

Raising Pasifika Achievement: Teacher Cultural-Responsiveness

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ABSTRACT

Pasifika learners, along with Māori, continue to experience high disparities in New Zealand's education system. Furthermore, it is predicted that over the next few decades, the majority of students in New Zealand primary schools will be Māori and Pasifika. The implications for classroom teachers are enormous. In reviewing a range of literature, this paper seeks to unpack the elements of cultural responsiveness to inform and support the most direct and significant influence on student achievement – the classroom teacher. The findings are presented as guiding principles firstly because 'Pasifika' is, in fact, a hugely diverse heterogeneous group, and secondly, to emphasise the need for teacher reflection and contextualised adoption and/or adaption of practice as required to respond effectively to the needs of the specific Pasifika learner.

Research paper

Keywords: *Culturally-responsive pedagogy, Pasifika, Pasifika achievement*

INTRODUCTION

The position of Pasifika peoples as a multi-ethnic group in New Zealand arose in the 1960s. This was a time when New Zealand's labour-market needs were high and subsequent immigration policies enabled large inflows from the Pacific Nations to meet that need (Ferguson, Gorinski, Samu & Mara, 2008). Pasifika peoples came, bringing with them dreams of a better life and a better education for their children. Decades on, those dreams are yet to be fulfilled as Pasifika, along with Māori, continue to experience the high disparities of New Zealand's education system, performing poorly on both national and international assessments (Alton-Lee, 2003). The Programme for International Student Achievement (PISA) results for 15-year-old achievement in reading literacy across thirty Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries shows a high mean achievement for New Zealand. However, our achievement disparities are second highest out of the 30 countries – a

pattern repeated in other international studies (Alton-Lee, 2005). The third national evaluation by the Education Review Office (ERO) (2012) reports Pasifika as most at-risk of not succeeding. Clearly, the system is not working for all children in our country.

This picture of underachievement in the 21st century is simply unacceptable. It is a matter of urgency to address inequity. By 2021, Pasifika peoples will make up 9.2 percent of New Zealand's population and 17 percent of all New Zealand children (Samu, 2006). Furthermore, it has been projected that by 2040 the majority of students in New Zealand primary schools will be Māori and Pasifika. The implications of this for classroom teachers are enormous.

This paper seeks to unpack the elements of 'cultural responsiveness' to Pasifika learners. Several factors affect learning; home-school partnerships; school leadership and governance; bilingual education; government policies and resourcing, to name a few. The focus here is teachers, the premise being that teachers make the biggest difference. Research indicates that the variance in achievement is predominantly between classrooms within a school than between schools (Alton-Lee, 2005).

DEFINITION: CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS

'Cultural responsiveness' is a framework through which teachers are able to better-meet the needs of *specific learners* of minority cultures in their classroom (Samu, 2006). Castagno and Brayboy (2008) cite Klump and McNeir's (2005, p. 4) definition of 'responsiveness' as "the ability to acknowledge the unique needs of diverse students, take action to address those needs, and adapt approaches as student needs and demographics change over time" (p. 947). Gay (2010) defines 'cultural responsiveness' as teaching that must be "to and through [students'] personal and cultural strengths, their intellectual capabilities, and their prior accomplishments" (p. 26). Samu (2006) writes about 'responsiveness to diversity'; Sheets (2005) about 'diversity pedagogy' (cited in Samu, 2006) and Castagno and Brayboy (2008) about

'culturally responsive schooling'. Regardless of which framework is used, the critical point is going beyond a surface acknowledgement and sensitivity to culture, to a place of deeper understanding which informs specific teaching to meet the needs of *specific learners*.

The findings from the literature review are presented as seven guiding principles. These are inter-related and inter-linked with other factors that affect learning (as mentioned above). They are intended to inform teacher practice and reflection, and the development of the relationships and classroom environments that better support Pasifika learners.

