

Family knowledge and practices useful in Tongan boys' education

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KEY POINTS

- The *kāinga* (extended family) and the elders are central to understanding the collective aspirations and motivations that define Tongan males' educational identity in New Zealand.
- The value of education for Tongan males in New Zealand is related to each male's position or role within his extended family.
- There are some cultural activities that Tongan males regularly practise in New Zealand within their *kāinga* that highlight areas of strength and knowledge, such as *ngāue fei'umu* (preparing underground food ovens), *va'inga sipoti* (playing sport such as rugby, rugby league, basketball), *pō talanoa* (story telling) with grandparents, *fakafamili* (family prayer), and *faikava* (kava drinking).
- There are key learnings in such cultural education that can be utilised by teachers; for example, learning the importance of service to others, learning to be a good leader, learning teamwork within a group, learning values of loyalty and sacrifice, learning the importance of determination, and learning to value *tauhi vā*.

Pasifika students' cultural knowledge and practices have long had low value in New Zealand schools. It has been argued that culturally responsive teaching practice is a priority for improving the achievement of Pasifika students. Teachers who are culturally responsive in their practice know how to capitalise on the key learnings of Pasifika students that are linked to their cultural values and beliefs. This article seeks to share some cultural knowledge and practices valued by Tongan *kāinga* (extended families), which may help teachers think about how Tongan males operationalise learning in New Zealand schools.

Introduction

I am a secondary school teacher of Tongan descent with some Samoan heritage. I was born in Niue to Tongan parents and raised in New Zealand. I went to school in South Auckland during the 1990s, and after completing my master's degree at the University of Auckland I returned to teach in that community. As the Year 11 academic dean—and in conjunction with the school's academic mentoring programme, which was part of the Starpath Project—my *fatongia* (responsibility) was to monitor student achievement data and implement initiatives that specifically targeted student learning.

The development of the University of Auckland's Starpath Project was driven by a concern that “Māori and Pacific students did not have an equal opportunity to enter and succeed in tertiary education” (University of Auckland, 2013). As a way to improve student outcomes for Māori and Pacific students, Starpath suggested “three-way conferences” for schools to enhance relationships with their Māori and Pacific families and the community. What concerned me during the three-way conference meetings was that discussions and decisions were centred on what students lacked, and what they needed to know in order to do well at school. I worried that even 14 years after Biddulph, Biddulph, and Biddulph's (2003) call for teachers to move away from deficit theorising of Māori and Pasifika students, teachers continued to speak of the Tongan children's deficiencies as the major barriers to their achievement.

Despite the many ways that policies, schools, and teachers have tried to connect with Pasifika students over recent decades, not a great deal of ground has been gained. If the values base of a new policy or programme—or the values of the individuals that enact it—do not align with a Pasifika values base,

it will be inherently problematic. In contrast, a Pasifika values base underpins the Pasifika Education Plan (PEP) (Ministry of Education, 2013). The PEP was created by Pasifika people based on a positive vision. Its aims focus on schools and educators working towards improving outcomes for Pasifika students. The PEP outlines how Pasifika learners' participation, engagement, and achievement in school can be enhanced as schools work towards the vision of students being “secure in their identities, languages, and cultures” (Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 3).

Despite positive goals, as outlined in the PEP, the implementation and practice of its aims are a struggle for schools. Two assumptions are still rife in New Zealand schools: Pasifika children lack knowledge at school, and their parents generally are disengaged. Some schools and teachers feel that Pasifika parents do not support their children appropriately in their education (Spiller, 2012, p. 63). Yet Pasifika parents do, and many choose to migrate to New Zealand precisely for this reason. Some Pasifika parents believe the teacher is the best person to teach and impart content knowledge and that parents should not try to do this, or even have views about it. However, teachers tend to perceive this inaction as parents lacking engagement. Both assumptions are expressions of teachers' limited understanding of cultural responsiveness. One path to cultural responsiveness lies in understanding that families may interpret education differently from teachers (Spiller, 2012, p. 59).

