Mate Ma’a Tonga:
An Insider Lens on Pasifika Secondary Schooling in Auckland

by

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Abstract

There's more to being a Pasifika secondary school learner in Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand, than just being part of the statistics and graphs. There's something unique about who Pasifika students are as learners, and the values they bring into the classroom. As part of Pasifika history in Aotearoa New Zealand, Pasifika students have been in Auckland secondary schools for more than 50 years, and in that time their journeys have been researched and documented by many academics and social researchers. But many of these reports focus on the negative aspects and failures of Pasifika learners. It is important that schools, teachers and policy writers are continuing to re-examine, discuss and deliver strategies and methods that suit the way Pasifika students behave and interact in the classroom environment.

This research draws on Pasifika education research and policy literature alongside personal narratives and autoethnography to examine the experiences and achievements of Pasifika secondary students from my unique insider perspective as a Tongan teacher and school leader. The ongoing challenge of Pasifika students experiencing lower academic success is my motivation to undertake this research to find the underlying reasons.

One important finding is that there is a lack of empirical and statistical research producing robust and quantitative data about the experiences and achievements of Pasifika secondary students. Despite the extensive body of literature on Pasifika education, most of the findings, theories and policies being suggested are developed primarily based on assumptions and opinions. There is reliable evidence to show that Pasifika families in Auckland are concentrated in the lowest socioeconomic bands, yet these wealth gaps are ignored in favour of holding schools responsible for student achievement.

My research reveals that secondary schools tend to delegate the achievement of their Pasifika students to the few Pasifika teachers and school leaders on their staff. Pasifika education policy continues to rely on cultural responsiveness, while teacher expectations of Pasifika learners continue to be influenced by deficit thinking. Under these conditions, it is no surprise that Pasifika secondary students continue to experience underachievement.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor used artificial intelligence tools or generative artificial intelligence tools (unless it is clearly stated, and referenced, along with the purpose of use), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed: *Date:* 01 May 2025

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Siosiua Pole

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'Ofa lahi atu kia moua.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my late father Tu'uhoko ki Langi. Rest in Love, Dad.

Toka a e ‘i he nonga moe fiemalie ‘o ‘etau tamai ‘oku ‘i hevani.

24.10.1952 – 24.04.2025

Vahe Taha: Introduction

I grew up in a strong Tongan family in which my elders prepared me well to take a place as a leader in my community. Values of tui (faith) and ako (learning) were encouraged by my parents and older siblings as essential for a better future. Leadership roles came early - at school I became a prefect, and at university I worked as a Residential Assistant. In becoming a teacher, I was following the example of my older brother. I wanted to be a teacher because I felt I could help teenagers and young people from families like mine, many of whom I saw floundering at school and drifting onto the wrong side of the tracks. But the parents of Pasifika students often went straight past me to talk to the Deputy Principal (DP) or Principal, seeing me as not knowing anything or not having the power to help them. On first meeting, I have often been mistaken as being the school security guard or a member of support staff. Students express surprise to find out that I am a Maths teacher, assuming me to be 'just' the PE teacher.

In the Pasifika Education Plans there is much talk of the need for more Pasifika leaders in schools. Yet, as a Pasifika male applying for promotion to leadership positions, I have been repeatedly passed over in favour of Palangi teachers with much less experience. Among my teaching peers, I have stood by and watched as colleagues were advanced into school leadership positions for which they were hardly competent, knowing I had the required skills and experience. I set my sights on becoming a school leader, eventually a principal, so that I could do more to help. In following this goal, I was advised by trusted mentors that I needed to do my Masters. So that was the motivation that brought me to postgraduate study.

The driving force of this research concerns the persistent problem of Pasifika school underachievement, with lower statistical rates of achievement of school qualifications, and higher rates of suspension, truancy and learning disabilities, compared with national, Palangi and Asian populations. Having come through the New Zealand education system myself, as an immigrant student in the pre-NCEA era, to working as a senior school leader in the current secondary context, I have witnessed Pasifika learners continuing to fail to achieve school qualifications, year after year.

Constant changes and demands from central bodies have significantly increased teacher workload, with negative effects on the learning of all students including Pasifika. Workload stress has resulted in many teachers leaving the country for opportunities overseas or seeking

to change career. In the year 2022 alone, more than 5500 teachers did not renew their practising certificates (Ministry of Education, 2024). Recent attendance figures for Pasifika and Māori give cause for serious concerns. The Ministry of Education defines 'chronic absence' as 70% attendance or less. In the post-Covid era, chronic absence is rampant. It is becoming difficult for schools to entice kids to attend school, and make sure that they turn up to class and remain for the entire lesson. Furthermore, increasing numbers of Pasifika Year 9 students are arriving at secondary schools working below the required curriculum level or standard for reading, writing and numeracy, which immediately puts them in a vulnerable position. Ministry of Education recommends that students should be working at NZC Level 5 to be able to cope with the NCEA Level 1 Assessments introduced in 2023 (Ministry of Education, 2023).

There are many contributing factors that influence the lives of Pasifika secondary school learners in Aotearoa New Zealand, and it would be difficult to name a single cause of the ongoing failure for so many Pasifika learners. Given the complex nature of the educational problem I am studying, I have chosen autoethnographic research as suitable for a small-scale research project like this. Autoethnographic research will allow me to dig deeply into my own experiences and test them against the educational literature, with the aim of bringing forward new insights concerning the conundrum of Pasifika education in Auckland secondary schools.

Research Question and Rationale

This research is guided by the question: **What can my insider perspective add to the research literature on the experiences of secondary Pasifika students?**

This research presents an account of Pasifika student experiences in urban secondary schools in Auckland from the unique vantage point of an immigrant Tongan male Deputy Principal (DP) in one such school. I will draw on critical readings of literature as well as my own life and professional experiences to explore Pasifika student experiences at secondary schools in Auckland to investigate the persistent problem of Pasifika underachievement. I will use autoethnographic vignettes in the form of personal and professional experiences and combine the results of autoethnography and literature reviews to address my research question.

In Pasifika research and in autoethnographic research, the identity and life of the researcher is of importance. There is an expectation that research on Pasifika education will be led by researchers who identify as Pasifika. Autoethnography draws on the life of the researcher as a

source of research data. Accordingly, the next section gives a detailed account of my own life and educational history.

’A’alo ‘eku Vaka (Paddling my own Vaka)

Growing up and completing my early years of education in Tonga helped instil some valuable lessons for my career as a teacher. The middle child of seven, I was a pusiaki child, adopted by one of my mother’s sisters and her husband, who couldn’t have children of their own. Pusiaki is an informal adoption practice, forms of which are very common, not only in the Tongan culture but throughout the Pacific, for example ‘whāngai’ in te reo Māori. My birth parents and my adoptive parents agreed on this arrangement when I was just two months old.

Early Life

I was raised by my adoptive parents in a hardworking fāmili (family) whose main source of income was running a dairy and cake shop on the main street of Nuku’alofa, the capital of Tonga, and the largest town on the island of Tongatapu. My adoptive father was a minister in the Siasi Tonga Konisitutone, and traditional values of humility and respect for family were practised in our home.

I attended Nuku’alofa GPS (Government Primary School), which was the main school for local families, except for those who could afford to send their children to Tonga Side School, on the other side of the fence, which was a school with a perception of being posh or a ‘Palangi school’. That was the school my birth siblings attended since my parents had government jobs and were able to afford the fees. Characteristics of competitiveness and gratitude were learned throughout my years at primary school. I have a clear memory of reciting the 11 times table in front of the class while the teacher stood next to me holding a wooden ruler as an incentive. Another memory is of playing rugby against my classmates, barefoot out on the fields, with a stick as the rugby ball.

Six years flew by, filled with valuable life lessons that have become habitual in my daily tasks and roles as an adult. I spent my intermediate years at Tonga College, one of the only two all-boys schools in Tonga, located on the outskirts of Nuku’alofa, with the school motto of ‘Mate ma’a Tonga’ (Give everything for Tonga). I enjoyed my two years at intermediate, learning some real-life lessons of hard work, including daily after-school sessions in the school plantation, and resilience from learning despite having very few classroom resources. From the beginning

of my secondary schooling, my life underwent a complete change when my birth family gained permanent residency status here in New Zealand and we relocated, dreaming of a land of milk and honey.

I remember my first day at Otahuhu College as a daunting experience. I had to navigate my way through what was for me a completely foreign school, while trying to speak and understand the English language in which I was newly immersed. I was placed in the Year 9 Foundation Class, alongside other ESOL students – a mix of Pasifika and Asian boys. Somehow, I made it through that school year, with the help of the boys from the local Otahuhu Tongan Methodist Church. I was fortunate enough to be part of the school brass band by the end of the year, having learnt to play the cornet growing up in the islands. My time as a student at Otahuhu College was my first experience of the learning barriers faced by Pasifika secondary students in South Auckland.

I decided to join the Otahuhu College Tongan Group in preparation for Polyfest the following year, having gained some confidence in my ability to communicate with other students. Polyfest is an annual cultural event celebrating the diverse cultures of the Pacific, held at the Manukau velodrome (see more discussion in Vahe Fā, p. 36). This experience helped develop my sense of identity and belonging as a Pasifika person living in a foreign country.

At the end of Term 1 of that year, my parents decided it was time for me to join my two older brothers boarding and attending Wesley College in Pukekohe. Arriving at Wesley College as a Year 10 student, I discovered that for many of the students, academic work took second place behind sports, particularly rugby union. Rugby was one of the reasons why my brothers and I were enrolled there by my parents. I soon realised that I needed to improve my basic literacy skills to understand the learning in the classroom, while trying to navigate a completely different education system from what I was used to from my childhood in the islands. Mathematics was a strength of mine, having always had a liking for the subject from growing up in Tonga and helping in the family shop. I figured I could cope with Mathematics and Science, but I struggled with language-based subjects like English and Social Studies. Essay writing was always a nightmare for me. I have spoken about these personal experiences in my teaching career to encourage Pasifika students with their learning.

At the beginning of Year 11, I decided to ask my teachers for extra assistance preparing for School Certificate. I also joined a few of my classmates spending most lunchtimes in the

school library. I had taken a particular liking to reading the sports section of the NZ Herald, so I always made sure I was one of the first students out of the dining room to get to the library.

At the end of my four years of schooling at Wesley College, I felt a great sense of belonging, knowing I had adjusted to living in a new country. I was happy to be offered a place to study a Bachelor of Management Studies degree at the University of Waikato. Having graduated with my degree, I returned to Auckland to study initial teacher education at the Epsom campus of University of Auckland.

Faiako (Teacher)

My first teaching job was at Kelston Boys High School in West Auckland, with a predominantly Pasifika student population. I was teaching Mathematics, and it was my introduction to NCEA, having gone through School Certificate and Bursary as a secondary student. I became involved in coaching sports and tutoring the Tongan cultural group, where I got to see Pasifika students thriving beyond the classroom. I got married at the end of my first year as a classroom teacher. I spent six years teaching at Kelston Boys High School where I took on various roles - classroom teacher, rugby coach, dean, and acting director of student learning. It was at Kelston Boys High School where I saw the positive influence of whānau support on the overall academic success of the student. Building connections and relationships with parents was key in trying to address the learning needs of the Pasifika students I was teaching. I also found that their children's schooling was not always the top priority for Pasifika parents. Fua kavenga and fa'alavelave (family and church monetary commitments) were often first on the list for Pasifika households.

My first experience of leadership roles came in my final school years, when I was a prefect and captained the 1st XV for a couple of games, and I noted these roles on my application for teachers' college. Having been encouraged into teaching by my older brother, at first, I didn't think about climbing the ladder of the teaching profession. However, gaining full registration two years later changed my perspective, and I began to aspire to move into middle management, with the goal of providing a voice for my Pasifika students and their families. But my experiences of applying for middle leadership roles were discouraging because I was repeatedly declined. On one such occasion, I was overlooked in favour of a student teacher for the position of teacher in charge of Junior Mathematics, despite my three years' experience on the job. Given that the school consisted mainly of Pasifika students, I wondered why an inexperienced Palangi teacher was preferred over me.

Semi-Professional Rugby Player

In my fourth year of teaching, I was offered an opportunity to play a season of rugby in the Premiership Competition in Hong Kong. I was very fortunate that the Board of Trustees gave me leave without pay with the opportunity to return to my job at the school. The club I was playing for arranged an apartment for me and my wife in Causeway Bay, close to the club grounds in central Hong Kong. My contract involved the opportunity to coach junior rugby teams, while teaching part-time in a couple of international schools on the island. This was an awesome opportunity to experience new school cultures and teach a different curriculum. Interacting with people from various ethnicities in Hong Kong was another great learning experience at the time. I was offered a second season, but with the imminent birth of our eldest child, we decided to head back home to Auckland.

Middle Leader

I returned to teach at Kelston Boys for one further year, then took a position at Wesley College as HOD Mathematics. By that time, I was becoming aware of the achievement gap between Pasifika and non-Pasifika learners at a national level. The role at Wesley was an opportunity to return to my old high school as staff, and more importantly, a promotion into a middle management position. This presented an opportunity and a platform from where I could act as a role model and help meet the learning needs of Pasifika students on a school-wide scale.

