit* relates to people united to build strength, all co-operating and working together, living in peace, harmony and good health.

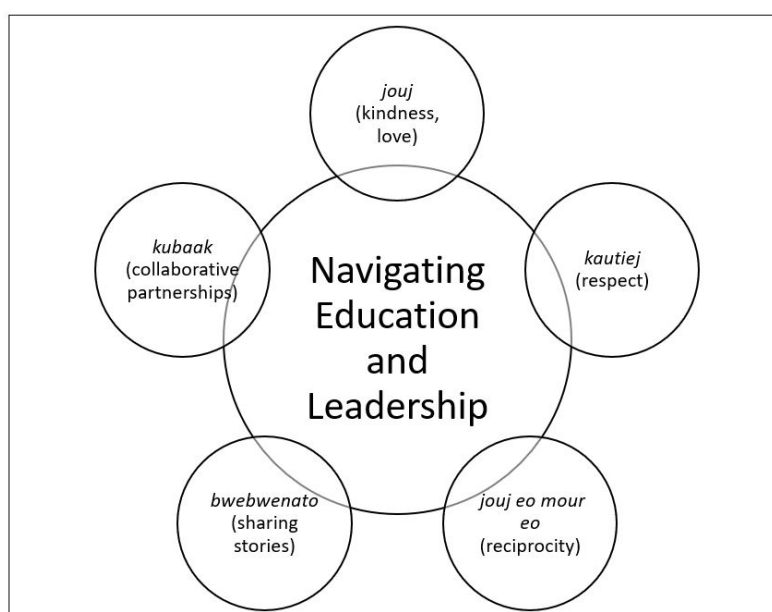


### **Kanne Lobal: A conceptual framework for education and leadership**

An education framework is a conceptual structure that can be used to capture ideas and thinking related to aspects of learning. *Kanne Lobal* is conceptualised and framed in this paper as an educational framework. *Kanne Lobal* highlights the significance of education as a collective partnership where leadership is an important aspect. As outlined above, *Kanne Lobal* draws from indigenous Marshallese concepts like *kautiej* (respect), *jouj eo mour eo* (reciprocity) and *jouj* (kindness, heart). The role of a leader, including an education leader, is to prioritise collective learning and partnerships that benefit Marshallese people and the continuity and survival of the next generation (Heine, 2002; Thaman, 1995).

Ejnar Aerōk, an expert canoe builder in the RMI, stated: “*Jerbal ippān doon bwe en maron maan wa e* (they work together so the boat can move forward)” (cited in Miller, 2010, p. 69). His description emphasises the significance of partnerships and working together when navigating and journeying together in order to move the canoe forward. The *kubaak*, the outrigger of the *wa* (canoe) is about ‘partnerships’. For us as elementary school leaders on Majuro, *kubaak* encourages us to value collaborative partnerships with each other as well as our communities, PSS and other stakeholders. Partnerships is an important part of the *Kanne Lobal* education and leadership framework. It requires ongoing *bwebwenato*—the inspiring as well as confronting and challenging conversations that should be mediated and negotiated if we and our education stakeholders are to journey together to ensure that the educational services we provide benefit future generations of young people in the RMI. Navigating ahead of the partnerships, mediation and negotiation are the core values of *jouj* (kindness, love), *kautiej* (respect) and *jouj eo mour eo* (reciprocity).

As an organic conceptual framework grounded in indigenous values, inspired through our lived experiences, *Kanne Lobal* provides ideas and concepts for re-thinking education and leadership practices that are conducive to learning and teaching in the schooling context in the RMI. By no means does it provide the solution to the education ills in our nation. However, we argue that *Kanne Lobal* is a more relevant approach which is much needed for the negatively stigmatised system as a consequence of the various colonial administrations that have and continue to reframe and reshape education in the RMI. Moreover, *Kanne Lobal* is our attempt to decolonise and deconstruct the framing of education and leadership, moving our *bwebwenato* to re-framing conversations of teaching and learning so that our cultural knowledge and values are foregrounded, appreciated and realised within our education system.



**Figure 2. Navigating education and leadership in the RMI.**

## **Bwebwenato: Sharing our stories**

In this section, we use *bwebwenato* as a method of gathering and capturing our stories as data. Below we capture our stories and ongoing conversations about the richness in Marshallese cultural knowledge in the outer islands and on Majuro and the potentialities in *Kanne Lobal*.

