

# CHAPTER 13

## **The place of ako in strengthening home-school relationships for Pasifika secondary learners in Aotearoa/New Zealand**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores connections between ako and home-school relationships for secondary Pasifika students in Aotearoa/New Zealand. It discusses how ako, a Tongan concept of learning that encompasses cultural continuity (Thaman, 1997), can be supported through closer connections between schools and families. Good practice in home-school relationships advocates collaboration and reciprocity between teachers and families (Bull, Brooking, & Campbell, 2008). Such good practice helps with an exchange of knowledge, thereby enabling teachers to develop their understanding of the cultural perspectives of families. An appreciation of the Pacific concept of va further endorses how strengthening home-school relationships can promote cultural understanding as highlighted in ako.

My doctoral study, which has explored home-school relationships for secondary Pacific learners, has been informed by an Appreciative Inquiry process (which recognises good practices). I have been able to draw out a number of strengths both from Pasifika families and the community, and from the schools. These strengths reflect a shared vision to see all Pasifika young people succeed in school. An analysis of findings also suggests there may be some areas for further development in terms of relationship-building between schools, Pasifika families, and the community.

This paper concludes that an Appreciative Inquiry model could be an effective tool schools can adopt to help strengthen home-school relationships, facilitating the process of ako, and, consequently, supporting students' successful learning outcomes.

### **Introduction**

In this paper, I set out to explore connections between ako and home-school relationships for Pasifika secondary learners in Aotearoa/New

Zealand. I draw upon my understanding of ako from Professor Konai Thaman's work (1997, 2008), where she reflects on what learning means in Tongan society. This helps me to consider what kind of learning may be relevant for Pasifika students in a New Zealand context, and how families might best be able to support this kind of learning. I argue that strong relationships between home and school can be enormously beneficial for students, and I draw upon my understanding of the Pacific concept of va to support this idea. This then leads to a discussion of Appreciative Inquiry (AI), and how I incorporated AI into my research design for a doctoral study. I aim to show how AI has the potential to strengthen home-school relationships and, thereby, enhance the quality of ako and successful learning experiences for Pasifika learners in New Zealand.

This paper is, therefore, divided into the following sections where I discuss:

- My positioning
- Ako with its relevance to home-school relationships and its connection to va
- Appreciative Inquiry (AI) with an explanation of the 4-D cycle (a way of putting AI into practice), an account of how AI supported my doctoral study, and a word of warning about its implementation.

I finish with concluding comments which, overall, recommend AI as a tool for promoting ako through the development of home-school relationships.

## **My positioning**

I would like to qualify that my background is European. Originally from England, I came to teach in New Zealand ten years ago. As such, I cannot explain from first-hand experience what ako means as I clearly do not belong to any Pacific culture. Instead, I enter this discussion as someone who has taught Pasifika (including Tongan) students in a New-Zealand context, and who has wondered how best to engage with students and their families whose cultural backgrounds are different to mine. This has led to my current doctoral journey, in which I am exploring how relationships between home and school for Pasifika secondary learners in New Zealand can enhance students' successful learning outcomes.

I appreciate that our understanding of the world is subject to the contexts in which we find ourselves. I align myself to a social constructionist worldview which acknowledges the existence of multiple realities (see for example, Gergen & Gergen, 2004; Shotter, 2013).

As we enter into dialogue with others, we continually edit and adapt our interpretation of the world around us. This means that our understanding evolves through the relationships and interactions in which we engage, so that we always have the opportunity to learn as we appreciate different perspectives. In relation to home-school relationships for Pasifika students in New Zealand, my understanding has evolved through interaction with the Tongan concept of *ako*. This paper explores the development of these thoughts, supporting my personal growth as I engage with Pacific concepts and consider how best to support Pasifika learners within the New Zealand education system.

