

Ko te Maoopopo ko te Lima Malohi

Collaboration is our strength



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ABSTRACT

A delegation from the Ministry of Education, Special Education (GSE) went to Tokelau in 2007 in response to a request from the Tokelauan government to help establish services for children with special education needs. The team was led by Ezra Shuster and made up of a special education advisor, a speech-language therapist, an advisor on deaf children, and a physiotherapist. This article discusses the work of this team and describes their unique, challenging and incredibly fulfilling experience.

Storied experience

Keywords

Cultural values, Pasifika children, Pasifika communities, service provision, special needs.

Malo ni ki te mamalu o na kaufaigaluega i loto o akoga mo te fehoahoaniga o fanau. Greetings to colleagues working in the area of special education.

In October 2007, a delegation from the Ministry of Education, Special Education (GSE) went to Tokelau in response to a request from the Tokelauan government for help establishing services for children with special needs. The goals for the trip were developed in close consultation with Lili Tuioti, Tokelau's Education Advisor, and the Tokelau Department of Education. They included raising public awareness of special needs education, starting a database of children with special needs, and providing individual assessments for children whom the schools had identified as at-risk. The team was made up of Tim Andersen, a special education advisor in Whangarei; Kathryn Meredith, a speech-language therapist in Wellington; Louella Neale, an adviser on deaf children in Lower Hutt and Colleen Taylor, a physiotherapist in Dunedin. The team was led by Ezra Schuster, National Pasifika Manager. Some of the most valuable work was done in the pre-planning stages in Wellington, Auckland and Apia. The majority of the

Tokelauan population lives in Wellington and numbers approximately 5,000. We were able to visit Tokelauan preschools in the area and meet with people who told us about the way of life on the atolls. Our boat journey out to Tokelau took on a life of its own through these stories and meetings and it was hilarious to watch a preschooler acting out the memory of his own trip by swaying around and falling over.

Tokelau is 500 kilometres north of its nearest neighbouring country Samoa, and is accessible only by sea. Tokelau is made up of three tiny coral atolls which are each very remote. The three atolls are Fakaofu, Nukunonu and Atafu and they have a total population of approximately 1450. The culture is influenced by Samoa and Tuvalu due to missionary work, with some influence remaining from the era of Peruvian slave ships.

Before leaving for Tokelau, we anticipated feeling overwhelmed by being in such a remote location. The reality was there wasn't a lot of down time to reflect on the solitary nature of the islands, and technology has made links with New Zealand and the rest of the world reliable and accessible. Also, the population density on the islands further belied any sense of the isolation we had expected. There were, of course, many quiet moments spent on boats in the Pacific Ocean. It took 26 hours on the MV Tokelau for us to reach the first atoll, and 80 hours on the MV Samoa Express to return from the furthest atoll. Between these two main journeys we also travelled between the atolls and to smaller outer motu¹ within each atoll.

The hours spent on the ships were rich with experiences. We experienced the enjoyment of motion and motion sickness, the fear, relief and exhilaration of trying to jump from a dinghy to a larger unanchored ship in large swell conditions, and awe at the expanse and depth of the ocean (at one stage

¹ Islands

the bottom of the ocean ceased to register on the navigation equipment which only measured 1.6 kilometres below). It was delightful to see dolphins, green turtles and flying fish which distracted us from our desire for land and our favourite foods. The journeys by ship were a new experience for us, but a familiar experience for Tokelauans and it gave a sense of how strongly the people are connected to the sea. For people in Tokelau, the sea is an instrument of existence rather than of leisure as it tends to be in New Zealand. The shipping timetable is influenced by the weather and people on the atolls are reliant on incoming supplies of supplementary food and medicines. Access to specialist services and emergency medical supplies, and services are a minimum of 26 hours away.

Arriving in Samoa, we spent a short time in Apia before departing for Tokelau. The cultural learning we experienced in trips to Samoan villages, church, government departments, families and schools was extremely powerful. As a team, we were given a gentle introduction to Pacific ways of life in Samoa and we all felt incredibly humbled by people's hospitality and openness. The importance of a culturally respectful and hospitable introduction to our services for the families we work with, was highlighted. As professionals we frequently introduce families to our system and services and we also do understand that it is paramount to develop relationships with Pacific families before getting down to business. However, the reality is that we are under time pressures which cause us to rush and it is rare that we truly spend time building relationships in introductory sessions. As a largely non-Pacific team we were on the receiving end of being introduced to a different cultural system. People in Samoa and Tokelau were generous hosts, placing as paramount our comfort and welfare. Our purpose was important, yet equally prioritised was the personal connection between us. Our introduction to Pacific life in Samoa gave us the time to adapt a little to a new environment and prepared us for the fast pace of our work in Tokelau. The foundation was laid for us to be able to work at the level of intensity needed to achieve our objectives, which was incredibly pressured by the boat schedule which allowed a specific and often short amount of time on each atoll. On each of the atolls after our initial community discussion, the list of people wanting to see us increased hugely. We frequently worked into the night and caught up on discussions and paper work on the deck of the MV Tokelau as we travelled between the atolls. We had to put the laptops away if the swells were too big because the ship had an open deck.

