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Pacific youth connecting through Poly

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The educational achievement of Pacific youth is a growing concern in New Zealand (NZ) today, especially given the increasingly visible relationship between education and social and economic participation (OECD 2011). Despite high retention levels, Pacific students “are doing ‘just enough’ to pass their exams and, certificate endorsement at all levels drags behind other groups” (Harris 2008). Many factors contribute to this situation, such as students’ language and literacy levels, how parents interact with schools, and parental understandings of the education system. However, despite the many interventions to address these and other concerns (MOE 2009), Pacific students, and males especially, are not connecting with schooling. The latest data shows 66 per cent (%) of school leavers achieved level 2 or above in the National Certificate in Educational Achievement (NCEA) and 28% achieved university entrance level. Furthermore, although the number of Pacific people with undergraduate degrees is increasing, few (0.66%) progress to postgraduate study. Pacific females score significantly better than males do on each educational outcome (MOE 2009). Clearly, many Pacific families in New Zealand today do not realize the migrant dream of a better life through education.

When I was asked to carry out the Pacific component of the national study of how migrant youth are connecting in New Zealand (VUW 2010), I decided to take Pacific educational outcomes as my starting point. My view is that much Pacific educational research has been culturally blinkered: it has not appreciated the strong relationship between cultural identity and educational achievement (Purkey 1970). Instead, in focusing on ways of assisting Pacific students to fit NZ curriculum requirements, there has been less understanding of the knowledge, values, and aspirations that Pacific students bring to school in terms of both cognitive and affective learning experiences. Smith (1999) argued very compellingly about the ways the persistent privileging of Western knowledge in schooling has negatively affected Māori students’ feelings of self-esteem, identity, security, and in turn, their motivation for school learning. Pacific researchers have also challenged the hegemony of the school experience — of what is taught and how it is taught (Taufe’ulungaki 2000, Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo 2005), including how the concern for competition and individual success is at odds with the Pacific priorities of cooperation, achieving together, and responsibility to the group. In the Pasifika Education Plan (MOE 2006), then minister of education Steve Maharey stated that “we can do better to build on the strengths that every Pasifika student brings to the classroom than we currently do” (quoted in Harris 2008). For Pacific educators, however, the issue is much deeper: although traditional knowledge is a strong base for future learning, traditional knowledge is also the invaluable foundation for identity security. These Pacific educators said that “from the depth of understanding and value of traditional forms

students will gain a strong sense of cultural identity and an understanding of who they are...and set the foundations for the development of further skills and knowledge bases, contexts and understandings for life in the 21st century” (UNESCO 2002:2).

My questions then became, if secure identity is central to further learning, what are the cultural strengths Pacific students bring to the school today and what are their feelings of identity. Cultural maintenance and participation are widely debated and negotiated issues in New Zealand today. New Zealand’s Pacific population is not only rapidly increasing (projections are that by 2021 Pacific peoples will form 9% of the total NZ population), but it is also tremendously diverse, comprising over 20 Polynesian, Melanesian, and Micronesian cultures and an even greater number of languages. Adding complexity to questions of identity security are such factors as the increasing multiple ethnicity of the Pacific population and that 60% are now NZ-born (MOE 2009). Findings from a national consultation on youth carried out by the Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs (MPIA) were that self-identity and cultural preservation have become main issues for Pacific youth today:

The issues of Pacific self-identity and cultural preservation have emerged as key issues for Pacific people, particularly for Pacific youth. For some second-generation Pacific peoples, the bonds of Pacific culture are not as strong or dominant and have resulted in a loss or weakening of Pacific identity, particularly for those of mixed marriages, who increasingly do not identify as Pacific. This has implications in terms of cultural and language preservation, Pacific identity and traditional Pacific values (MPIA 2005).

These and other considerations led to my research focus on whether and how schools could create spaces where cultural knowledge and identity were promoted and enriched, what was happening in those spaces, and how secure identity might contribute to Pacific students connecting more strongly with schooling and thus lead to better educational outcomes.

THIS STUDY

Participants in this study were students at a male secondary school (given Pacific males’ lesser educational achievement) who were members of the school’s Polynesian Club. The aims of these school-based and voluntary Polynesian Clubs are to reinforce Pacific identity and cultural security. Polynesian Clubs are a significant activity in many NZ schools today. Their popularity is seen in the fact that there were over 85,000 performers at Auckland’s 2007 Polyfest Secondary School Festival and over 90,000 in the audience (MOH 2007). While still labelled Polynesian Club, or Poly (because of its formation when the majority of migrants to New Zealand were from the Cook Islands, Niue, Samoa, Tokelau, and Tonga), membership includes all ethnic groups of Pacific heritage and others who would like to join. Poly clubs organize in their own way and rely heavily on parents and community for support. Most participate in larger cultural festivals, such as the Auckland Polyfest, a fiercely competitive event held annually in February and Wellington’s Tu Tangata Festival, a much smaller and non-competitive occasion held in September each year. While some clubs exist mainly for the school Festivals and then disband, in other cases, such as the club in this study, club and related activities continue through the school year.