The diverse ethnic groups represented under the term *Pasifika*, plus the additional layer of gender, mean that we cannot assume homogeneity among Pasifika students' enactment of their cultural knowledge and identities. An Education Review Office (2012) report, focused on improving the educational outcomes of Pacific learners, noted that

Pacific learners are far from homogenous, however, as yet, there is little evidence of primary and secondary schools

responding to the diversity, identity, language and cultures of Pacific learners, as envisaged in the PEP. (Education Review Office, 2012, p. 2)

Gender differences must also be attended to by schools (McLellan, 2004). For example, data show that Pasifika boys have poorer NCEA outcomes and are over-represented in stand-down, suspension, exclusion and expulsion statistics (Ministry of Education, 2015). In this article I focus specifically on Tongan boys, and even among this group of students we cannot assume homogeneity.

Culturally responsive practice is promoted by both non-Pasifika and Pasifika teachers and researchers as central to improving Pasifika students' learning in the classroom (Harcourt, 2015; Siope, 2013; Spiller, 2012). However, very little attention has been placed on articulating the kinds of cultural knowledge and practices that Tongan children bring to school to which teachers might be culturally responsive.

Culturally responsive practice and collective cultural identity

Culturally responsive practice takes into account how Pasifika students live and learn (Harcourt, 2015). It requires an understanding of how Tongan people and families live as Tongans in their daily environment, including school. In working out how to succeed in school, Tongan males learn to negotiate their own cultural position and ways of being Tongan within their experiences in the classroom. For some this can have drastic implications, because who they choose to be and what they bring with them into the classroom have little or no value to the teacher (a point argued by Jones in 1991, and more recently others including Milne, 2013).

For teachers with good intentions, being culturally responsive in their practice can be “fraught with challenges of interpretation and translation into practice” (Spiller, 2012, p. 59). Teachers' own underlying and expressed understanding sometimes acts to impede their Pasifika students' learning. Even when teachers' cultural awareness is raised, complex sets of relationships and interactions seem to be hard to change (Spiller, 2012, p. 59). Martyn Reynolds (2017), a non-Pasifika teacher and researcher, claims that teacher learning about Pacific concepts such as *vā*, a relational space where the relationality between students and teachers is articulated and understood, “offers potential for a reframing of Pasifika education where teachers learn about themselves by comparison” (p. 1).

Learning about *vā* allows teachers to

reframe Pasifika education as learning about the self in relation to others [and] shifts [the] focus from teacher personality and makes opportunity, ability, and willingness to learn significant. (Reynolds, 2017, p. 17)

Maintaining the *vā* is a valued practice in Tongan boys' education.

Tongan concepts such as *tauhi vā* (to maintain strong relational ties or connections) that explain the kinds of cultural knowledge and activities valued by the *kāinga* (extended families) are unfamiliar to most teachers in New Zealand. In reporting on my research below I share with teachers the concepts at the heart of the valued knowledge that Tongan boys and their extended families appreciate. Like Cooper, Hedges, Lovatt, and Murphy (2013) in their review of ways to best engage with Pasifika families, I seek to actively provide teachers with information about the knowledge and activities treasured by the *kāinga*, which teachers can utilise in the classroom.

Tongan males' cultural identity in education relates to their sense of belonging in New Zealand. It is a shared collective identity. Tongan elders play an important role in how their sons and grandsons frame their cultural identity. The grandfathers in this study are the holders of the *kāinga's* valued knowledge (Helu, 1995). Embodied within individuals are the cultural resources that come in the form of Tongan language (*lea faka-Tonga*), respect (*faka'apa'apa*), humility (*'ulungāanga faka-tō ki lalo*), relational connections (*tauhi vaha'a*) and responsibility (*fatongia*), which are transmitted to young Tongans as part of their cultural education (Toetu'u-Tamihere, 2014).