At each of the atolls we first met with the Taupulega, the village elders who govern the atolls. We discussed our plans with them and received their blessings. Villages are structured so that the Taupulega have ultimate control over the running of the island. There is the Fatupaepae², and the Aumaga/Taulelea³ who take responsibility for the tasks that need to be done on each island, whether it is building, cleaning, providing for the needy or administration.

² The *Fatupaepae* is the women's village working group. The name of the group has been taken from the role of the female within the extended family. The *Fatupaepae* is the person that is responsible for the welfare of the extended family, for example, pastoral care, advice and importantly the distribution of resources to all members of the family.

³ The *Aumaga/Taulelea* is the men's working group.

Tokelau has a cultural system called *inati* which essentially means sharing of resources, such as the daily catch of fish, so that all people are provided for.

Education is important to Tokelauans and there are high attendance and literacy rates. Each atoll has a school and preschool on it and caters for students up to year 11 (year 12 education is being introduced in 2008). Some of the schools were in quite poor physical condition and are now in the planning stages of rebuilding. This provided an extra opportunity for our contribution to ideas about the best physical structure to give access for all children. On most occasions the children nominated for assessment were systematically seen by all members of the GSE team. Usually we saw children in schools and preschools. We often worked after school had finished using either makeshift clinics in a room where we were staying, or in government buildings and the occasional home visit. We gathered comprehensive assessment data and delivered strategies that informed both the individual and collective needs of children in Tokelau.

Our approach took the form of a trans-disciplinary model which was a real key to our success in gathering information in a time-intensive way. We worked in pairs or individually with children, teachers and families and learned a lot from working with each other. Our respective disciplines and experience all added to the collective knowledge of the team. Sitting as a group to discuss our findings was valuable and informed a truly ecological perspective for each child. As well as giving information back on an individual level to children, families, the doctor and teachers, we held meetings on each atoll and discussed our findings with the communities. These were fantastic opportunities to feedback to almost the entire population. It was a great forum to discuss a range of topics including ear health, importance of communication between health and education services, attitudes to children with special education needs, early identification of needs, inclusion in schools and communities, and multilingualism. We experienced the warmth of people at these meetings who often ended by thanking us through music.

As professionals it has been hard for us to return to New Zealand knowing that we are walking away from children whose needs cannot yet be met in Tokelau. There is a balance between providing support at an individual level and providing systematic support which will enhance service and resource provision in the long term. One success we have had since our return is in the securing of funding for three individualised wheelchairs and pressure care bedding for children on the islands. We also take solace in the fact that this trip was only the beginning of support for children with special education needs in Tokelau.

A lasting impact for us all is in our confidence to work with Pacific families here in New Zealand. Living with a Tokelauan family allowed us to closely observe the importance of family life, church, dress, personal conduct and food. We all appreciated the cultural insights and guidance given to us by Ezra. Our first-hand experiences in Tokelau and Samoa have increased our cultural understanding of families in New Zealand who come from Pacific Island countries. For all of us this was a unique, challenging and incredibly fulfilling experience.

AUTHOR PROFILES

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Kathryn Meredith

Kathryn is a speech-language therapist working in early intervention in Wellington. Kathryn has travelled and worked throughout Asia and the Pacific and has strong interests in cross-cultural work, child development and education. Kathryn is currently studying towards a Masters of Development Studies and is researching inclusion in education for children with special education needs in developing countries.

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Louella has been working in special education since the 1970s. She has worked in Australia, England and New Zealand as a teacher of both deaf and blind children and a range of students with special education needs. Louella has also worked as a RTLB and a teacher. Louella has a keen interest in early intervention and working with families. Louella has worked as an adviser on deaf children since 1995.

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Tim works for the Ministry of Education, Special Education as a special education advisor in Te Tai Tokerau district. Before joining special education, Tim worked as a primary school teacher in New Zealand, The United Kingdom, Malawi and Ukraine. Tim is currently involved in doctoral studies at the University of Auckland; his research is focused on school culture and school-wide behaviour intervention.

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Colleen is a physiotherapist working in the school focus team for the Ministry of Education, Special Education in Otago. She holds a particular interest in the relationship between the health and education system for students with special education needs. Originally from Wellington, Colleen has been working for the Ministry of Education, Special Education since 2006, after graduating from Otago University in 2005.

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Ezra is the National Pasifika Manager with the Ministry of Education, Special Education (in Auckland) and manages the newly formed Northern Region Pasifika team working right across the education sector. He led the special education project to Tokelau in 2007 with the follow-up planned later this year. Ezra has been involved in the education sector, both domestic and international, for a number of years and more recently in national leadership roles. Ezra has travelled extensively and has lived and worked in Thailand, Japan and the wider Pacific region. He sits on a number of advisory boards and has developed several educational and youth leadership initiatives, with a focus on working with Pasifika communities.

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