The rationale for this study is that participation in Poly (customs, values, practices, and language) builds youth’s sense of self-esteem, belonging, and wellbeing which, in turn, foster

positive school achievement and confidence to participate in other learning spaces. Research questions included how do these youth value Poly club membership and activities, who do these youth say they are (identity), and with whom do they connect at school, in the wider community, and academically.

The study followed a mixed-methods approach and comprised a group meeting with year 12 and 13 Poly club members, followed by individual interviews with 10 of this group over one year (March 2009 – March 2010). Senior students were chosen because of the likelihood of their having had more than one year's experience of Poly membership. Participant observation was also carried out at such events as Poly practices, sleepovers, community meetings, sports days, rugby matches, and the national Choral Club Competition, which a choir drawn from members of the Poly club entered "for the first time ever." Interviews were held with the teachers coordinating Poly and other staff members: these discussions added valuably to understanding the study context and revealed the considerable amount of time Pacific teachers devote to Poly Club and the school-related liaison and support activities that flow on from this commitment. Finally, the academic records of Pacific students were reviewed. These were disaggregated by students who were members of Poly and those who were not. This brief review was carried out with the principal and in a way to ensure student confidentiality.

For this chapter, prominence is given to the youth voice as expressed in the 10 individual interviews. This chapter begins with a brief discussion of the Polynesian Club, shares findings from the individual student interviews (in sections Being a member of Poly and With whom do we connect?), and concludes with a discussion.

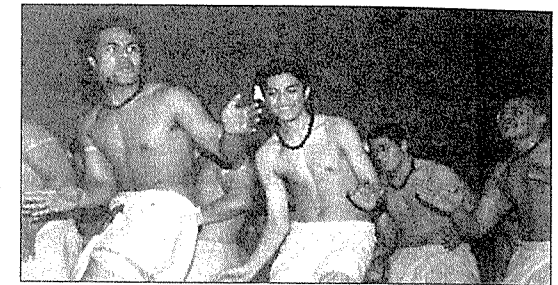
THE POLYNESIAN CLUB

The Polynesian Club studied here is based at a Wellington State Secondary School. Of the school roll of 650 at the time of the study in 2009, 36% were NZ European and 4% were Māori (MOE 2010). The other 60% included 21% Pacific students (Samoan 15%, Tongan, 4%, other Pacific 2%); 9% Chinese; 9% Indian; and 21% East European, Middle Eastern, and other — indicating a very culturally diverse school community. Samoan Studies is an option at the school, and Polynesian Dance was introduced as an NCEA subject in 2004 at unit standard level. The Polynesian Club at this school has existed for more than 30 years.

The 2009-2010 Poly Club was found to be the central hub of an extremely vigorous school-wide Pacific programme, the motto of which was *o le ala i le pule o le tautua* (the pathway to leadership is through service). Club-related activities included a homework centre and study groups, Pacific book club, parent liaison (as the monthly meetings of the Parents Association and Pacific Family Days), and community and old boys liaison days (see Annex). The club met outside class time, during lunchtimes and weekends. Membership was open to all year 9 to 13 students and at the time of the study ranged between 70 and 80 students, the majority of whom were Samoan, which is in line with the school profile. While the club performed at many school events and community meetings, preparing the presentation for the annual Tu Tangata Annual Secondary School Festival was the major focus. Tu Tangata, the showcase for Pacific youth in Wellington, is organized by a team of teachers who also mentor groups from the eight participating schools so as to ensure maintenance of quality

standards. The Department of Māori Affairs established the Tu Tangata Festival in Wellington almost 30 years ago as an event to promote Pacific culture — an equivalent to the Māori Festivals of the time.

Parents and extended families played a large role in the Poly Club, as supporters, helpers, demonstrators, and fund raisers, and by "just being here." The home-school links built in Poly have carried into other school activities as well and played a large part in ensuring the election of a Pacific parent to the School Board.



Tu Tangata Festival, September 2009.

BEING A MEMBER OF POLY

Although responses are inter-related, these are set out in three themes for ease of discussion: who do you say you are, why did you join the club, and what does being in Poly mean to you.