### **Danny Jim**

When I was in third grade (9–10 years of age), during my grandfather’s speech in Arno, an atoll near Majuro, in a time when a *wa* (canoe) was being blessed and ready to put the canoe into the ocean, my grandfather told me the canoe was a blessing for the family. “Without a canoe, a family cannot provide for them,” he said. The canoe allows for travelling between places to gather food and other resources to provide for the family. My grandfather’s stories about people’s roles within the canoe reminded me that everyone within the family has a responsibility to each other. Our women—mothers and daughters—have a significant responsibility in the journey. In fact, they hold us, care for us, and give strength to their husbands, brothers and sons. The wise man or elder sits in the middle of the canoe, directing the young man who helps to steer. The young men, they do all the work, are directed by the older men. The young man steering takes advice and seeks the wisdom of the elder. In front of the canoe, a younger boy sits because of his strong and youthful vision. He is able to help the elder as well as the young man on the canoe.

The story can be linked to the roles that school leaders, teachers and students have in schooling. Without each person knowing intricately their role and responsibility, the sight and vision ahead for the collective aspirations of the school and the community are difficult to comprehend. For me, the canoe is symbolic of our educational journey within our education system. The school leader, a central, trusted and respected figure in the school, provides support for teachers who are at the helm, pedagogically striving to provide for their students. Without strong direction from the school leaders and teachers at the helm, the students, like the young boys, cannot foresee their future or envisage how education can benefit them. This is why *Kanne Lobal* is a significant framework for us in the Marshall Islands because within the practice we are able to take heed and empower each other so that all benefit from the process. *Kanne Lobal* is linked to our culture, an essential part of who we are. We must rely on our own local approaches, rather than relying on other drivers of education reform that are not relevant to what we know and how we live in today’s society.

One of the things I can tell is that in Majuro, compared to the outer islands, it’s different. In the outer islands, parents bring children together and tell them legends and stories. The elders tell them about the legends and stories—the *bwebwenato*. Children from the outer islands know a lot more about Marshallese legends compared to children from the Majuro atoll. They usually stay close to their parents, observing how to prepare food and all types of Marshallese skills.

### **Loretta Joseph Case**

There is little western influence in the outer islands. Children grow up learning their own culture with their parents, not having TV. They are closely knit, making their own food, learning to weave. They use fire for cooking food. They are more connected because there are more of them practising their own culture. For example, if they’re building a house, the ladies will come together and make food to take to the males that are building the house, encouraging them to keep on working—*jemjem maal* (sharpening tools like axes, encouraging workers to empower them). It’s when they bring food and entertainment.

### Rubon Rubon

Togetherness, working together, sharing of food, these are important practices as a school leader. *Jemjem maal*— the whole village works together, men working and the women encouraging them with food and entertainment. All the young children are involved in all of the cultural practices; cultural transmission is consistently part of their everyday life. These are stronger in the outer islands. *Kanne Lobal* has the potential to provide solutions using our own knowledge and practices.

### Connie Joel

When new teachers become a teacher, they learn more about their culture through teaching. Teaching raises the question, who are we? A popular saying amongst our people, *Aelon kein ad ej aelon in manit*, means that our islands are cultural islands. Therefore, when we are teaching and managing the school, we must do this culturally. When we live and breathe, we must do this culturally. There is more socialising with family and extended family. Respect the elderly. When they're doing things the ladies all get together, in groups and do it. Cut the breadfruit, and preserve the breadfruit and pandanus. They come together and do it. Same as fishing, building houses, building canoes. They use and speak the language often spoken by the older people. There are words that people in the outer islands use and understand; language regularly applied by the elderly. Respect elderly and leaders more, i.e., chiefs (*iroj*), commoners (*alap*) and the workers on the land (*ri-jerbal*) (the social layer under the commoners). All the kids, they gather with their families and go and visit the chiefs and *alap*, and take gifts from their land, the first produce/food from the plantation (*ejōk*).

### Tommy Almet

The people are more connected to the culture in the outer islands because they help one another. They don't have to always buy things by themselves, everyone contributes to the occasion. For instance, for birthdays, boys go fishing, others contribute, and all share with everyone. *Kanne Lobal* is a practice that can bring people together—leaders, teachers, stakeholders. We want our colleagues to keep strong and work together to fix problems like students' and teachers' absenteeism which is a big problem for us in schools.