I introduced initiatives into our mathematics curriculum that were tailored specifically towards the learning needs of Pasifika ākonga, including units of work and achievement standards assessments that were more culturally relevant. DMIC (Developing Mathematics Inquiry Communities) is a culturally responsive pedagogical approach in Mathematics for Māori and Pasifika students, which we introduced after assessing the entrance numeracy results from our new students to school the year I started at Wesley College.

Actively demanding more teacher learning assistants to support the learning of our low-ability learners in the classroom was another important move by the school, as more students were arriving who were working below the required curriculum level. We encouraged these students to attend weekly extra tuition sessions after school for individual help from our Maths teachers.

Senior Leader

I took up a new challenge as Tumuaki Tuarua at Tuakau Primary School in Term 4, 2020. As my first opportunity to work in senior leadership, it was valuable career experience. One unique aspect of working in the primary sector was the opportunity to observe how parents prioritize the learning needs of their children. Tracking the child's learning in the classroom was not a priority. Over half the school roll was registered as Māori, so I had to adapt my teaching philosophy, having been mainly in Pasifika schools until then.

I took this opportunity to learn more about te reo me ngā tikanga Māori in trying to live up to the name 'Matua Siua' I was given by the Tumuaki (Principal) and kura. I completed a Level 4 Certificate in Māori Protocols and Language at Te Wānanga o Aotearoa. There were few Pasifika students, but I worked hard to introduce new ideas and activities to celebrate each Pasifika language in its own week. I helped support all our teachers to include Pasifika culture and language materials in their lessons. The senior leadership team worked to encourage Pasifika students to learn more about their cultural heritage.

I also introduced the Mathematics DMIC program school wide, which I had previously incorporated into the Junior Mathematics Curriculum at Wesley College, as part of my senior management portfolio. Looking at the Numeracy data schoolwide at the time, there was a real need for some intervention particularly for our Māori and Pasifika students. We invited our Māori and Pasifika whānau into the school one evening where we introduced the DMIC program with them, but more importantly they had the opportunity to share and discuss anything else they wanted to know about their child's academic progress. Teachers that attended the hui were also able to make connections with parents, and in some cases managed to meet parents of their students for the first time.

I jumped at the chance to return to secondary school as Deputy Principal at Pukekohe High School, knowing there is a growing Pasifika community in Pukekohe and the wider Franklin area. It was time to return to my own sector with more knowledge about how to actively address the learning needs of Pasifika students. After 18 months in this role, working with both curriculum and pastoral management, I have clearly seen the correlation between a student's learning needs and their behaviour in the classroom. It was becoming increasingly common for classroom teachers to report students not complying in the classroom and needing more

behaviour intervention due to their academic ability. This adds to the workload of a senior management / front corridor team already under pressure.

As DP I achieved my ambition to become a senior school leader. With this dissertation research project, supported by 16 weeks of full-time study away from school on the teacher study award, it made sense for me to take the opportunity to closely examine and investigate the challenges of Pasifika education that had been so important to me as a practitioner in the urban secondary schools of New Zealand, especially Auckland.

Overview of Dissertation Chapters

This chapter, Vahe Taha, has introduced the reader to me as the researcher and my research project. The topic is secondary Pasifika schooling, and the research starts from my life and experiences as an insider expert. The next chapter, Vahe Ua, describes the research approach, using Pasifika education research methodology combined with autoethnographic and post-qualitative methods of collecting and analysing data.

Vahe Tolu uses the literature to introduce the background context of historical and contemporary underachievement of Pasifika students in urban secondary schools in Aotearoa New Zealand and investigate the research question, including an extended close reading of the classic study, *At school I've got a chance*, by Alison Jones.

Vahe Fā presents insider narratives based on my experiences and observations of Pasifika secondary education based on four dimensions of my work in schools: coordinating Polyfest, coaching rugby, as a teacher, and as a senior school leader. Each section of Vahe Fā includes fictionalised stories or vignettes, used in slightly different ways.

Vahe Nima draws on the previous chapters to give a summary of the important themes and findings and how these address the research question. Vahe Ono summarises the dissertation, discusses the limitations, and comments on the future implications of this research.

Vahe Ua: Methodology

Research is a powerful way society uses to advance knowledge through finding solutions and developing new ideas (Swann & Pratt, 2003). It involves the researcher navigating through activities that are both creative and critical, with an overall goal of improving society. This research project explores my experiences as a Tongan-born Deputy Principal working with Pasifika secondary school learners in urban South Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand. The purpose of this chapter is to explain how this research was undertaken, which is the question that concerns methodology.

Social researchers are increasingly adopting qualitative methodologies when it comes to the fields of education, business, and health, as opposed to post-positivist or quantitative methodologies (Savin-Baden & Major, 2023). Social researchers seek to include complex dimensions of the lives of the research participants, which cannot be represented by numbers and statistics. This research is about countering the dominant accounts of Pasifika education underachievement in Aotearoa New Zealand using qualitative and narrative research methods. This research does not involve the collection of empirical data; instead, it involves writing critical literature reviews and autoethnographic narratives (Adams et al., 2013).

This research project is aligned with the way that I, as the researcher, interpret the world as well as the underlying paradigm on which my research is based (Chang, 2008). There is a growing acknowledgement that critical autoethnography is a method with rich potential for Pasifika and other Indigenous peoples. Pasifika researchers are leading the way in showing how narrative and autoethnographic research methodologies open space for including all aspects of our cultures and identities in research (Iosefo et al., 2021).

This chapter describes how this research is undertaken in three sections:

- Theoretical Framework, which covers its underlying principles and concepts
- Study Design, which explains the approach taken to data collection and analysis
- Ethical Considerations, which covers how fairness to all has been considered.

Theoretical Framework

Every form of research has a paradigm consisting of the basic assumptions on which it is based and the theoretical concepts it depends on to make sense of the research field it is addressing.

The Pasifika research methodology of David Fa'avae (2020) will be activated as a model for the epistemological assumptions underpinning this research. David Fa'avae is a leading Tongan education academic, former secondary school teacher and currently (in 2025) an Associate Professor at the University of Auckland. Fa'avae has explored the validity of using autoethnography as a 'method for minority researchers' in a Pasifika context (2018, p. 127). The use of the terms 'malie' and 'mafana' (sense of warmth and belonging) have deep cultural connections to guide this research (Fa'avae et al., 2016).

Pasifika Research Methodology

Pasifika Research Methodology relies on research methods specific to Pacific languages, cultures and communities, in which they are understood on their own terms and perspectives deeply rooted in the Pacific context (Hau'ofa, 2008). The research in this dissertation aligns with Pasifika Research Methodology in the sense that it centres Pasifika perspectives and aspirations in education, and accepts the validity of Pasifika languages, cultures, and ways of doing things (Baice & Samu, 2023). One way this is reflected is in the use of the Tongan language in headings, proverbial sayings, and in dialogue within the autoethnographic narratives. A glossary of Tongan words (and one of Māori words) follows the final chapter (see pages 58-59).

'Talanoa' will used as the framework underpinning this research where the researcher will be sharing stories and lived experiences using autoethnography. Pasifika qualitative research methodology of 'Talanoa' provides a framework for Pasifika researchers to explore the research fields without any limitations (Fa'avae et al., 2016). It is conducted in a circular process of "talanoa-knowledge-talanoa-knowledge" as opposed to a linear approach of reviewing the literature in Western research (Fa'avae, 2018, p. 131). Fa'avae explains that "talanoa encompasses a practical method and the theoretical concepts used to enact that method" (p. 140). This practice has also been recommended for school practitioners as a research tool that "has highlighted a valued practice that generates meaningful sense-making for Pasifika educators and researchers" (Fa'avae et al., 2022, p. 115).

Talanoa'i/Talanoa

'Talanoa'i' is the derivative term for 'Talanoa'(telling/sharing stories), where researchers Sitiveni Halapua and Timote Vaioleti were first to capitalise on its cultural relevance and its capability as a research method (Fa'avae et al., 2016). 'Talanoa'i the Talanoa' refers to the complexity of telling/sharing of stories where the researcher is also an active participant (Vaioleti, 2013). The

usefulness of this process is for when “those who are involved have complementary expertise in the area of focus or have similar status and backgrounds” (Vaioleti, 2013, p. 203).

Any form of research develops new methods of doing things thus encouraging the researcher to be creative and think critically (Swann & Pratt, 2003). Further to this, Pasifika research methodology can serve many purposes, even with a single goal of providing benefits for Pacific peoples and communities. Educational research is also designed to provide solutions about issues in education (Newby, 2014). Regardless of methodology, all researchers should understand that we are not rocks or telephones; rather, we are dynamic, unpredictable, and ever-changing beings (Adams et al., 2013).

Fa’avae (2022) reiterated the need for both the researcher and the participant to share “Talanoa ‘oku fakaivia - storytelling with the purpose of empowering others” for Pasifika people living in the diaspora (p. 14).Telling “one’s own story implies that culture is embodied in the process” by “contextualising the narrative and recognising cultural factors in the narrative dynamic” (Vaioleti, 2013, p. 195). This idea is supported by having meaningful ‘talanoa’ where the “arrangement of living and non-living entities are being observed through the connections of people, people and place, or people and spirit” (Fa’avae, 2022, p. 13). The researcher’s lived experiences of working with Pasifika learners and their families outside of the classroom environment gives the researcher an opportunity to ‘talanoa’ about success stories on the experiences of Pasifika learners.

Insider versus Outsider

These lived experiences provide an insight to the social challenges that Pasifika secondary school learners face every day, evidencing the deficit thinking behind the Pasifika under-achievement in Aotearoa (Samu, 2020). To examine and possibly counter the dominant narratives of Pasifika underachievement in Aotearoa New Zealand, as the researcher I will be using an insider lens of a Pasifika researcher, as opposed to an outsider (non-Pasifika) research lens (Fa‘avae et al., 2016). The concept of using the insider lens allows the researcher to reflect deeply on their lived experience as a Tongan/Pasifika, thus giving the reader more cultural knowledge and understanding of their past (Fa‘avae et al., 2016). Fa’avae acknowledges the difficulty of looking through such a lens when it is easier to revert to a more privileged Western-type lens.

As a Pasifika and Tongan researcher, using the lens of an insider presents a more authentic perspective on the key measures of Pasifika education success in Aotearoa New Zealand. Being in the role of a Pasifika Deputy Principal places me in a unique position of telling personal narratives and stories about the continued struggle of Pasifika secondary school learners in the Aotearoa New Zealand education system. Despite the difficulties in doing so, some of my stories will counter what is already published and accepted within Pasifika education.

Qualitative research is based on the idea that people develop knowledge through their involvement in activities, experiences, or events, and by reflecting on what those experiences mean (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Qualitative research conveys 'knowledge' through language and is therefore concerned with what is true and makes sense, rather than calculating, measuring or classifying aspects of reality related to the research problem as per quantitative research methods (Stewart, 2021). My research approach fits under qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) and aligns with autoethnography, where the aim of being detached from one's own research is abandoned. This allows me as the researcher to include my own experiences and observations as 'research data' and to reflect on what my experiences mean.

Talanoa–vā/Sacred-vā

Talanoa–vā was developed by Pasifika/Pacific scholars seeking to "do critical analysis work that does not result in others losing face" (Fa'avae, 2022, p. 13). The authenticity of these stories, conversations and discussions are dependent on the level of social connections of different characters involved in the stories (Fa'avae, 2022). Talanoa–vā is also a framework that is aimed at interrogating the circumstances of "productive and unproductive discussions" in this case by both the researcher and the participant (Fa'avae, 2022, p. 13). Stories are more likely to be transformed and received by the receiver in ways that resonate with the teller, if the feelings of ongomālie (inspiring and hopeful) are being encouraged (Fa'avae, 2022).

Sacred-vā rhythms represents "intergenerational talanoa" where the stories are inspiring and heart-warming for the reader (Fa'avae, 2024, p. 706). An important element of 'talanoa' that are often missing from academic publications (Fa'avae, 2024). This is further supported by Linita Manu'atu through her implementation of mālie in research context as a way of "decolonizing the thinking of Tongan people, to draw upon their concepts, values, and beliefs in their own Tongan language for ideas to deepen their thinking about their education, pedagogies, and philosophies" (Faʻavae et al., 2021, p. 114).

Study Design

This study does not involve the collection of any empirical data or information from any other person through interviews, surveys or observations. This is a personal study and collects 'data' from me: from my life, my experiences, and my views on the world of secondary schooling and how Pasifika students are faring in that world. This study relies on me, the researcher, being the person I am – a Tongan immigrant secondary school leader in South Auckland. It is auto-research, or self-research, which can be considered the most extreme form of insider research. The 'data' in my study was 'collected' by two research approaches: Critical Literature Review, and Autoethnography. The inverted commas recognise that the ideas about collecting and analysing data are unusual when compared with older, more established research methodologies.

Critical Literature Review

While the collection of empirical quantitative data is highly recommended for scientific research, this study uses critical literature review as a valid form of research involving secondary data, collected from previous studies. The growth of the Pacific diaspora in Aotearoa New Zealand has led to a new category of educational research, that of Pasifika education. Many researchers have been exploring the uniqueness of Pasifika experiences in Aotearoa New Zealand education at a wide range of levels, from the empirical to the more profound. The volume of published research on the underachievement of Pasifika learners has increased (Samu, 2010), yet the persistent inequity of schooling outcomes for remains a dilemma for educational policymakers (Baice, 2023).

