

# **Pasifika Success**

*Exploring Pasifika student conceptions of success and learning  
at secondary school*

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## ABSTRACT

Improving Pasifika student achievement and success in New Zealand is an ongoing challenge to education. The research literature suggests teachers, schools, parents and families play a critical role in supporting Pasifika success.

This thesis examines Pasifika student conceptions of success and learning at secondary school. A small group of eleven ‘academically successful’ Year 13 Pasifika students participated in the research and shared their views on learning and educational success and the extent to which academic counselling had contributed to their progress and achievement.

The research design chosen was that of an exploratory, qualitative descriptive study. Semi structured individual interviews and one focus group discussion were used to obtain the descriptive data to address the research questions.

The research findings indicate that there are many variables which influence what ‘success’ means to Pasifika students and what they see as helpful to their learning and achievement at secondary school. The Pasifika participants defined ‘success’ as a process, a collective endeavour and identified important factors which had contributed to their learning and success. These factors highlight the interconnected role teachers, parents and families play in supporting Pasifika student success and the benefits of academic counselling as a model for ‘productive learning partnerships’ between secondary schools, teachers, Pasifika students and their families.

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*All glory and honour to our heavenly Father and lord and saviour Jesus Christ.*

*Without your blessings and guidance, none of this would be possible.*

*Ia viia Le Atua aua ua tau lau o le faamoemoe.*

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

*I'm just sick and tired of my people always thinking they belong at the bottom of the food chain — or how statistically Māori and Pacific Islanders are low academic achievers...*

*Are we not capable of attaining a Bachelor's, a Master's or a P.H.D? Brown brother, do not be afraid to be the first, the first to graduate, the first to climb, the first prime minister, or the first good wife — brown brother, do not be afraid to be the change. Not in skin tone or colour, but a change in mind-set. (Joshua Iosefo, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A-kd6FaxKx4> )*

Joshua Iosefo, a Year 13 student at Mt Roskill Grammar School, gained a great deal of media attention recently when his speech “Brown Brother”, made to a school assembly, was uploaded onto YouTube. As a young man of Samoan and Niuean descent, he wanted to inspire his fellow “brown brothers” to succeed. Joshua is an example of Pasifika success. He has excelled academically, proven his leadership skills, and plans to study law and arts at university and become a successful film and theatre director.

There are many able and academically successful Pasifika students like Joshua, although their stories seldom reach the media. The dominant discourse tends to be one of failure and underachievement. In a departure from the dominant discourse, my aim in this research study is to focus on Pasifika students who are succeeding in their secondary schooling and to explore their views of learning and educational success and the extent to which school support in the form of academic counselling might contribute to their learning and educational achievement.

## **Background**

Pasifika people are one of the fastest growing ethnic communities in New Zealand. According to Statistics New Zealand (2006), 6.9% of the New Zealand population identifies as Pasifika. The term 'Pasifika' is a social construct and is an umbrella term for people who reside in New Zealand but were either born in or are descendants of people who came from one of the Pacific Island nations. The seven largest Pasifika groups in New Zealand include people from Samoa, Tonga, Niue, Cook Islands, Fiji, Tokelau and Tuvalu. Although each Pacific nation has its own distinct language, culture, history and way of life, Pasifika people in New Zealand also share common experiences of migration, resettlement in a new country, learning a new language and adapting to life in a very different environment.

Pasifika learners in Aotearoa New Zealand may claim heritage from one or more of the Pasifika groups (with the possible addition of Māori, Pākehā, or other ancestry). They might be "island" or New Zealand born; monolingual, bilingual or multilingual; first, second or third generation New Zealanders. Over two thirds of Pasifika students were born here and close to three quarters of them live in Auckland (Statistics New Zealand, 2006). The Pasifika population in New Zealand is youthful, diverse and fast growing. Projections indicate that by 2015, one in five students in New Zealand will be of Pasifika descent (Ministry of Education, 2009). This demographic shift makes it imperative that Pasifika students successfully navigate and complete compulsory schooling and gain access to post-secondary education and skilled employment (Airini, Rakena, O'Shea, Tarawa, et al., 2007).

Although the New Zealand education system ranks among the best in the world, it is also marked by low equity of educational outcomes, with Pasifika and Māori students achieving at

a lower rate than their European/Pākehā and Asian peers (Alton-Lee, 2003; Ministry of Education, 2012). The Ministry of Education's *Statement of Intent 2012-2017* acknowledges an urgent need to accelerate achievement for Māori, Pasifika, and learners from schools in low-income communities (Ministry of Education, 2012). My study has focused on secondary school Pasifika students, one of the identified priority groups of learners in New Zealand.

## **Personal connections**

Growing up as a New Zealand-born Samoan, I was often reminded by my parents of the main reason why they migrated to New Zealand. It was embedded in my head and heart that our family had come here so that I and my siblings would have access to better education and better employment opportunities. The immigrant dream of my parents became my own and it motivated me to successfully navigate and complete compulsory schooling and tertiary study and inspired me to pursue a career in education.

As a secondary school teacher and dean, I hoped I would be able to help other young Pasifika students succeed. In this role I often witnessed first-hand Pasifika students achieve academic success. Just as often, I saw Pasifika students who had shown academic potential, but who for one reason or another left school without formal qualifications. I began to wonder why Pasifika students, who came from similar backgrounds and attended the same school, experienced schooling in ways that led some to achieve while others failed.

In my current role as a Pasifika Education Coordinator for the Ministry of Education, I work directly with schools and communities to implement strategies and initiatives that will help raise Pasifika student achievement. Although the focus is on “accelerating achievement”, the



dominant discourse is about “underachievement” and failure, words that permeate the language used in reference to Pasifika learners. Consequently, much of the research on Pasifika students has ‘underachievement’ as its starting point and main focus.

