Ensuring Literacy Acquisition for Adolescent Pasifika Learners

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ABSTRACT

In an educational system based on equity, ensuring the achievement of Pasifika students in secondary education is seen as a key focus of the Government approach to education (Ministry of Education, 2013b) and a major step in addressing the social and economic inequities experienced by Pasifika peoples in New Zealand. While there has been a significant amount of research done since the 2000 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) report on Pasifika Education (Sturrock, 2004), in order to improve outcomes, research suggests that there are key areas which could be improved to raise the academic success of Pasifika students. This article focuses on this research, particularly in the area of literacy.

Research paper

Keywords: *Literacy, Pasifika, Pasifika achievement*

INTRODUCTION

The Pasifika Education Plan, 2013-2017 (Ministry of Education, 2013b) aims to ensure that Pasifika communities are able to access the opportunities available in the New Zealand education system. Much of the recent research around quality education for Pasifika learners has been developed as a response to the 2000 PISA report on Pasifika Literacy (Sturrock, 2004), and also Alton-Lee's research (2003), and focuses on the key areas of the specific needs of Pasifika communities. These are identified as being to promote and retain their Pasifika Languages and culture; the need to form closer connections between school communities and Pasifika families; how teachers can respond to the needs of Pasifika students' identities as they have different roles in home, church and school; and the bilingual nature of Pasifika students, as well as effective approaches to gain the best outcomes for Pasifika students.

BACKGROUND

The diverse Pasifika student population, while identified in most of the literature under review as a homogenous group, are diverse in their place of origin, first language, religion, home background and educational achievement. Sixty percent of adult Samoan and Tongan New Zealanders in Auckland can talk fluently in their Pasifika language (Sutton & Airini, 2011), although only 32 percent of Pasifika children in New Zealand can do so. In contrast to the popular perception of Pasifika people as recent immigrants, over 56 percent were born in New Zealand (Statistics New Zealand, 2010). While identifying factors for educational success, it is important to acknowledge the importance of appreciating the students as individuals with their own strengths and needs.

Since the focus on Pasifika achievement in reading literacy results from the PISA 2000 Report (Sturrock, 2004) was released, there has been a move to improve the outcomes for Pasifika students. However, while the gap has narrowed (Ministry of Education, 2012), Pasifika students have yet to experience the same degree of educational success as the overall population.

While many Pasifika students are achieving highly in secondary schools, there is a large tail of underachievement which limits Pasifika achievement in secondary schools, and therefore limits their access to higher education. In 2012, National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) results showed that 52.5 percent of Pasifika students were achieving NCEA Level 2 with their cohort (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, n.d.) and 69 percent of eligible Pasifika students gained NCEA Level 2. The 2009 PISA study found 24 percent of Pasifika students were achieving at Level 4 or above on the PISA reading literacy scale, which is at an above-average level, however 35 percent were below Level 1 (Telford & May, 2010). In addition, whilst 42.9 percent of Pasifika students achieved university entrance in 2012, this compares unfavourably with the average for all candidates of 67.6 percent in 2012 (NZQA, 2013). A focus on improving literacy outcomes for Pasifika students will enable them to have access to other curriculum areas and help them to reach their educational potential.

PASIFIKA STUDENTS AS BILINGUAL AND SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS

One of the ways of improving literacy outcomes is to recognise the large number of students who are bilingual and second language learners. Teachers and school leaders need to acknowledge and develop effective pedagogy for the large number of Pasifika students who do not speak English at home, although some of these students may not have been born overseas. Alton-Lee (2003) refers to research done in American communities which found that exposure to language differs according to ethnicity, and reminds us of the ability of educators to address this issue. McKay (2002) considers this inequity as one which is central to how we view achievements in literacy. He states that "the evidence seems to suggest that there are initial gaps or disparities at school entry between learners whose first language was not English and those whose first language was English" (p. 16) and makes a convincing case for bilingual education. However, in New Zealand the reality is that only three percent of New Zealand classrooms offer any form of classes in Pasifika languages (Sutton & Airini, 2011). A growing body of research shows the benefits of acquiring the first language in supporting English language acquisition (Gorinski & Fraser 2006; McKay, 2002; Nation, 2001). Futhermore, the structure of schools in Tonga and Samoa, for example, is much more rigid than in New Zealand, and the students can struggle with the transition to New Zealand schools (Allen, Taleni & Robertson, 2009).