Who do you say you are?

Nine of these students identified strongly, and somewhat uncompromisingly, with their ethnically specific Pacific group and one with the generic Pacific Islands (PI) label. They defined themselves as full Samoan (3), NZ Samoan (1), Samoan (2), Afakasi *half caste* (1), PI (1), Samoan German English (1), and Cook Islands-Māori (1). Explanations included:

that's what my parents always say...we are *full* Samoan.

if someone asks I say, Samoan German English straight away — that stops the next question "how come you have a palagi (English) surname?"

I say PI...because that's what I am.

All but one of this group was NZ-born. Only four students had been to the "homeland," but most were able to recount family stories of the homeland and the migration journey. With regard to how they knew these stories, four said their grandmothers, who had come to New Zealand to live with them, had taught them the language and the *faa Samoa* (Samoan way):

I didn't know much...my parents are always working...my granny was the one that always taught me that.

Why did you join the club?

Each student said that participation in Poly was an important part of "being Pacific" at this school and had almost become a school tradition for Pacific students. Poly was the place where they debated ideas about culture, learnt "what it really means to be Samoan" and where "I can be me."

It's taught me who I am. A Samoan...Island boy.

It's taught me to be proud of who I am...and where I'm from and to showcase where I'm from.

Lots of people think Poly is just song and dance...(but at Poly) we learn to look behind the actions to the meanings, like why do we do things this way, the faa Samoa, and words to show respect and what makes a good chief or leader...male and female roles.... (Teacher keeps reminding us that) our stories, chants, songs and dance are our history.

Three of this group had not joined the club in years 9 to 11 because their parents thought this would distract them from study. For one, Poly had not been "cool." By way of contrast, four others said they had joined the club expressly at the wish of their parents:

(I didn't join in the third form). I think I was too cool...spent all my time hanging out with friends.... But when xx got the award that year, I thought there's more to it than just your lunchtimes. So I tried it in the fourth form...like it's better than rugby really...but it only lasts for 15 minutes on the night (of the festival).

I've always been interested in the faa Samoa and I've learnt a lot...my parents really wanted me to learn, especially the dancing.

Quality! (My parents) heard from our friends that Rongotai is a high quality club. Always a high standard. So, they send me to this school and they make me join.

Being able to participate in the Tu Tangata Festival was another reason given for joining Poly. However, Poly had come to mean "more than that" over the years:

The most obvious answer is that we all like to do the performance at the end of the year (but) at Rongotai the common word is brotherhood that I know is used a lot... when we first started everyone talked about it...so we all went to see what it was like... we all had a basic idea...but over the years it's come to mean even more than this... especially as we know our school years are coming to an end, and we know we probably won't be doing (Poly Club) five years from now, it's become more important....

These boys described the Tu Tangata experience on the night as "awesome," "empowering," and the "pinnacle" event of the year. One captured what this meant to him with these words:

"...just the feeling you get on the night when you're performing. You don't get it anywhere else.... It's a feeling of happiness, heaps of happiness. Just like nothing is going to go wrong in your whole life again.... Anywhere else. I have never had that feeling...every year. It's just awesome."

While this group acknowledged that gaining NCEA credits for Polynesian Dance had become an important incentive for some students joining Poly, this was not important to them. They said (our) "joining Poly was not to get credit points."

In the study year, one non-Pacific student was in the club. Other students were not sure why this was so: they said this was highly unusual as there were usually up to five or six. They strongly believed that Poly Club was non-threatening and did not discriminate against other races joining.

We welcome everyone...but sometimes they don't like the amount of time we give to Poly. We would like them to come and learn and be one of us.

Maybe they feel it's not their thing...that they will be mocked or teased...awkwardness. One said to me "what if I joined?...I'll stand out in the row!" (but) pity they don't join.... nice if they want to join and get a taste of other cultures and see something different.

One student said that it did not really make sense to talk about Pacific or non-Pacific because "our students are mixed." Multi-ethnicity was an accepted fact of life to this group and "no big deal." While all could quickly list which students were of Cook Islands, Niuean, Tokelauan, or Fijian Indian ethnicity for example, in their view, all were "Poly." When asked if any Māori students had joined the club, all answers related back to a Pacific relationship:

Yes. Of course. There's x, his mother is Māori but his father is Samoan. And x, his father is Māori and his mother is Cook Islands.

