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Understanding Pasefika perceptions and experiences of the school system in Years 7 to 10

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
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Abstract

Drawing on questionnaires and interviews of Pasefika students, their parents, and teachers, this case study provides an understanding of their perceptions and experiences of the school system in Years 7 to 10 within a family resource framework. Essentially, the financial, social and cultural resources available to Pasefika students within the context of their family's *cultural capital*, and their prior cognitive ability and non-cognitive dispositions have greater influence on their engagement and success at school than their culture or ethnicity. Respondents' suggestions for changes to enhance schooling and the social and educational needs of Pasefika students, including the support for a middle-school structure and provision of an extra year prior to NCEA qualifications, reiterate similar multivariate recommendations and findings of other studies.

Acknowledgements

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, *Anae* Si'anaua Ostler, a pioneering Samoan woman from the village of Falelatai in old Western Samoa who is the only woman to hold the *matai* title of *Anae*. *Anae* was a school teacher, the first Pacific radio announcer and compère for New Zealand Broadcasting, the first Pacific social worker employed by a statutory department in New Zealand, and currently a Samoan translator and interpreter for Auckland courts, police and Translations and Interpreters Services. I am indebted to Vinepa Aiono (2006:6) who has recorded this information as well as one of the many significant contributions *Anae* made for the betterment of Pasefika peoples:

My final accomplishment was far removed from usual social work advocacy... I sought the assistance of a talented Samoan lawyer Tasi Malu who drafted a proposal for negotiating the portability of superannuation schemes for New Zealand Samoan residents wishing to return to Samoa in their golden years... I took the proposal to the Pacific MPs on both sides of the parliamentary house of that time but nothing was done. By chance I managed to gain an audience (with the assistance of George Fepulea'i Samoan High Commissioner who I met one day leaving the Park Royal Hotel that Tofilau Eti (Samoan PM) was staying at in New Zealand)... and was given 10 minutes to state my proposal to Tofilau Eti who graciously informed me that he would raise the issue with Jim Bolger who he was meeting the same afternoon... How the final arrangements occurred with the portability scheme gaining governmental approval is beyond me, but that I took the chance to influence positive change, is for me the fusion of my Samoanness and a developed social work skill.

Anae considers the truly valuable things are all the things that God's Word holds up as being important – believing in the living God, family, and service. Any achievements I make and any positive changes as a result of this thesis are only possible because my mother paved the way.

To the participating Pasefika students, parents and teachers of Porirua City, I gratefully acknowledge your time and sharing of personal stories, dreams, experiences and ideas. My desire is that your Pasefika perceptions and experiences shall influence positive change in

schools. May the Word of God continue to be a Lamp to your feet and a Light to your path (Psalms 119:105).

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1. Introduction

In 18 years of teaching maths at low-decile¹ colleges² and an alternative school with predominantly Pasefika and/or Māori students, and as a mother of four children attending low-decile schools in Porirua and parent Board of Trustees member, I have found it saddening to watch the majority of our Pasefika/Māori children leave school with no or low qualifications.

Pasefika students are capable of achieving as school leaver statistics have improved with the introduction of NCEA³ in 2002, and at alternative schools such as *He Huarahi Tamariki*⁴. The question is why proportionally, after 30-plus years of educational reforms, research, reports, conferences, symposiums and professional development (P.D.), their achievement rate remains so low and why the achievement ‘gap’, which has not reduced, continues to exist between Pasefika and Asian or Palagi students?

Socio-economic status (SES) and ethnic/cultural explanations from research are available but these alone do not explain then the cause of high Asian⁵ student achievement. It is clear that there are complex, interconnecting historical and social factors (such as employment, housing, living conditions, and health) which impact on Pasefika student achievement and cannot be fully discussed here. This is a multivariate problem. However, despite recognising family resources as the major issue in terms of educational inequality (Ministry of Education (MOE), 1998 cited Adams, Clark, Codd, O’Neill, Openshaw & Waitere-Ang, 2000:285), successive governments and the MOE have placed the blame for the failure of low-income, Māori and Pasefika student underachievement onto the local school, teachers and the parents. By devolving responsibility for resolving educational inequalities, nobody assumes direct

¹ Decile indicates the extent to which a school draws its students from low socio-economic communities. Decile 1 schools are the 10% of schools with the highest proportion of students from low socio-economic communities. Decile 10 schools are the 10% of schools with the lowest proportion of these students. Low decile = 1 to 3; Middle decile = 4 to 7; High decile = 8 to 10.