The evidence around second language learning is that the best practice of small group work and explicit teaching is the most effective approach. This is supported by student interviews in the 2000 PISA study (Nation, 2001; Sturrock, 2004). By understanding these Pasifika students as second language learners, schools can better-support these students to gain fluency in English (Ministry of Education Learning Media, 2000). More importantly, this approach allows teachers to understand the shifting identities of their students and encourages explicit teaching of codes of behaviour and learning.

STRENGTHENING THE CONNECTION BETWEEN WORLDS: HOME AND SCHOOL COMMUNICATION

It is important to Pasifika communities that students have access to their own language. Pragmatically, it gives bilingual students a chance to work from their strengths. While most schools do not offer Pasifika languages, NCEA standards are available in Tongan, Samoan, Cook Island Maori and Niuean. In forming closer connections between home and school, the teachers of these subjects often take a lead role as bilingual liaisons and are seen as being approachable by parents (Gorinski & Fraser, 2006). In addition, if we are to have an inclusive education system and raise student achievement, then students need to see themselves and their culture as being valued by the school culture (Alton-Lee, 2003; Ministry of Education, 2012). For secondary Pasifika students, priority needs to be given to increasing Pasifika students' access to academic learning in, and about, their own language.

Pasifika parents, like all parents, want their children to succeed in school, however there are often not close home-school relationships, particularly in schools where Pasifika students are a minority (Gorinski & Fraser, 2006). There is a great deal of evidence in what limits parental involvement including the monocultural, institutional nature of schools; however, the involvement of parents in schools has been linked to higher achievement (Alton-Lee, 2003; Fletcher, Parkhill & Fa'afoi, 2005; Gorinski & Fraser, 2006; Spiller 2012). Kupu Macintyre (1999), when looking at Tongan mothers, raises the issue of conflicting worlds and values between home and school. She notes that the parents, in seeking to support their children to be good students, do not believe it is their place to interfere with the teacher's role and that they may not, in fact, know what to do to help their children at school. Spiller (2012) states that "for Pasifika parents, helping their children to be educated involves supporting the teacher as the authority, the person with the knowledge that will be imparted to their son or daughter. They ensure their children are respectful to the teacher by listening and doing the work required"(p. 65).

While the Pasifika Education Plan 2013-2015 (Ministry of Education, 2013b) sets goals for increasing the engagement of Pasifika parents in the school communities, particularly as representatives on Boards of Trustees, this has been slow to happen. In 1998, Pasifika parents were represented fairly on 26 percent of Boards of Trustees, and in 2012, they were fairly represented on 35 percent of Boards of Trustees (Ministry of Education, 2013a).

While Spiller (2012) raises the issue that non-Pasifika teachers and Pasifika teachers will understand parental concern with behaviour and learning differently, in that they see behaviour as important and that good behaviour is consistently associated with their children learning, this claim is contradicted in part by Sitene (2010) who suggests that the allocation of identity in classrooms by teachers is not so simplistic and Schulster (2008) also sees the relationship as a complex one in

which quality teaching is more important than the culture of the teacher. It is important for teachers, in seeking to ensure that Pasifika students have access to quality literacy programmes, to be aware of the worlds of home and church, in which questioning and challenging authority, including literary texts, is not acceptable (Dickie, 2010).

SHIFTING IDENTITIES: STUDENTS CROSSING WORLDS

Pasifika students have shifting identities depending on their environment (Dickie, 2011; Mila-Schaaf & Robinson, 2010; Siope, 2011; Wendt Samu, 2006). Students who are better-able to recognise and understand the different coda of the specific environment, for example school, and adapt their identities to suit, are generally able to achieve better educational outcomes (Mila-Schaaf & Robinson, 2010). Research as part of the Achievement in Multicultural High Schools (AIMHI) project (Hawk & Hill, 1998; Hill & Hawk, 2000) discusses the different worlds of students and identified the issues that arise when the values of these worlds come into conflict.

> Students were very analytical about the circumstances of their lives and very articulate in describing how they deal with such dilemmas. Their main way of coping is to keep the worlds separate and to move from one to another, rather than to attempt to reconcile the differences. The strategies they use to try to deal with the conflicting pressures include "making excuses" i.e. telling lies, avoidance or opting out altogether (Hawk & Hill, 1998, p. 2).

