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TE HAUTAKA MĀTAURANGA O WAIKATO

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SPECIAL SECTION 2007: *Creative Research in the Arts*

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This special section focuses on creative research in the arts, opening the door to multiple ways of representing research in the area of creative arts in education. In order to celebrate the creativity that is an inherent part of the creative arts field, the journal welcomes submissions in non-traditional formats such as personal narratives, short stories, poetry, images and cartoons, as well as more traditional manuscripts such as reviews of knowledge in the field, theoretical approaches to research, analyses of recent curriculum developments, pedagogical innovations or issues and recent research findings. Depending upon the submissions accepted for this special issue, a CD may also be published for submissions such as photographs, illustrations, moving images, etc. Researchers are welcome to contact the Special Section Editor regarding ideas for specific submissions.

Please note that the *Waikato Journal of Education* publishes material of general interest to a range of academics and teachers in the field of Education. Manuscripts should follow APA (fifth edition) for referencing, not normally exceed 6,000 words (although shorter texts are welcome) and be submitted electronically to the Special Section Editor: Dr Karen Barbour (karenb@waikato.ac.nz) or by mail to: Editors, the *Waikato Journal of Education*, School of Education, The University of Waikato, Private Bag 3105, Hamilton, New Zealand.

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EDUCATION JOURNEY: TERE API'I KI AOTEAROA¹

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The National Heart Foundation*

ABSTRACT *The following pe'e (chant) from Mangaia speaks to me from Avaiki. I have chosen it to express the journey of my education, and also that of other Cook Islands students studying at the University of Waikato. Most of us leave our beloved family, our village, our island, to study overseas for better opportunities in New Zealand and other parts of the world. Our supporters include our parents back home, the Cook Islands government, the people we meet, our friends, our mentors, our families here in New Zealand and ourselves. This pe'e is about learning new skills, furthering our knowledge and developing our own beliefs to help us navigate our way through the challenges of life. Our journey connects us with our ancestors who learned all the skills of navigation as they traveled from one destination to another across Te Moana Nui o Kiva (Pacific Ocean). The journey of my ancestors is rooted in mythology, in history, in memories and in shared experiences. Their journey is not just travel. It embodies new ways of thinking and new ways of learning. I think the journey of Cook Islands students at the University of Waikato is history repeating itself, mirroring the journey when we arrived here with so much excitement and fear of the unknown. This article describes some of the challenges and the opportunities discovered on the path that these students have pursued.*

KEYWORDS

Cook Islands students, Tertiary education, Language difficulty, Cultural barriers

PE'E-CHANT

“Opuopu te uru e no Mangaia e”
No Mangaia!
Kua pueke te a'i vaenga moana
Ki te ata kurakura
Akamou te tira ia tumu te 'oe
Kia inga vekuveku te tere I to vaka I te 'itinga ra

The hills of Mangaia are lost to sight
Alas Mangaia!
Torches light our pathway over the sea
Where the ruddy sun went down
Set the sail and paddle thy journey
That your canoe forges relentlessly ahead to the rising sun

INTRODUCTION

I was raised in Mangaia in the Cook Islands and travelled to New Zealand at the age of 23 with the dream of obtaining a tertiary education. My journey to complete my Bachelor's degree has taken seven years and I have learnt a lot along the way. I have faced the challenges of studying in New Zealand with limited knowledge and resources, and have given in to, as well as resisted, some of the distractions of Aotearoa. I continue to draw on strength from my family, my mentors, my supporters and myself. During my journey I have met other students from different backgrounds including the Pacific. Some of these were successful in their path to education and some were not.

In 2001, there were a total of 231,801 Pacific peoples in New Zealand, making up 6.2% of the total population of New Zealand. Of these, 23% identified as Cook Islanders – the second largest Pacific Islands community in New Zealand after Samoan (Statistics New Zealand, 2003). As of July 2000, 3.4% of New Zealand university students were Pacific peoples. Given the younger age structure of the Pacific peoples, this statistic is a positive one. In 2000, 462 Cook Islands people were enrolled at New Zealand universities, which represents only 11% of all Pacific peoples at New Zealand universities (Ministry of Education, 2003b). There is developing evidence that those Pacific students who do enrol at tertiary institutions have the lowest retention rates (Ministry of Education, 2003a).