This was followed by "but PIs don't usually join the Māori club." In discussing this point further, the student of Cook Islands-Māori heritage commented:

My mother says..."hey that Poly Club is turning you into a Samoan!" She has a bit of a laugh. (The reason) I don't go to the Kapa Haka (Māori cultural group) is because I feel good about all that.... I can speak Māori. We always go to the marae [sacred, communal ground]. I come to Poly to keep building up my Poly side.

What does being in Poly mean?

To this group, being a member of Poly meant brotherhood, relationships, leadership, and coming to understand better the meanings of many of the words and behaviours they experienced in their daily home life. Then, it was bringing all these values, words, and actions together to create a *real* Pacific performance.

Brotherhood

The club activities and the way these were organized reinforced strong feelings of brotherhood, of working together, relying on each other and everyone pulling together to ensure a complete performance:

Everyone says brotherhood.... that's the big word around here. But it's more than that.... not sure how I'd discuss it...but it's part of me...precious.

...huge influence — my pride in my culture and my school. Just the sense of belonging, the brotherhood in the school, the enjoyment of being part of the group.

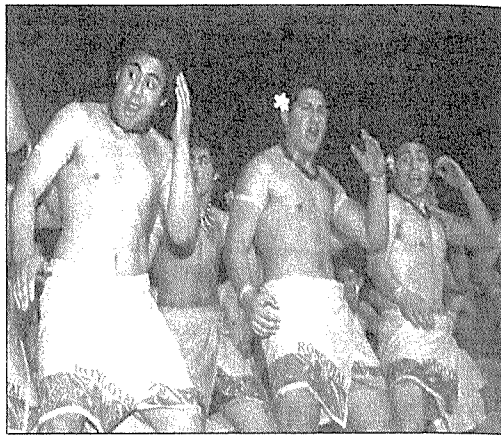
Just the sense of belonging...in the club...just being able to really be a part of something at school, part of the spirit and the adrenalin of being with your peers.

These feelings of brotherhood, responsibility, and unity (being a unit) carried over into their feelings about the school and their relations with Māori students and Māoritanga (Māori culture):

To be part of Rongotai...as a student.... but to be part of a Samoan Rongotai — to be part of the Poly...if that makes sense.

We always finish our performances with the Rongotai haka (ceremonial dance). We are very proud of that. We don't belong to the Māori Club... some of them (Māori) join Poly — but we love the Rongotai haka. That is us!

(Our Poly) brings a lot of different culture to the country...but so do Māori.



School haka (ceremonial dance).

Relationships

Many levels of relationships were nurtured in the Poly Club: between teachers and students, Pacific students and the wider school community, among year 9 students through to year 13 students, between and within the different Pacific ethnic groups, and between then currently enrolled students and old boys who “keep coming back to help us.”

Just binding with the other boys, hanging out with the young guys has been a challenge for me.

...for example x (Tokelauan student) teaches us the Tokelau dance.... in the beginning we weren't doing that good. Miss M said “this is his dance.... respect it and do it properly!” And we did.

That is what the Poly Club means.... (Miss M) looks after us, guides us through the school.... in trouble? She talks to our parents.... Personal....relationships...of the future and building our confidence to go out. (She) looks out for us.

Old Boys turned up regularly during the study year just to catch up, help with the Poly sleepovers and practices and show “how we used to do it.” They also supported the Pacific Career Days and community meetings. I was told that this was not unusual, that the Poly Club was still regarded as a cherished home base for many past students.

When asked to explain further what relationships meant to them, answers included:

We begin (Poly) with a prayer...and we always finish with a prayer. We give thanks to God for everything.

Everything that happens...she's (teacher) always talking relationships and she uses the Samoan words — like faaloalo (respect), iusitai (focus), alofa (caring), and onosai (patience and perseverance), tautua (service), and fealofani (looking after others). She says that's what it means to be a Samoan.... (Now) I find myself saying those words too and trying to do them.

My granny always says those (Samoan) words.... it's like those are the rules.... I'm starting to get it!

This group also emphasized that the discipline and behaviours they learnt and that were reinforced in the Poly Club were the standards they tried to follow at all times, even in their rugby matches and the inter-college sports meetings:

“When we go to the play sports with other teams, we try to act the way we should.... discipline and (show) how Rongotai boys act and how Pacific boys act.”

One quoted to me the Samoan saying *A malu i fale, e malu foi i fafo* (if behaviour is poor inside the family, then it will be poor outside the family). In this case, bad behaviour outside the school indicated also that all was not well inside the school and vice versa.