For this research study, I have chosen to focus on Pasifika student success. Given that education is prized within Pasifika communities, and that Pasifika student achievement is a national priority - what can we learn from high achieving Pasifika students? What has helped them to succeed at secondary school and how do they define educational achievement and success?

### **Defining student success**

Student success is a complex construct and defined in a number of ways. Most writers on the topic use traditional measures of academic achievement to define and study the topic. These include the analysis of assessment scores or grades, completion of specific qualifications or levels of achievement, as well as consideration of student participation and retention statistics (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006; Zepke, Leach, & Butler, 2011). Most of both international (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Yorke & Longden, 2008) and New Zealand research (Zepke & Leach, 2005) has defined student success in terms of such measurable outcomes.

Alongside such readily quantifiable indicators of success, there are other, more difficult to measure indicators. These include student engagement gauges such as motivation, personal development and satisfaction, as well as the progress made by learners towards their academic and personal goals. There is limited research into these, predominantly subjective

understandings of student success, particularly with regard to Pasifika students. In this research study I have drawn on measurable indicators such as the participating students' NCEA results, as well as on their subjective perceptions and conceptualisations. For the purposes of this study I have also accepted the assumption that for Pasifika students, “success is more than we think” and that the notion of success can be linked with “individual and community notions of potential, effort and achievement” (Airini. et al., 2007, p. 4).

Although there is a tendency to focus on the “tail of underachievement” for Māori and Pasifika students, it needs to be noted that since the introduction of the National Certificates of Educational Achievement (NCEA), there has been a significant improvement in Pasifika students' achievement rates over the recent years. In 2011, the majority of “participating”<sup>1</sup> Pasifika students achieved NCEA (i.e. 59%, 64%, and 55% at NCEA Levels 1, 2, and 3 respectively). The achievement rate for University Entrance (UE) was 39% (NZQA, 2012). These and other Pasifika student achievement rates are still challenging, especially when compared to the achievement rates of other students. The conditions or interventions that support Pasifika student achievement are discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

## **Situating students in research on student success**

The majority of research on raising student achievement, including research on effective schools, effective teaching and schooling improvement, is from the perspective of adults – parents, teachers, university academics, and policymakers. There is surprisingly little research on what students consider important, and even less on what academic success means to

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<sup>1</sup> “Participation based” achievement rates include students who were enrolled in appropriate standards with sufficient credits to have the potential to complete the relevant NCEA certificate or University Entrance in a given year.

Pasifika students and what they see as helpful to their learning and achievement. For this reason I have chosen to focus on a group of Pasifika students who have been successful in their secondary education, and who were expected to achieve NCEA Level 3 and University Entrance in their final year at school.

## **Research questions**

The *main research question* for this study was: *What are Pasifika students' conceptions of success and learning when they have met challenging targets in NCEA?*

A *related question* was: *To what extent and how (if at all) did aspects of the Academic Counselling programme introduced to their school two years previously support Pasifika students' learning and help them achieve their educational goals?*

The following *sub questions* were also considered: *What do Pasifika students believe are the key levers for student success? Why do students hold these beliefs? What actions do students take on the basis of these beliefs?*

The overall aim of the project was to identify and describe how academically-successful Pasifika students think of and define success, and what they see as helpful to their learning and success.

## **Design and methods**

Given the constraints of a minor thesis (60 credits and one semester duration), the research design chosen was that of an exploratory, qualitative descriptive study.

A large co-educational secondary school in South Auckland, with more than half of its students identifying as Pasifika, was chosen as the research site. Participants were invited from the 2011 Year 13 Pasifika cohort, on the basis that they:

- Identified as Samoan, Tongan, Cook Island Maori, Niuean or with another Pasifika group;
- Were at least 16 years of age;
- As Year 13 students were on target to achieve NCEA Level 3 and University Entrance, with at least some credits with Merit or Excellence.

The students from the particular school were chosen as they would have had two years of experience of an academic counselling programme which started when they were in Year 11. Purposive sampling (Sandelowski, 1995) ensured that both male and female students were included.

Semi structured individual interviews with 11 students were used to obtain initial descriptive data. A focus group involving six of these students was conducted a month later to clarify data from individual interviews and to explore issues raised in greater depth. Copies of the

students' Records of Achievement were also obtained and provided an additional source of data on students' subject selection and academic achievement.

My research aim was not to produce findings representative of all Pasifika students or generalisable across a population (Sarantakos, 1998). Rather, my aim is to provide a rich description of the experience and views of a group of Pasifika students that would deepen our understanding of what learning and success mean to them and what they have found helpful and supportive.

## **Thesis organisation**

*Chapter One* – has included an introduction and background, as well as the rationale for the present study. It also included a statement of the research questions and a brief outline of the research design and methods.

*Chapter Two* – includes a review of the literature around Pasifika student success and learning. It identifies what is known about this topic and explores gaps that currently exist in the literature.

*Chapter Three* – includes a more detailed description of the study design and methods used in this research project. Ethical considerations and some practical problems that arose during the research are also discussed.

*Chapter Four* – the findings of the study are presented under four key themes developed from the interview and focus group data:

- (1) Defining Pasifika success
- (2) Family – the blessing and the burden
- (3) Teachers – and the students’ need to be known as a person, and
- (4) The importance of preparation for university – All dressed up with nowhere to go!