² Years 9 to 15, though most students leave after Year 13. Also called secondary schools.

³ National Certificate in Educational Achievement.

⁴ *He Huarahi Tamariki* (HHT), an alternative local school of predominantly Pasefika and Māori teenage parents, has achieved almost 100% NCEA pass rate with students continuing to tertiary education (*HHT Newsletter* March 2003 & March 2004).

⁵ Asian students represented 8.8% (65,583) of the domestic student population in New Zealand as at 1 July 2008 compared with 9.5% of Pasefika students. Asian students predominantly attend middle-high decile schools (decile 4-7 and 8-10) compared to Pasefika students who predominantly attend low-decile schools (decile 1-3) (MOE, 2008b). However, in Census 2006, the lowest median annual personal income for people aged 15 years and over was for those who identified with the Asian ethnic group (\$14,500); Pasefika peoples was \$20,500. The Asian ethnic group has higher proportions of people in the younger age groups (who tend to have lower incomes). People identifying with the Asian ethnic group had the highest proportion (58%) of people receiving under \$20,000 a year (Statistics NZ, 2008b, Quickstats about Income).

responsibility for the failure of, and lack of, educational (and social and economic) policies and practices to *significantly* affect Pasefika educational achievement.

For years those at the ‘chalk-face’, such as former primary school Principal May (1993 cited Coxon, Anae, Mara, Wendt-Samu, & Finau, 2002:63), have advocated “structural as well as curriculum, pedagogical, and evaluation change... to make a difference for culturally diverse students”. Tangaroa College Principal Jim Peters (1996:134) also boldly argued:

...in addition to addressing issues related to how students learn and how teachers teach, we need to look at other factors that impinge on the learning environment... we need to critically examine school structures and perhaps take a plunge at experimenting with some of the innovative structural changes that have been tried in schools in the USA in poor communities with high Black and Hispanic populations. Schools need to identify the systems and structures that are not working for Pacific Islands’ students and change them. ...And... schools in the low socio-economic areas have to be better resourced. Teachers with up to 30 students in their classes, a very high proportion of them with learning difficulties and presenting challenging behaviours, cannot adequately meet the needs of all. ...We need more teachers and more money for basic learning resources.

School structures, the nature of teaching and learning, and resourcing are critical issues at the school site.

The focus of this thesis, *‘Understanding Pasefika perceptions and experiences of the school system in Years 7 to 10’*, is to explore the perceptions and experiences held by three Pasefika groups – students, their parents and teachers. Concentrating on Years 7 to 10, it draws on participant interviews and questionnaires to ascertain these groups’ perceptions and experiences of the school system, its structures and processes and their suggestions for change to enhance schooling and the social and educational needs of Pasefika students. It will then explain the observed statistical patterns of Pasefika students’ underachievement within the theoretical context of the Family Resource Framework (Nash & Harker, 1997). This Framework utilises explanations of family, school and social contexts.

1.2. Research Problem & Questions

The Family Resource Framework (FRF) in which Nash and Harker’s (1997 & 1998) project was constructed provides for an understanding of educational inequality (FRF will be elaborated in chapter two). Briefly, FRF “allows for different methods, ...quantitative and qualitative, and for the integration of different theories” to explain the complex issues around differential educational achievement (O’Neill & Nash, 2005:344). Thus, to understand the

central question, ‘what is going on?’ for Pasefika students in Porirua schools in Years 7 to 10 prior to NCEA qualifications, and to understand the complexity of issues, the FRF approach using “numbers and narratives” underpins this study (Nash & Harker, 1998:2).