### Demetria Malachi

The culture in the outer islands is more accessible and visible to children. In Majuro, there is a visible mixing of cultures and knowledges, influenced by western thinking and practices. *Kanne Lobal* is an idea that can enhance quality educational purposes for the RMI. We, the school leaders who did GCSL, want to merge and use this idea because it will help benefit students' learning and teachers' teaching. *Kanne Lobal* will help students to learn and teachers to teach though traditional skills and knowledge. We want to revitalise our ways of life through teaching because they are slowly fading away. Also, we want to have our own Marshallese learning process because it is in our own language, making it easier for students to understand and learn. Essentially, we want to proudly use our own ways of teaching from our ancestors, acknowledging and honouring the blessings given to us.

## Ways forward

To think of ways forward is to reflect on the past and on current learnings. Instead of a traditional discussion within a research publication, we have opted to continue our *bwebwenato* by sharing what we have learnt through the GCSL programme. Our *bwebwenato* does not end in this article, and this opportunity to collaborate and partner together in this piece of writing has been a meaningful experience to conceptualise and unpack the *Kanne Lobal* framework.

Our collaborative *bwebwenato* has enabled us to dig deep into our own wise knowledges for guidance to mediate and navigate the challenges in education and leadership (Sanga & Houma, 2004). For example, *bwe-jen-lale-rara* reminds us to inquire, pay attention and focus on supporting the needs of others. Through *enra-bwe-jen-lale-rara*, we are reminded to value cultural exchange and reciprocity which will strengthen the development and maintaining of relationships based on ways we continue to honour each other (Nimmer, 2017). We not only continue to support each other, but also help the next generation of school leaders navigate the education system (Heine, 2002).

Education and leadership are all about collaborative partnerships (Sanga & Chu, 2009; Thaman, 1997). Developing partnerships through the GCSL was useful learning for us. It encouraged us to work together, share knowledge, respect each other and be kind. The values of *jouj* (kindness, love), *kautiej* (respect) and *jouj eo mour eo* (reciprocity) are meaningful in being and becoming educational leaders in the RMI (Jetnil-Kijiner, 2014; Miller, 2010; Nimmer, 2017). These values are meaningful for us to practise, particularly given the drive by PSS for schools to become accredited.

The workshops and meetings delivered during the GCSL in the RMI from 2018 to 2019 about *Kanne Lobal* have given us strength to share our stories and experiences arising from meeting with the stakeholders (see below). Before we met with the stakeholders, we were encouraged to share and speak in our language within our courses: EDP05 (Professional Development and Learning), EDP06 (School Leadership), EDP07 (School Management), EDP08 (Teaching and Learning) and EDP09 (Community Partnerships). In groups, we shared our presentations with our peers, the 15 school leaders in the GCSL programme. We also invited USP's RMI staff. They liked the way we presented *Kanne Lobal*. They provided us with feedback; for example, how the use of the sail on the canoe, the parts and their functions can be conceptualised in education and how they are related to the way we teach our own young people.

Engaging stakeholders in the conceptualisation and design stages of *Kanne Lobal* strengthened our understanding of leadership and collaborative partnerships. Through various meetings with the RMI's Pacific Resources for Education and Learning (PREL) team, PSS general assembly, teachers from the outer islands and the PSS executive committee, we were able to share and receive feedback on the *Kanne Lobal* framework. The coordinators of the PREL programme in the RMI were excited by the possibilities around using *Kanne Lobal* as a way to teach culture in an inspirational way to Marshallese students. Our Marshallese knowledge, particularly through the proverbial meaning of *Kanne Lobal*, provided so much inspiration and insight for the groups during the presentations, which gave us hope and confidence to develop the framework. *Kanne Lobal* is an organic and indigenous approach, grounded in Marshallese ways of doing things (Heine, 2002; Taafaki & Fowler, 2019). Given the persistent presence of colonial processes within the education system and the constant reference to practices and initiatives from the US, *Kanne Lobal*, for us, provides a refreshing and fulfilling experience and makes us feel warm inside because it is something that belongs to all Marshallese people.

## Conclusion

Marshallese indigenous knowledge and practices provide meaningful educational and leadership understanding and learnings. They ignite, inspire and transform thinking and practice. The *Kanne Lobal* conceptual framework emphasises key concepts and values necessary for collaborative partnerships

within education and leadership practices in the RMI. The *bwebwenato* or talk stories have been insightful and have highlighted the strengths and benefits that our Marshallese ideas and practices possess when looking for appropriate and relevant ways to understand education and leadership.

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