*Chapter Five* – includes the discussion of the significance of the study’s findings. Implications for Pasifika secondary students, Pasifika families and communities, secondary schools and teachers and tertiary education providers are identified. Opportunities for further research are discussed and a conclusion is presented that evaluates the aims of the research project.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I have critically reviewed the research and literature with regard to the research topic – Pasifika success and learning at secondary school. Although the literature explores many aspects that impact on Pasifika learners, in this review I will focus on key themes which emerge repeatedly throughout the literature reviewed. These themes highlight the important role teachers, parents and families play in supporting Pasifika student success and the advantages of school interventions that can facilitate productive learning partnerships between Pasifika students, teachers and families. According to the literature, these factors can significantly contribute to improved outcomes for Pasifika learners. By reviewing the relevant literature and identifying any gaps which exist, I have aimed to set the context, background and rationale for the current research project.

#### **Pasifika success and learning**

There is a considerable amount of research and literature which explores the attainment of Pasifika students. Most of the literature identifies various aspects which impact on Pasifika students including the importance of effective teaching, learning and assessment, productive learning partnerships and acknowledging Pasifika identities, languages and cultures in the classroom (Alton-Lee, 2003; Benseman, Coxon, Anderson, & Anae, 2006; Biddulph, Biddulph, & Biddulph, 2003; Bishop & Berryman, 2007; Ferguson, Gorinski, Wendt-Samu, & Mara, 2008; Hawk, Tumama Cowley, Hill, & Sutherland, 2001; Madjar, McKinley, Deynzer, & van der Merwe, 2010; McKinley et al., 2009).

While the literature focuses on numerous aspects that can make a difference for Pasifika learners, there are clear themes that emerge upon which there seems to be widespread agreement. These themes emphasise the important and interconnected role teachers and parents play in supporting Pasifika student success at school. Key findings from the Education Review Office (ERO) pilot evaluation of 32 Auckland schools in 2009 support this conclusion. ERO found that schools that were most effective in accelerating Pasifika students' presence, engagement and achievement had good quality teaching strategies and strong partnerships with Pasifika parents and families (Education Review Office, 2009).

These aspects are of particular relevance to this research as 'learning partnerships' between students, teachers and parents has been identified as one of the key principles of the Academic Counselling initiative which this study hoped to investigate.

## **Productive learning partnerships**

### ***Teachers***

The research literature posits that teachers have a significant influence on student achievement and it is well documented that effective teaching is a key lever for student success (Bishop & Glynn, 1999; Hattie, 2003; Nuthall, 2007). As this research is focused on Pasifika student conceptions of success and learning, it is important to examine the key role teachers' play in enabling Pasifika students to achieve their potential at school.

Research highlights aspects of teaching that lift the achievement of Pasifika students. Effective schools have high quality teaching practices. These teaching practices motivate, challenge and are responsive to Pasifika learners. They are shaped by strong, mutually



respectful teacher-student relationships. In Hawk, Tumama Cowley, Hill and Sutherland's (1999) longitudinal study of 'effective teaching practice' in eight decile one Auckland secondary schools, Maori and Pasifika students identified seven attributes which they saw as important to establishing positive relationships with their teachers. These qualities included the importance of relationships based on Empathy, Caring, Respect, Going the extra mile, Passion to enthuse/motivate, Patience and Perseverance and Belief in student ability. Students reported that when teaching and learning was based on these aspects, it positively affected their learning.

Similarly, a growing amount of literature emphasises the significant influence of teacher expectations, qualities and behaviours on student achievement and success. A number of studies highlight increased Pasifika student engagement and achievement when students knew that the teacher had high expectations, 'cared' about them and the relationship was good. Consequently the students responded by wanting to do their best for those teachers (Irwin, 2007; Makisi, 2008; Pasikale, 1996; Siope, 2011). Evans (2011) in his research study which examined 'teaching practices' that supported the high achievement of Pasifika boys at De La Salle College, found that without exception, all of the teachers who had very successful Pasifika academic results in their classes reported that they held very high expectations of their students to achieve.

Conversely, teachers' low expectations of students' has been identified as a barrier to student success. Research conducted by Rubie-Davies, Hattie, and Hamilton (2006) found that teacher expectations were often unconsciously based on ethnic stereotypes of students that disadvantaged minority students. Similarly, Alton-Lee (2003) in *Quality Teaching for Diverse Students: Best Evidence Synthesis* also found that "Inappropriate teacher expectations can undermine students, or constitute a barrier to effective practice. Teacher expectations

have been found to vary by student ethnicity, dis/ability, gender and other student characteristics unrelated to a student's actual capability (p.16)."

Meaningfully connecting to students and their worlds is crucial to improving outcomes for Pasifika learners (Alton-Lee, 2003). It is important that students' cultural capital is acknowledged and affirmed in the classroom and is a point discussed by several authors (Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai, & Richardson, 2003; Jones, 1991; Macpherson, Bedford, & Spoonley, 2000; Nakhid, 2003; Parkhill, Fletcher, & Fa'afai, 2005). Problems arise when "deficit theorising results in perceptions that are based on factors such as low socio-economic status of Pasifika, academic underachievement and assumptions that many Pasifika students are recent migrants...which becomes the 'lens' through which some teachers see their students" (Ferguson et al., 2008, p. 27). It is especially concerning as these low expectations and perceptions then frame teachers' responses to these learners and become a barrier to student success.

According to Bourdieu (1977) the education system advantages students whose 'cultural capital' matches that of schooling. Students who are of the dominant culture and class (white and middle class) can readily access beneficial social and cultural capital as the values and beliefs they bring from home match those present in mainstream schooling and society. Whereas for minority, migrant and lower socio-economic students there is a cultural mismatch present which they must address and navigate. For Pasifika students to succeed in New Zealand, it is important that schools are responsive to their needs and include their unique 'capital' in the teaching and learning.