One study in the history of Pasifika education stands out, closely examined in the next chapter and used to help guide the overall threads of this research. This is the book *At school I've got a chance*, by Alison Jones (1991). This book is based on an empirical study examining the experiences of Pasifika secondary school learners. Jones spent a total of over 500 hours in class with the Pacific and Palangi students of one inner-city Auckland secondary school, closely documenting how the classroom experiences of these two groups differed in very subtle but important ways. No other study comes close to this level of detailed observation of classroom experiences of Pasifika secondary students. Even though Jones completed her research in the late 1980s, little has changed in terms of Pasifika secondary experience and the inequity in

achievement levels. These points justify my extended reading of this key piece of research literature.

Literature searches have revealed a relative lack of published research on Pasifika student experiences, particularly in secondary schools, and for this reason, I have included a number of postgraduate research dissertations and theses in the literature reviewed in the next chapter, as well as summarising past and current policies for Pasifika education in Aotearoa New Zealand. A critical literature review on the experiences of Pasifika secondary learners has the potential to be of significant value for school practitioners who teach and work with these student populations.

Autoethnographic Narratives

Autoethnography is a research methodology that starts from the researcher as a source of data, collecting information based on the researcher's own life and professional experiences (Adams et al., 2015). It is a useful approach when the researcher is immersed within the educational scenario they are investigating (Stewart, 2023). It combines the principles of both ethnography, looking outwards from one's own perspective, and autobiography, looking inwards on oneself (Mao et. al., 2023, p. 3). In my case, as an immigrant Tongan Deputy Principal in a South Auckland secondary school, I am an 'expert insider' with a unique vantage point from which to comment insightfully on Pasifika secondary education. The political potential of Pasifika autoethnography and narrative research has already been noted (Fa'avae et al., 2021).

My narratives are based on my lived and teaching experiences of being and working with Pasifika secondary school learners and their families, including accounts of how my identity as a proud Tongan has influenced my teaching and leadership practice. Autoethnographic narratives must be relevant to the research question and valid in terms of the researcher's own cultural and educational experiences (Fa'avae, 2018). Autoethnographic research centres on the life and practice of the researcher, making them vulnerable by exposing themselves and their lives. Autoethnographic writing can make the researcher more self-conscious and more self-connected, compared with more traditional forms of educational research.

This dissertation includes narratives of several kinds. Vahe Taha contains an extended autobiographical narrative of my own life and work in schools (p. 3). Vahe Tolu includes some narrative material recounted by Jones from her time immersed in her study school, including an

incident where she breaks school rules (p. 26). Vahe Fā is centred on my 11 short autoethnographic narratives about aspects of my work in secondary schools (pp. 38 - 48).

Ethical Considerations

Post Qualitative Inquiry approaches, including Autoethnography, are like all qualitative research methodology when it comes to ethical considerations. Although no formal ethics approval is required, it is essential for me as the researcher to remember my ethical obligations towards those with whom I am in relationship, and anyone who appears as a character in any of my autoethnographic narratives, and to hold those obligations in the highest regard (Adams et al., 2013).

I am in a privileged position in being able to explore the effects of Pasifika culture on teaching and learning in Aotearoa New Zealand from the inside. In daring to investigate Pasifika secondary schooling, I recognise that I am obliged to my community at all levels – from my fāmili, to my school whānau, to the Tongan community at large.

Ethical obligations towards people with whom the auto-researcher is in relationship are termed 'relational ethics' (Ellis, 2007). Relational ethics have been used throughout all stages of this research. One ethical risk is that people who appear as characters in my stories may be easily identifiable by the readers of my research (Ellis, 2007, p. 14). I have fictionalised my narratives to minimise this risk by combining and changing details of characters and events. This technique is known as 'ethnographic fiction' where the aim is for verisimilitude, or believability, rather than literal truth (Bruce, 2014; Stewart, 2021).

An inherent limitation of my research approach is that it relies on my perspective and my memory of how things have happened (Chang, 2008). Researchers using self-study must consider the balance between "stories, cultural interpretation and the exclusive reliance on personal memory" (Fa'avae, 2018, p. 134). A personal study obviously cannot generate findings that are statistically significant, but this limitation also applies to small qualitative studies using interviews. Despite these limitations, the combination of critical literature review and autoethnography provides a way of gathering non-empirical data that allows me to tackle the question of Pasifika secondary student achievement in a different way from the usual interview methodology.

Vahe Tolu: Literature Review

This chapter uses the literature to write an account of the background and evolution of Pasifika education in Aotearoa New Zealand since the 1950s. The first section presents the history of Pasifika people in Aotearoa New Zealand and some of the early challenges that they encountered, followed by a high-level overview of Pasifika underachievement. The third section traces a timeline of the response by the Ministry of Education to the increasing numbers of Pasifika learners in schools in the form of an annotated list of policies and initiatives. Then follows a close reading of the book, *At school I've got a chance* by Alison Jones (1991), and comments on its significance for this research. The final section unpacks the 'myth' of Pasifika education success and its possible meanings.

History of Pasifika peoples in Aotearoa New Zealand

Pasifika people have been part of the national population of Aotearoa New Zealand since about 1950 (Chu et al., 2013). The post-war period of the mid-20th century was a time of rapid expansion and diversification of the New Zealand economy, with the growth of industry and manufacturing, leading to a serious shortage of unskilled labour. The populations of the Pacific Island nations were seen as a "cheap and convenient labour force required for New Zealand's economic development" (Mara et al., 1994, p. 196). The result was a 'flood' of Pacific migrants arriving in New Zealand throughout the 1960s and 1970s, most settling in the main cities, but also in forestry towns like Tokoroa (Salesa, 2017). Today, two-thirds of the Pacific population of Aotearoa New Zealand lives in the Auckland region; hence Auckland is known as the biggest Polynesian city in the world (Samu, 2006). The Pasifika population of Aotearoa New Zealand is largely made up of the children and grandchildren of those earlier generations of migrants (Mara et al., 1994).

Lifestyles in the Pacific Island nations have been changing for several generations, but for many families are still based on subsistence fishing, gardening, and farming, supplemented by cash crops or jobs. Children who grow up in the islands report hearing from a young age about 'the New Zealand Dream' from family members who return from there: a faraway place that is imagined as 'magical and fun' (Mulipola, 2024, p. 3). For people living in their home islands in the Pacific, New Zealand is seen as a land of opportunity, plentiful jobs and excellent education prospects (Coxon & Mara, 2000).

The various Pacific Island nations have different rules governing migration to New Zealand. People of the Cook Islands, Tokelau and Niue have co-citizenship as part of the Realm of New Zealand. For families in Tonga, the primary pathway for migrating to New Zealand is through the Pacific Access Category resident visa, which requires registration for an annual ballot, and the luck of being selected. The Samoan Quota Scheme works in a similar way. These immigration schemes are informally known among the people as 'winning the lottery' – a chance to 'live the dream' in the land of milk and honey (Elizabeth et al., 2017; Iloilo, 2023). Leaving their home islands is inevitably difficult for Pasifika families, and Pasifika people routinely experience a culture shock on arrival in New Zealand (Mulipola, 2024). The ways of life are the opposite of what they are used to, including living in separate nuclear family groups, amongst diverse people from many other cultures, and without the support of the extended family and village.

The promise of unlimited employment opportunities has been short-lived for many Pacific migrants in Aotearoa New Zealand (Iloilo, 2023). By 1970, jobs were becoming scarce, and the Pacific peoples who had been strongly encouraged to migrate only a few years earlier were now seen as unfairly taking up jobs that should have been available for other New Zealanders. The notion that Pacific people were living and working in New Zealand illegally gave rise to the term 'overstayers' and the infamous Dawn Raids (Iloilo, 2023). These were a series of police operations between 1973 – 1979 that targeted Pacific homes, usually in the early morning, whereby people who looked Pacific would be asked to prove their right to be in the country. The implicit racism behind the Dawn Raids was acknowledged in the formal apology given by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern in 2021.

The population of Pasifika people in Aotearoa New Zealand grew from 66,000 in 1976 to 442,632 in 2023, with generations of Pasifika families having now called New Zealand home. The Pasifika population of New Zealand is youthful compared to the overall population, and one in every four babies born in New Zealand is of Pacific descent. The New Zealand government can no longer afford to ignore the importance of Pacific people to the national economy (Salesa, 2017).

Pasifika patterns of educational underachievement

The focus of this research is Pasifika student success in Auckland secondary schools, which is normally assessed using secondary qualifications statistics. As the Pasifika population of Auckland increased over the decades of the second half of the 20th century, Auckland

secondary schools began to experience rapid roll growth of students of Pacific ancestry (Chu et al., 2013). This Pasifika influx added to the increasing ethnic diversity in classrooms caused by rapid Māori urbanisation between 1950-1980, which had brought large numbers of Māori students into formerly monocultural (Palangi/Pākehā) classrooms in urban Auckland secondary schools (Walker, 2016).

Ever since, Pasifika and Māori students have been heavily over-represented at the low end of educational achievement, a persistent statistical inequity known as the 'long brown tail' in an education system that prides itself on providing equity and equal opportunities for all to succeed (Fasavalu, 2022; Stewart, 2014). These schooling population facts have resulted in Pasifika and Māori education becoming longstanding topics of interest in New Zealand education policy and research (Baice & Samu, 2023; Pene et al., 2002). The dominant concern for researchers and policy makers remains on 'closing the gaps' and achieving parity of educational outcomes.

According to senior Pasifika scholar Tanya Samu, the chapter by Diane Mara, Lita Foliaki and Eve Coxon (1994) in an early New Zealand ITE (Initial Teacher Education) textbook was a seminal publication "identifying Pacific education as an area of focus" (Samu, 2020, p. 199). That chapter gives an account of early colonial education in the Pacific and its ongoing impact, which provides a background for understanding the depth and extent of the belief amongst the peoples of the Pacific Island nations that education is the pathway to future salvation and success of their children and future generations.

This strong commitment and belief in education is a defining characteristic of Pasifika communities in Aotearoa New Zealand education (Chu et al., 2013). Yet the high aspirations of Pasifika parents for their children to succeed in education are routinely dashed by the dominant of Pasifika experience of failure, particularly in secondary qualifications, which blocks access to university and the professions (Starpath Project - University of Auckland, 2009).

Roy Nash (2000) examined Pasifika educational success using the theories and concepts of Bourdieu, in particular the notion of 'habitus' that contributes to a sense of identity, and what is normal for persons of that identity in regards to social systems such as education. Bourdieu theorised that education systems serve to reproduce existing social inequities, including of gender and ethnicity. In the New Zealand school system, Māori people tend to follow this

pattern: most Māori parents have experienced failure at school, and many carry traumatic memories from their own school days, factors that limit their expectations of school success for their children (Jenkins & Ka'ai, 1994; Selby, 1999). As recent arrivals from their home island nations, Pasifika parents and communities are in a slightly different situation, making them a 'special case' in which 'the usual associations between aspirations, ability and attainment are hardly evident' (Nash, 2000, p. 79). Pasifika parents place high expectations of educational success on their children, but lack the cultural capital required to support those expectations.

> The relationships between social class, the possession of literate resources, the generation of effective cognitive ability through specialised socialisation practices, and the achievement of literacy by children, being real, continue to exist even when ignored. (Nash, 2000, p. 76)

Here Nash identifies (English) literacy as the key criterion and predictor of generic educational success. What he calls 'possession of literate resources' (e.g. books in homes, quiet spaces to study) and 'specialised socialisation practices' (e.g. parents reading to children, help with school projects) are other words for 'cultural capital' leading to the kind of academic literacy that students require for educational success, as measured at the end of schooling by secondary qualifications.

The Progress at School research project studied the secondary school attainments of 5,400 students at 37 New Zealand secondary schools from Year 9 in 1991 to Year 13 in 1995 (Nash & Lauder, 2010). The results showed that the aspirations of Pacific students are "extraordinarily high and bear little or no relationship to their scholastic achievements' (Nash, 2000, p. 76) so that school becomes a place of "desperate hopes" (p. 83) and "hopelessly unrealistic expectations" (p. 80). Mindful of these Pasifika patterns of high aspirations and disappointed hopes, it is worth reviewing the efforts that have been made through Ministry of Education policies and initiatives to improve student outcomes and overcome Pasifika underachievement.

The 1996 ERO report was the first report released by the Ministry of Education identifying the achievement gap of Pasifika learners in comparison to Europeans and Asians where much of the blame was placed on parents. In the late 1990s AIMHI and SEMO (Strengthening Education in Mangere and Otara, followed by MEI (Manurewa Enhancement Initiative) were developed

with strong involvement of Pacific communities of those areas. The result was the release of the first Pasifika Education Plan in the year 2001, which highlighted the commitment of Ministry of Education to helping Pasifika education.

Pasifika education policies and initiatives 2001 - 2024

The following overview provides a timeline of policies and initiatives that have been introduced in the past 25 years to improve the outcomes of the Pasifika school student population.

2001 – 2006: 1st Pasifika Education Plan (PEP)

The first PEP was introduced after a key 1996 Education Review Office report revealed underlying socio-economic issues had resulted in 'chronic issues of low attainment and truancy' of Pasifika students (Samu, 2020, p. 2000). Effective teaching practice was proposed in preparing teachers, parents and learners to raise achievement levels (Ministry of Education, 2001).