My specific questions focusing on Years 7 to 10 are:

1. How do Pasefika students, parents, and teachers perceive and experience mainstream schooling?
2. What positive changes could be made to enhance schooling and the social and educational needs of Pasefika students?

This study draws on New Zealand research such as Hill and Hawk’s (1998) examination of the *Achievement in Multi-cultural High Schools* (AIMHI⁶) project, Nash and Harker’s (1997) *Progress at School*⁷ study, and the *Competent Children, Competent Learners*⁸ project by Wylie, Hodgen and Ferral (2006b) and Wylie and Hodgen (2007). From these studies, I believe the best explanation for the observed Pasefika differences in school attainment is recognising the importance of the complex structural inequalities in our society generated by economic, political, and socio-cultural systems, in which the family and school are located. It is with Pierre Bourdieu’s *cultural capital* and *habitus* concepts and Basil Bernstein’s *socio-linguistic* theory – to be discussed in chapter two – and strongly influenced by Nash and Harker’s (1998) work that this thesis will engage. Briefly, students’ differentially developed prior cognitive abilities (particularly in literacy) and *non-cognitive dispositions* (aspirations, academic self-concepts, and perceptions of the school and teachers (Nash 2002:95)), located within social class and cultural practices (particularly influenced by ‘maternal qualification’), that the school recognises/ignores, accounts for differential outcomes in education. In simple terms, to succeed at school a student’s *cultural capital* needs to match the school’s *cultural capital*; the converse unfortunately is less likely to occur. Hence, despite social class, Asian

⁶ *Achievement in Multi-cultural High Schools* is a development project initiated and funded by the MOE to raise the achievement levels of students at eight low-decile secondary schools with high ratios of Māori and Pasefika students (seven colleges in South Auckland, and one in Porirua).

⁷ The 1991 New Zealand project followed 5388 students in 37 secondary schools from third form to seventh form (ages 13 to 17 years or Years 9 to 13). The research was designed to investigate school effects and its specific focus was on those inequalities that seem to be associated with individual schools. The research also had wider concerns with central policy issues concerned with social access to education.

⁸ *Competent Children* project focused on 500 Wellington region children. The study charted their cognitive, social and attitudinal competencies from when they were close to 5 years of age and still in early childhood education, until age 16. Its main aims are to explore the roles of home and education in the development of children’s competencies and to investigate if these roles change over time and as children have other experiences. Summary reports of the findings for the fifth stage has been presented in “*Twelve Years Old and Competent 2004*” (Wylie, 2004), the sixth stage in “*Growing Independence: A summary of key findings from the Competent learners at 14 project*” (Wylie et al., 2006a) and “*Completely different or a bigger version? Experiences and effects of the transition to secondary school*” (Wylie et al., 2006b), and the seventh stage in “*Competent learners @ 16: Competency levels and development over time*” (Wylie & Hodgen, 2007).

students' *cultural capital*, which Thernstrom and Thernstrom (2003) have briefly identified (and beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss), have the best match to the school's *cultural capital* than non-Asian students. The most satisfying explanation of ethnic differences in educational attainment is from Nash and Harker (1997:13):

...it is crucial to have regard to the evidence that the family practices causally related to the development of cognitive skills and scholastic forms of learning are not associated in the same way with social class in all ethnic communities.

Studies such as Nash (1999b) and Wylie, Hodgen, Ferral, Dingle, Thompson, and Hipkins (2006a) demonstrate that when solid foundations for learning are established early (preschool and primary school) children are likely to perform well later. Harkess, Murray, Parkin, and Dalgety (2005:6) note international studies for Pasefika students who reached senior secondary schooling, showed they had achieved less in primary and junior secondary school. The local assessment data of Years 7 to 10 Pasefika students (discussed in chapter four) also support these findings.