The notion of Pasifika 'cultural capital' is referred to by some researchers as "Pasifika pedagogy" (Kalavite, 2010; Manu'atu, 2000; Utumapu - McBride, Esera, Toia, Tone-

Schuster, & So'oaemalelagi, 2008) and is defined as “an integration of teaching and learning methods that are informed by and validate Pacific values, world views, knowledge and experiences” (Koloto, Katoanga, & Tatila, 2006, p. 4).

A number of studies have shown that Pasifika students experience positive progress when their cultural capital is used to facilitate learning at school (Evans, 2011; Fletcher, Parkhill, & Harris, 2011; Mila-Schaaf & Robinson, 2010; Milne, 2010). A key finding from a study into ‘factors that promote literacy learning for Pasifika learners’ concluded that “Pasifika students learning was more likely to be enhanced when Pasifika values, language, identities and cultural knowledge were made an implicit part of teaching and learning processes” (Fletcher, Parkhill, Fa'afoi, Taleni, & O'Regan, 2008).

There is a limited knowledge base which currently exists to educate teachers and schools about the variety of values, beliefs and behaviours of diverse groups of students within Aotearoa. This clearly indicates a further need to examine Pasifika student perceptions of success and learning. It would also be worthwhile to discover whether or not Pasifika students' views and experiences echo the findings from the review of the literature which highlight the importance of positive teacher/student relationships; teacher qualities and using Pasifika students' cultural background and experiences as a foundation for learning.

### ***Pasifika parents and families engagement in education***

Strong partnerships with Pasifika families and communities are identified as one of the most influential factors “contributing to improved Pasifika student engagement and achievement” (Education Review Office, 2009, p. 32). The literature asserts that these partnerships should

involve and value parents in ways that impact on Pasifika students' motivation and academic achievement (Biddulph et al., 2003; Gorinski & Fraser, 2006).

Research indicates that Pasifika parents and families find it easier to connect with schools when the sharing of knowledge, resources and practices is reciprocal (Ferguson et al., 2008). This means that Pasifika families can share their own views and ideas about what they do at home and in their community that could contribute to their child's learning at school.

As the literature identifies that schools involvement and engagement with Pasifika families is crucial for accelerating Pasifika student achievement, it is important that potential barriers to quality home/school engagement are minimised. One factor that has been identified as a possible barrier to establishing effective partnerships is a 'cultural mismatch' that may exist between schools and families (Weiss, Kreider, Lopez, & Chatman, 2005). Gorinski and Fraser (2006) discuss this mismatch and state that Pasifika acculturation issues can result in "unquestioned parental obedience and respect for authority that precludes their engagement in inquiry focused dialogue with teachers and school personnel" (p.11). They further assert that this can be perceived by schools to be a 'lack of interest' from Pasifika parents. This mismatch in schools and families expectations of one another can create barriers to Pasifika student success therefore it is vital that this issue is addressed.

Establishing productive home/school learning partnerships is one way to ensure that Pasifika students, parents and teachers have mutually agreed 'shared expectations'. This is particularly pertinent given that both national and international research literature corroborates the link between parental and family engagement and children's educational achievement (Coxon, Anae, Mara, Wendt Samu, & Finau, 2002; Delpit, 1995; Robinson, 1994; Siilata & Barkhuizen, 2004).

Schools can ensure that productive learning partnerships are established with Pasifika students, parents, families and communities by developing relationships based on ‘shared goals’ (Gorinski, 2005). There is no doubt that Pasifika students and their families; teachers and schools share the common goal of increasing student achievement and success therefore it is vital that they work together for this purpose. Pasifika parents need to receive practical advice from teachers on what they can do to help their child to achieve academically and understand how they can connect with the school to support their child’s achievement and success. Teachers also need to work with parents to understand how they can support Pasifika students learning at school. Given that NCEA attainment is a key indicator of academic success at secondary school level, it is especially important for parents to understand how NCEA works and feel confident engaging with teachers to help their child’s learning.

It is therefore of increasing importance that school initiatives are developed that foster this type of ‘productive learning partnership’. Academic Counselling is one such example of an initiative that explicitly fosters a learning partnership between Pasifika students, parents and families focused on the ‘shared goal’ of academic progress and achievement.

### ***Interventions that facilitate productive learning partnerships***

It is clear that teachers and families can significantly influence student success (Gorinski & Fraser, 2006; Noguera, 2001; Valdez, Dowrick, & Maynard, 2007). Although each has different roles and responsibilities, “the partnership and engagement between the two is critical” (Education Review Office, 2009, p. 32). It is equally important that these partnerships are focused on increased student achievement and success. McNaughton and Lai (2009) and Hattie (2003) assert that ‘evidence-based’ conversations are important for raising achievement. Specifically they discuss the importance of schools and teachers using data and

evidence as the basis for making informed teaching and learning decisions that will enhance student progress and achievement. Similarly, findings from phase one of the Starpath Project<sup>2</sup> reiterate the importance of developing methods of “using, analysing and understanding longitudinal educational data [as well as student tracking]...to provide a sound evidence base for setting student targets and guiding student achievement” (The Starpath Project, 2010, p. 6).

Since 2005, Starpath have published many research reports that have identified strategies that enhance student success in secondary schools (Madjar & McKinley, 2012; Madjar et al., 2010; Madjar, McKinley, Jensen, & van der Merwe, 2009; McKinley et al., 2009). Much of this research is focused on lifting NCEA achievement for Maori and Pasifika students and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds so that they can successfully transition to tertiary study.

The Academic Counselling and Target Setting (ACTS) programme was a Starpath initiative established at Massey High School in 2007 with the aim of increasing student achievement through the use of comprehensive longitudinal student achievement data. The aim of the programme was to create a ‘systematic, whole school approach’ to student achievement, improve communication between the school and families about students learning and to provide appropriate advice to students on academic pathways based on their aspirations and academic achievement records (McKinley et al., 2009) .