2006 – 2010: 2nd Pasifika Education Plan

The second PEP continued the focus of the previous plan, with stronger emphasis on measurable targets for Pasifika students' achievement. The plan sought to increase early childhood education access for Pasifika families, improved Pasifika family engagement in education, and develop the cultural competency of teachers of Pasifika learners (Ministry of Education, 2006).

2006 – 2018: The Starpath Project

This research project was funded by the New Zealand government and aimed to increase the number of Māori and Pasifika students entering university study. It focused on using data to track student progress, identify barriers, and make evidence-based interventions to support students' academic success (Starpath Project - University of Auckland, 2009). Findings from the Starpath project also put employers on notice in terms of making an allowance for their Pasifika employees to attend their children's school commitments.

2007: LEAP - Language Enhancing the Achievement of Pasifika

This initiative was designed to help teachers better support the learning of bilingual Pacific students. Revamped and placed online, the resources provides practical examples and exercises to support teachers to explore and improve their practice (Franken et al., 2007).

2008 – 2012: 3rd Pasifika Education Plan

The third PEP built on the previous work with more emphasis on early intervention and support for Pasifika students throughout their educational journey, early childhood to post-secondary schooling. The focus was more on targeted support for Pasifika students, in improving their literacy and numeracy. Scholarship opportunities was also an emphasis of this policy with improved pathways to tertiary studies (Ministry of Education, 2008).

2009 – 2012: 4th Pasifika Education Plan

The Fourth PEP was designed to reiterate the goals of the previous PEPs with an increased focus on family engagement and workforce development to better serve Pasifika students (Ministry of Education, 2009). Increased teacher diversity and leadership development within Pasifika communities were key strategies of this policy, to help create an inclusive support system around Pasifika learners.

2013 – 2017: 5th Pasifika Education Plan

The fifth and most recent PEP provided a more targeted approach to guaranteeing equity for all Pasifika learners as well as clear targets for achievement in literacy, numeracy, and NCEA levels. Increased access to vocational and tertiary pathways was a focus with more emphasis on developing cultural competency in schools. Strengthening family and school partnerships and setting measurable goals for student success were also emphasised (Ministry of Education, 2013).

2013: PowerUp

This initiative was designed to engage Pasifika families and communities directly in their children's education, empowering them to provide the right support, and be involved a lot more in their children's academic journey. It was initiated as a response by the Ministry of Education to the ongoing educational disparities faced by Pasifika students. Community-based learning hubs were established, where teachers, students and parents could work together. The main intention of these workshops was to develop parent's knowledge on the New Zealand education system and acted as a network of support for Pasifika families (Ministry of Education, 2021).

2016: Developing Mathematical Inquiry Communities

DMIC was developed to improve Pasifika students' mathematical knowledge by adopting a collaborative and culturally response approach to teaching mathematics (Hunter et al., 2018). Key focus was on shifting traditional methods of teaching to a more inquiry-based model where students were working in groups and solving real-life problems. Key to the inquiry was drawing from Pasifika cultural values, with teachers receiving specialised training and preparation beforehand.

2018: Tapasā Framework

The Tapasā cultural competency framework for teachers of Pacific learners' main aim was to improve non-Pacific educators' cultural responsiveness and understanding of Pasifika students (Ministry of Education, 2018). Resources and guidelines were designed to help teachers' knowledge of Pasifika cultural identities, values, and learning styles. This policy mirrors the intentions of previous work of aiming to improve engagement and achievement of Pasifika students.

2020-2030: Action Plan for Pacific Education (APPE)

The APPE is designed to provide a long-term strategy to achieving equitable educational outcomes for Pacific learners by the Ministry of Education. Again, this is a response to the persistent underachievement of Pacific learners within the education system. This is aimed to be achieved through a culturally inclusive and supportive education system at all levels. A key strategy was to increase family and community engagement, ensuring Pacific learners feel safe, valued, and supported at school. Notably, this is the first-time racism has been acknowledged alongside potential actions for places of learning under Key Shift 2: Confront systemic racism and discrimination. In addition the APPE sought to promote more representation of Pacific in leadership roles and continued to encourage Pacific languages in schools (Ministry of Education, 2020a).

2020: Pacific Values Framework (PVF)

The PVF was developed alongside the APPE to provide a foundation of Pacific values to assist educational policies and practices directly at Pacific communities. These Pacific values were designed by a group with representatives from various stakeholders in Pacific education (Ministry of Education, 2020b). Values, including respect, service, family, inclusion, and love

are endorsed in the PVF to guide educators, policymakers and schools when developing culturally effective practices that reflect strong Pacific identities.

2022: Talanoa Ako (previously PowerUp)

Talanoa Ako was launched as part of the wider goals set out in the APPE, thus focusing specifically on engaging Pacific families with their children's education. It builds on the concept of 'talanoa' which encourages open and respectful dialogue while maintain culturally resonant practice among Pacific communities (Ministry of Education, 2021). Again, it is aimed at empowering Pacific parents to know more about the New Zealand education system and be directly involved with their children's learning.

Summary of Pasifika education policies

This overview highlights the long list of Pasifika policies and initiatives put in place in the last 25 years, yet the gap in Pasifika student achievement remains as entrenched as ever. Macro-economic changes from about 1980 eventually resulted in massive increases in the poverty of the less-advantaged sectors in New Zealand society, especially Pasifika and Māori families, who had previously occupied the working-class or blue-collar socioeconomic strata: not wealthy but earning enough to support their families and aspire to social success such as owning their own home. The 1996 ERO report painted the reality: secondary schools in the most impoverished suburbs of Auckland, with rolls of all brown (Pasifika and Māori) students, fall below the national average of success in secondary school qualifications.

The following paragraphs identify and briefly explain important concepts in Pasifika education policies and associated literature.

Cultural responsiveness

Cultural responsiveness was introduced into Māori education literature in the 1990s, led by influential research such as the book by Russell Bishop (1999). As concern about Pasifika education emerged in national discourse in about 2000, cultural responsiveness was there as a readymade 'answer' and over two decades later, today (in 2024) it remains the dominant policy driver, with extensions including the following two concepts growing up or branching out from it.

Cultural responsiveness is an international concept, associated with authors from (among other places) the USA, including Geneva Gay (2002), whose writings helped introduce the concepts to Aotearoa New Zealand. There is a family of related terms, including culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP), culturally sustaining pedagogy (Acton et al., 2017; Paris & Alim, 2017; Ualesi, 2021) etc, but whether these different terms refer to substantively different concepts is still in doubt. In this dissertation, these terms will be considered synonyms.

The importance of cultural responsiveness is that it promises that culture cannot be ignored, across all aspects of educational theory and practice (Taleni & Surtees, 2024). The weakness of cultural responsiveness is that while it may 'open the door' to the classroom, it cannot on its own deliver educational success to the underachieving students of communities in places like Mangere and Otara (Krzyzosiak & Stewart, 2019).

The effect of cultural responsiveness in national policy is to support shifting the responsibility for student outcomes away from the state as school provider and onto individual schools and teachers as 'implementers' and 'deliverers' of the curriculum. Unsurprisingly, this long-term policy shift has been accompanied by the rise of a new concept of 'bad teachers' and the shift of balance from teaching to learning, in what Gert Biesta (2016) and others call the 'learnification' of schooling. What is not often acknowledged is how these shifts take power away from teachers, making them easier to blame for the lack of success of their students.

These shifts supported the overall abdication of state responsibility for quality of state schooling provision, fundamental in the market and neoliberal policies introduced in New Zealand state education policy following the 1984 and 1987 general elections (Devine & Irwin, 2005; New Zealand Treasury, 1987). The overall effect is that the national education system devolves responsibility for student outcomes onto individual schools, school leaders and classroom teachers.

Deficit theory/deficit thinking

Deficit thinking is a polite term for racism in the sense of racist thinking, which in education means basing professional judgements on one's invalid or ideological ideas and understandings about 'race' or ethnic culture. Deficit thinking is also called 'deficit theory' since it refers to mental ideas and ideologies that one may not ever speak about, but which affect all areas of one's professional practice, nonetheless. In a society like Aotearoa New

Zealand, in which there are no legal sanctions on universal free movement and interaction within public spaces, and where public displays of overt racism are met with opposition (Laing, 2022; NZ Herald, 2019), deficit theory/thinking points to the hidden, underground, structural nature of racism, but this point often goes misunderstood. Structural racism means racism that is built into the structures and systems of societies, to an extent that individuals are no longer consciously aware of racism and how it operates in the everyday social contexts of their lives.

Since many people are unaware of social history and theory, they confuse the notion of 'deficit thinking' with 'negative thinking' and then assume that any reference to student failure is 'deficit thinking.'

Teacher expectations

This concept arises from deficit theory and cultural responsiveness, directed more specifically towards teacher agency and classroom practice (Rubie-Davies, 2014; Turner et al., 2015). It challenges teachers not to succumb to lowering their expectations of Pasifika students based on experience or ethnic gaps in national statistics.

Language, values, and culture

In steering away from deficit theory, researchers and policy makers have followed 'strengths based' approaches and focused on success factors and positive aspects that Pasifika students bring with them to school (Jacobs et al., 2021), including Pasifika languages (Amituanai-Toloa, 2007), values (Rimoni et al., 2022) and cultural practices (Airini et al., 2010).

Reading the literature on Pasifika education, what becomes apparent is a lack of research based on empirical evidence. Even in 2025, very few research studies based on empirical observations of Pasifika students in secondary school classrooms have been completed, and none that surpass this study by Jones, in terms of time spent in class with secondary Pasifika students.

A close reading of *At school I've got a chance* by Alison Jones

This section presents a close reading of this important study by Alison Jones in 1991. The uniqueness and relevance of this study justify including this in-depth analysis. When the book was published in 1991, Jones received a lot of criticism from Pasifika researchers and scholars, mainly due to her being a Palangi. As Pasifika Education was only starting out as an academic

and research field at the time, the opposition is understandable. It is important to compare the findings from Jones' study with my own knowledge of the experiences of Pasifika students in 2025. The educational experiences of Pasifika students are still influenced by cultural and socioeconomic factors that directly affect their interactions with the educational system, 35 years later.

Overview of the study

Jones notes she spent four terms in class, three days a week - which adds up to about 600 hours. Jones adopted an embedded observer methodology in seeking to 'blend in' with the girls, who were from Samoa, Tonga, and other Pacific nations, as well as iwi from around Aotearoa. Notably, no research like this has been done since, in terms of time spent in the classroom observing Pasifika secondary school learners.

When Jones was there, the school was still using 'streaming' whereby incoming students would be assigned to 3rd form classes based on their results in entry tests of literacy and numeracy that were administered towards the end of the preceding year. It was a practice that effectively separated the students by ethnicity. Jones obtained permission to observe students in two classes, and she conducted her observations in two consecutive school years, when the same groups were first in the 4th form (Year 10 in today's terminology) then in the 5th form (Year 11) when students sat the all-important School Certificate qualification. One class was 4/5 Mason, which consisted of mainly Pasifika students, and the other was 4/5 Simmonds, made up mainly of Pākehā students with middle-class / professional parents.

When Jones first met with the school staff to explain her study, she recorded some comments they made about the 4 Mason girls, including: "They're an interesting bunch, if you've got the energy" and "If you show some interest, they'll be all over you like a rash" (p.16). The school's records showed that, as a group, Pasifika students consistently achieved below the school's average. That history and experience had lowered the teachers' expectations of their Pasifika students (Turner et al., 2015).

Jones narrates an incident from her second day, when one of the girls invited her to break class rules by leaving before the bell:

> She started to walk off with two other girls. For a moment which seemed like forever, I hesitated. My dilemmas seemed to crush me. (. . .) But my desire to become trusted by the girls was strong, and I started to walk off with them. Predictably, the teacher's voice thundered after us 'Hey you girls! Come back here, come on, the bell hasn't gone yet.' (p. 20)

Jones reflects on how this incident tested her loyalties and was an important step in earning the approval of the girls. After a while having her there became normal and the girls dropped their guard. Jones sums up: "I was accepted – it was probably closer to tolerated – by the girls" (p. 21) and continues:

> As a participant at the school, I was 'a student' in that I went to assemblies (sitting on the floor with the girls), to classes, to gym. I 'wagged' with the girls, ate with them, stood in queues 'down tuck' and hung about with them at intervals and lunchtimes. (p. 21)

Jones writes about her differences in social position from the girls, reflecting at length on her positionality in the study, the initial assumptions she brought to the research, and how she gradually deepened and complicated her understandings, both of her own experience as the researcher, and in relation to the friendship groups of the Pasifika students. She reflected on the difficulty she had in asking the girls to elaborate on their thoughts and beliefs about their school work or future employment. "It took me a while to realise that I was attempting to do two mutually exclusive thngs: be a friend and an outsider" (p. 25). Jones observed that the primary ethic among the students operated to maintain a sense of unity through shared common-sense, so that among themselves, "it was very rare for one person to ask another to elaborate on something they had said" (p. 26). As well as making it more difficult for Jones to document what the students thought and believed, Jones found these ways of relating to each other "significant to understanding the girls' responses in the classroom" (p. 26). The next section summarises differences and gaps between the Pasifika girls' homes and what they encountered at school.