While this research acknowledges the limitations of school leaders and teachers in being able to address these complex issues, it is suggested that a closer connection between home and school would help the students to navigate their different worlds, rather than keep them separate. These findings are supported by Siope (2011) and Mila-Schaaf & Robinson (2010). To improve student achievement, schools and teachers need to explicitly acknowledge and teach the world views and social rules of the academic environment and give Pasifika students both the cultural capital to succeed in the wider New Zealand environment, but also understand the world view of their students and form connections between the two (Alton-Lee, 2003; Ministry of Education, 2004; Schulster, 2008). For literacy education in secondary schools, the literacy values and expectations of these worlds often seem to be in conflict as church, home and school concepts of literacy may conflict. This is because while in church, the emphasis is on understanding what is being read, and being able to relate it to everyday

life (Dickie, 2010); by secondary school the emphasis has shifted towards being able to think critically about texts.

CHURCH AND SCHOOL: BUILDING FROM THE STRENGTHS OF PASIFIKA LEARNERS

Pasifika students have a different view of literature to the critical literacy expected of them in the English classroom. The majority of Pasifika students have their values and view of how to approach literature shaped by their strong connection to their church and study of the bible (Dickie, 2010; Hawk & Hill, 1998; Kupu Macintyre, 1999; Parkhill, Fletcher & Fa'afoi. 2005b). As Hawk and Hill (1998) state "Pasifika children are not expected to challenge or question in their homes or at church. In school, however, they are expected to do both these things as an integral part of the learning process …." (p. 3). Hence, while Pasifika students usually have a good understanding of vocabulary, their comprehension and critical analysis of texts lags behind (Dickie, 2010; Dickie, 2011; Fletcher, Parkhill, Fa'afoi & Tufulasi Taleni, 2006). The reasons for this are the differing values systems that students are negotiating amongst church, home and school. For many Pasifika communities and students, the central place of church in Pasifika life is seen as being integral to maintaining community links (Dicke, 2010; Siope, 2011). Dickie argues that "students may be brought up to think about literacy in ways that differ from those of school. In some instances the Church has been identified as hindering the acquisition of school-type learning" (Dickie, 2010, p. 27). However he acknowledges that specific literacy practices of tauloto (scriptural recitations in church) and reading from the bible at home may be relevant to teachers of literacy (Dickie, 2010; Ministry of Education Learning Media, 2000). McNaughton (as cited in Fletcher, Parkhill, Fa'afoi and Tufulasi Taleni, 2008) sees the church-based literacy as providing strengths in skills that are critically important to the task of decoding text within classroom teaching. McNaugton also acknowledges that the training in accepting the literal interpretation of a text can be counterproductive in acquiring critical literacy skills. Dickie (2010) conducted student interviews with fourteen Year 7 and Year 8 students about church-based literacy and found all students had access to the bible and twelve attended church and Sunday school. He also spoke to three church representatives from the community and found there was an emphasis in the churches on understanding the bible verses and relating it to children's own experiences and everyday life.

Hence, a central issue is to use the strengths of students from one world of studying the written word and teach them the skills necessary for the

other world they encounter in schools by critically examining written texts. Kauffman, cited in Hill and Hawk (2000) suggests that teachers must understand how the language students use at home and at school is different. For teachers to be culturally-responsive to Pasifika students, they must both respect the place of the church in many Pasifika students' lives (Ferguson et al., 2008) and understand the different values and purposes of language in church and in school, and explicitly address them in their teaching.

While most of the research in Pasifika literacy, (Allen, Tufulasi Taleni & Robertson, 2009; Fletcher et al., 2006; 2008), has been performed outside of Auckland, where the majority of Pasifika students live, and with primary and intermediate age children, these critical literacy skills are the very ones that need to be fostered in order to meet the expectations for NCEA assessments and therefore must be acknowledged and addressed in secondary education. By explicitly teaching the differing expectations of church-related literacy and literacy in the classroom, teachers can help students to develop the skills for academic success.

CONNECTING WORLDS, USING STRENGTHS

By incorporating values of Pasifika students and explicitly forming connections between text, context and Pasifika values, teachers from non-Pasifika backgrounds can help students to access the complex ideas in texts. This is also a pragmatic way of using student's "unschooled knowledge" (Fletcher, Parkhill & Harris, 2011, p. 125) and of demonstrating that being Pasifika is "recognised and valued by schools" (Nakhid, 2003, p. 223). Hill and Hawk (2000) allude to the importance of values in teaching life skills, and many values are a core part of the curriculum, and worthy of further research on their own. However, Dickie (2011) contends that an implication of Samoan students in dealing with these differing values systems is for teachers to build on students' understanding of popular texts to relate values to their own lives and role in society. While there is increasingly limited access to reading texts by Pasifika authors (Collins, 2011; Tuafuti, Pua & Schajiik, 2011), explicitly forming connections between texts and Pasifika values may be a way to increase the relevance of English texts to Pasifika students. The *Effective Literacy Strategies in Years 9-13* (Ministry of Education, 2004) provide an extremely useful evidence-based approach to specific and deliberate use of literacy strategies which can be adapted for most types of texts, however Dickie does highlight the weakness of the Effective Literacy Strategy in Years 9-13 in that the strategies do not inherently incorporate

other forms of knowledge about literacy (Dickie, 2008). Furthermore, Mila-Schaaf and Robinson (2010) suggest that retention of Pasifika values and acceptance from others are associated with positive educational outcomes. It may also be that a greater understanding and explicit use of values will enable teachers to begin to allow students to begin to form connections.