Results from the evaluation of the ACTS programme showed that Pasifika students made significant academic gains with 20 percent more Pasifika students achieving NCEA Level 1

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<sup>2</sup> ‘The Starpath Project – a Partnership for Excellence’ between the University of Auckland and the government, was established in 2005 to determine ‘evidence-based ways of transforming patterns of underachievement’ particularly for Maori, Pacific and low decile school students.

Literacy and Numeracy. Southern Cross Campus, a South Auckland school with 70 percent of its roll comprising of Pasifika students reported similar success rates after trialling the ACTS initiative in 2009. Pass rates for NCEA Level 1 rose from 22 to 45 percent and of particular significance was the Level 1 Literacy pass rate which went from 41 percent to 83 percent, well above the national average (The Starpath Project, 2010).

Comparable results have also been reported in a recent Starpath study – ‘Partnering for Success: Data-based parental engagement in low-income communities in New Zealand’ which aimed to improve student achievement in five secondary schools located in low-income communities with high numbers of Maori and Pasifika students (Madjar & McKinley, 2012). In this study, like the ACTS initiative, a key aspect of the programme was the redesign of traditional ‘parent-teacher’ meetings. Unlike traditional secondary school parent-teacher meetings where parents would meet with individual subject teachers for 5-10 minutes at a time; the new meetings were longer e.g. 30 minutes and were with one assigned teacher. They were more academically focused and based on student achievement data and progress towards goals and targets. They also required the students to participate in the ‘3-way learning conversations’.

Overall the findings from the ‘Partnering for Success’ study indicated that teachers, parents and families felt the new Parent-Teacher-Student conferences were beneficial and this was evidenced in the positive change in attendance figures, parental feedback, teachers’ attitudes and perceptions as well as changes in school practice. Attendance at parent-teacher-student conferences rose from less than 10 percent in one school to 76 percent in the first year the programme was piloted. It is also worthy to note that in another school where parent attendance had been less than 20 percent, Pasifika parent and family attendance rose to 85 percent (Madjar & McKinley, 2012)

## Research background

Given the accelerated achievement of Pasifika learners in schools with Academic Counselling, it would be worthwhile to delve deeper into what aspects of this initiative, Pasifika students believed were most beneficial to student outcomes.

I have argued in this chapter that teachers, schools, parents and families play a critical role in supporting Pasifika student success. Interventions that facilitate productive learning partnerships between Pasifika students, teachers and families can also improve outcomes. In particular, Starpath research has shown that Academic Counselling in secondary schools can increase achievement for Pasifika learners.

While much of the research and literature investigates factors that affect Pasifika student achievement, little has been done on exploring Pasifika students' own perceptions of success and learning at secondary school.

My research project is aimed at adding to the current knowledge of factors that influence Pasifika student success from the *perspective of successful Pasifika students*.

What does 'success' mean to these students? What do they believe has made a difference to their progress and achievement at secondary school? Do their perceptions echo the literature or are there additional themes that may emerge? How might these findings be used to accelerate achievement for Pasifika learners?

In the next chapter, I explain the study design and methods used in this research project. I also provide the reasons and rationale for the use of qualitative description, selection of study



participants, data collection, data analysis and ethical considerations. Practical problems which arose during the research are also discussed briefly.

## CHAPTER THREE

### STUDY DESIGN AND METHODS

In this chapter I outline the design, methods, and procedures used to investigate the research questions and conduct the study. Demographic information about the study participants is provided, and ethical issues and some practical problems that arose in the course of the study are briefly discussed.

#### **The purpose of the research**

The current study was designed to explore Pasifika students' conceptions of success and learning at secondary school and the extent to which academic counselling they had experienced over the past two years might have contributed to their academic achievement. One of the aims of the study was to present the students' perspective, and to give voice to students' experiences and understandings. The ultimate aim of the study was to contribute to knowledge and help inform teaching practices in secondary schools in relation to Pasifika students who have the ability and aspiration to be successful and perhaps go on to tertiary study.

The research questions that guided the study, as already presented in the introductory chapter, were as follows:

- *What are Pasifika students' conceptions of success and learning when they have met challenging targets in NCEA?*

- *To what extent (if at all) did aspects of the Academic Counselling programme introduced in their school two years earlier support Pasifika students' learning and help them achieve their educational goals?*
- *Related to the two main questions: What do Pasifika students believe are the key levers for student success? Why do they hold these beliefs? and What actions do students take on the basis of these beliefs?*

## **Design of the study**

This study is underpinned by the interpretivist approach to inquiry which seeks to discover how people give meaning to their experiences and their interactions with others. As a researcher I accepted the assumption that social phenomena are socially constructed through human experience, language, and other cultural activities (Sarantakos, 2005), and that as well as being subjective, social phenomena (such as academic achievement, or success and learning) can also be given common meanings and become “shared realities” for particular groups in society (Berger & Luckman, 1967).

More specifically, the study was designed as a qualitative descriptive project, drawing on the work of Sandelowski (2010) and others, as this approach adeptly reflects the “particular combination of sampling, data collection and data analysis techniques” (p.78) suited to my study. Qualitative description also enables the production of findings that are “closer to the data” (Sandelowski, 2010, p. 78), rather than focusing on the development or testing of theory, or aiming to provide broadly generalisable findings. This was of particular importance as I wanted to provide a genuine opportunity for Pasifika student voices to be heard –

something that is still relatively rare in research on Pasifika education and achievement in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Other aspects of qualitative descriptive research were also helpful in the context of inquiry involving Pasifika students. Purposeful sampling and minimally structured methods of data collection and analysis (Sandelowski, 2010) allowed me to use culturally appropriate ways of communicating with potential participants, engaging them in individual interviews and working with a sub-sample of them in a focus group. My aim was to provide a rich description of students' views and experiences that was time and context specific (Sarantakos, 2005).