CULTURALLY-RESPONSIVE TEACHERS UNDERSTAND PASIFIKA DIVERSITY

Theoretical Basis

The danger of blanket terms like 'Pasifika' is that it masks the realities of those they describe. Alton-Lee (2005) argues that the weakness of our education system lies in our responsiveness to diversity. Timperley, Wilson, Barrar and Fung (2007) urge teachers to respond to diversity rather than teaching to a hypothetical 'normal' group of students. The characteristics of diversity include ethnicity, socio-economic background, home language, gender, special needs, disability and giftedness (Alton-Lee, 2003). Pasifika peoples are a heterogeneous group - Samoa, Cook Island, Māori, Tonga, Niuea, Fiji, and Tokelau being the seven main groups. Each is unique in terms of ethnicity, language, culture, history, social and political experiences, and whether they are

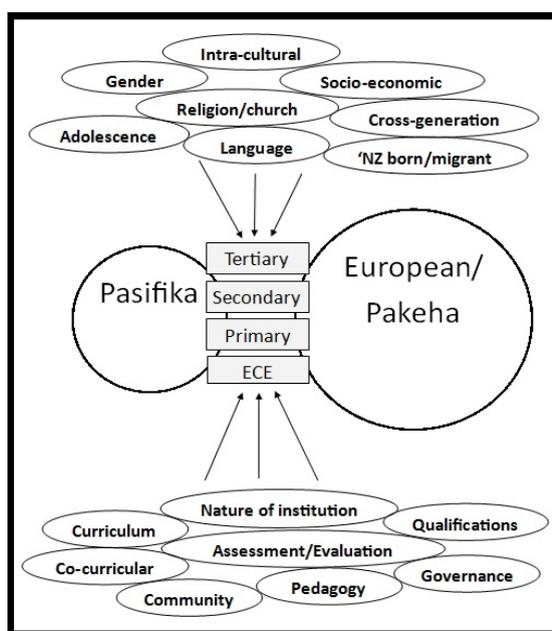


Figure 1. The Ethnic Interface Model.

Pacific born or New Zealand born. The Ethnic Interface Model (EIM) (Samu, 2006, p. 43) below shows possible diversities amongst Pasifika. At the interface are the sectors from early childhood to tertiary. At the top of the EIM are the factors that shape the cultural capital of the learner, which are outside the control of teachers. At the bottom are the factors the teachers and institutions control. It is essential that teachers take time to get to know each Pasifika learner and their families rather than assume a homogenous Pasifika identity. The emphasis made above on *specific learners* is deliberate to avoid assumptions Pasifika learners' needs are the same.

Effective Teaching Practice

- Understand and appreciate the heterogeneity of Pasifika peoples.
- Understand and appreciate that what it means to be Pasifika will vary from person to person; all are valid and authentic to the individual.
- Be open to look and learn through a different lens.
- Actively look for ways and opportunities to integrate the 'cultural capital' of Pasifika students into classroom teaching and learning. Take the time to talk to your Pasifika students and their families. Get to know them and take an interest in their unique story.
- Invest time and effort to meet and build a relationship with students' families to enrich your understanding of their particular experience, circumstance as well as aspirations.
- Attend local Pasifika events to get a sense for the diversities.

CULTURALLY-RESPONSIVE TEACHERS UNDERSTAND 'CULTURE OF POWER'

Theoretical Basis

As depicted in Samu's Ethnic Interface Model (2006), Pasifika students interact with their teachers at the interface between two culturally-embedded worlds (Samu, 2006). The unequal and imbalanced power relations that exist in society are depicted in the EIM with the smaller Pasifika sphere and larger European sphere. Thaman (2009) refers to curriculum as the 'best of culture'; the decisions about and selection of curriculum and how it is delivered (pedagogy) requires value judgements (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). These values mostly reflect Western notions of competition, independence, initiative, self-management and self-discipline (Cahill, 2006). Such values are in

stark contrast to non-Western notions of self which emphasise role, status and rank in the community rather than the individual. Those who hold the dominant 'culture of power' in the classroom and school are those whose values are reflected in all facets of school life. Those students whose culture matches the dominant culture are effectively privileged over those minority students whose culture is different (Savage et al., 2011).

The implications for teachers is to realise that what they do on a day-to-day basis could effectively be reproducing the dominant values of the culture of power, while at the same time be failing to validate those values of minority groups in their classroom. It is essential therefore that teachers:

- 1) critically reflect on how their own cultural identity impacts on their students' cultural identities;
- 2) consider how power relations can be shared in the classroom; and
- 3) value the home culture by integrating it appropriately and meaningfully into teaching and learning. Pasifika students must be able to succeed without sacrificing who they are (Savage et al., 2011).

