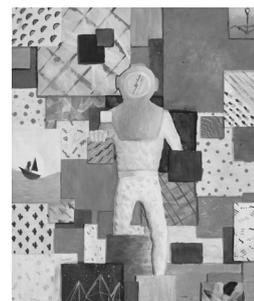


‘O mātou ‘o le fatu ‘o le fa‘amoemoe - Fesili mai! *We are the heart of the matter - Ask us!*

Pācific heritage student views about effective teaching and learning

Lynda Knight-de Blois and Jenny Poskitt



ABSTRACT

Teachers often worry about how to optimise learning for students of Pācific heritage. To address the concern, this study sought views of junior secondary school students of Pācific heritage about what enhanced their learning. An innovative approach was trialled in focus group interviews which involved four Samoan teenagers as research assistants alongside the researcher to draw out participants' views about what helped them to learn. Data analysis led to the identification of four themes: engaging teacher behaviour, lessons stimulating learning, positive student-centred relationships, and teachers respecting students' culture(s). For Pācific students, successful learning involves: inclusion of Pācific mores and values; sufficient depth and clarity of explanation to ensure students understand new concepts; encouragement; varied and practical learning activities, and strong, respectful relationships between teachers and learners.

Keywords:

adolescent voice, culturally-responsive pedagogy, effective learning and teaching, Pācific heritage

Research paper

INTRODUCTION

The goal of raising educational achievement for students of Pācific descent remains a challenge for the compulsory and tertiary sectors of the New Zealand education system (Fairbairn-Dunlop, 2015; Ministry of Education, 2015). There have been slight improvements for students of Pācific heritage in the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) results (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2014), and National Standards achievements (Ministry of Education, 2015). However, a significant gap remains between the performance of Pācific students and their New Zealand European peers. Such trends are viewed as distributional social injustice (Nakhid, 2003), for all ethnic groups ought to be proportionally represented in academic success.

Nakhid (2002) posits three reasons for Pasifika underachievement. Firstly, school system issues where dominant cultural assumptions undermine identity development of Pācific students. Secondly, conflicting perceptions of ability whereby teachers view ability as academic performance, while Pācific students view ability as 'wanting to make the effort'. Thirdly, different explanations held by teachers and students for under-performance. Teachers reason cultural factors such as lack of academic motivation whilst Pācific students view motivation as dependent on teacher's teaching styles – their use of 'professional language' at the expense of more accessible everyday language. These conflicting perspectives between teachers and Pācific students led Nakhid (2002, 2003) to argue the importance of identifying processes and negotiated spaces to foster learning. By identifying processes she meant an environment in which identity formation and a sense of belonging were valued – a redistributing power relationship in the education system to incorporate the way in which Pasifika students see themselves, how they wish to be seen and to have academic success proportionally represented. Teachers and students need opportunities to dialogue in order to negotiate new understandings about their different cultural and learning perspectives. Baskerville (2011) agrees and posits the power of storytelling to deepen relationship pedagogy. She argues that respectfully sharing personal stories enhances cultural understanding and forges connected relationships.

Student voice literature demonstrates how integral contributions of learners are to the design of relevant curriculum and pedagogy (Cook-Sather, 2009; Mansfield, 2014; Mitra, 2008; Rudduck, 2007). The power of student perspectives is seen in New Zealand's *Te Kotahitanga* project where subsequent transformation of teaching methods has led to increased academic success for young Māori (Alton-Lee, 2014). It is therefore "important to find out who Pasifika students really are, how they see themselves, the schools, the teacher and their classmates, and how they themselves are seen, if we are to find an effective way of dealing with the problem of Pasifika underachievement" (Nakhid, 2003, p. 305).

Hunter and Anthony (2011) demonstrated the value of fostering meaningful talk and the power of creating authentic cultural contexts in the classroom. The manner in which teachers talked with students and the way teachers initiated learning situations enabled students to experience Pasifika values such as reciprocity and collectivism. Teachers' ethic of care caused teacher expectations and actions to *positively challenge* the learning and achievement of Pācific students (Hunter & Anthony, 2011). This positive belief and challenge is critical because "students most in need of teacher support are most vulnerable to teacher expectations" (Rubie-Davies, 2009, p. 699). Often teachers have lower expectations of ethnic minorities, giving them less-challenging tasks and fewer opportunities to learn with peers. Teacher expectations pervade the classroom instructional and socio-emotional climate (Rubie-Davies, 2009).