Using a qualitative descriptive approach also allowed me to participate, not as a detached observer of research subjects, but to engage purposefully, as a Samoan person and educator, moving between insider and outsider perspectives. Therefore, I was able to make empathetic connections with the research participants (Smith & Heshusius, 1986), and affirm our shared Pasifika cultural values, particularly those of belonging, relationships, respect, and reciprocity, identified elsewhere as key elements of Pasifika research (Airini et al., 2010).

## **Research participants**

In keeping with the principles of qualitative methodology, the research site and participants were selected on the basis of “places and people” that would best help me understand the central phenomenon of my study (Creswell, 2005). In this I was guided by the need to work

with students who were both academically successful and had had the experience of academic counselling, as well as identifying with one or more Pasifika groups.

A large, urban, co-educational high school in South Auckland was chosen as the site for the study, and the selection was confirmed following discussions with the school Principal who agreed to the study taking place within the school and to facilitating recruitment of research participants. Pasifika students comprise a little over one quarter of the student roll of more than 2000 students. The school introduced a programme of data-based academic counselling to its Year 11, 12 and 13 students in late 2009.

The school was asked to identify and give out research invitations to a group of Year 13 students who had by that stage experienced two years of academic counselling. Purposive sampling (Sandelowski, 1995) was used to identify students who met the following inclusion criteria:

- Male or female;
- Identifying as Samoan, Tongan, Cook Island Maori, Niuean, or any other Pasifika group;
- 16 years or older (and able to consent to participation in research on own behalf);
- Deemed by their teachers to be on target to achieve NCEA Level 3 and University Entrance this year, with at least some achievements with Merit or Excellence.

Twelve students met the inclusion criteria and were invited to take part in the study. Of these, 11 agreed to participate; seven females and four males. In line with the school's demographic profile, the majority (seven) were Samoan, two Tongan, and two identified as Samoan-Tokelauan and Niuean-Maori respectively. As well as being seen as high achievers at

secondary school level, all participants also planned to go on to university or other tertiary studies.

## **Data collection methods**

According to Wolcott (1992), data collection in everyday terms is about “asking, watching and reviewing” information in the chosen context. For the purposes of this study, 11 semi-structured individual interviews and one focus group were used to obtain narrative data that contained “direct quotations... about their experiences, opinions, feelings and knowledge” (Patton, 2002). Copies of the students’ NCEA Records of Achievement were also obtained. These provided an overall picture of each student’s academic achievement, including subjects taken at each level of NCEA, and standards and credits attained.

Interviews are one of the most commonly used and productive methods of data collection in qualitative research (Patton, 2002), allowing the researcher to explore participants’ individual experiences and perspectives. Focus group discussions, on the other hand, use the dynamics of a small group to explore issues and generate data through a “conversation with a purpose” (Dexter, 1970, p. 136). Both methods were used in the present study. Eleven students took part in individual interviews and six of them took part in the focus group conducted a month later.

Each individual interview took approximately 30-45 minutes. A total of 318 minutes of interview time produced 217 pages of narrative data. As part of the interview process, every attempt was made to take time to put participants at ease and to develop a sense of rapport

with them before commencing the interview. I introduced myself and my research project and invited each participant to tell me about themselves, and to ask questions. Any social connections (through extended family, cultural or other ties) were acknowledged. I thanked them for their willingness to take part and stressed that participation was voluntary, and that they could choose not to answer specific questions, without having to give a reason.

The interview process was fluid, flexible and interactive and included a mix of more or less structured questions. Although each interview was guided by an indicative list of questions, there was no 'predetermined wording or order' (Merriam, 2009). The ultimate aim was to generate rich descriptions of the Pasifika students' lived experiences and explore the ways these experiences influenced their conceptions of success and learning (Minichiello & Kottler, 2010).

The focus group discussion took one hour and enabled me to explore in more depth topics that arose during individual interviews and to clarify some of my perceptions and conclusions. Participants were encouraged to talk as a group, ask questions and comment on others' points of view and experiences. This method was particularly useful for exploring participants' values, beliefs and experiences and was useful in clarifying not only what participants thought but also why they thought in that way (Mertens, 2005).

Both the individual interviews and the focus group discussion were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Participants in individual interviews were offered the opportunity to check the transcripts and correct or clarify any statements they made.

As already mentioned, students' NCEA Records of Achievement were the third source of data, and allowed me to validate students' comments about their subject choices and specific achievements at each NCEA level.

## **Data analysis**

According to by Morse and Richards (2002) the process of analysing any research data is one of transformation and interpretation. For the purposes of the current study a thematic approach was seen as the most appropriate way to analyse the textual data. Data analysis was conducted by the researcher and started after the completion of the last interview.

Interview and focus group recordings were transcribed verbatim by me. I then read each interview line by line in order to identify key words and phrases related to Pasifika students' conceptions of success and learning. These keywords and phrases became the preliminary codes of the emerging themes.

From these codes, categories were formed that led to the development of more encompassing themes which helped to conceptualise and describe the findings in a succinct way whilst ensuring that the richness, depth and context of the original data was retained.

Major themes and subthemes were identified and as the coding process continued, new themes were occasionally added. The analysis was an iterative and sequential process as I revisited earlier interview transcripts to check coding, categories and themes and to ensure that similar comments on new themes had not been previously overlooked. Data which did



not fit under the developed themes were grouped together and examined again as a separate category to ensure that data that did not seem to fit the emerging themes were not ignored.