Students of Pacific ethnicity remain at school to the same age as non-Pacific students but leave with the least qualifications. In the 2001 census, analysis of the highest qualifications obtained indicated that 41% of Pacific peoples in New Zealand aged 15 years and over had not obtained a qualification, 54.5% had obtained a school qualification (in New Zealand or overseas) as their highest qualification and 4.5% had obtained a bachelor or higher degree (compared to 12.5% of all New Zealanders). Cook Islands women were slightly more likely to have obtained some form of educational qualification than their male counterparts (Statistics New Zealand, 2003). Of the total Pacific peoples living in the Waikato, 4,353 (41%) are Cook Islands people (an overrepresentation). In 2003, there were 396 Pacific peoples enrolled at the University of Waikato (University of Waikato, 2003). This number is high enough to have an impact on university life, and this group deserves some study of their well-being. However, I was unable to find the exact numbers who identify themselves as Cook Island people. During my academic journey, I have met very few Cook Islands students who like myself were completing tertiary education. This suggests to me that although they are overrepresented in the Waikato, Cook Islands people are considerably underrepresented at the region's university. This personal observation is a reflection of the poor rates of enrolment and retention by Cook Islands students at university in New Zealand.

THE EDUCATION JOURNEY OF COOK ISLANDS STUDENTS (In video form)

As part of an assignment during the third year of my studies, I made a video about the experience of five Cook Islands students at the University of Waikato (Atatoa, 2003). Three of these students were born in Aitutaki and two were born in the Waikato. Four out of five of these students speak Cook Islands Māori. It is the first language for the three students born in the Cook Islands. All students were full-time; their ages ranged from 19 to 55 plus years. One student was on a scholarship. I asked them what drove them to go to university, what were the difficulties and barriers, and what supported their studies?

Three themes emerged from these discussions. The first theme was that personal and family support was central to what drove them to embark on tertiary study and to what kept them going. The second theme was the common barrier of language difficulty. The third theme was the cultural barrier to asking for help. In telling their stories, I have used their voices and I have also included my own experiences.

PERSONAL AND FAMILY SUPPORT

All five students had very different experiences, and the question about “what drove you to tertiary study?” made this very clear. They all referred to the influence of family. One of the students said that she wanted:

To be a good example to my sister ‘cos I’m the oldest. I think I wanted to prove to a lot of people back home that I’m capable, I can do it, ‘cos there were quite a few back home that actually ... looked down at me or looked down at my parents and so I thought I’m going to show them that, you know, though my parents didn’t make it further than ... 3rd form or 4th form, I can do it for them, you know? That’s the main thing that drove me here.

Another of the students said that she was “driven by making a difference, how can I make a difference to the community that I live in; for example, my mother, my husband, my children, my family”. She added:

When I look at them and the hardship they went through when they first arrived in New Zealand, you know, they worked their guts out and they had no education.

For two of the other students, a family member who had been at university was influential; an older sister for one of them, and for another there were teachers in the family and so he decided to study teaching. For all of the students, their families were supporting them financially (as well as emotionally and sometimes spiritually) through their studies. All students also spoke of the personal support by individual lecturers as a reason why they persevered with their studies. One commented:

My lecturer, she was a great encouragement to me ‘cos in fact it was her sincere manner and encouragement that inspired me, that it is

possible to stay in this study. And she gave me resources or guided me to say that if you're looking for this you've got to go to this, and I made sure that I found it there. And if I didn't, I'd ask. And that was my pattern of learning.

There is a message here. These students, and their lecturers, had all found a way around the potentially impersonal nature of a university. Their support came from family and people in the university who took an interest. In these cases, their support did not come from a formal community of Cook or Pacific Islanders in the university or the wider community of Hamilton City.

Three of the students mentioned the need for greater support from the Cook Islands community of Hamilton City. Many of the students lacked close family. This key link is important for the sense of belonging of the students and for their happiness. They instead created a strong bond with each other.

I was driven to university study by a combination of all of these things. In Mangaia, my papa (grandfather) was always encouraging others and me in my family to attend university and I was also inspired by an elder brother and a sister who attended university before me. I did not attend university straight from school. Instead, I travelled to Rarotonga to work and then came to New Zealand to study and get a better job. I wanted to prove to myself and to those back home that I could do it. I also wanted to inspire my own daughter. I found great support from my partner in New Zealand who was experienced in New Zealand life and in the university system – how to study, where to go for help and the little things that made a difference to me finishing or not finishing my degree.