Although there have been a number of other New Zealand research studies concerning Pasifika achievement and student views about learning and teaching (Amituanai-Toloa, McNaughton, Lai & Airini, 2009; Baskerville, 2011; Hawk, Cowley, Hill & Sutherland, 2002; Hill & Hawk, 2000; Otunuku, 2010; Spiller, 2012), research is needed to ensure the voices of Pācific young people influence national policy and practices to increase their engagement and achievement in learning. What might Pācific student views inform us about appropriate pedagogy and curriculum for these adolescents?

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research design and selection of data gathering techniques for this study were informed by the research question: *What do Pācific students say is effective teaching and learning for them?* This research was partly inspired by the *Te Kotahitanga* 'narratives of experience' work (Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai & Richardson, 2003) and their subsequent development of the *Effective Teaching Profile*. Further motivation was the Pasifika Education Plan (Ministry of Education, 2012) that could benefit from specific information to guide classroom teachers.

Participants included twenty-three Year 9 and 10 students from three North Island city secondary schools (single sex and co-educational schools) representing a range of socio-economic communities. The participants identified as Samoan, Cook Island Māori, Tongan and Fijian nationalities. Four Samoan high school students (from different schools) took a lead role as "insider" research assistants in the research design, questionnaire wording and focus group interviews. This approach was chosen in order to elicit more authentic student voice. Unlike the researcher, the research assistants shared similar generational and ethnic cultures with the participants.

Data were gathered from questionnaires, focus group interviews and a "post-it" voting exercise within the focus group. After completing questionnaires, participants took part in semi-structured focus group sessions which employed aspects of the talanoa¹ approach. The early stage of the meeting involved food, drink and conversation which helped to build relationships. This aspect of talanoa is based on the premise that many Pācific people will not open up and share personal opinions until they feel they can trust those they are conversing with. The sharing of food and personal stories helped inter-personal connections to form and conversation to flow, as did the inclusion of "insider" research assistants. Talanoa relates to the pan-Pācific concept of the 'va'; the 'va' or 'space that relates must be cherished and nurtured to establish and maintain the relationships amongst researchers and participants. 'Teu le va' means 'take care of the va' in Samoan. The Samoan notion of 'vafeoloa'i' or 'strong and respectful relationships' is linked to the Samoan concept of 'relational self' which is explicit in New Zealand literature about Samoan well-being.

The "post-it" voting activity involved participants brainstorming words and labels describing what they believed were characteristics of effective teachers. Participants then selected their top three words or phrases which described their ideal teacher and wrote them on a post-it. Each data-gathering technique was analysed separately and a combined synthesis was subsequently undertaken to identify themes and factors students associated with effective learning and engagement.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The factors identified by students (across the three data sources) clustered into four themes:

- a) Respect their culture (RTC). Factors included: relationships, respect, basing learning within their cultural/family contexts, and helping students feel sufficiently comfortable with and trusting of the teacher to learn.
- b) Engaging teacher behaviour (ETB). Teacher factors included: explaining and refining students' conceptions until students fully understand, being strict yet making lessons fun, having a sense of humour.
- c) Lessons stimulating learning (LSL). Factors included: using practical and interactive activities, interesting and new learning (not "stuff they already know"), avoiding long periods of reading/writing and varying lessons.

¹Talanoa is a term used in Samoa, Tonga, Fiji and other Pacific Island nations to describe a particular form of meeting or talk. It has been adopted by some Pācific researchers to describe a research methodology.

d) Positive student-centred relationships (PSR). Factors included teachers: being positive and caring, helpful, encouraging, understanding/knowing students, and having high expectations.

Relative proportions of these four themes are portrayed in Figure 1.

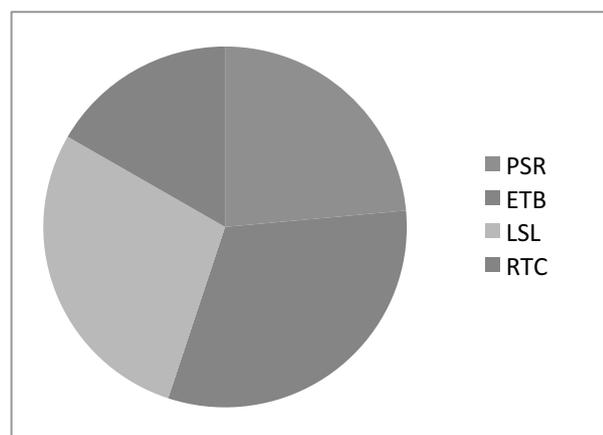


Figure 1. Pasifika student views on effective teaching and learning

These themes are now examined more fully.