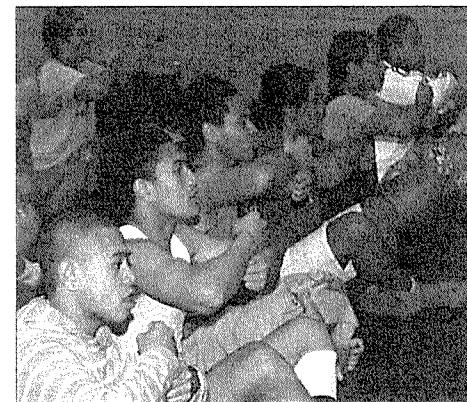
Leadership

Leadership and taking responsibility for one's actions were important values and expectations in every activity of the Poly Club. One student described the Poly Club as being “run like a Samoan village....” He said “the senior boys take it, the teacher is there (she's the matai [titleholder] ha ha) but the senior boys do the work and the rest of us listen and watch and learn.” All students saw this division of roles as the way things should be done. The senior students said:

It feels good to be a leader, but it's pretty hard as well, pressure, trying to keep all the boys together and at the same time trying to suss out all the new items, for example, and the rules. We make up the movement. We get together during study periods or after school and think about the actions and songs and things that we can add to Poly. (We) try not to repeat things we've done before, or from other schools as well. (We want) that little bit of difference.

(This responsibility) Helps me to step up, become a leader. Because the Poly really needs leaders. Helps me stay committed to something...stay and go to every practice.... a good thing for me I guess. (Sometimes I don't want to.)

I'm attending a Leadership Training Course for Prefects. Only three of us PI, and about 50 others. I don't feel intimidated.... I think being a Poly leader has helped me be a good prefect too.



Brotherhood, relationships, leadership.

The younger students said:

We don't mind...we know our turn will come. We know to be patient and watch and learn from the seniors. We look up to them.

(Our boys) know how to lead more (in the school not only the Poly).... I've seen heaps of palagi prefects.... they don't know how to act with others. Plus, all the boys (not just the Polys) listen to them. (Students often don't listen to the other guys.)

The cultural performance

Each of these students was adamant that the Poly Club performance must be of high quality and real. On one hand, this was necessary because they were representing the school. On the other, this was important because they were showing Pacific culture in a manner they hoped was traditionally acceptable, authentic, and "right." The cultural performance was a political statement of who they were.

Answers indicated that these students were becoming knowledgeable about dance, the core values encapsulated in the dance, and the influences of change:

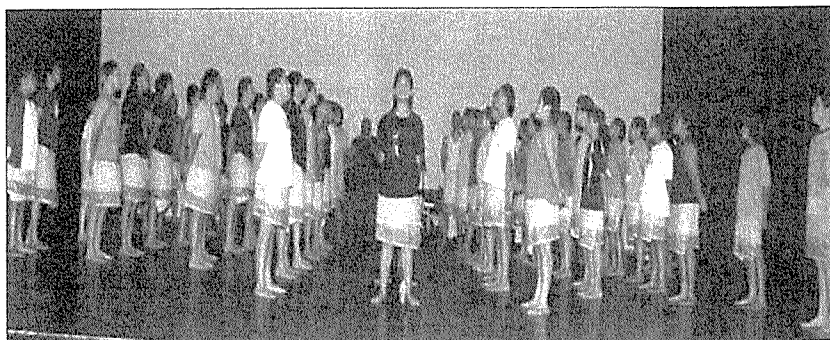
I think as long as you don't alter it (the traditional ways) too much.... it's good to add your own flavour. Style...but if you take it away from the actual dance type — it's not really Samoan. You can't call it Samoan any more....

Our school...we always do it "properly." We practise it over and over.... sometimes tired. But, we do it properly.

We listen to endless tapes from the old days to new.... (When we select our songs,) we look at old videos, we watch others, we think about the actions and sometimes we ask our parents....

Our Poly has a pattern just like the old days and the lauga (Samoan oratory). Everything has a pattern. We always start with the hymn and prayer. Then we do the traditional (may be 70% of our item) then we do the school haka. Then...we do our own thing.... freestyle to finish! This year we did Mamma Mia...that brought the house down! I will never forget that night.

All told, Poly was not simply a place for "song and dance" for this group: the activities, expectations, and discussions reinforced their feelings of identity and belonging through challenging their understandings and adding meaning to their experience of being Pacific. In addition, the way the club was organized promoted mentoring a cadre of youth who had understanding of both Pacific and palagi leadership styles and responsibilities. Poly was the place where students connected with who they were (their own identity). Being part of the club also helped them connect with their parents as they came to understand better why their parents "do things the way they do." They could see how different their lives were



Leadership.

from those of their parents. Each talked about the sacrifices their parents had made (and were making) so they could have the chances their parents had not had. Sometimes, this was a bit of a burden:

Not financially wealthy.... For the ones who came down first, like my mum and uncles.... they kind of had to suffer from that...being in an environment that doesn't really help their generation. So that's where I come in really. They didn't have a chance. I'm trying to do well.