LANGUAGE DIFFICULTY

When I asked the Cook Islands students that I interviewed what made it difficult, or what were the barriers, two replied that it was the fear of the unknown. One of them linked this to language difficulties. All students commented on language:

I know I speak English well, but when it comes to writing it down, yeah, it's like all those big words that I've never heard before and then I have to go and like look in the dictionary every time ... Writing essays, you have to have an introduction and ... oh my goodness.

It was not just the barriers of converting language from talking to writing, or from a first language of Cook Islands Māori to English. As one of the students put it, it is the further language shift to academic English:

There's also the language barrier. Turning English into English you know. Let alone worry about English into Māori ... English to English. You're talking academic English here. Completely different to conversational. So we have to shift again.

For me, language issues were also a factor. This involved not being prepared because I missed out on key skills and did not receive up-to-date information, or up to New Zealand university standards, while attending school in the Cook Islands. I did not understand academic language. I struggled with learning how to write essay

assignments, how to convert my ideas into academic writing, how to understand academic concepts and theories and how to interpret them into my 'Island way of thinking'. Referencing correctly, understanding and answering exam questions, and trying to master the skills of note taking (interpreting lecture information into a language that I could understand) and study techniques were also difficult.

CULTURAL BARRIERS

Several of the students described a reluctance to seek help from student services as a cultural barrier: "The trouble with us Pacific Islanders is that we are sometimes too scared to go out there and find the help ... I won't ask in class, which is probably your usual Polynesian trait". Another student commented, "For us, for myself, I'm too scared, too shy to go and seek help. I think that's a problem a lot of us Pacific Island students have, eh? We think that if we ask for help people will laugh at us 'cos we're used to people at home laughing at us". This student, although she commented that it was a European thing to do, did use the counselling service once and "I thought that they were really, really good".

Some of the people I interviewed found it difficult to express in English their ideas about cultural barriers. One of them said:

We need a recruiting officer who will also support the study ... How many of them (in Student Services) can relate if I said, "well I'm thinking of my brother he's really sick in the islands and every time I pick up my book his face comes across into me. He's worrying about me and I'm thinking about it and it takes away all my thinking". It's that kind of perspective, because the 'thinking Māori' is not the same.

For me, cultural barriers have not been such an issue. In my opinion, it is possible that occasionally a cultural barrier can be used as an excuse not to seek help. Many of the students interviewed knew about the available services but they did not access them. While studying, I have accessed many student services such as courses to learn about academic writing, tutorials on how to use the library and explanations of how to reference. I also felt comfortable with other student services (such as the banks, the gym and the medical centre). However, I do agree that it has been difficult to approach lecturers and tutors for help. Particularly in the early years of my university study, I felt like the lecturers would get frustrated with me and my inability to understand what they were trying to teach. I (like others that I interviewed) then used this shame and misunderstanding as a reason for not attending class.

CONCLUSION

These thoughts reflected the diverse experiences of six Cook Islands university students (including myself). There was a plea from one of the participants:

Don't put us together as Pacific Islanders. Put us together as Cook Islands. And within Cook Islands we can then explain about the

diversity of being a Cook Islander and differences of what we are confronting here.

Nevertheless, there were some common themes that should be of interest to tertiary institutions who wish to support students from the Pacific Islands: the personal and family focus, the difficult shift from Cook Islands Māori to conversational English to academic English, and the difference of 'thinking Māori'.

My view is that a Pacific Island liaison officer would be a good idea for all universities in New Zealand. Some universities already have them. A Pacific Island liaison officer could help to inform students about the university culture, and inform those at the university about the Cook Islands and other Pacific Island cultures. He or she could be a recruitment person as well, and liaise with lecturers and the Cook Islands Māori (and other Pacific Island) community in the city of the university so that students have a wider support network beyond the family and the university.

There is work to be done to improve the recruitment and retention of Cook Islands students. One of those interviewed said that the video assignment was a 'good start', and videos (or DVDs) of successful students' educational pathways into and through the university provide a valuable resource for bridging the gap between the university and the Cook Islands community.

Since this was completed, five of the six students (including myself) have successfully completed their degrees and are all working in responsible positions within their chosen fields. Four of these are working in New Zealand and one has returned to the Cook Islands. The other student (who when interviewed was the only one who was unsure that she was on the right track) has changed her programme and will complete at the end of 2007.

Kia orana and kia manuia.

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¹ Tere api'i ki Aotearoa is literally translated as School Journey to Aotearoa/New Zealand.