## **Ethical considerations**

The major ethical considerations that were addressed during the research process related mainly to the issues of *informed consent*, *risk of harm* and the need for *cultural sensitivity and understanding*.

### ***Informed consent***

The initial approach to prospective student participants was made through the school. Potential participants were given written information about the study through their form teacher. Once they accepted the invitation to take part I met with each student individually to ensure that they understood their participation was voluntary and to discuss the proposed research and how it would be conducted. Students were also made aware that they could withdraw from the study at any stage without having to give a reason, and it was evident that five of them did so as they were not available for the focus group.

### ***Risk of harm to participants***

The risk of harm in this study was minimal and related mainly to the issue of confidentiality and the accurate and honest recording and reporting of research findings. As the researcher I

have made every effort to ensure that the identities and records of participants remained confidential. To protect participants' identities, personal information is being kept in a secure place and participants' names and any identifiable information are not used in this dissertation. Nevertheless, participants were advised that while every attempt would be made to ensure their confidentiality, given the small sample and the use of one school as the research site, it is possible that participants might be identified. This point was stressed in relation to focus group discussion and participants were asked not to identify other participants or the content of the discussion outside the group.

### ***The need for cultural understanding and sensitivity***

The research was conducted in a culturally sensitive manner, bearing in mind that as a researcher I was in "receipt of privileged information" (Smith, 1999, p.176). Using my knowledge of Pasifika cultures and my own experience as a New Zealand born Samoan person, I ensured that I established and maintained respectful, reciprocal relationships with the Pasifika student participants, and made sure they were aware that I valued their contribution.

Participants were informed that my aims were to identify key factors which the students themselves believed contributed to their success at school and that these findings could be used to raise achievement for Pasifika learners. This was an important part of the research process as it stressed that the focus of the research was on educational success with students who had demonstrated academic ability; therefore the data collected would be 'positive' information unlikely to cause embarrassment or harm to the participants or others.

All meetings with participants included elements of a Pasifika *fono* (meeting), including provision of refreshments, which (hungry) young people appreciated but also recognised as an acknowledgement of their cultural practices.

## **Practical problems**

The scope of the study was designed to reflect the time constraints of a 60-point thesis required to be completed within the full time equivalent of one semester. Because of this, it was very important that strict timelines were adhered to during the research process. It was unhelpful therefore that, despite a well prepared application, delays occurred and approval from the Human Participants Ethics Committee was not received until three months later. This meant that very limited time was available for data collection before Year 13 students left to prepare for their final external examinations. Hence, the 11 individual interviews had to be conducted over a two consecutive days, without the opportunity to review initial interviews, seek supervisors' advice and make any adjustments. It also meant that the focus group could not be conducted until after the last of the NCEA external exams, by which time some of the participants were away or working and no longer available to take part.

The findings of the study, focused on the four key themes developed from the data, are presented in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

#### Introduction

The eleven students that I interviewed for this study can be described as ‘successful’ Pasifika students. These students were identified by their school as being among the best Year 13 Pasifika students. In terms of academic achievement they stood ‘head and shoulders’ above their peers. Much was expected of these young people, by their families, communities as well as their school. When I interviewed the students, it was early November and they were preparing for their upcoming external examinations.

Four main themes emerged from the analyses of the eleven participant interviews and the focus group discussion. These themes are: what is meant by Pasifika success?; the importance of *family* in the pursuit of success; the key role *teachers*’ play in success; and the significant *preparation* that is needed for *university* study.

#### Defining Pasifika success

Success is described by the Oxford dictionary (Oxford Dictionaries, 2012) as being “the accomplishment of an aim or purpose”; and/or the “attainment of fame, wealth, or social status”. Educational success therefore could be defined as the achievement of educational goals or aims. In this sense, success could be seen as the ‘product’ or positive outcome of one’s work or effort. In schools, ‘success’ is not explicitly discussed but is often referred to

by teachers and school staff in the context of achieving academic goals and qualification benchmarks such as NCEA levels 1, 2, 3 and University Entrance. 'Success' in this respect has a pre-determined definition and consequently presents academic goals for students to achieve.

However from my discussions with students it became evident that the very notion of success is complex and much is required for Pasifika students order to be 'successful', particularly in education. For the majority of students in this study, success was not discussed in terms of 'outcomes' but more in terms of a 'process'.

*"The idea of success to me is achieving goals that I have set and then making more goals to keep moving forward..." (Alapati)*

Many of the students went on to say that success had certain requirements that had to be fulfilled. Students described 'how' to be successful and discussed what attributes they believed were needed, such as "trying your hardest", and "making myself happy".

*"Success to me is being able to try to the best of my ability, whether failing or achieving my goal – at least I have tried my hardest and best towards my goal." (Sina)*

It was clear that for many of the participants 'success' included the effort they had put in towards their goals, about displaying determination, as well as achieving the goals themselves. In this respect, success could be described as an attitude and a state of mind. It became evident that this very notion was pivotal to understanding how students viewed success and subsequently how this impacted on them individually and as a group.

The fact that students viewed success as a process impacted on the type of goals and pathways they had set for themselves. Many of the students talked about success as 'making

themselves and their parents and families proud' by 'making it into university' and 'getting a good job' in the future. However, when they were probed for further detail as what this looked like, what type of goals they had set in terms of university courses and future career pathways, many could not state what tangible outcomes they hoped to achieve.