School-home gaps

Ethnicity and norms

These first two dimensions of difference are obvious given that Pasifika girls were the focus of the study. Jones recorded that the girls she studied were from Samoa, Cook Islands, Tonga, Niue and Tokelau. For the Pasifika girls, being brown and all that comes with being brown in a European-dominated society like New Zealand was normal in their homes. In their secondary school environment, however, like all places beyond their homes and communities, being Pākehā or White was considered normal.

Whereas the teachers might regard as normal things like overseas holidays, eating out at restaurants, activities like ski-ing, owning a pleasure boat, etc, these are much less likely to be seen as normal by the families of the Pasifika girls. On the other hand, having large families, regularly sending significant amounts of money to relatives in the islands, (etc) would be considered normal in their families.

Culture and language

Although Jones gives no evidence about the language spoken in the homes of the students she was studying, it can be assumed that Pacific languages were being spoken in the majority of their homes. Mainstream New Zealand tends to assume that Māori and Pacific peoples are fully assimilated, but this is not usually the case. The Pasifika girls came from homes mostly supported by low-waged workers, which were therefore relatively impoverished, whereas at school the assumption would have been that their families could provide everything the school deemed necessary.

Books and a culture of reading is a specific school-home difference that would likely impact on academic achievement for the girls Jones studied. At school it would be assumed that the students came from homes in which books were abundant and people read for pleasure, but with the differences in languages and cultures for the Pasifika girls made this far less likely for them.

Religion and beliefs

State secondary schools are secular institutions in which religion is absent. In contrast, religion is almost always present in Pacific homes, usually a form of Christianity very often adapted with

elements of Pacific culture, for example, Christian prayers translated into Pacific languages are often said before meals and in family prayer evenings.

Rules and freedom

As school students, the Pasifika girls were expected to conform with all school rules, and to obey teachers without question. At school, corporal punishment had been abolished in practice a few years before Jones' study, and became illegal a year or so later, making it unlawful for teachers to use force to discipline or punish students. How would disciplinary expectations differ at home? Pasifika families have a reputation for using physical punishment e.g. when kids get into trouble at school, but is this true?

In New Zealand, secondary students are generally accepted as being mature enough to go to and from school and other activities under their own steam, and to be at home unsupervised. Many 14 - 15 year olds are learning to drive, working part-time, embarking on sexual relationships, etc.
How would these norms of freedom compare for Pasifika families and homes?

Child-adult expectations

At school the Pasifika girls were expected to follow the instructions of their teachers, so in that sense were treated as if they were children, whereas at home they were likely to be expected to be responsible for themselves and their younger siblings. They could have had adult expectations placed on them such as cooking the family's evening meal or taking full responsibility for the children. In a Pasifika household, the girls are expected to be good at doing 'household' tasks such as cooking, cleaning and laundry duty, while the boys are given more outdoor chores such as fishing and attending to the family plantations to grow and harvest crops to feed the family (Ralston, 1992).

At school, the Pasifika girls were expected to ask questions, voice their opinions, and speak out about the topics being discussed in class. The school culture rewarded students for thinking critically and expressing their own thoughts. In contrast, in Pasifika homes, children are taught to show respect to their elders by not speaking and staying silent. Pasifika children are not allowed to make eye contact with adults. The expectation for children to stay quiet and not speak is what might be called a 'cultural silence' in Pasifika families, which contrasts with the norms of school culture in New Zealand. The culture of silence is based on Pasifika traditions,

where values of humility and respect are encouraged, in ways that inhibit individuals from speaking up in formal settings (Tuafuti, 2010). The next section focuses in on the learning behaviours of the Pasifika students and compares typical patterns of Pasifika and Pākehā student behaviour.

The students in the classroom

Jones had a real desire to get know the girls in the 4/5 Mason class, "both as a participant and as an observer, to understand what was being said" (p. 26). As she got to know the girls, "their enthusiasm for school became less surprising" (p. 50). Through these close observations she discovered the girls to be quite selective in their behaviour towards their learning. One was choosing to either "just sitting, staring out the window or fiddling with pens" during class (p. 60). Despite their behaviour, Jones had made the correlation link between ethnicity and schooling, and other factors that decides who benefits from schooling other than ability and motivation. In their English class, Jones had picked up on Ms Leighton's teaching styles that was very encouraging and suitable to the 5 Mason learning needs. She encouraged an environment where it was comfortable "to discuss topics of interest…even a bit of Truth! Anything!" (p.76). The girls however were still "unconsciously seemed to ensure that classroom practice conformed to what they considered to be appropriate work" (p. 77), as mentioned in the previous paragraph. The girls had inherited a habit of gaining knowledge in the form of writing notes, as provided by Elizabeth and Mona here:

> Elizabeth: She wants us to talk about something from the paper. But so what? What's that go to do with it? There's no point in it.
> Jones: Won't you get to practice using English?
> Mona: Oh yes. But it's better to write it for learning for exams and that (p. 77)

In addition, the 5 Mason girls would often control the teacher to teach in a way in which the students think is appropriate. Method of learning by the 5 Mason girls includes memorisation and objected to questions which "involved interpretation and public exploration" (p. 78). They would usually express their opinions in a form of a joke which was seen as not "culturally appropriate" by the school (p.79). Behaviours that would never have been accepted in their homes by their parents.

The idea of a "good teacher" by the girls was based on where teacher had provided clear notes that intended to earn the best school knowledge in the form of copying (p. 75). A lot of the girls

in 5 Mason would write down “rough notes” in class with the idea of copying it neatly later, at home for homework (p. 75). They would show very little interest in understanding their notes by chatting to each other, while the teacher is explaining something. The girls knew how to play the game when being in the class my controlling what was happening.

Jones further labelled the 5 Mason girls as “master strategist” in the way of actively manipulating their teachers in the classroom with little knowledge of their intention (p. 84). Strategic ways such as “wait and copy” (p. 83). The girls would spend between a few minutes to almost a whole lesson sitting in silence doing nothing, waiting for the teacher to initiate the learning. Again, the girls knew how to play the game by doing such things as:

> If the teacher is close by, sit with your arm covering your page, head down, looking intense as though concentrating, or ask the teacher a personal question like ‘Did you have your hair cut?’ or ‘I like your dress, Miss.’ If the teacher is at distance, write out the given exercise questions slowly and neatly with gaps for the answers. From a distance this can appear to be ‘working’. (p. 84)

When the girls arrived in 5th form (Year 11), most of 5 Mason had clearly stated their desire to pass School Certificate as their ticket to future employment. However, the subjects that they chose did not align with their vision for the school year, as Jones had found out. One of them was Typing, regarded as a popular choice among the Pasifika students. This was an obvious choice for 5 Mason with further encouragement from their parents to take up the subject. It was perceived to be an easier pathway to achieve School Certificate accreditation, and an opportunity to earn jobs in “nursing, teaching or the police” (p. 47). It was so popular that “56.5% of Pacific girls sitting School Certificate chose the subject in comparison to 38.4% of Pakeha girls in the year 1986” (p. 49). Here are two of the girls’ responses when they were questioned about typing by Jones:

> Repeka: I took typing because it was the easiest one…I never used a typewriter before. Even in Intermediate (School) we weren’t allowed to touch the one in the office. So I thought it’s our chance now to get into it.
>
> Noeline: Before in Form One and Two I used to love pressing the buttons and used to see my cousins doing drrh drrh (fast typing movements) – really good! (p. 49)

More strategic ways that Jones saw were the 5 Mason girls 'choosing to comb hair, looking outside or reading a hidden magazine inside their books' while waiting in silence for the teacher to provide copied notes (p. 19). The girls again used this 'culture of silence' to disguise their lack of understanding and hide their avoidance of their schoolwork. The girls would continue to be sitting and "doing nothing" and "mucking about" in most of their lessons while being in silent (p. 60).

The girls would continue to praise their teachers for giving them notes so they are able to work in total silence while copying them down. Teachers would find this quite rewarding for their practice as "silent writing students epitomise a busy, organised and settled class" (p. 78). The Pasifika 'culture of silence' is also interpreted by Boon-Nanai and colleagues (2022) as having "cultural associations, and educational setting that can only be explained from an inter-cultural viewpoint of the 'va relationality'" (p. 187). Understanding this relational space is common practice amongst Pasifika traditions as it helps shapes who they are. It is clear from Jones' observation notes, however, that the teachers of 5 Mason were unaware of this viewpoint.

Furthermore, Jones had observed the amount of copying that the girls were doing in class and undertaking unrelated activities such as "waiting for the bell" or "waiting for the teacher to start", that were not related to the learning (p. 61). It was evident that their learning behaviour did not follow their learning goals, through the comments made by Elizabeth and Mele respectively, "I want to get my School C because I want a good job when I leave school", and "I came back to school to get a better job" (p. 45). The girls' learning behaviour is also supported by education writers arguing that "working class people doesn't favour schooling" because they fail to understand it's purpose (p. 57).

As well as spending time with 5 Mason, Jones had made sure that she also observed lessons and gathered student voice in the 5 Simmonds class. Jones had picked up on the 5 Simmonds girls' total opposite behaviour towards their learning in comparison to 5 Mason. Healthy competition was encouraged and most of the girls were "actively engaged in the learning" either through class discussions or "working it out" for yourself (p. 86). There was a general desire to understand what was being taught in the classroom:

> If someone did not understand what was being said or what she had read, she would usually attempt to work it out herself or consult the teacher or a friend, as soon as possible. (p. 86)

Kate, one of the girls in 5 Simmonds, also informed Jones of her personal enjoyment on whole class discussions as "you really get to work out what you think" (p. 86). This evidence supports the claim that students of a more elite community arrive at school equipped with plenty of prior knowledge, as evident in the 5 Simmonds class. Parents who were middle-class professionals made good educational role models for these students. The girls in 5 Simmonds brought to the classroom learning expectations that were the opposite of the 5 Mason girls. They enjoyed challenging their teachers and, in some cases, found "delight in correcting" them (p. 86). Jones was noticing the difference in these learning behaviours in comparison to the Pasifika girls in 5 Mason, where it was "rare for anyone to challenge the teachers" (p. 87).

The journeys of Martha, a working-class Pasifika student in 5 Mason, and Sue, a middle-class Pakeha student in 5 Simmonds, was used by Jones to show that all students can be similar trajectory regardless of their work in the classroom. Martha's journey reflects a lot of the girls in 5 Mason, departing high school with success in one subject from School Certificate exams and working in undesirable low paid jobs. Whereas Sue, who left high school with University Entrance credentials and worked in retail before returning to university and gaining a Bachelor of Arts in English. Although the girls had belonged to different socio-economic classes, "their service jobs included little opportunities for advancement, poor pay and low autonomy" (p. 39).

Jones recorded her initial surprise to find that the Pasifika girls enjoyed school and wanted to be there. Through to their 5th form year (Year 11 in today's terms) they held a belief that if they behaved well and listened to the teachers they would succeed in School Certificate and be able to get a good job, or carry on to finish senior secondary school and go to university. Towards the end of Year 11, when it became obvious that some or most of them were not going to fulfil the dream and get School C, the girls main explanation was that they must be 'dumb.'

Pasifika education success: Myths and realities

The myth of educational success is so strong and widespread that it can be regarded as a super-myth that takes different forms at different times and in different places, and therefore appears to be a set of myths, in the plural (Jones et al., 1990). The myth of educational success promises

the student that if they work hard and stay in school, they can achieve school qualifications and go on to university or a good job after they leave. This myth is strongly held in all corners of society in countries like Aotearoa New Zealand, which have similar school systems and cultures.

In Aotearoa New Zealand the myth was reinforced by the Beeby statement of egalitarianism, which proposed that all children in the country, regardless of where they lived or who their parents were, should receive an excellent education to their full potential (Couch, 2017). Beeby's statement "is often seen as capturing the egalitarian vision articulating New Zealand's education system" (Couch, 2017, p. 96). The first sentence has become famous:

> The Government's objective, broadly expressed, is that every person, whatever his level of academic ability, whether he be rich or poor, whether he live in town or country, has a right as a citizen, to a free education of the kind for which he is best fitted, and to the fullest extent of his powers. (Couch, 2017, p. 96)

Three main dimensions of social justice are gender, ethnicity and 'class' and each of these constitutes a version of the myth of educational success (Jones et al., 1990). Here 'class' takes inverted commas since Aotearoa New Zealand does not have a traditional social class structure like that of the UK, but the local loose concept includes terms like 'blue collar' associated with manual work and lower qualifications, and 'white collar' associated with the professions and wealthy elite.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, the myth of Pasifika educational success has remained an active research and policy focus. The myth has been that schooling and university hold the key to Pasifika socieconomic success. This myth has caused many misconceptions, importantly the thinking of policy writers around addressing the underachievement of Pasifika learners. Unless addressed by the goverment directly, the low socio-economic status of the Pasifika population will continue to influence the academic experiences of Pasifika learners (Nash, 2000).

Jones (1991) found that the Pasifika girls were being treated differently by their teachers in comparison to the Pakeha girls. The myth of Pasifika students being good at sports and cultural activities, and not the learning in the classroom contributed to how the girls were treated. The

assumption by teachers that the girls were learning when they were sitting quietly is a myth that is still contributing to the under-achievement of Pasifika learners in the classroom.