In this article I articulate some deeply embedded values and activities that are significant in the lives of Tongan males. I draw attention to knowledge that Tongan boys bring to school but that is currently rarely identified by schools as valuable in the classroom context. As a father of a Tongan boy, and an uncle to many Tongan boys, I have some insight into, and interest in, the ways in which Tongan boys can and do enact their culture. From my doctoral research I share Tongan practices and knowledge that are valued by Tongan families. Readers will find that, far from lacking knowledge and learning that are useful for school success, Tongan boys have plenty of cultural knowledge that can be built on and recognised in schooling. To help our teachers I not only articulate what Tongan valued practice and knowledge look like, but also share how I have gone about gathering and understanding what the families value, as schools may be seeking to learn more from their own Pasifika students' families. In my view, how teachers respond to the values shared in this article determines their capacity to be culturally responsive to Tongan male students.

Research participants, design and key findings

As part of an intergenerational narrative study I explored the educational experiences of three generations of Tongan

males in New Zealand and Tonga. In-depth *talanoa*, or discussions, with three families were carried out (Fa'avae, Jones, & Manu'atu, 2016). Initial *talanoa* was with the grandfather, and through him I gained permission to *talanoa* with other members of his *kāinga*. Despite being the researcher, as respectful practice I mainly sat back and listened and paid close attention to the grandfather's and father's descriptions of their aspirations and expectations for their next generation. On very few occasions I shared my thoughts, but it was not until the second or third *talanoa* that I was able to ask my research questions. Building a relationship of trust and care with them first was key to their sharing their knowledge with me. The findings for each *kāinga* were triangulated using the rich descriptions from every individual involved in the research. Although the grandfather, son, and grandson were the primary participants, other family members were also involved, as decided by the participants themselves.

Tongan males' valued knowledge and practices are manifested in their collective and shared activities in New Zealand. In Figure 1, I summarise the findings in three layers: first, the *kāinga's* shared cultural activities, which then unfold the second layer, the cultural values and beliefs embedded in their collective practices. Finally, in the context of schooling, the third layer relates to the key learnings that emerge from the *kāinga's* activities and values. These six key learnings are considered important for Tongan males to learn, and can be both drawn on and developed by New Zealand schools. While I do not intend to generalise naively, I present my findings in order to give insight into the lives of Tongan boys and men in New Zealand. Anonymity is established by using pseudonyms to describe the three *kāinga*.

Kāinga Simione

- Samiu (grandfather): born and raised in Tonga
- Roger (son): born in Niue and raised in New Zealand (mixed ethnicities)
- RJ (grandson): born and raised in New Zealand (mixed ethnicities)
- Heather (Roger's wife): born and raised in New Zealand.

Kāinga Fatai

- Manase Sr (grandfather): born and raised in Tonga
- Hailame (son): born and raised in Tonga
- Manase Jr and Christopher (grandsons): born and raised in New Zealand
- Lavinia (grandmother): born and raised in Tonga