Effective Teaching Practice

- Understand your own culture first. Unpack your own beliefs, attitudes and values and consider how they influence your thinking and actions as a teacher and how that in turn impacts on students in your class.
- Self-critique your beliefs, attitudes and values and be open to other ways of thinking and knowing, e.g. through ongoing professional learning about cultural competency.
- Develop a richer image of the Pasifika students in your class by incorporating their experience and Pasifika peoples' knowledge and practice appropriately. Avoid perpetuating stereotypes and misrepresenting the lived experiences of your students.
- Encourage and accept both divergent and convergent thinking and perspectives.
- Put yourself in a 'novice' position to learn from your Pasifika students.
- Help Pasifika students take charge of their own learning. Teach them explicitly *how* to learn (including how to set goals, ask questions, use metacognitive skills, and self-monitor progress), as well as the social skills

they need to work cooperatively and collaboratively with their peers. Teach them the 'rules' of the 'culture of power' e.g. that it is acceptable to hold a different opinion.

- Value the home culture. Invite families to partner with you in making decisions concerning their child's learning. Be prepared to learn from one another.
- Ensure every student in the class has a voice.
- Value diversity without putting Pasifika students 'on show' as being different from the 'normal'.

CULTURALLY-RESPONSIVE TEACHERS ENABLE IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Theoretical Basis

Good teaching is recognising that each student is an individual with their own understanding of what it means to be Māori or Pasifika (Ministry of Education, 2009). Pasifika students often need to reconcile multiple identities in order to achieve equitably in the classroom (Ferguson et al., 2008). These students often live in five or six worlds – the world of their family, culture, church, school, peers and when they are older, the world of part-time employment (Hill & Hawk, 1998). Just as the Samoan adolescents in Cahill's (2006) study switched constantly between the expectations of the two different worlds of home and school, the high school Pasifika students in Hill and Hawk's study also learnt to live in each world. Where difficulties arise it is when the values and expectations between two or more worlds are in conflict. Teachers have an important role in understanding this and responding by reducing the gap between school and home culture, and expectations. School achievement should not be at the expense of cultural identity.

Teachers have the potential to make a difference by validating the cultural identities and valuing the cultural knowledge students bring to school (Savage et al., 2011). Robinson et al., 2004 found the problem students experience with non-recognition of their cultural capital is the issue of establishing a Pasifika identity. In the same way that the Māori education strategy *Ka Hikitia – Managing for Success* (Ministry of Education, 2008) aimed for Māori to enjoy educational success as Māori (emphasis added), teachers must also consider how to support Pasifika learners to succeed in education as their own unique Pasifika identity.

Effective Teaching Practice

- Never make assumptions about Pasifika self-identity e.g. that their identity is a confused mix of ethnic identity and a NZ national identity. Help students clarify their *own* self-identification.
- Avoid promoting a singular identity because 'identity' itself can be both multiple and fluid.
- Recognise, understand, affirm and validate your Pasifika students' self-identification – as they see themselves, not as you perceive them.
- Allow them to have an input into what and how they learn about Pasifika culture. Be aware that many New Zealand-born Pasifika people have little to no experience of life in their Pacific nation and/or may not speak their Pacific language. This does not make them any less 'authentic'.
- Use sensitivity and contextual understanding of Pasifika students to inform the learning experiences you plan in order to affirm and validate identity.
- Listen to the perspectives, opinions, ideas and thinking of your students.

CULTURALLY-RESPONSIVE TEACHERS REJECT DEFICIT EXPLANATIONS

Theoretical Basis

Savage et al.'s (2011) research on the impact of teacher professional development to instil culturally-responsive pedagogy in secondary schools found that teachers commonly place the cause of underachievement on the students themselves and their families. Cavanagh, Macfarlane, Glynn and Macfarlane (2012) found the same situation in their research in New Zealand and US schools. They argue that placing the blame almost entirely on the students and their families abdicates teachers' educational responsibilities as well as enabling punitive responses to learning and behavioural needs.