It is clear the majority of Pasefika children need more time to acquire curriculum knowledge and skills to levels necessary to meet the academic demands of senior college (I suggest more time to mean postponing NCEA Level 1 to Year 12 rather than the current Year 11. This will be discussed further in the next chapter). Early low achievement has a cumulative effect on college achievement, and secondary schooling is obviously not meeting Pasefika students' needs.

Education Review Office (ERO) reports (1994, 2001, 2003) reveal unresolved issues about the educational needs of students in Years 7 to 10. Middle-schools had not been established at the time of the 1994 Office report which stated "...no particular type of schooling arrangement has necessarily addressed the specific needs of Form 1 to 4 students successfully" (ERO, 1994:section 6⁹). However, while noting four middle-schools had no statistical significance, of interest in a later Office report (ERO, 2003:section 4¹⁰) was the quality of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in these schools which were found to be "significantly higher than in any other form of school" and organisation "was significantly more responsive than that found in Years 7 to 13 and Years 9 to 13 secondary schools". Nolan, Brown, Stewart and Beane (2000 cited ERO, 2001:section 4¹¹, italics mine) argue:

Over 40 years of school-based research and experience with hundreds of thousands of students in over 10,000 middle schools show that separate three

⁹ 'Overall conclusions' par.2.

¹⁰ 'Overall findings across all school types' par.3, 4.

¹¹ 'The argument for middle schools' par.5.

to four year age span middle schools, *when properly planned and led*, are the most appropriate way to meet the educational needs of emerging adolescents. Though predominantly from overseas, the literature on middle-schooling for ethnic minorities indicates possible solutions for positive change and towards early successful achievement at levels required for success at senior college. This is briefly discussed in chapter two.

The solution therefore lies in part with Pasefika students and their parents but for the most part with schools and government to address social inequalities. Conventional schooling is not working for Pasefika students and this thesis provides evidence of the need for multifaceted solutions, including cultural change within schools – values, habits, skills, structures and processes – and improved resourcing (particularly in low-decile schools), to increase academic achievement.

1.3. 'Pasefika' defined

Pasefika students in New Zealand include those whose heritages are from Pacific Nations but usually excluding New Zealand Māori. Within-group diversity by gender, recency of migration and various stages of adaptation to New Zealand society, socio-economic status, combination of ethnicities, individual differences and other characteristics create wide diversity under the term Pasefika. In addition, the varying degrees to which Pasefika students identify themselves create wide diversity within the Pasefika student population that exists in New Zealand schools. Participants in this study identify with their Pacific Nation not 'Pasefika' and not 'New Zealand/Pacific Island born'. Readers should bear in mind that cultural and academic patterns described in this study should not be taken as applying to all individuals indiscriminately.

Various terms are used in New Zealand to describe Pasefika peoples (Pacific Nations peoples, Polynesian, Pacific Islander, Pasifika) but I use 'Pasefika' because it is the 'correct' spelling taken from my mother rather than the Palagi/European spelling 'Pasifika'. Quotes using the term 'Pasifika' have not been altered.

The Samoan term 'Palagi'¹² is used in reference to European and New Zealand European/Pākehā peoples.

¹² The correct Samoan term is Papālagi meaning foreigner, European, white man.

1.4. Thesis Outline

Chapter one introduces this study and argues that the educational achievement ‘gap’ between ethnic groups has multivariate causes that are wider than the school and include family resource and socio-political explanations. The literature review in chapter two presents school statistics concerning Pasefika students and what is being done to ‘close the gap’. Theoretical foundations are introduced to explain educational inequalities and an introduction of Nash and Harker’s (1998) work. The argument for middle-schools and an extra year for Pasefika students are made as structural solutions for underachievement. The methodological foundations of the research design and methods, including the implications of the Family Resource Framework (FRF), are provided in chapter three. The introduction in chapter four provides the format for chapters four to six which analyse and discuss the data from the three groups of Pasefika participants. Answers to my research questions are briefly discussed in chapter seven, drawing on the key theoretical foundations and concepts from the literature research. Recommendations focus on school changes.