We know what they expect from us...(and we know) sometimes we let them down.

Eight members said that becoming involved with Poly had helped their parents understand the school a bit better as well. Given that only four of this group had been to the homeland, their comments support Gezentsvey's theory of ethno-cultural continuity, that migrant "continuity with the past gives an anchor in time, provides a social location in the present and serves as a starting point for the future" (2008:35). For this group, feelings of identity were being constructed in New Zealand, and Polynesian clubs were part of this fashioning process.

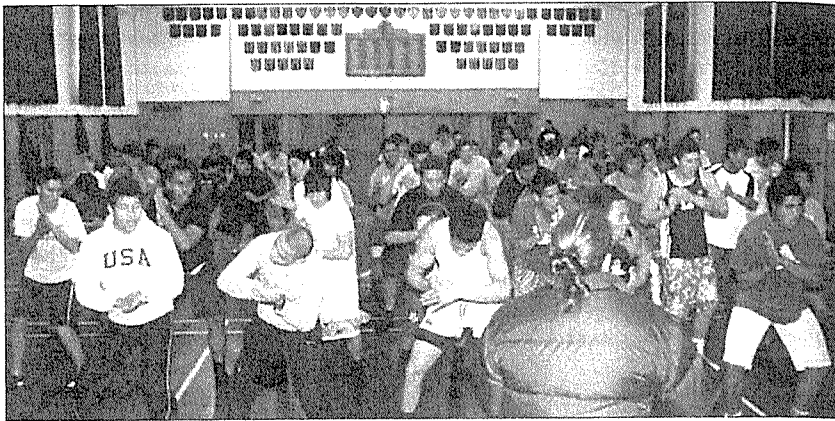
How did the strengths and learning from the club translate into their connecting with other communities?

WITH WHOM DO WE CONNECT?

Aside from the Poly club, the main school groups these students belonged to were rugby, other sports, and the school's Stage Challenge team, a national competition among secondary schools and featuring a musical performance based on a self-selected theme. Their passionate interest in rugby was not surprising, given that a current All Black, a Junior All Black, and members of the Wellington provincial rugby team were Rongotai and Poly old boys, three of whom regularly attended the Poly practices and sleepovers. It was clear that some of these students could easily have been tempted to neglect their studies and try for a career in sports. One had already been selected to join the Wellington Rugby Development Squad. That aside, the majority of the Poly Club belonged to the school rugby teams and reported that the team's chief supporters were Poly Club members, their families, and Miss M.

Six of the ten interviewees also talked glowingly about their experience of joining the school's Stage Challenge Team as performers, stagehands, information technology (IT) support, and "painting the backdrops." They had "totally loved this" and found it exciting to perform "another kind of music...modern music." They also commented on the fantastic experience of working at the back of the house preparing "the art...the scenery and seeing how the teachers put all of that together." As with the Poly Club, the Stage Challenge was seen by this group to be student centred, with students and teachers working together on a joint outcome — a public stage performance.

Outside of actual class time, three main patterns of participation were found. First, the majority said they socialized with family, Poly Club members, friends from their rugby teams, and their church youth. A second group, of two, said that, although most of their friends were of Samoan or Pacific ethnicity, they had other friends and no trouble joining



Sleepover, 2009.

other groups in which they were interested. The final two were one student who had very strong affiliations with a local Māori gang and spent most of his time with them and another student whose main friendships were with Wellington's 'crump' (a form of hip-hop) community, which he joined as many nights as he could. This student spoke very knowledgeably about the influence of American youth culture on Pacific youth in New Zealand today. Both students were living with family members because, for various reasons, their parents had gone back to Samoa. The fact that both were not doing well at school and engaged in risky behaviours outside of school time warrants further study.

The question of whether being in Poly actually kept these 10 students from joining in other school activities or from mixing with other students met with a firm "no." These students said that was just the way it was: the Poly boys were the ones with whom they liked to be and they felt comfortable. That aside, whether Poly clubs encourage separation or serve to marginalize PI students warrants further study.