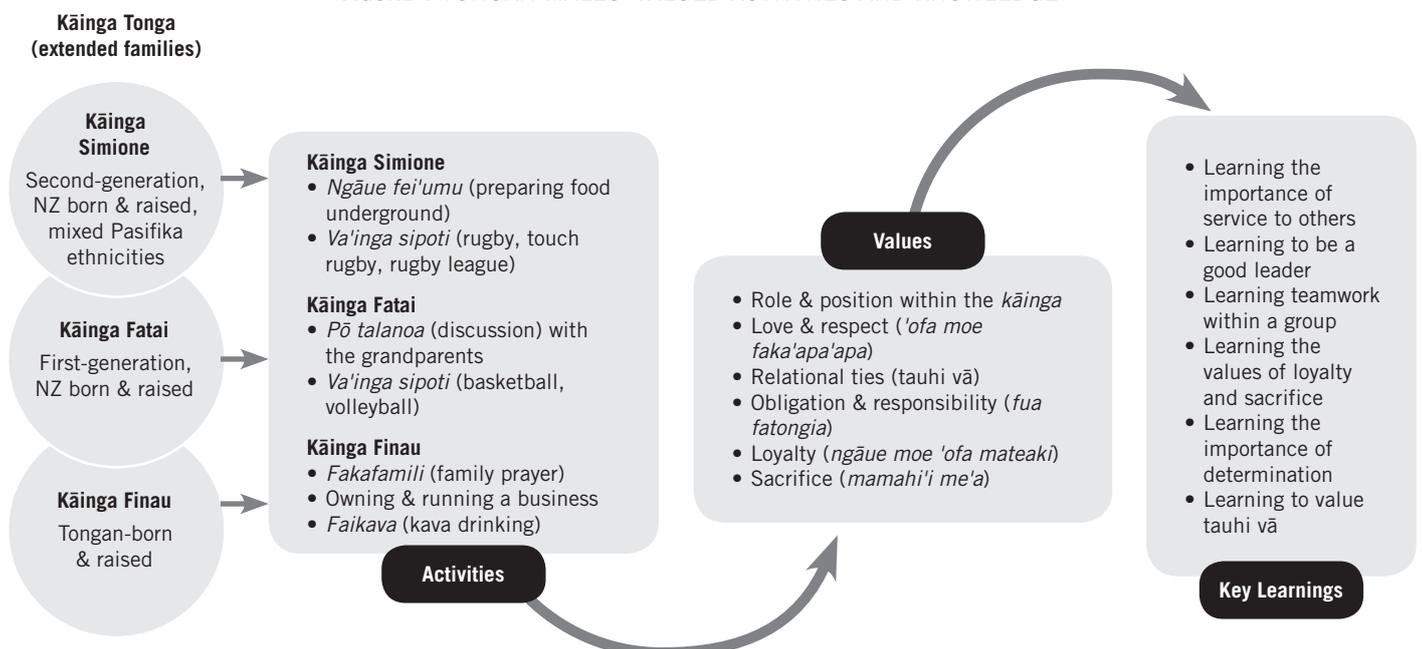
Kāinga Finau

- Viliami (grandfather): born and raised in Tonga
- Paula (son): born and raised in Tonga
- Dante and Miguel (grandsons): born and raised in Tonga

Key learnings

In this section I unfold the kinds of key learnings that are employed by each *kāinga* and that are useful for teachers in the context of formal schooling. While the perceptions of what constitutes Tongan cultural knowledge and practice are diverse and vary from *kāinga* to *kāinga*, the perceived importance of such knowledge and practice for Tongan males' education is shared. The key learnings are symbolic of the valued activities and cultural values that can be utilised by teachers in the classroom (see Figure 1). In what follows I use examples from at least one *kāinga*

FIGURE 1 TONGAN MALES' VALUED ACTIVITIES AND KNOWLEDGE



to illustrate each key learning. Later, I pose reflection questions for school leaders and teachers, and also present an example of classroom or school-wide practice related to each key learning.

Learning the importance of service to others

Learning the importance of service to others is valued within the *kāinga*. It is a worthwhile learning within the church and the wider community. Being part of a collective, each Tongan male has a responsibility within the group. From a young age he learns where he fits and belongs. The families in this study all value service to others and practise this in other areas of their lives. For teachers, utilising Tongan males' ability to serve and work for the greater good of the collective is a worthwhile learning.

Learning to be a good leader

Learning to be a good leader is worthwhile knowledge for Tongan males. Each Tongan male defines education in relation to his roles and responsibilities within his *kāinga* in New Zealand. As a grandfather, father and the *'ulumotu'a* (highest-ranked male), Samiu Simone's responsibility is to ensure his son Roger and grandson RJ are equipped with the knowledge to carry on the role of *'ulumotu'a*. Making them understand their role and responsibilities as the *'ulumotu'a* is Samiu's obligation as the grandfather. For the grandfathers, learning that is worthwhile to the "cultural continuity" (Shipman, 1971, p. 70) of their *kāinga* relies on knowledge and practices that are aligned with their roles as the highest-ranked males.