As well as the myth of tertiary education as the key to success, there is also the notion that Pasifika students just need to work harder in order to achieve academic success. This myth fails to consider the systemic barriers that Pasifika secondary school learners face every day (Nash, 2000). From a curriculum that marginalises Pasifika learners to over-crowded classrooms, the idea of enticing Pasifika learners to work hard in the classroom does not result in academic success. Alongside their Māori peers, the myth has also been created that Pasifika parents are uneducated and uninterested in their children's learning. Such myths contribute to the continued use of deficit theorising by "placing blame for poor educational achievement squarely on the shoulders of students and their families" (Hetaraka, 2022, p. 323).

Perhaps the most significant myth is the idea that academic success can only be measured through NCEA data and statistics. While important, those do not totally capture success for Pasifika secondary school learners. They do not count leadership roles held by Pasifika secondary students in sports and cultural groups and their local church communities. Nor do NCEA data and statistics capture the cultural capital and 'polycultural capital' of Pasifika people born in Aotearoa New Zealand (Mila-Schaaf & Robinson, 2010).

Vahe Fā: Insider Narratives

This chapter presents autoethnographic data and narratives, in four sections based on four main dimensions of my work in secondary schools. Each section features fictionalised narratives, also known as vignettes, indented and in italic font, embedded within an overall first-hand account based on my own experiences and observations. The vignettes are like very short stories, and they are 'fictionalised' because the details have been invented, changed or made anonymous.

The first section is about Polyfest and starts with a brief overview about the history of this event, drawing on the research published on this topic. Polyfest is important because it is one of few times Pacific culture is recognised in New Zealand secondary school calendars. The second section covers rugby, my second major co-curricular involvement, which is another area where Pacific students experience success and can include their culture in school activities. In both Polyfest and rugby, however, Pacific students can be caught between conflicting commitments.

In the first two sections the vignettes are illustrative examples of what is explained through literature and professional notes, but the third and fourth sections are carried by the vignettes. The third section considers my role as a teacher and contains three vignettes of typical stories based on my experience as a Pasifika teacher. The fourth and final section offers snippets about typical scenarios I have encountered as a senior school leader. Background context for the latter two sections has already been provided in the previous chapters.

The Polyfest Coordinator

Polyfest is the largest annual cultural event in Auckland for Māori and Pacific secondary students, of vital importance 'for the teaching and learning of Pacific music and dance in Auckland' (Williams, 2022, p. 157). Its full name is the Auckland Secondary Schools Māori and Pacific Festival, and ASB has been its principal sponsor since 1984, hence the event is widely known as the ASB Polyfest (see www.asbpolyfest.co.nz). The Auckland location is significant because that is where most of the Pacific population in New Zealand resides.

Cultural festivals in education have become more popular in response to increasing global migration and multiculturalism. They are described as 'sites of mixing, conviviality and cultural and cross-cultural encounters' (Wood & Homolja, 2021, p. 377). By celebrating non-dominant

ethnic identities, such festivals not only support students' existing identities, but also provide a space for diasporic youth to articulate counter-narratives and to assert their status and belonging (Wood & Homolja, 2021).

The origins of Polyfest date back to the early 1970s, a time when Pacific people in Auckland were the targets of blatant racism used for political purposes. Along with Māori, Pacific people were being blamed for increasing rates of crime and unemployment and seen as not part of New Zealand society (Williams, 2022), giving rise to the infamous Dawn Raids. Working against this negativity, schools such as Hillary College in Otara were supporting the cultural identities of their Pacific and Māori students, including the formation of the first 'Poly Club' that demonstrated the school's ethos of community inclusiveness, involving parents and local organisations working together with staff and students. The idea of celebrating their culture originated at Hillary College, who were joined by Aorere College, Seddon College, and Mangere College. These schools were also working to support the needs of their communities and multicultural student populations.

The first festival was held on 20 October 1976, in the Hillary College school hall, with those four participating schools. Today, the ASB Polyfest takes place over four days at the Manukau Sports Bowl and Velodrome. Over 10,000 students from more than 80 schools participate, with an audience of about the same size in attendance. There are six performance stages: Māori, Tonga, Samoa, Cook Islands, Niue, and the Diversity Stage for students performing from Asian, African and other smaller Pacific and non-Pacific cultures. In addition to ASB, sponsorship is provided by universities and polytechnics. There is entertainment by Māori and Pacific musicians, food stalls, games and competitions, and television film crews. Politicians make regular appearances for the good publicity opportunities (Williams, 2022).

My personal experiences of Polyfest

I've been involved with Polyfest since I arrived in New Zealand. As a secondary school student, I performed with the Wesley College Tongan group for four years, and in my final school year I was the student leader of that group. As a teacher, first at Kelston Boys High School, then at Wesley College, I was in charge of the school's Tongan group. Finally, in my role as a DP at Pukekohe High School, one of my portfolios was as the Polyfest coordinator. Each group operated independently, but my role involved liaising between the school and the group leaders. While still heavily involved with the Tongan group, I was responsible for all the groups – ensuring each

one had tutors and adult helpers, completing the administration of entries and school trip forms, permission slips, and problem-solving the myriad issues that arise in such a complex undertaking.

At the start of each school year, I would call a general meeting in the hall for all the students and staff who were interested in participating or helping with Polyfest. In recent years our school had prepared four groups to go to the festival: the kapa haka, the Tongan group, the Kiribati group and the Indian group – the latter two groups performing on the Diversity stage. Unlike Kelston Boys, which had a strong Samoan group, at Pukekohe High the Samoan students who were interested in participating joined the Tongan group.

Funding for Polyfest

I was the teacher in charge of the school's four cultural groups. I made an appointment with the business manager.

"I want to know more about your response to my email, saying that there's 'no money' in the school budget for our groups to attend Polyfest. I thought the increase in the school roll would have brought in more money and resources?"

"Unfortunately, we have decided to reallocate some of the original funding for Polyfest towards repairs and maintenance of our classrooms. You will have to increase the fee for each student or consider pulling out all four groups."

Money was a constant, difficult challenge for the groups attending Polyfest. Although I prepared budgets and submitted what I thought were reasonable requests for support, the school's financial commitment only covered the cost of buses for transporting the performers and their support teams to and from the venue. Everything else came from the students and parents. The financial commitment demanded of the families included charging each performer, parent sponsorship, and ongoing fundraising through regular raffles and lunchtime food stalls. The performing costumes were made and paid for by the parents.

Time was another challenge. The first eight weeks of the school year were always dominated by preparations for Polyfest, which meant I usually got home about 7pm each night. The performers practiced before school, after school, and at lunchtime. Their commitment to

preparing for Polyfest often created conflict between the performers and their teachers, especially for the senior students involved. I would be constantly bombarded by emails or in person whenever the teachers saw me. Many of the teachers were focused only on assessments and seemed to have little understanding of how seriously the performers had to take their commitment to Polyfest. Some students took advantage of the looming festival by absenting themselves from class and organising their own unauthorised practice sessions.

> ***At Polyfest Practice***
> *Mrs Finau is the mother of one of the performers in the Tongan group. She attends an after-school Polyfest practice. Her child's Dean has just happened to stop by at the practice, checking in on some of the students.*
>
> *"Hello Mrs Finau. I'm Ms Whyte – I've been trying to contact you about coming in to meet with me." The Dean had requested a meeting with the family about their child's poor behaviour and attendance at school.*
>
> *"I'm so sorry, Ms Whyte, for not returning your calls and emails. We are currently in emergency housing as we had to move out of our place. It's been a difficult few weeks for our family."*

'Fiefia night' is the name for the dress rehearsal performance held at the school, a week before the date of the performance at Polyfest. Not only is it a chance for the groups and tutors to run through the entire bracket and iron out any final wrinkles, but it is also a chance for the rest of the school, both students and families, to view the performances and celebrate what the groups have achieved – how far they have come since starting out. It is also a much-needed final fundraising opportunity. The power of cultural performance is shown by the size and enthusiasm of the audience at these performances, attracting many parents who are never otherwise seen at the school.

Following fiefia night, my colleagues often commented to me about their surprise at seeing some of the performers on stage despite hardly ever being in class – or who were difficult to manage when they were present. Over the years, I've heard teachers say of a student 'they're only back for Polyfest' or that they 'can't wait for Polyfest to be over' so that those students would then leave school.

Once Polyfest was over for the year, I always received positive feedback from the school leaders and board members, especially Māori and Pacific representatives, who seemed to have a genuine belief in the worth of Polyfest for the school in terms of its impact on the students. Polyfest is seen as a stepping stone to achievement for Pacific and Māori students. It is widely regarded as a "lever that encourages Pacific students to engage positively with school and experience improved academic success" (Faitala et al., 2022, p. 1). Yet I received no formal recognition or compensation for the extra work and time involved. I was expected to squeeze in my duties as Polyfest coordinator around and on top of my other portfolios.

Adequate financial support for Polyfest would be a tangible way for a school to show that it appreciates the value of cultural teaching and learning involved. It would also reduce the burden on staff and parents, who have so much to do in preparing the performance groups without also having to fundraise, scrimp and save, and put their hands in their own pockets.

As of 2025, Polyfest has been going for 50 years. Its value to Māori and Pacific students and their communities is clear, as shown by the enthusiasm with which they take on the challenges, as outlined above, required for them to participate and support. But if it was true that Polyfest supports the academic achievement of Pacific students, then surely, after 50 years, we would not see the same gaps in the NCEA statistics. Is it worth it? Yes, resoundingly so. Does going to Polyfest help students achieve NCEA numeracy and literacy? No, it doesn't.

The Rugby Coach

Given my background as a semi-professional rugby player, it has made sense and come easily for me to be involved in coaching and organising rugby teams, as part of the co-curricular life of the schools where I have taught. Like Polyfest, sport is universally agreed to be a positive influence in the lives of secondary school students. Many Pasifika boys and girls thrive and shine in the sports arena, even if they struggle with the academic expectations of their school subjects. Participating in a team sport not only supports a student's physical and mental wellbeing but is also an opportunity for learning important lessons and values, such as commitment and determination, being a team player, resilience and coping with failure. Schools will use sports to put pressure on students to comply with expectations for attendance and completion of schoolwork. Expectations from home can also conflict with the demands of being in a sports team.

After the rugby game

At the end of a school rugby game, I'm approached by a frustrated parent in the carpark. "Mr Pole. Kataki pe 'e lava keta ki'i talanoa? Oku ou loto mamahi he 'ikai ke lahi e taimi va'inga 'o 'eku foha." (Got a minute to talk? I'm not happy that my son didn't get much game time today).

I had put his son on the field as a replacement for only the last 10 minutes of the game due to his not attending any practices that week. The parent told me his son had not been at school or rugby practice because of relatives visiting from Tonga. His son had been hosting their visitors and taking them to places around Auckland.

I responded, "Malo 'aupito. 'Oku fiema'u ke ha'u ho'o foha ki he ako, tautefito ki he fakamalohisino. Ko e mala'e eni 'oku ne manako ki ai telia na'a ma'u ha'ane kaha'u heni. Ko 'ene ako 'oku 'ikai ke sai he taimi ni." (Thank you for informing me. However, your son needs to attend school and rugby practice more regularly. Rugby is something he is good at and a potential career pathway. His work in the classroom is not going well unfortunately).

In recent decades, rugby and other codes such as rugby league and rugby sevens have become increasingly professionalised. National and professional rugby teams around the world feature a high proportion of Pacific players. All schoolboy rugby players in New Zealand have an opportunity to participate in a national tournament held annually in Term 4, playing for their heritage teams. From there, selections are made for the teams to compete in the Global Youth tournament, including the Tongan Barbarians team, which I have been involved in coaching for five years.

The Tongan Barbarians rugby sevens team is sponsored by the Malakai Alatini Trust, which also provides ongoing educational support and mentoring for the players. The stakes are high - the games are live-streamed, and this tournament can provide a pathway to the Olympics and professional rugby contracts.

Rugby Star

Peni is a schoolboy rugby star of Tongan and New Zealand European heritage who attends a Decile 9 school in Auckland. He's been selected by both Tonga and New Zealand Rugby Sevens squads for the upcoming Global Youth tournament. Peni is undecided about who to represent, so he decides to attend both teams' trainings. In the end he chooses to play for Tonga. During the four-day camp leading up to the tournament, the players are asked by their coaches to share some of their reasons for choosing to play for Tonga.

Peni is the first to stand up. "I chose to represent Tonga because I want to learn more about my Tongan heritage. I really enjoyed the first training, especially the sharing of the himi (hymns) and lotu (prayers)."

The standard of school sports in the island nations is not comparable to New Zealand. The churches provide sports scholarships to enable a few promising young sportspeople to come to New Zealand to play and study. For example, the Methodist church provides two rugby scholarships per year for schoolboy rugby players to attend Wesley College and play for their school.

Rugby Scholarship

Nela is not named in the 1st XV team for their next game, so he approaches one of the coaches at the end of training. "Kataki pe faiako. 'E lava ke ke talamai e 'uhinga 'oku 'ikai ke fili au ai he uike ni? 'Oku ou 'ilo pe 'eku sikolasipi pea 'oku tonu keu kamata" (Excuse me, coach, can you please tell me why I wasn't named in the team? I have to be in the team - I'm on a rugby scholarship).