Te Kotahitanga is a research-based professional development programme implemented in thirty-three secondary schools, since 2004 (Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai & Richardson, 2003). Teacher participants developed an 'effective teacher profile' (ETP) which required them to take an 'agentic' position enabling positive outcomes for Māori – firstly by accepting responsibility for the learning of their students. There is no Pasifika initiative equivalent to *Te Kotahitanga*, and improved outcomes for Māori cannot be presumed for

Pasifika. Arguably, it can be presumed that there is need to build on Pasifika learners' cultural capital with a focus on strengths rather than perpetuating deficit theories. To this end, perhaps the underlying principles of *Ka Hikitia* (Ministry of Education, 2008) can be extended to support Pasifika learners:

- Māori/Pasifika potential – all Māori/Pasifika learners have unlimited potential.
- Cultural advantage – all Māori/Pasifika have cultural advantage by virtue of who they are – being Māori/Pasifika is an asset, not a problem.
- Inherent capability – all Māori/Pasifika are inherently capable of achieving success.

Effective Teaching Practice

- Hold high expectations supported with quality teaching which may include:
 - Providing enriched and concrete experiences.
 - Checking-in frequently to clarify understanding, and provide feedback.
 - Demonstrating tasks; providing models; teaching the vocabulary, knowledge and skills Pasifika students need to participate and engage in learning.
 - Providing scaffolding either through the task design or through interactions.
 - Providing sufficient time and opportunities to learn, practise and apply new learning.
 - Be agentic in your role as a teacher.
- Individually, or as a staff, reflect on your assumptions and beliefs about Pasifika learners and their families. Question the basis on which you make those assumptions or beliefs.
- Never judge or blame students; focus on what they do bring to school and teach them what they need to know to build on that.
- Base expectations on student capability not their socio-economic or ethnic background.
- Tap into family and community resources; encourage their involvement in the classroom.
- View first language as a strength, not an impediment. Encourage use of first language.

CULTURALLY-RESPONSIVE TEACHERS BUILD EFFECTIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Theoretical Basis

Hawk, Tumama Cowley, Hill and Sutherland (2002) found that when a positive relationship exists between teacher and student, students are more motivated to learn, participate more in their learning, and that learning is likely to be more effective. The finding is the result of three separate projects with Māori and Pasifika lower socio-economic status (SES) students in the Auckland region covering three sectors – primary, secondary, and tertiary. From another research (Amituanai-Toloa, McNaughton, Lai & Airini, 2009), the collation of Pacific (primary and secondary) student voices identified attributes of teachers and teaching that enabled them to be more successful learners. Cahill's (2006) qualitative research with a small group of Samoan (secondary school) parents also suggests the interactions between the teachers and their children has some bearing on motivation, achievement and well-being. Castagno and Brayboy's (2008) review of research involving indigenous (American Indian and Alaska Native) youth in the USA, also found a commonality regarding relationships. They found that teachers must have a particular set of dispositions, attitudes, values, and knowledge to make culturally-responsive schooling successful. The narratives that were the basis of the *Te Kotahitanga* initiative (Bishop et al., 2003), the stories of the Year 9 and 10 Māori students, their parents, and principals, indicated that classroom caring and learning relationships are a primary influence on achievement.

The literature suggests that there are particular teacher qualities and behaviours that form the relationships with students which lead to improved learning – and that these positive relationships are especially important to Māori and Pasifika learners (as they are for the indigenous students in the US studies). Some of the common qualities from the literature include empathy – valuing students' language, culture, and their 'world'; authentic caring (Valenzuela, 1999; cited in Savage et al., 2011) – about health and well-being as well as about learning and academic achievement; belief in students - their ideas and abilities; passion to enthuse and motivate – loving their work with students and giving of their time to help them understand.

Of significant contribution to this theme of relationships is the work of Cavanagh et al., (2012). This research gathered qualitative information from teachers and students, from schools in New Zealand and the US. The notion of a 'culture of care' was developed around two

major themes: whakawhanaungatanga – building and maintaining relationships; and manaakitanga – exercising holistic care. Schools and teachers that succeed in co-constructing a 'culture of care' with their students and community will have "values and practices that make it safe for all to engage, build relationships that make it safe for students to contribute on the basis of who they are, without threat to their individual cultural identities, values, beliefs and practices" (p. 453). This idea is in essence an encapsulation of the ultimate outcome for learners; that on the foundation of such relationships and learning environments, Pasifika can engage, participate, and achieve – as their own Pasifika identity.