'A ia 'oku ou fa'a lea pē kia Roger. Ko e me'a kotoa pē, ke ofi 'i hoku tu'a.

'Aho koia te u mate ai, kuo ne 'ilo 'a e me'a totonu ke ne fa'i, he koe fatongia ia 'o e tama'i.

So I always try and talk to Roger. With everything that we do, I want him close to me. When I pass away, he will know what needs to be done. It is my obligation as his father.

Trust and the confidence to be a good leader are emphasised within the Simone *kāinga*. It is not only within 'the family' (understood in Western terms) that valuable learnings occur: the church is usually an extension of the family and *kāinga*, and these groupings cannot be separated. Roger's confidence to be a good leader has grown because of the valuable learning within his church group. As a youth leader within the church, Roger coached touch rugby and tag rugby league. His son RJ also plays rugby and tag rugby league for his high school.

He gained confidence to lead as part of the team. Roger's confidence to lead became cultural capital in high school in the late 1990s, when a teacher valued his ability

and knowledge in sports. Roger's physical education teacher and rugby coach, Mr Peterson, believed in him and gave him the responsibility to coach other players within his first XV rugby team as well as younger players in the lower grades. Mr Peterson not only valued Roger's ability to lead on the rugby field; he also understood the significance of schooling to Roger's family.

Learning to lead as a father and husband and provide for the family is worthwhile knowledge for Tongan males. At the age of 16 Roger married his high-school sweetheart. Months later they gave birth to their first child. As a promising rugby player who made the Auckland and North Island teams, Roger appreciated his first XV coach because he never gave up on him. At school, despite being a young husband and father at the time, Mr Peterson continued to provide Roger with advice that kept his dream of playing rugby alive. Roger eventually made the decision to leave school and work with his uncle in order to provide for his wife and young daughter, but he never forgot Mr Peterson's care and respect for him and his family. This is an example of a teacher who was valued for his ways of working, which aligned with the Tongan values of care and compassion (*'ofa*) and respect (*faka'apa'apa*).

Learning teamwork within a group

Learning from and alongside others within a group is valued learning for Pasifika people (Kēpa & Manu'atu, 2008). Learning with other young boys in a group was worthwhile experience that Hailame Fatai and his brothers valued and capitalised on at a young age during plantation work in Tonga. Even during *kava* drinking (*faikava*), the value of group work was emphasised and practised (Fehoko, 2015). Similarly, for Roger Simone, his brothers and cousins all learnt to rely on each other and gained confidence to complete tasks with assistance from their fathers and uncles.

Although during the *fei'umu* food is now prepared in huge gas ovens instead of underground, working in groups is still a necessary task. Groups of boys in Roger's *kāinga* are often allocated specific tasks during the *fei'umu*, such as peeling food crops like taro and cassava, gathering and assembling rocks and firewood, and gutting and cleaning pigs before they are placed on the spit. Rarely is an individual allocated a task on their own until he has mastered the requirements. Even then, that particular male has a responsibility to teach and pass on his knowledge to others in his *kāinga*. RJ, Roger's son, appreciates hanging out and learning from his father and uncles.

Learning values of loyalty and sacrifice

Loyalty and sacrifice are key values passed down the generations in Tongan *kāinga*. Learning to make sacrifices

and take risks are attributes Paula Finau acquired from his grandmother, Mele, and his mother, Lātū. His sons, Dante and Miguel, learnt from their father's own struggles at school. This provided motivation for the boys to work hard at their single-sex school in the South Island. During family prayers (*fakafāmilī*) on Sundays they were often reminded to act wisely and responsibly. They were encouraged to persevere with their schooling. Despite some teachers at their high school ignoring Dante and Miguel's needs in the classroom, the boys continued to practise respect (*faka'apa'apa*) and maintain respectful relationships (*tauhi vā*) with the teachers because they value their parents' sacrifices to send them to New Zealand for better educational opportunities.