Engaging teacher behaviours: Explain until I Understand and Lessons Stimulating Learning

Explaining and refining students' conceptions until they fully understood were frequently mentioned comments by students. Sometimes these students wanted ideas explained in different ways (either by other students or teachers) because the esoteric language of a subject confused them, at other times they wanted to pause (check, or apply their understanding) so they could 'take on board new ideas', or their life experiences meant the ideas were foreign to them. Multiple demands mean teachers often experience tensions between 'covering the curriculum' in a timely fashion, and 'ensuring sufficient student understanding'. However, the Pācific students in this study appreciated teachers taking (extra) time to ensure they understood new concepts and ideas. The notion of time is perhaps different from a western perspective. In the Pācific context, time is related to 'being' – 'being present with others' (relationships) and 'being in the conceptual moment' (to deepen understanding and learn). Often teachers from a non-Pācific culture focus more on the efficiency or 'doing' of time – covering the curriculum, getting around each group or child, rather than 'being and focusing on the moment' or nurturing the 'va'.

These Pācific students, like most adolescents (Gibbs & Poskitt, 2010; Hawk et al., 2002), valued

teachers who supported their learning by making learning fun; such as practical, interactive and varied activities (not long periods of reading and writing); new learning, and a classroom atmosphere where the teacher is strict but has a sense of humour and sufficiently relaxed to enjoy students and their learning. Rubie-Davies (2009) referred to these classrooms as having a more facilitative approach to learning where teachers challenge and extend student learning through questioning, giving students more responsibility for their learning, and opportunities for working collaboratively with peers. In essence, Pācific students' in the current study realised when teachers have high expectations they create positive learning climates so they will learn. They had also encountered teachers who have difficulty ensuring their students experience clarity of learning. ERO found many teachers and leaders would benefit from a better understanding of how to include their Year 9 and 10 students in their learning (ERO, 2012). System-wide guidelines and expectations e.g. Registered Teachers' Criteria and the 'Effective Pedagogy' section of *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007), could be more explicit about ways teachers might assist students understand what they are learning.

Positive Student-Centred Relationships

Students in this study reported that positive, caring connections with those who teach them are essential for their active engagement in learning and their subsequent educational success. Their views echo voices of Pācific and Māori students in other research about culturally-effective teaching (Amituanai-Toloa et al., 2009; Hill & Hawk, 2000; Ostler-Malaulau, 2009; Otunuku, 2010; Poskitt, 2015; Spiller, 2012). Hawk et al. (2002) argued that relationship-centred teachers were friendly, warm and connected to their Pācific students. They wanted to learn about them, their worlds and their experiences. Furthermore, such teachers displayed enthusiasm and a respectful manner towards their students. These teachers exhibited and expected a strong work ethic and educational success. Although New Zealand research, such as Amituanai-Toloa et al. (2009) and McGee et al. (2003), focused on the importance of teacher-student relationships, other than Hawk et al. (2002) and *Te Kotahitanga* (Alton-Lee, 2014), there is minimal research on how to strengthen teachers' relationships with individual students.

Poskitt (2015) argues students are perceptive about the teacher qualities, interactions and learning processes that are likely to enhance their learning. Talking with students and seeking their views are key ways to improving teacher-student relationships and

learning quality. As Nakhid (2003) and Spiller (2012, p. 65) say, “Most of all, for good Pasifika learning to occur, teachers and schools need to really listen to their students”. What opportunities do we provide for listening to our students? To which students do we listen? What about those who disturb our views, classrooms or systems? Potentially these are the ones who have the greatest insights about fairness, equity and justice.

Students in this study yearned for teachers to spend time talking with them, to learn about their interests, culture and family, to ask questions and most importantly, listen. Using this knowledge to make learning relevant for students (e.g. maths problems contextualised in traditional Pasifika settings) helps them bridge together their school and outside-school lives. Efforts teachers make to get to know them convey to students that teachers respect and care about them. These conversational moments also provide teachers with opportunities to encourage students, to believe in them, and to convey high expectations for their learning.

Students are a potentially rich source of data to inform and guide teachers (Chu, 2013; ERO, 2014; Hill & Hawk, 2000; Nakhid, 2003; Poskitt, 2015). It may be timely for schools, educational leaders, policy makers, initial teacher education and Professional Learning Development (PLD) providers to examine how well teachers are provided with appropriate support to establish and maintain effective, caring and respectful connections with students, particularly Pācific students.

Respecting their Culture (Culturally Responsive Curriculum Content)

Students in this study appreciated teachers who reflected the Pācific concept of the ‘va’ and pan-Pācific values of love and respect. However, only a few students in the research talked explicitly about a culturally-responsive curriculum or their cultural identities, unless prompted to do so. That is, there was little reference to lesson content, materials and concepts that reflected their own Pācific cultures. Did students not talk about a culturally-responsive curriculum because they were interviewed by Pācific students with an implicit understanding ‘it was a given’? Hill and Hawk (1998) referred to ‘different worlds’ in which these students live. The world at home is richly Pācific, while the world at school is ‘other’ – Palangi. Or did cultural responsiveness not feature strongly in their experiences at school?