## **Ako**

The Tongan concept of *ako*, Thaman (1997) explains, refers to the ongoing process of learning. Someone, who has successfully experienced *ako*, can be said to be *poto* – someone who has acquired the skills and knowledge to be able to serve family and community well. Thaman (1997) acknowledges, however, that it has come to be associated with the formal education system whereby a focus on the acquisition of qualifications becomes the priority. Whilst this may well facilitate an educated person to be in the position to effectively support family and community, I appreciate Thaman's concerns; this is a Westernised approach which protracts the cultural richness of indigenous groups (1997). She reminds us of the importance of cultural continuity; that *ako* originally referred to the kind of learning which supported skills and knowledge necessary for survival in Pacific Island countries (p. 122). Extending this argument, I draw on Thaman (2008) to encompass a broader understanding of cultural continuity. She reminds us of the importance of the education system in supporting students' cultural identity. For instance, she emphasises the relational way that members of Tongan society interact with one another and the danger of a Western education system which prioritises personal achievement, thereby undermining a Tongan worldview (Thaman, 2008).

Thaman (2008) argues that, if learners are to operate with confidence across cultures, they need to be knowledgeable about and confident in their own families' culture. However, she is concerned that cultural identity has been eroded through the formal education system in countries like Tonga where Westernised worldviews have been superimposed (Thaman, 2008). Nakhid (2003) validates this argument concerning students who identify with Pacific cultures and who are educated in the New Zealand education system. Her research has captured the struggle for personal identity which such students may face within the New Zealand schools.

A lack of identity can erode confidence and, consequently, negatively impact upon successful academic outcomes. Thaman's discussion of ako has served well, therefore, in reminding us of the dual responsibility of an education system to promote both students' cultural identity and formal achievements. The successful accomplishment of the latter is, in actuality, dependent upon the inclusion of the former. This is just as relevant for students in a New Zealand context as it is for the learners in Tonga to whom Thaman refers.

### **The relevance of ako for home-school relationships**

Ideally, home-school relationships might operate in such a way that they support students' successful learning experiences as highlighted through Thaman's definition of ako. Families may not only help schools to connect with students' cultural backgrounds but they may also work with teachers to support students' learning beyond the classroom. If schools are able to nurture their relationships with families, families can play a valuable role in helping students to achieve successful learning outcomes. Research literature advocates such support with the claim that effective home-school relationships, across diverse contexts, can have a positive effect on student achievement (Bull, Brooking, & Campbell, 2008, Jeynes, 2007). In the New Zealand context, ERO (the Education Review Office which reviews educational provision) has confirmed through a document analysis that positive links between home and school for Pasifika learners contribute to positive academic outcomes (ERO, 2013).

Whilst different contexts call for different ways in which teachers and families might work together for the benefit of the students, Bull et al. (2008) have drawn together some generic conclusions on effective practices. In their literature review on "Successful home-school partnerships" (which includes both international and New Zealand case studies), they note the importance of "collaborative and mutually respectful" relationships. Acknowledging the influence of families on learning, communication between home and school should be "two-way". Schools should also be "responsive" to the needs of the community, and ensure that home-school practices are well-planned, embedded into the school system and focused on learning (Bull et al., 2008, p. 1). A key point is that, if home-school relationships are to effectively support students' learning, then clarity is required on the learning focus. Relationships hinge on this understanding. Thaman's description of ako helps draw attention to the learning focus – where the promotion of cultural identity underpins the journey towards formal qualifications (Thaman, 1997). Families are well positioned, in this

regard, to give their support.

### **Va in home-school relationships**

Furthermore, the Tongan concept of *va*, as identified by Thaman (2008), adds an extra dimension to the meaning of “mutually respectful” relationships between home and school. The Tongan worldview, in prioritising relationships over individuality, emphasises the need to inculcate respect when relating to others so that trust and harmony are achieved through appropriate conduct. The value placed in nurturing relationships is also common in other Polynesian cultures, as exemplified by the Samoan notion of “*teu le va*” – meaning to look after and protect the space that connects one person to another (Airini & Mila-Schaaf, 2010). Airini and Mila-Schaaf (2010) provide advice on recommended practices related to the forming of relationships in Pasifika education research. For those of us who are developing our understanding of Pacific notions and philosophies, we can appreciate how the nature of the relationship defines the quality of desired outcomes. Taking this discussion further, Māhina (2008) links the Tongan notion of *va* (space) to *ta* (time); he explains how Tongan people contemplate the past as they negotiate the present, since what has happened in the past informs what might happen in the future. Thus, a shared understanding of past experiences, formed through the unfolding of relationships in the present, helps forge an understanding of the way forward. A focus on future student targets, without acknowledging the capacity of the present to discuss the past, may not lead to successful results. As Māhina (2008) suggests, a linear path to decision-making (common to the Westernised school system) does not encapsulate the power of a circular concept of time where story-telling invokes the past to guide the future. Nurturing the *va*, it seems, is a critical process and schools would benefit from practices which enhance the relationship space when teachers are interacting with families.