Dante and Miguel are aware of their father's aspirations for them to finish their high school education. Paula's expectation is for the boys to continue with tertiary studies in New Zealand and eventually return to Tonga. As described by Miguel, his father's aspiration is for him to take over the family business.

'Uluaki pe ke lava lelei 'a e akō. Te u ha'u leva ke feinga ke fakalele 'a e pisinisi. Ko 'ene taumu'a ke tatau mo ia, ka e feinga ke to e laka angē i ai. Pea to e ha'u 'o fakalele 'a e pisinisi 'o to e sai ange.

The first thing is to succeed at school. And then come and try to run the business. His goal is for him to be like us, but better than us. And then come and run the business so that it can be even better.

Learning the importance of determination (*loto-ma'u mo loto-feinga*)

Learning determination is important for Tongan boys and can be put to the test in schooling, for better or worse. Learning to “give it his all” is worthwhile learning for Hailame Fatai. Although Hailame struggled with his studies at the University of Auckland, his father's teachings always reminded him, “*ke fai 'aki hono 'osi'osingamālie*” (to always give it his all). He was determined to finish his university degree because his parents and extended family had invested a lot in him. Hailame learnt from his parents not to give up—even when things appeared difficult.

Manase Jr Fatai was a Year 12 student at a predominantly Pasifika school in Auckland. He wanted to succeed like his father Hailame. Even though he felt pressured to do well at school like his father, Manase Jr relies on his grandparents and aunt to support and remind him of his responsibility to lead and guide his younger cousins. Having passed NCEA Level 1 with a Merit endorsement in 2014, he was determined to complete high school and join the army. To deal with the pressures of school, he turned to basketball. He also learnt to find guidance from God.

I'm thinking about going into the military. My grandad was in the police. Something like that I'd like. Respect and discipline and stuff—I need that. I've been told to stop and ask God if I'm stuck ... I feel good afterwards. My Sunday school teachers told me this, and my parents.

Unlike his cousin, Christopher Fatai went to an affluent all-boys school in Auckland. He found strength and determination to deal with the struggles at school from his grandfather's sacrifices. Christopher's experience with a teacher's deficit views of Tongan people showed him that not all teachers thought highly of him. His English teacher's decision to show a negative YouTube clip of a senior prefect disciplining a student at a school in Tonga indicated to Christopher her lack of awareness and care for him as a Tongan. As a result, he felt embarrassed and disengaged from the lesson.

Learning to value tauhi vā

Learning to maintain strong relational ties or connections (*tauhi vā*) based on care and trust is valued knowledge for Tongan males in accordance with their roles and responsibilities in Tongan society (Helu, 1995). This valuable learning is observed when Tongan males successfully maintain important relationships with others in their *kāinga* as well as in the community. The grandfathers in this study are respected for their wisdom and care and play an important role in maintaining relationships within the *kāinga*. Maintaining respectful relationships with Manase Sr and Lavinia Fatai is worthwhile learning for both Manase Jr and Christopher because they value the discussions (*pō talanoa*) with them. As described by Manase Jr, he loves and respects his grandfather because of the man that he is. He described his grandfather as honest and hard working in all aspects of his life. Manase Jr and Christopher value their relationship with their grandparents.

Relational ties (*tauhi vā*) between Pasifika students and teachers go along with high levels of trust (Hill & Hawk, 2000). Christopher trusted Mr Fei, an Asian teacher in his 60s who was “fair and just” in his practice, regardless of students' ethnic backgrounds. Mr Fei looked after the Tongan group at Polyfest, and also taught Christopher mathematics, which Christopher enjoyed and succeeded in. This is another example of teacher practice that works well.