Researcher (late in the group interview): *And what about teachers who make sure that some of the lessons have something to do with Pācific cultures?*

Student: *We don’t have that here. That never happens.* (Others shake their heads)

Student: *Nah.*

Researcher: *What about in English? Do you ever get to read books that have anything to do with your culture?*

Student: *Nah.* (General shaking of heads)

Research Assistant: *Not even in Social Studies?*

Student: *Nah, aw – sometimes.*

Spiller (2013) writes, “Pasifika students know only what they experience in front of them e.g. the pedagogies of their teachers. They have no other comparison” (p. 63). Other researchers also found Pācific students rarely mentioned cultural experiences in discussions of effective teaching and learning (Amituanai-Toloa, McNaughton et al., 2009; Hill & Hawk, 1998; Ostler-Malaulau, 2009; Spiller, 2013). Nakhid (2002) argued this was because Pācific students were *rarely asked by teachers* about their perceptions of the schooling experience, which differed remarkably from the assumptions teachers held. Hence efforts that both parties made to address educational shortcomings were disconnected. Nakhid (2003) argued that the absence of culturally-valuing experiences in schools denies Pācific students relational opportunities, undermines their identity formation, and ultimately prevents proportional representation in the school’s academic success. Creating opportunities for students to negotiate teachers’ cultural understandings is vital if perceptions are to be changed and better-align learning and teaching to the needs of Pasifika.

STUDY LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Only 23 Pācific students participated, they represented only three secondary schools in one region of New Zealand, the researcher and research assistants were inexperienced, and the study occurred in one school term. Further research is needed to ascertain how representative these student views may be. Although there are national guiding documents and resources which outline strategies to enhance teaching and learning for Māori students such as *Ka Hikitia: Accelerating Success* (Ministry of Education, 2013), *Tātaiako: Cultural Competencies for Teachers of Māori Learners* (Ministry of Education, 2011) and the *Effective Teaching Profile* (Bishop & Berryman, 2009), there is minimal support for teachers of Pācific students. *The Pācific Education Plan 2013-2017* (Ministry of Education, 2012) is a strategic document which highlights goals and strategies for various organisations and stakeholders, however it includes little specific advice and guidance for teachers at a classroom level.

Further research is needed to investigate why Pācific students rarely mention culturally-responsive experiences at school. More research into systematic ways for teachers (and school leaders) to strengthen how they listen and respond to those at 'le fatu o le fa'amomoe'² is needed so they can adapt their teaching and increase successful engagement of their learners. Further research alongside effective teachers of Pācific students and their impact on the educational success of Pācific students (Chu et al., 2013) could influence pedagogical practice more widely.

CONCLUSION

Pācific students in this research commented on a range of factors they believed helped them to learn. Four themes emerged: engaging teacher behaviour; lessons stimulating learning; positive student-centred relationships, and respecting students' cultures. Most prominent were the themes related to ETB (engaging teacher behaviour) and LSL (lessons stimulating learning) indicating students with a Pācific heritage are keen to learn (despite what some teachers might think or that their achievement results may suggest). Valued by these students were: an atmosphere of positive, mutual respect; relationships based on mutual exchange and cultural understandings; teachers' willingness for students to fully-understand new learning, to deepen and apply it, and belief in them as people and as effective learners.

New Zealand educators and policy makers have been striving for two decades, through successive Pācific Education Plans, to close the achievement gap between Pācific learners and their peers. While there have been recent small improvements in NCEA results for Pācific cohorts, there remains a "long brown tail of underachievement" (Aumua, 2014, paragraph 1) with Māori and Pācific youth overrepresented among the 10,000 students who leave school each year with no formal qualifications. This research demonstrates that the pan-Pācific concepts of love, respect and the 'va' are of great significance for Pācific peoples in all their relationships. With increased understanding of the importance of the 'va' and a deliberate focus on how to 'teu le va' in their interactions with Pācific learners, teachers are more likely to adjust their expectations and instructional environments to better-match the cultural learning needs of Pācific youth (Hawk et al., 2002; Ostler-Malaulau, 2009; Otunuku, 2010; Pasikale, 1998; Spiller, 2012). The words of a Year 10 male participant in this research sum up the significance of teacher-student relationships:

If I don't get along with the teacher then I don't have a good lesson. (September, 2014)

The words may be simple, but have we heard them?

²Translation: 'the heart of the matter' (Samoan)

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