Teachers may require the knowledge, skills, and time to develop such relationships with families. As Bull et al. (2008) argue, home-school partnerships are effective when there is reciprocity, and communication runs in both directions. Teachers need to listen to parents and understand the needs of the community, as much as families need to listen to teachers and understand the world of school (Flavell, 2017). Of course, each school context is unique. Home-school policies cannot be universally applied but recommendations, such as those from Bull et al. (2008), require a careful consideration as to how they may come into effect. How one school might plan to nurture relationships with families may or may

not work for another. The key is for schools to consider how they can best implement collaborative and respectful relationships with families which will engender successful learning opportunities for the students. This requires consultation. If home-school policies are planned by the schools for the benefit of families but without engaging in home or community relationships when forming policy, then relationships may be compromised. This is inconsistent with the recommended good practice on home-school partnerships and with the principles of *teu le va* (Airini & Mila-Schaaf, 2010; Bull et al., 2008).

For this reason, I turn to the Appreciative Inquiry model as a way that schools, families, and the community might work together to create collaborative practices that support the process of *ako* within schools.

### **Appreciative Inquiry**

Cooperrider (1986) proposed the idea of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) when considering how action research might deliver worthwhile change in organisations once the focus is moved away from problems. He was concerned that a diagnosis of problems might just deliver short-term solutions that support the existing system, rather than questioning the system itself. Such a narrow focus could inhibit creativity, prohibiting a flow of generative ideas that has the potential to deliver a fresh approach. He, therefore, proposed that we consider the power of human interaction when experiences are shared and when engagement in meaningful and creative dialogue is encouraged (Cooperrider, 1986). Thus, the idea of AI emerged as an alternative way to conduct action research.

As its title suggests, the emphasis is on appreciating the best in people through a systematic inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000). It is both a philosophical approach which appreciates the potential for vitality and energy in human relationships, and a methodological practice that can be applied to diverse contexts involving organisational change and human development. AI is firmly embedded within a social constructionist worldview, accepting a subjective reality where an understanding of the world can only be gained through relationships (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000, p. 5).

### **The 4-D cycle**

A recommended methodological approach for actioning the philosophical aims of AI is that of the 4-D cycle (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000). The 4-D cycle provides specific guidelines which can facilitate practical situations

like, for example, how teachers and families might work together in order to support the learning process for students:

- The first D is for the discovery phase. This is an opportunity to discover what strengths can be found within individuals or within the organisation; it is a chance to share stories of success and positive experiences, and to explore important values.
- The second D is for the dream phase. Here participants can identify key themes which they believe are essential for the creation of success. Participants can use their imagination and be aspirational in thinking of what would be ideal.
- The third D is for design. In this phase, participants collaborate on rethinking values and processes which could turn their aspirational ideas into reality. It is an opportunity to create a shared vision through collective discussion. This phase could generate a provocative statement which crystallises the vision that participants collectively want to take forward.
- Finally, the destiny phase allows participants to embark on planning for the future, considering specific actions which work towards the desired vision. The word “destiny” is carefully selected over the word “delivery” to denote the possibilities for real transformation when there is a collective affirmation to adopt new pathways (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000).

The word “cycle” reminds us that this is an iterative process that can be applied to diverse contexts in order to encourage creative and constructive thinking (Finegold, Holland, & Lingham, 2002). The process has the potential to encourage commitment from individuals who can step up and work towards a shared vision, thereby channelling their creative energy towards positive outcomes for the greater good.