Effective Teaching Practice

- Create an inclusive, caring and supportive environment that engages and motivates the learner by:
 - Taking an interest in students and what's happening in their worlds. Caring about them as a whole person, not just about their academic achievement.
 - Having empathy and showing that you can relate to other cultures. Taking care with pronunciation, particularly of names and allowing use of first language.
 - Believing in and showing you believe in the students and their potential.
 - Encouraging students: providing feedback, listening to them and learning from them.
 - Creating a safe, non-judgemental, non-competitive class culture where students feel respected and connected to one another.
 - Being patient; repeating information, explaining it in different ways, providing a range of examples to support students to understand new concepts.
 - Showing your passion for teaching and learning.
- Explicitly teach, model, encourage and reinforce the positive and inclusive behaviours expected in the classroom.
- Use antecedent behaviour management strategies. Handle behaviour difficulties restoratively.
- Be flexible and adaptive as needs require.

- Build and maintain a positive relationship/partnership with parents: keep them informed; provide honest feedback about their child's progress; and involve them in making decisions about their child's learning.

CULTURALLY-RESPONSIVE TEACHERS MAKE LEARNING RELEVANT AND AUTHENTIC

Theoretical Basis

The literature reviewed validates Alton-Lee's (2003) argument that in teaching, teachers must make links to students' socio-cultural contexts and that they must value – and be seen to value – the cultural backgrounds of learners. Castagno and Brayboy (2008) add that validating students' cultures and languages enables students to co-construct knowledge in the school setting. Importantly, Ferguson et al., (2008) argue that in this process, students should not have to 'conceal' their own cultural behaviours; they should be able to 'see themselves' reflected in both the curriculum and the classroom, and school culture.

The importance of teachers reflecting critically about what they are teaching and why they are teaching it, is especially crucial for improved outcomes for Pasifika students. This is highlighted further by the unfortunate findings that only a small minority of schools are effectively including Pasifika themes and contexts in their curriculum (ERO, 2012). Even within Pacific Island nations there is contention about what is taught, how it is taught, and how learning is assessed and evaluated. Thaman (2009) therefore argues for a more culturally-democratic teaching and learning environment in Pacific Island nations, where serious consideration is given to the ways Pasifika peoples think, learn and communicate with one another.

Recognising the cultural capital of Pasifika students to build on and integrate as a resource, has to be done carefully and thoughtfully. Care has to be taken to accurately present specific cultural contexts of both past and present (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). The success of this is premised in the teacher first seeking in-depth understanding of the specific diversities of their specific Pasifika learner (Samu, 2006). This cannot be done in isolation from the students' parents – who are their first teachers. Effort has to be made to work together effectively to co-construct meaningful contexts for an education that will support the strengths, needs and aspirations of learners and their families (Ferguson et al., 2008).

Effective Teaching Practice

- Make teaching and learning specific to the context of the Pasifika students in your class. This is premised on you having knowledge of students' socio-cultural contexts.
- Strengthen the classroom programme by tapping into the interests, strengths and resources of students' families and community.
- Make Pasifika peoples' knowledge, practices and perspectives visible in the classroom e.g. through text selection for reading.
- Learning and learning processes need to make sense to Pasifika students (and their parents):
 - The what, why and how of learning all need to be explicitly shared and taught.
 - Effective teaching should close the gap between current understanding and the new learning.
 - Consider the students' learning style; be flexible and use a range of strategies to cater for different needs (including modelling, questioning, using effective feedback, explaining, directing and prompting).
 - Consider the students' learning needs; be flexible and adaptive in how students record their thinking and how they present and demonstrate their understanding.
 - Know your subject and subject progressions in order to recognise students' current understanding, and provide the next steps they need.
 - Teach students what they need to know in order to take risks, think critically, and engage effectively in learning.
 - Make learning goals explicit and make links to their lived experiences.
 - Teach the skills students need to work collaboratively and to participate in cooperative learning.
 - Be firm but fair, and balance rigorous and challenging instruction with fun.