New Poly ventures: The Choral Festival

During the study year, a decision was made by the club members to try something new: to form a choir and enter the Wellington Region's Big Sing Choral Festival (June 2009). As reported, the school had not participated in this prestigious event for many years. Coordinated by the Poly Club teacher and senior students and supported by an old boy (operatic tenor Benjamin Makisi), a choir of 28 was formed, comprising mostly Samoan students, one Māori student, and one Tokelauan student. This group prepared three songs and performed alongside eight other secondary schools at the Wellington Town Hall. The songs selected were Lark in the Meadow, a hymn (Blessed Assurance), and an old Samoan song sung in the Samoan language. They sang without accompaniment. To their great surprise and astonishment, their choir won the Festival Cup, awarded to the choir that best captured the spirit of the Choral Festival. Their choir also won the choir leader award. Both were popular wins and widely reported in the media.

Seven of the 10 students interviewed had been members of the choir, and one had been the choir leader. The other three had attended the final night of the competition concert. All ten described this entire event as "totally awesome":

(This) was a big jump into another paddock.... wasn't really us. But Miss M said we have to do. All the boys, she's got that respect, where all the boys they'll just do it.... I wasn't signing up for the choir, I walked into the room and they were having the practice. She told me to sit down and learn it.... But I was pleased. It turned out so great. Yes...taking our place alongside other groups.

Watching those other choirs.... professional.... huge numbers.... very sophisticated music.... I enjoyed that.

Winning the Festival Cup? Well...my mum and dad were so pleased. They sat in the Town Hall and watched it all. They saw all the palagi schools.... they were so proud that we can do it.

One thought that "maybe, just maybe, Rongotai had influenced the 'mainstream' culture" on the night:

We went into it — all those schools with huge choirs...and we were just a few. But we went in, and I think we changed the ways.... We didn't sing their songs, we sang our songs...and we did it our way... we challenged the mainstream?...that is our strength.

There had been a clear lack of confidence, some fear, and perhaps some feelings of discrimination on the night and in that setting. Feelings were not only "this is not quite us," "that



Wellington Big Sing Choral Cup.

is a whole new field of music," and "this really moved me out of my comfort zone," but also "well, we did it and we'll do it again."

In this instance, the confidence and brotherhood gained in Poly supported these young people to participate in a new activity. The teacher's strategy of deliberately introducing students to areas outside their comfort zone warrants further research. So, too, does the fact that aside from sports, the main groups in which these students participated were music, performance, and art related. Furthermore, each activity featured a public group performance, e.g., as the Poly, Stage Challenge, and the choir.

Connecting to school

How did these feelings of belonging transfer into school educational outcomes? Six of this group said Poly was a reason they liked coming to school. One student responded that Poly was the only reason he came to school:

Poly is the only thing that keeps me coming to school...and then when I come to school I do my schoolwork...go to classes. Just for me...Poly is a big thing. It's the boys, the teacher, the brothers, just being together.

Encouraging you to come to school...do the right thing.... a lot of us by the 7th form it's hard to keep coming to school every day and on time.... I reckon it's the boys — another reason that I come to school. They mean a lot to you. If you don't come to school, you won't see the boys.

Some said Poly meant having a safe room and place at school, teachers who listened to them and pushed them to do their schoolwork, study groups, and a homework centre:

Yes it takes a lot of time...but I don't think it interferes with my schoolwork. Because being in Poly actually made me focus more on school, because I'm getting closer to Miss M and she pushes me to do better in class as well. So that's a good thing. The other years I just sit around doing nothing at lunch time.

The teacher's room...that is our safe room. We can always go there. We meet there. That keeps us together. And she stands for us...any problem in the school... she stands for us. We know she is there. But — she is no nonsense!

Three described how they were finding that some of the things they learnt in Poly fed into their other school subjects:

The drumming sequences, the music the sounds we do in Poly club.... I take these into my own music courses especially my composition. I use them all.

(For my video project,) I am interviewing Samoans about how they define terms, like faaalalo, iusitai, faalavelave [family event].... mostly elders, but some young ones too.

English. Library and literature. I am starting to read more Pacific writers like Albert Wendt and *Sons for the Return Home*.... this made me think of me and my father too.

Lots of us take (Miss M's) subjects...because she's a good teacher, she's tough, but she listens, explains things.... (You know) some other teachers don't really connect to us....

Each of these students had what appeared to be quite a realistic view about what they wanted to do when they left school and the credits they would need to achieve these goals.

University or further tertiary study, the army or police, and careers in IT or design were the main goals for this group. Three said they should be doing better at school and "it's up to us." One expressed puzzlement as to why, when PI students were so focused, disciplined, and aimed for excellence in Poly club, they did not devote the same commitment to their schoolwork:

We appreciate all things family.... it's the same with rugby.... we all have a strong sense of commitment to Poly, but trouble is they don't always commit to school. That's the problem.