The coach replies, "Na'e fetu'utaki mai ho faiako Sainisi, 'oku te'eki ke 'osi ho project pea na'ake hola he kalasi. Te ke 'alu 'o va'inga he timi 2nd XV he uike ni pea kapau 'e sai ho va'inga pea ke toki foki mai." (Your science teacher emailed me that you haven't completed your work in class and didn't attend one of their lessons this week. You will play for the 2nd XV this week, and if you meet school expectations, then we can discuss your return).

For these Pasifika secondary students, rugby is their ticket to achieving what many of their peers in the islands can only dream about. They trade everything they have ever known for the chance to come to New Zealand. But the interests of the students are not always a priority for the schools who receive them. I have known of many Pasifika boys who are held back to repeat Year 13 so that they can keep playing in their school's 1st XV. While there are some success stories, many such students lose touch with their peer groups and drift. Only a small percent of schoolboy rugby players will ever be able to make a career by getting a professional contract, but too many of them don't have a Plan B.

The Teacher

This section presents three vignettes or stories written in the first person and based on my own work experiences. These vignettes are not in a sequence; rather, they are of equal importance in illustrating various aspects of the kind of work undertaken by a Pasifika teacher, which may be less well-known to their non-Pasifika colleagues. The titles of the stories are:

Teacher 1: Friday night phone call

Teacher 2: NCEA Fono

Teacher 3: The Viliamu Brothers

The first vignette is about a typical example of the 'cultural double shift' (Haar & Martin, 2021), which refers to where an employee's cultural identity results in them being loaded with additional work that is not part of their formal role. In my situation, there are times when parents do not follow the correct process and come straight to me as someone who they know and trust, having previously met me in person, when a crisis occurs, and they need help.

Teacher 1: Friday night phone call

It's 10pm on a Friday night when I receive a phone call from an unknown number. It's the father of a student who was sent home from school earlier that day.

"Kataki pe Mr Pole he ta tu'apo atu. Ko 'eku toki tuku ngaue. Ko 'eku ta atu he ko 'eku foha eni na'e fakafoki mai mei he ako he 'aho ni. Na'e talaange he tokoni puleako ke ne kumi ha 'apiako fo'ou" (Apologies for ringing so late but I've just got home from work. I need your help. My son was sent home today and told by one of the DPs to find another school. I don't know what to do).

"Na'e foki atu ho foha mo ha tohi mei he ako?" (Did your son give you a letter from the school?)

"Ikai. Ko e fekau pe na'e tuku mai he telefoni ka 'oku 'ikai ke mahino mai." (No. I only have a missed call on my phone with a message that doesn't make sense).

"Tuku keu faka'eke'eke holo peau toki taa'I atu 'apongipongi. 'Oua teke hoha'a ki ai he teu feinga pe ke tuku ho foha heni he ako" (Let me investigate and contact you tomorrow, as I don't have all the relevant information).

After looking into the situation, I found that the school had failed this student and his family. There was no record of any incidents in the school's behavioural data system. The lack of accountability from the school had clearly caused this family a great deal of stress. Might this student have been treated differently if he wasn't Pasifika?

NCEA is a complex qualification system and in its first few years was undergoing regular changes and updates, so that even teachers were struggling to keep up. Eventually the Ministry produced booklets to explain NCEA to parents, which were translated into Pacific languages. It took some years before these resources became available, however, and in any case, they were difficult to understand and full of jargon. As DP, I was motivated to call a meeting about NCEA specifically for Pasifika parents. To refer to a meeting as a 'fono' is significant in making Pasifika parents feel that the meeting is for them, which makes them more likely to attend. Even more important was the fact that I was taking the time to explain how NCEA worked, in their language, and in ways that they could understand.

Teacher 2: NCEA Fono

Mr Fifita approached me at the end of one Polyfest practice to ask about the upcoming NCEA fono I was preparing to run for Pasifika parents.

"Ko e ha fakataha ko eni na'a ke send mai. 'Oku fiema'u ke ma ha'u? Ko 'ema kauleka ena 'e toko fa kuo na'u 'osi mei he ako pea kou tui kuo ma 'ilo e me'a kotoa" (I want to know about the fono you emailed us about. Do my wife and I really need to

attend? I'm pretty sure we know all about NCEA already, since our older four kids have been through the system).

At the fono, I unpacked NCEA in detail. I focused on the quality of credits and the requirements for University Entrance. When I had finished, Mr Fifita asked, "Excuse me, I want to confirm what you're saying - the more credits for which a student receives Merit and Excellence, the higher their chances of going to university?"

"Yes, that's correct, Mr Fifita" I replied.

"Thank you very much. I will try and push my children that are still here at school to try harder in their classes." He continued, "I've been coming to parent meetings here at this school for the last six years, and this is one of the most useful meetings I've attended. You've explained the pathway to university through NCEA and I've finally understood how this thing works."

The third teacher vignette below is an optimistic one about how second chances can work, and sometimes completely transform educational outcomes for students. Students in these kinds of situations would often make comments to me about how other teachers 'hate' them or think they are naughty or dumb. They would often hide their real feelings behind a 'tough' front and act like a different person. They would ask me why I was trying to help them and sometimes urge me to let them drop out or go back to their 'hood.' This story is about believing in our Pasifika students and seeing past their outer shell to the potential they hold inside.

Teacher 3: The Viliamu Brothers

The Viliamu brothers have been expelled from school. Their solo mum reaches out to me for help.

"Are you able to help me find a school for my boys? I have applied to a few local schools, but none would take them. I really need them to continue at another school as they are both under 16."

I knew the family well, having taught and coached the younger brother. I knew they had academic potential and were promising rugby players. I was also aware that their mother was recently diagnosed with a terminal cancer only weeks prior.

"We could try boarding school. The boarding school I am thinking of supported myself and many other Pasifika students from challenging backgrounds. The boys could do well in this environment."

The boys and their mum agreed to apply to the boarding school with a supporting reference from the teacher. They were accepted.

Both brothers excelled in an environment that provided wrap around support. Their mother was able to see her youngest son become a school prefect before she passed away. The brothers went on to complete Year 13 and pursue their chosen career paths.

The School Leader

The vignettes in this section are not so much based on my own work, but more on what I have observed in my time in the senior leadership team. The first vignette is succinct and humorous, written in tongue-in-cheek style, but concerning a serious issue: when the school staff, students and families become fatigued from constant change. This vignette conveys a picture of an outsider using Pasifika peoples as material to play around with.

Experiments

Mr Smith is a new DP who has many exciting ideas on ways to engage students in the classroom. His ideas come from research in countries outside of New Zealand. He believes that these ideas and strategies could work for his predominantly Pasifika student body.

He changes the school timetable structure five times in five years. He does so without community consultation or student voice. Student engagement decreases and staff are exhausted.

The community brace themselves for the next 'exciting' timetable experiment.

The next vignette tells a story about the gaps between typical secondary schools and Pasifika homes and families. No communication system is 100% perfect, but too often assumptions are made about Pacific students and families. Sometimes these assumptions or failing to take due care can lead to schools making serious errors of judgement, whereby students who have done nothing wrong are treated with gross unfairness and not given the support they need and deserve.

'Etuate

'Etuate is a Year 13 Pasifika student who has had a two-week absence. On his first day back at school, he is called to meet with the Year 13 Dean, Mrs Richards, a Palangi teacher in her 11th year at the school.

Mrs Richards: "It's been two weeks, Edward. That's what your name means right? Edward? Anyway, where have you been?"

'Etuate: "Sorry Miss. It's just... I had to stay home to look after my mum."

Mrs Richards: "What's wrong with your mum? Can't your dad look after her?"

(Long pause) 'Etuate: "My dad passed away two years ago of a heart attack. I thought you knew Miss. My mum has been diagnosed with cancer."

Mrs Richards: (softens) "I'm so sorry to hear Edward. Do you have extended family helping you at home?"

'Etuate: "No Miss. I'm the youngest and the last sibling who is not working, so I'm the only one looking after my mum."

Mrs Richards: "Again I'm sorry to hear about the situation with your mum. We will mark all your missed school days to date as justified absences."

'Etuate is at school for three more days before he is away from school again as his mother's health deteriorates. This time, he is away for two whole weeks. A letter from the school is sent home notifying 'Etuate's caregivers that 'Etuate has been removed from the school roll.

Below, the final vignette shows how the school expected me to singlehandedly fix Pasifika achievement based on a short period of study leave. My colleagues assumed that I had all the answers to improving the academic performance of our Pasifika students. They acted as if they believed that it was my job to look after all our Pasifika students by myself, as well as every other non-Pasifika student in the school.

The Question

On returning to school after my 16-week study leave, I was greeted by my colleagues as we gathered for the first whole staff meeting. One colleague asked "So did you find the solution? Hopefully all our Pasifika kids will be good now you're back." I was aware that others had stopped talking and were waiting to hear my answer.

I replied, "To be honest, I think the solution lies beyond us teachers. Our Pasifika students are already failing before they get to school, so as well as the work we are doing at school, we also need the help of people with power, our board of trustees, local government and the politicians down in Wellington. It's going to take a village."

This chapter set out to provide insight from my perspective as a Pasifika teacher and school leader. Throughout my journey from teacher to senior leader, I have seen high expectations placed on Pasifika teachers and leaders to create success for Pasifika secondary school learners.

The next chapter considers all the information presented so far and draws out major themes to address the research question.

Vahe Nima: Discussion

This chapter presents the themes and main ideas that emerge from all the research completed in the previous chapters and uses these findings to address the research question that has guided the process. The educational issue underlying this research is the underachievement of Pasifika secondary students, which the government holds schools responsible for overcoming. Pasifika underachievement is caused primarily by the wealth disparities between ethnic groups in the population of Aotearoa New Zealand, with Pasifika and Māori families concentrated in the lowest socio-economic bands. This basic economic inequality is seldom acknowledged, however, in the ongoing debates about education. Instead, there's a narrative based on the misconception that teachers are the reason why Pasifika learners are failing in the classroom. This misconception is based on very little evidence. Most teachers try their best to make a real difference for their learners. Why else would teachers dedicate their time to a demanding job that's one of the lowest paid professions in the country?

This dissertation is looking through the eyes of a Pasifika teacher and school leader at what secondary schools can do to help their Pasifika students achieve success. There is a gap between the reality and the rhetoric, and that gap tends to be filled by false ideas, which can also be referred to as misconceptions, fallacies, half-truths and myths. In a situation like this, there is a relentless drive to identify quick, simple solutions. This chapter will highlight these problematic ideas and their effects in Pasifika education under four sections:

- Pasifika research and policy
- Pasifika teachers and school leaders
- Pasifika culture, language and values
- Pasifika faith in the system.

Pasifika research and policy

As discussed in Vahe Tolu, many policies and initiatives have been produced in the past 25 years to address the problem of underachievement of Pasifika students. There is a growing volume of research literature on this topic, including articles, reports and postgraduate dissertations and theses. Yet this ongoing parade of Pasifika education policies and expanding volume of research is based on very little empirical data, with the study by Jones (1991) still unmatched in terms of detailed information based on researchers spending time with Pasifika

secondary students in their classes. The second largest collection of empirical data on Pasifika education was the Progress at School project, 1991-1995 (Nash, 2000).

This tendency to lack reliable evidence reflects an overall weakness in educational research in general but is even more pronounced and influential within Pasifika research. Of the small amount of empirical research done in the last 30 years, almost all of it has been based on surveying or interviewing Pasifika students and/or their parents and teachers. While student voice is important, the balance has swung too far. There may be an assumption among policy makers that much more empirical research has been done, and data collected, than is the case.

Current Pasifika education policy is based on theories of cultural responsiveness, but there is a lack of evidence that culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) can overcome educational underachievement. CRP policy is aimed at non-Pasifika teachers and designed to overcome their deficit thinking and to ensure they respect the cultures of the students they teach. Arguably these are modest aspirations and should be expected as a baseline of good classroom practice, rather than being seen as able to transform historical patterns of underachievement.

Tapasā

The Tapasā document produced in 2018 is a cultural competency framework designed to support non-Pasifika teachers and leaders of Pasifika learners. Its purpose goes beyond Pasifika learners and includes their families and communities, through strengthening their educational success and wellbeing. The Samoan word 'tapasā' means 'compass' since the document is designed as a navigation guide for teachers and leaders of Pasifika learners. Tapasā "serves a twin purpose of being a guide for teachers as they navigate their own journey of becoming more culturally aware and competent, and as a symbol of the learning pathway that Pacific learners' and their families undertake" (Ministry of Education, 2018, p. 5).

In my experience, assumptions are made by Principals and Boards of Trustees that teachers have read and studied the Tapasā document and framework. Senior school leaders tend to see Tapasā as the answer to Pasifika student failure, even though they may not actually have read it themselves. Schools make limited opportunities available for teacher professional learning on Tapasā, which raises questions about whether they value their Pasifika students and see their success as a priority.

Pasifika teachers and school leaders

There are several aspects to consider: the positive value that Pasifika teachers and school leaders bring to their schools and communities; the myths that have been created about Pasifika teachers and school leaders; and the unrealistic expectations placed on Pasifika teachers and school leaders.