While dome research indicates that a high number of teachers from non-Pasifika backgrounds form meaningful relationships with Pasifika students and provide a quality education to their students, (Hill & Hawk, 2000; Schulster, 2008), there is still room for improvement. Pasifika students sitting NCEA for example, often do not know how to decode examination questions (Ferguson et al., 2008) and more generally, do not feel they have the opportunity to read and write about their own culture in a culturally-safe environment (Fletcher, Parkhill & Taleni, 2006). In classrooms where Pasifika students are a minority, students felt uncomfortable reading aloud, regardless of the source of the text (Fletcher et al., 2006). Harvey (cited in Parkhill, Fletcher & Fa'afoi, 2005b) concluded that Pasifika students are more likely to be engaged when Pasifika writers are being used to promote writing.

In the study by Fletcher et al., (2006), students also identified Information and Communication Technology (ICT), behaviour management (in particular in relation to noise and bullying) and use of group work as being important to their learning. This is consistent with most of the other research on Pasifika students' learning (Sturrock, 2004). Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that group work, in particular, must be carefully organised and meaningful to the lesson in order to be of value (Alton-Lee, 2003). Hawk and Hill (1998), in researching the AIMHI initiative in low decile, multicultural Auckland high schools, state that:

> Teachers and students talked about the enjoyment and benefits of working in groups. The examples given included structured group activities and opportunities to discuss informally with other students. They also commented that group work needs to be set up carefully and with 'clear steps' in place to ensure the students get the most out of the activity and that it cannot be taken for granted that they will have all the necessary skills to work effectively in this way (Hawk & Hill, 1998, p. 7).

The use of group work with Pasifika students is well-above that of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average, (Sturrock, 2004). This suggests that while teachers are frequently using group work, there must be provision for careful structuring of group activities in a meaningful and productive way.

CRITICAL LITERACY: STRENGTHS-BASED PEDAGOGY

While international educators suggest that critical literacy is very useful for developing minority students' understanding of texts and critical thinking skills (Behrman, 2006; Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Janks, 2010), in New Zealand there is no research so far that addresses the classroom use of critical literacy approaches that are becoming increasingly popular in teaching practice. To summarise, critical literacy is a way of viewing texts through their representations of power relationships. This enables students to work from their ability to see through different lenses, and from different identities and explicitly develop the critical ability necessary for success in tertiary education. These approaches may appeal to teachers of Pasifika students as they address the very inequities of access and promote the skills absent in church teachings. One of the key ideas in critical literacy is that they promote reading texts from different identities (Behrman, 2006; Sandretto, 2006). Explicitly teaching literacy strategies empowers students to create their own meanings and read 'between the lines' for meaning (Sandretto, 2006). By explicitly teaching students how to use literacy strategies, teachers empower students to make their own meaning and view texts from different perspectives. For Pasifika students, this approach offers a way of recognising and valuing the different identities and worlds of Pasifika learners.

CONCLUSION

However, having a better understanding and appreciation of Pasifika culture and acknowledging students have shifting identities will only help teachers so far. Understanding students' existing strengths in out-of-school literacies and using their experience of other worlds is of use. Nevertheless, to benefit Pasifika students in literacy learning, there is a void in pragmatic advice for the teachers which needs to be further developed. In particular there is also limited research available for secondary teachers that has practical and implementable strategies and ideas. It may be that the next wave of research should be focused less on the attributes that teachers have and instead on their effective use of strategies and tasks which foster involvement of Pasifika communities.

Hawk, Tumama Cowley, Hill and Sutherland (2001) show the importance of the relationship between teachers and students as being the foundation to successful teaching of Pasifika students. This also highlights the issues of power which critical literacy approaches attempt to make transparent. By developing the idea of schools and classrooms as communities, which support both students and teachers to work together towards their learning goals, we will achieve the intent of the Pasifika Education Plan and enable all Pasifika students to achieve.

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