CULTURALLY-RESPONSIVE TEACHERS REFLECT ON THEIR PEDAGOGY

Theoretical Basis

Ferguson et al., (2008) argue that when teachers have particular pedagogical behaviour ('Teacher Pedagogical Behaviour' - TPB), students will respond with particular cultural displays ('Student Cultural Display' - SCD). With regards to SCD of 'knowledge acquisition' they identify a wide variety of strategies: for example, that teachers will learn when they self-critique their role in the learning experience rather than blaming the learner. This supports the Ministry of Education's emphasis on teacher-learning, namely, to use the 'Teaching as Inquiry' cycle (Ministry of Education, 2009) to inquire into the relationship between their teaching and their students' learning. The teachers involved in this ministry project documented their experiences as 'learning stories' to illustrate how they added to their knowledge and skills to better-respond to particular needs, interests and strengths of the diverse students in their class.

The 'Schooling Improvement' research (Amituanai-Tolua et al., 2009) asked the questions, "What works in schools for Pasifika students?" and "What are the barriers to schools achieving positive learning outcomes for Pasifika students?" One of their findings is that schools with robust and well-developed inquiry processes showed gains of up to one year in addition to expected national progress for their predominantly Pasifika student population.

A premise of an inquiry approach is that a reciprocal relationship exists between teacher and student where both can simultaneously be the 'teacher' and the 'learner'. At times teachers need to adjust their understanding rather than expecting that learners will always adjust theirs (Ferguson et al., 2008). A relevant approach here is cooperative learning. Castagno and Brayboy's (2008) review of US schools found cooperative learning was effective for indigenous students because it reduced the element of competition and increased student engagement. Participating teachers in *Te Kotahitanga* with high implementation of the 'Effective Teacher Profile' (ETP) had students engaging in more quality learning time than low implementors of ETP (Savage et al., 2011). Cooperative learning strategies featured here to effectively engage students in group work.

Effective Teaching Practice

- Inquiry into pedagogy needs to focus on student outcomes and be informed by assessment information, evidence of best practice, research and teachers' in-depth knowledge of students' socio-cultural context.

- Deficit views that blame the learner will not improve Pasifika outcomes. Self-critiquing own role in learning experiences, taking an agentic role and strength-based approach, will.
- Raise student voice: co-construct teaching and learning with students; be willing to learn with, about and from the students (and their families).
- Develop a culturally-responsive environment that is evidenced by mutual respect and positive relationships and interactions between teacher-student and peers.
- The power of reflection is being able to recognise and take action to change the things that are not working. At a school level, a coherent school-wide approach to teacher-inquiry is associated with greater effectiveness: teachers having a shared belief about teaching and learning, a shared focus and goals, knowledge about effective practice and consistency in ways of teaching and assessing.
- Pedagogy needs to incorporate Pasifika background knowledge and styles of interacting.

CONCLUSION

This literature review unpacked the elements of cultural responsiveness to Pasifika students with respect to the teachers' role on the premise that teachers make the biggest difference. What emerged is a set of guiding principles that can help teachers develop specific teaching and learning environments that better-meet the needs of their Pasifika students. It would be inaccurate to interpret these principles as strategies for Pasifika; the heterogeneity of Pasifika peoples calls for teachers to find out more about what each of their Pasifika learners bring to their classroom, and to respond to them as individual learners. While these principles can apply to all students, findings demonstrate that they are especially important to Pasifika [and Māori] students for whom the current system is not working.

Some points to consider out of the review:

- Other important factors not covered within the scope of this review - home-school partnerships, bilingual education, school leadership and governance, government policies and resourcing etc.
- There is little quantitative data to show the relationship between acknowledging cultural identity and student achievement.

- How does cultural responsiveness sit in the current climate of increased standardisation and accountability, and what impact is that having on Pasifika students?

It is clear that further research is necessary to gather empirical data on the relationship between the principles of cultural responsiveness and their impact on Pasifika achievement. This is particularly important in the current climate of increased standardisation and high stakes accountability.

Teachers have both an educational and moral responsibility to urgently respond to the state of Pasifika achievement. Pasifika learners have the capability, potential and cultural advantage (to use the principles of *Ka Hikitia*) to achieve and they must be enabled to do so without sacrificing who they are (Savage et al., 2011).

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