Value

Some of the insider narratives in Vahe Fa went into detail about the positive worth and value of being a Pasifika teacher and school leader. Such members of school staff do not require Tapasā or training in cultural responsiveness. They are not operating from deficit thinking; they believe in the strength and potential of their Pasifika students and their families. Implicit in their skill set is the ability to look past the stereotypes and masks that students wear, to see who they really are. Pasifika teachers and school leaders naturally incorporate Pasifika languages and values in their work and include examples from Pasifika cultures when appropriate in their teaching programmes. They know much more than most of their Palangi peers about their Pasifika communities, who trust them and hold them in the highest esteem.

Myths

Pasifika teachers and school leaders tend to be seen by their Palangi peers and managers as innately and uniquely capable of teaching Pasifika students and enabling them to achieve academic success, even those with significant social problems or histories of behavioural and learning issues. This belief has become a myth that ignores the difference between, on one hand, having high expectations of Pasifika students, and on the other hand, magically overcoming even the most difficult backgrounds. This myth is sometimes internalised by Pasifika students, who may say things like ‘only a Pasifika teacher can teach me’ which is clearly to their own disadvantage.

Unrealistic expectations

Tied up with the above aspects are the unfair and unrealistic expectations placed on Pasifika teachers and school leaders. For example, a dean who happens to be Pasifika may be expected to manage pastoral care and academic advising for *all* the Pasifika students at their school. Schools tend to devolve the responsibility for overcoming Pasifika underachievement onto the shoulders of their few Pasifika staff. The myth of the quick-fix solution to Pasifika education features in the vignette in Vahe Fā titled *The Question* (page 48) in which my colleagues seemed to believe I could find the answer to overcome Pasifika underachievement in a short 16-week study leave break from my role at school.

Pasifika culture, language and values

Beliefs about Pasifika education expressed in education policy and research have changed from seeing Pasifika languages and cultures as drawbacks that disadvantage students, to more recently asserting that Pasifika culture, language and values are essential for students to succeed at school. This understanding is expressed in the Va'atele Framework (Si'ilata et al., 2017) where the metaphor of a double-hulled canoe represents Pasifika students moving forward with both cultures reinforcing each other. It is a 'both-and' rather than 'either-or' concept. The Pacific Languages Strategy was released in 2022 to coordinate support for Pacific languages (see www.mpp.govt.nz/programmes/the-pacific-languages-strategy-2022-2032/). One way the government supports Pacific languages is through the Pacific language weeks, with 12 of these being celebrated in 2025 (see www.mpp.govt.nz/programmes/pacific-language-weeks/).

Pasifika values highlighted in the Pacific Values Framework (PVF, see page 22) include: Alofa, Kuleana, Vaka, Vā and Fonua. Another published version of Pasifika values lists these nine: Belonging, Family, Love, Service, Spirituality, Reciprocal Relationships, Respect, Leadership, and Inclusion (Rimoni et al., 2022). None of these values is unique to the Pacific, but Indigenous cultures, including Pacific and Māori cultures, place more emphasis on these values compared with modern Western culture. As noted above (see page 10) the Tongan values of malie and mafana are indicators of successful classroom practice for teachers of Pasifika students (Manu'atu, 2000).

The teaching profession is still dominated by people who identify with Western cultures, including those who grew up in Aotearoa New Zealand as well as White immigrants from the UK, South Africa and other countries. These teachers are under pressure in today's policy climate to include Pacific languages, cultures and values in their classrooms, even while the impact of socioeconomic disadvantage and the negative effects of systemic racism and stereotyping are ignored.

Pasifika faith in the system

Pasifika people in Aotearoa New Zealand have inherited a history of colonial ideas about the key role of education for future salvation and success, which reinforced traditional hierarchical systems of access to knowledge and power (Mara et al., 1994). Aligned with the strong influence of church among Pasifika communities, these influences result in the tendency for Pasifika

people including teachers and school leaders to put their faith in the education system; to believe in the policies and their efficacy to deliver educational success. These influences make it more likely that Pasifika student failure will be blamed on the student, not the system.

Education is highly valued in most Pasifika households, which makes Pasifika parents reluctant to challenge or question any school decisions concerning their child. Examples in the vignettes include *NCEA Fono* (page 44) where Mr Fifita had not attempted to find out about NCEA despite having four children go through it. Another example is *Experiments* (page 46) where the Pasifika school community had not questioned multiple changes to the timetable structure. Most Pasifika parents believe it's better to say 'yes' than 'no' so as to avoid upsetting Palangi teachers.

Pasifika faith in the system is also aligned with a recognition that Pasifika people are an important part of the national population of New Zealand (Salesa, 2017) who have made significant contributions in sports and arts. However, the over-representation of Pasifika people in poor housing, health and income create doubt and lack of trust in the education system. Stereotypes of Pasifika people as only good for low-paid jobs lower the expectations of Pasifika parents and create doubt about whether their children can succeed at school.

It is time to use these themes and findings to address the research question.

What can my insider perspective add to the research literature on the experiences of secondary Pasifika students?

To address my research question, which is given as the section heading above, I have used my unique insider perspective to comment on and critique the research and policy literature and to unpack the dominant ideas about Pasifika success and failure in secondary schools in Aotearoa New Zealand. I have maintained focus on the underlying socioeconomic cause of Pasifika underachievement and brought attention to myths and misconceptions about Pasifika students assumed and promoted in policy.

What does the literature say?

Examining the research and policy literatures reveals that patterns of Pasifika under-achievement cannot be blamed on students. Pasifika parents have high hopes and dreams for their children to do well at school, but instead they have experienced a history of under-achievement. Changes in Pasifika education since the early 1970s has been of interest to researchers and policymakers and led to a plethora of literature but little empirical evidence

and few clear answers, and the cultural gap between schools and Pasifika homes has been left to take the blame.

My insider perspective

By writing vignettes and personal narratives, I have highlighted myths, assumptions and hidden factors behind the dominant ideas related to the causes and solutions for the under-achievement of Pasifika learners. Racist myths about Pasifika people being less intelligent or less interested in education still exert influence in the secondary school sector. Lack of accountability on the part of school leadership has led to educational frameworks and initiatives being not assessed, brushed over, or passed onto Pasifika staff members to lead. The assumption is that raising Pasifika achievement is the responsibility of Pasifika staff with the support of the school teaching body. This approach, coupled with the impact of ethnic socioeconomic inequality, continues to impede efforts to improve Pasifika achievement.

Vahe Ono: Conclusion

In completing this account of my research, this chapter presents a synopsis of the dissertation and its key findings, limitations and implications for future research. It concludes with a personal reflection on my journey to complete this research, and final thoughts.

Synopsis of the dissertation

The dissertation comprises six chapters, named using the Tongan word 'vahe' and numerals 1-6 followed by the role of the chapter. The Introduction and Methodology chapters define the inquiry and approach, and recount my personal story, the narrative that forms the backbone of the study. The middle chapters, Literature Review and Insider Narratives, contain the non-empirical 'data' or information collected in this research. Critical summaries of research and policy literature describe Pasifika schooling in Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand: how it came into being; the dominant and persistent experience of failure in secondary qualifications; the long list of policies and initiatives over the past 25 years; and some key themes. The Literature Review chapter includes a close reading of the book, *At school I've got a chance*, by Alison Jones. The Insider Narratives chapter has four parts corresponding to four aspects of my professional secondary practice, each part featuring 2-3 fictionalised vignettes or snippets to illustrate experience. The Discussion chapter presents key findings and addresses the research question, and this Conclusion chapter reviews what has been achieved.

Summary of key findings

1. There has been a lot of research and policy on the topic of Pasifika school education, but very little of it is based on solid empirical data.
2. The underlying issue of the wealth disparity for Pasifika families is ignored in policy.
3. Deficit thinking or racism has subtle but real effects in relation to Pasifika secondary schooling.
4. The work done by Pasifika teachers and school leaders goes above and beyond their official roles.
5. Schools claim to support Pasifika students and staff, but those claims often ring hollow when compared with actions such as: lack of support for Polyfest; failure to promote Pasifika teachers to leadership roles; not reading Tapasā nor making time for PLD on Tapasā.
6. Secondary teachers and leaders easily succumb to the idea that their Pasifika colleagues are and can be responsible for the success of all the Pasifika students on the school roll.

7. Pasifika students have the right to see their cultures reflected and respected in their classrooms and school environments, but inclusion of Pasifika cultures, languages and values cannot bring about academic success for Pasifika students.
8. Not only Pasifika parents but also Pasifika teachers tend to believe in the ability of secondary schools and education policies to enable Pasifika learners to achieve success.

Limitations

This research is based on my own experiences and lens, so has a major limitation in that it only provides one single person's perspective on the research topic. It has been a very small study based on non-empirical data and evidence. Nevertheless, because of this personal focus, I have been able to dig deeply into my own experience in a way that could never be achieved by quantitative methods of data collection and analysis.

Implications for future research

There's most definitely a solid case for further exploration of the systemic challenges facing Pasifika secondary school learners in Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand. It would be inspiring and enlightening to read more critical autoethnographies from a wide range of other Pasifika teachers and leaders and hear their stories of working with their Pasifika students.

At the same time, there's also a need for larger scale research on secondary Pasifika education, using other methods such as ethnography and statistics to collect robust data in order to generate findings, theories and policies that are based on solid and reliable evidence. There is also a need to tackle head-on the persistent but often invisible problems of poverty and racism in Pasifika education research and policy.

Personal reflections

Completing this dissertation research project has been easily the most useful professional development of my teaching career. It has been a valuable, enjoyable, challenging journey, in terms of new learnings as well as personal growth, taking me well outside my (former) comfort zone, and causing me to re-evaluate aspects of my own behaviour as a Pasifika person in education. I have had an opportunity for deep reflection on my own tendency to respond by saying 'yes' instead of bringing a critical Tongan perspective into discussions. I think I am now more critical when it comes to encountering different viewpoints.

Choosing the research pathway for completing this Master's degree and following advice I received to undertake autoethnography turned out to be a complete unknown, for which I was not prepared at all, despite my prior assumptions. I have found it difficult trying to separate my personal values from what was required as a researcher. It has been necessary for me to bring everything I had to this research. Gradually I realised that autoethnography has space for me as the researcher to do that—to bring everything, including my own unique Tongan perspective and values. I became aware of bouncing between my own Tongan worldview and the mainstream Palangi worldviews of secondary schools and research. In these ways, autoethnography has made me more self-conscious and more self-connected (see page 14).

Final thoughts

The journey of completing this dissertation has confirmed that writing about Pasifika education is a very complex process with many moving parts. On one hand is the government rolling out policies designed to bridge the achievement gap, and on the other hand are secondary schools operating as solo monopolies to try to create success for their Pasifika learners. All too often, Pasifika children with their fāmili and wider communities are lost in the middle. Research is an opportunity to see the myths that shroud official discourses more clearly. This means research can have a transformational effect on educators like me, who start their research believing everything the Ministry of Education says.

This dissertation is also about honouring the 'ngaue malohi' of previous researchers and academics who have worked so hard to uphold the interests of Pasifika secondary school learners in Aotearoa New Zealand.

In closing it is necessary to return to the underlying reason why we teach, why we take up school leadership positions, why we open ourselves up to critique through research. Our children who are the learners in our schools are the future of our people. We keep on going, we give everything we have for them.

'Ausia kae kisu atu pe'

To be swept away by the current yet still spitting and swimming ahead

(Tongan Proverb)

Glossary of Tongan words

As used in this dissertation

Tongan	English
‘A’alo	Paddling
Ako	School/learning
‘Apongipongi	Tomorrow
‘Etuate	Edward
Fā	Four
Fa’alavelave	Commitments, monetary contribution
Faiako	Teacher
Faka’eke’eke	Explore
Fakafoki	Returned
Fakamalohisino	Training
Fakataha	Meeting
Fāmili	Family
Fiefia	Celebration
Fiema’u	Needed
Foha	Son
Fono	Meeting
Fua kavenga	Family and church monetary commitments
Himi	Hymns
Hoha’a	Worry
Kaha’u	Future
Kalasi	Lessons
Kataki	Please
Kauleka	Children
Kolo	Village
Kumete	Kava bowl
Loto mamahi	Feeling sad
Lotu	Prayer
Mafana	Sense of warmth
Malie	Sense of excitement
Malo ‘aupito	Thank you
Manako	Enjoys
Mate ma’a Tonga	Give everything/die for Tonga
Ngaue malohi	Hard work/ work hard
Nima	Five
Ongomālie	Inspiring and hopeful
Ono	Six
‘Oua	Don’t
Palangi	White New Zealander(s)
Pasifika	Person(s) with Pacific Island origins
Puleako	Principal

Pusiaki/Pusiaki'i	Adopted
Siasi Tonga Konisitutone	Constitution Church of Tonga
Sikolasipi	Scholarship
Taa'i atu	Make contact
Talanoa	Talk/conversation
Tolu	Three
Tu'apo	Late in the evening
Tui	Faith, belief
Ua	Two
'uhinga	Reasons
Va'inga	Game
Vahe	Chapter
Vaka	Ship

Glossary of Māori words

As used in this dissertation

Māori	**English**
Ākonga	Learner/student
Aotearoa	New Zealand
Hui	Meeting
Iwi	Tribe
Māori	Indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand
Matua	Term of address for male teacher
Kura	School
Pākehā	White New Zealander
Te reo me ngā tikanga Māori	Māori language and culture
Tumuaki	Principal
Tumuaki Tuarua	Deputy Principal
Whānau	Family, school community
Whāngai	Adopted

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