School educational outcomes (2009)

PI student data was broken down by a) those who attended the Polynesian Club and b) those who did not. Although other variables were at play, findings included a significant relationship between student educational participation and Polynesian Club membership. Students who belonged to Poly scored significantly higher on three indicators. First, they were less likely to be absent from school. Second, they performed better on numeracy and literacy tests. Third, they were more likely to be enrolled in, and to have completed successfully, a higher number of NCEA credits (school principal 2010, pers. comm.). This is groundbreaking data and again warrants further research.

DISCUSSION

Contrary to the predictions from the Ministry of Pacific Islands *Ala Fou* report presented above, this group of male senior secondary school students continue to identify strongly with their Pacific ethnicity. Their identity was being reinforced, and in some cases constructed, in their New Zealand experience. The Polynesian Club and related activities were central to this process.

For these male students, the Poly Club:

- provided a safe and trusted space for students to engage in cultural activities and processes; to build their sense of belonging and identity; to gain esteem, confidence, and support through shared activities; and then to launch out of their comfort zone, as in their participation in the choral festival. Overall, there was pride and satisfaction as the Poly Club community worked together to achieve the complete performance.
- reinforced, and in some cases taught, students the meaning of the faa Pasifika (Pacific way). As noted, membership was open to all the students (cross generational), tasks were allocated, and senior students took lead roles in club organization and process.
- contributed to educational successes through the relationship between membership in the Poly Club and educational outcomes. These students are connecting to the school which, in turn, provides the opportunity for educational leverage.
- demonstrated a teaching / mentoring model by which Pacific students' pathways into wider and broader community engagement were mediated.

This study has reinforced the value and place of Polynesian clubs and related activities for Pacific male students — the learning, discipline, and cultural enrichment — and the positive correlation of membership with cultural security and educational participation. If

the Poly Club is a way of reinforcing Pacific identity, of getting students into school and teaching attitudes and skills that are central to academic success (such as discipline to the task, focus, and aiming for excellence), can these learning processes be up-scaled into a whole of school learning experience and in a way that will benefit both Pacific and non-Pacific students? Changing the culture of the school in this way may be a longer term process. For the present, ensuring that schools have trusted small spaces, such as Poly, where students can bring, share, and enrich their own knowledge and gain confidence to participate in other learning spaces is a priority.



Pacific students connecting through Poly.

ANNEX. PACIFIC PROGRAMME RONGOTAI COLLEGE

Pacific Programme Rongotai College

O le ala i le pule, le tautua.

The pathway/road to leadership is through service.

This Samoa proverb underpins, and is the name of, the Pacific programme at Rongotai College. Loosely translated, it means the way to leadership is through service. The way to achievement is through work but without losing the essence of who we are as Samoan/Pacific.

Aims: Raising Pacific achievement at Rongotai College

1. Level 2 as a minimum, all leavers placed into employment, apprenticeships, courses, or tertiary study.
2. Forming strong relationships — staff and students, and staff and the Pacific community.
3. Retention of Pacific students in and at school. Reducing absences.

The programme is based upon highlighting Pacific identity at school and what it means to be Pacific, Samoan, Tokelauan, Cook Islander, for example.

Success as a group

Cultural Base: Faa Rongotai (Rongotai Way)

Alofa, Usitai, Faa'aloalo, Fealofani, Tautua and always Onosa'i

Samoan language taught from year 9 to year 13

Polynesian Dance NCEA credit

Polynesian Club Programme of activities (2009)

Students

Aoga afiafi (afternoon school, every Wednesday 3.30-5.30)

Yr 9 Pacific Book Club (lunchtimes one day a week)

Poly Club — Tues / Thurs lunchtime (term 1)

Sleepovers — Fri / Sat (terms 2/3)

Choir Practices

Parent liaison

Pacific Family Day (Feb)

Parents Asosi (association one evening per month)

Fiafia farewell to Pacific Yr 13-14 school leavers — night of celebration and reflection

Community and old boys liaison

Pacific Role model days, referrals, career days / evenings and role model days, VUW and NCEA events, cultural assemblies, assistance in finding employment

Source: School reports 2009-2010

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Taturoanui (Tata) Graham Crocombe (L) and Professor Wilsoni Hereniko (centre) listening to Tagaloatele Professor Peggy Fairbairn-Dunlop at the Festschrift Conference, Rarotonga, Cook Islands, 12-13 August 2010 (photo: Diane Goodwillie).