### **My doctoral study**

In my own doctoral study on exploring relationships between home and school for Pasifika secondary learners in New Zealand, I drew on the 4-D cycle to support fieldwork. I conducted this study in a rural town in New Zealand which has two high schools with approximately ten per cent of the student population identifying as Pasifika. The discovery and dream phases enabled me to gather rich data, as participants (Pasifika parents, students, and their teachers) engaged with the topic of home-school relations. As Michael (2005) discovered (with her fieldwork with NGO



directors in Africa), a positive framing of questions is non-threatening. An AI focus permits the interviewees to celebrate, appreciate, and share what has enthused them. In my study, parents appreciated the commitment of teachers, teachers appreciated how hard some parents worked to support Pasifika students, and students valued support from both home and school. An overall finding that emerged was that the participants valued working together to support the career goals and learning needs of the students. Students tended to emphasise personal responsibility; parents generally emphasised the collective nature of decision-making, stressing the importance of being involved in important decisions related to their children's education; and teachers emphasised the value of closer cultural connections between home and school. Some participants acknowledged that a further strengthening of relationships between home and school would be beneficial. In particular, participants saw a need to help develop home-school relations for those families who were very busy and who did not understand the school system that well.

Since I was not in a position of responsibility, I could not implement the whole 4D cycle. The latter phases, design and delivery, rely on opportunities for shared decision-making and joint action planning which, in my role as researcher, I was unable to initiate. However, I did co-construct a report with some of the participants, and then present the findings from this report back to the schools and to members of the Pasifika community. Recommendations included: a working party to operate across the schools and Pasifika community to share good practice; further professional development for the schools; and a joint approach between the schools and the community to negotiate funding for a co-ordinator to support links between home and school. I hoped the report would be useful so that the schools and Pasifika families could potentially work together to progress ideas and actions. I take heart with a conclusion reached by Grant and Humphries (2006) in their Appreciative Inquiry-led research on Boards of Trustees in New Zealand schools. Whilst unable to confirm if the final phases of the 4-D cycle had come to fruition, they did feel that they had been able to "create something new" through the discussions they triggered (p. 412). Seen in this light, I hope that I was able to facilitate fruitful dialogue.

### **A word of warning**

An important point to raise when implementing AI is that it has been criticised for its emphasis on the positive with the claim that significant problems are overlooked. It has been argued that this could render it ineffective as



a means of actioning change or enabling insightful evaluation (Grant & Humphries, 2006; Patton, 2003). It may appear to deliver empowerment by listening to voices; but, if there is no space to raise concerns, then the existing structures are maintained and the opportunity for people to express what they are feeling has been denied. This need not be the case, however. It is important to honour all viewpoints (Fitzgerald, Oliver & Hoxsey, 2010). The delivery of the 4-D cycle does provide opportunity for participants to work through any issues as they ponder the ideal dream scenario (Patton, 2003). When problems are raised, it does not necessarily lead to an exacerbation of them; instead, the sharing of concerns can be framed in such a way that it acts as a precursor to agreeing positive intent for planning a brighter future (Grant & Humphries, 2005). Indeed, I did find that participants needed to talk about what concerned them. It seemed to be an important process for them to go through before they envisioned what ideal home-school relationships might look like.

### **Concluding comments**

An AI process emphasises the capacity for inclusive relationships to bring about collaborative and positive outcomes. It not only has the potential to expand the capabilities of an organisation but also the individuals within it. If an AI model were to be applied to a home-school context, it could be used to facilitate discussion between families and teachers so that effective ways of working together are formulated. Contextualised discussion could encourage forward-looking, creative, and collaborative ideas with the potential to energise current home-school practices. Furthermore, such discussion provides opportunity for developing va, and shows alignment with recommended practices for effective home-school partnerships (Bull et al., 2008). If schools are committed to working with families in order to strengthen students' cultural connections and formal achievements (as highlighted through Thaman's discussion of ako), then AI may be a tool worth considering to facilitate these endeavours.

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