Conclusion

The cultural education of Tongan males is diverse, and its key purpose is to benefit the *kāinga*. I have suggested here some aspects of Tongan students' cultural activities and knowledge from home to which teachers and school leaders can be responsive in the classrooms and schools. I have

shared with teachers some Tongan concepts that are useful to bear in mind because they highlight key values and practice from Tongan extended families. Like Reynolds (2017), I encourage the use of Tongan (or other Pacific) concepts like *vā* because they allow teachers to reframe

Pasifika education as learning about the self in relation to others ... [and it] shifts [the] focus from teacher personality and makes opportunity, ability, and willingness to learn significant. (p. 7)

Thinking using Tongan concepts addresses teachers' "challenges of interpretation and translation into practice" (Spiller, 2012, p. 59). If teachers are willing to do so then it will place them in a better position to support Pasifika students and be praised for students' success. Moreover, when teachers engage in learning that appreciates and values the *kāinga's* knowledge from home, they are more likely to realise culturally responsive practice in the classroom.

To conclude, I would like to offer a reflection question and an example of schooling practice in order to help teachers harness and further develop each of the key learnings. When teachers recognise such key learnings in aspects of teaching and learning, as well as in school-wide programmes, positive outcomes for Tongan males become far more likely.

Learning the importance of service and leadership

Reflection question for school leaders

- How can we as a school connect student leadership/prefect systems and leadership experiences to Tongan values and practice?

Example of practice

Initiate a school-wide programme where senior Tongan male prefects and young Tongan boys in the junior school work together and each are taught their *fatongia* (obligation/ responsibility). Ensure that students are aware of the collective goal and that they are working towards achieving this. The values of *loto 'ofa* (love and care), *faka'apa'apa* (respect), and *mamahi' i me'a* (sacrifice) are central to the practice of service and leadership.

Learning the importance of determination

Reflection question for classroom teachers

- How can I set up learning situations that reflect practices within the *kāinga*, and how might these support Tongan students' learning?

Example of practice

Family or biographical stories often provide rich qualitative data for classroom teachers. Teachers are

encouraged to find out more about Tongan students and their nuclear family as well as their *kāinga*. Learning more about Tongan males' grandparents or key elders in their *kāinga* is useful learning, not only for the teacher but also for the students themselves.

Learning values of loyalty and sacrifice

Reflection question for classroom teachers

- How can I incorporate an explicit focus on Tongan students' values into my classroom practice and relationships with students? And, how can I use Tongan concepts in my lessons?

Example of practice

Selecting appropriate content material is important because it can potentially affect students' learning in your class—either positively or negatively. Incorporating Tongan concepts or values into your lesson can engage your Tongan male (and female) students in the learning.

Learning to value tauhi vā

Reflection question for school leaders

- How can we build and strengthen the *tauhi vā* (relational connection) with Tongan families, such that it is based on mutual trust, respect, and care? And how can we improve our ways to connect with Tongan (or Pasifika) values and practice?

Example of practice

Schools are encouraged to review their pastoral systems, particularly in the reporting of students' behaviour. What you tell families and the way you tell them are both valued practices in Tongan families. Visiting families' homes is more appropriate than a phone call, because it shows that teachers care. Consider both when attempting to reach out to families. This is appropriate in *tauhi vā* (relational connection). Also, include the grandparents or other elders within the *kāinga* as sources of support for the students.

Learning teamwork within a group

Reflection question for classroom teachers

- How can I utilise cooperative group tasks or team work situations in the classroom that enable Pasifika students to learn from and support each other?

Example of practice

Co-operative group tasks are significant for Tongan males. When they are part of a group (e.g., sports teams, cultural groups) they thrive in the environment if each is explicitly made aware of their role (*fatongia*) and responsibility. Teachers can achieve this in the classroom

by initially profiling Tongan students based on their position and role in their kāinga.

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