### *Success equals having a purpose*

Without exception all students believed it was important to be successful. Success meant 'having a purpose' and this belief underpinned all the students did at school and in life – including their achievement at secondary school. In addition to being academically achieving students, all the students had other significant commitments and responsibilities. Many of the students also excelled in other areas of school life such as in the sports, arts and cultural arenas. For example, one male student in the group had not only achieved very well academically but also played in the school band that had won numerous regional and national awards. In addition to this, he was captain of the school rugby league team and a house captain. This was not uncommon amongst the group; other students talked of balancing multiple roles including family, church and work commitments. These particular students seemed to be quite adept and confident in their ability to balance many different roles as well as manage their studies.

Although some students felt confident balancing such roles and commitments, for others they acknowledged that in order to achieve academically they needed to sacrifice certain things. For one student, it meant not playing representative rugby for Counties Manukau. Rather than be upset or negative about this, he spoke reflectively and said that it was a small short term sacrifice for a long term gain. He would not be playing representative age-group rugby for his

region while he was sitting his NCEA Level 3 but as he would only be 17 when he finished high school, he had decided he could play in the new year once he had successfully completed his Year 13 studies. This example highlights how at least some of these students were very aware of their own abilities and understood well their capabilities for successfully achieving their goals. They also could identify their limitations and make decisions accordingly such as this student demonstrated.

Students were purposeful and believed that being something or somebody and achieving goals was important. Vai summed it up in this way:

*“If you don’t set goals in life then there’s no point in living and if you don’t set goals, there’s nothing to look forward to...success is about constantly setting goals and trying to achieve them.”*

### ***Success equals hard work***

All students said that success did not come easily and that in order to succeed, they had to be willing to work hard. When asked to talk about what qualities were important to success, without fail students mentioned the importance of ‘hard work’. They also described qualities associated with this such as high expectations, determination, perseverance and the importance of a strong work ethic. They all believed that success did not come to those who were not willing to put in the ‘hard yards’.

*“In order to get, you got to give. Nothing comes easy, if you want something you have got to work for it. (Tiare)*

There seemed to be a shared mentality among the students that in order to succeed they had work ‘twice as hard’ as other [non-Pasifika] students.

One student said he needed to:

*“Push hard and go for it and prove people wrong”... [as some people viewed Samoans as] “slackers and lazy”. (Ioane)*

For most of the students this notion of ‘working twice as hard’ seemed linked to overcoming barriers and obstacles and succeeding despite challenges presented to them. Students talked about challenges such as having to cope with limited financial resources, minimal academic role models and relevant social networks as well as dealing with deficit Pasifika stereotypes such as identified in the quote above. However most students did not speak negatively about these challenges but merely accepted that they were part and parcel of what they would need to deal with in order to achieve their goals. They accepted that this is the way things were and that they needed to take responsibility for their own success. One student when reflecting about why some of her Pasifika peers had not done well at school said:

*“Some people look down on them because they’re [Pacific] islanders...so some students think this is what they expect, so this is how I should be...but what they should do is just try hard and prove those people wrong who think Islanders can’t do it...if you put your mind to it then you can.”(Evelyn)*

Two students in the group emphasised natural ability as being a large part of their own success. Although these students highlighted their academic strengths, at times they seemed uncomfortable talking about themselves and wanted to ensure that they were not ‘blowing their own trumpet’:

*“I don’t want to sound cocky but everything can come pretty easy to me if I listen....and then do the work”. (Kali)*



For these students, there seemed to be an obvious tension between highlighting their academic strengths and reflecting on themselves as individuals versus perceiving to remain ‘true’ to their Pasifika cultures by demonstrating qualities and behaviours such as humility, respect and subservience which are highly valued by Pasifika families and communities. These qualities are often in direct contrast to intentionally focussing on the ‘individual’ and therefore for some Pasifika students such as these ones, reflecting positively on their abilities and success could be an uncomfortable space.

A couple of the students talked about ‘proving people wrong’ and this type of ‘negative motivation’ was not uncommon and seemed to be a strong driver which motivated many students to succeed. One student when asked if she thought it was important to be successful replied:

*“Yes it’s very important because I don’t want to look like a fool...”(Tiare)*

This comment highlights an issue which emerged during my discussions with the participants. Many seemed highly influenced by others – what others thought of them, expected of them and this ultimately impacted on how they would respond to these expectations.

### ***Success as a collective endeavour***

Although all the students identified family as providing strong motivation for them wanting to succeed and do well, students reflected on this differently. Some students spoke about the importance of doing well at school and in life so they could make their parents and families

happy and contribute to the betterment of their lives. Others emphasised the importance of succeeding so they would not 'disappoint' their parents and families.

*"A lot of the time I try to do my stuff so it doesn't disappoint my parents...my dad has been working for about 21 years at the same place and he's hoping to retire soon so I really just don't want to disappoint my parents..."(Mele)*

*"I don't wanna waste my parents' hard work and money... so I need to do well at school". (Ioane)*

As discussed, all of the student participants expressed that family motivated them to do well, however over two thirds of the students shared examples of 'negative motivation' such as the quotes above illustrate. As motivation can directly shape actions and in turn these impact on outcomes, it is important to examine positive and negative motivation further.

Put simply, negative motivation could be described as "push" motivation - you are trying to push something you do not want away from you. Positive motivation is "pull" motivation - you are trying to bring something that you DO want closer to you. Both types of motivation serve as encouragement in order for one to achieve a particular goal or aim.

For most of the students in this study, their families had provided 'negative motivation' and they were using this type of motivation themselves as a strong driver to succeed. Perhaps a reason why negative or 'push' motivation was used by the majority of the Pasifika student participants and their families is because for many of the students and families - all they know is what 'they do not want to be'. They know they do not want to fail, or be a cleaner or work in a factory because for many Pasifika people this has been their experience.

*"You know... it is important to be successful, I don't want to ...work in a factory or be a cleaner or a bum on the street...I have to be somebody"*  
(Mele)

What is more ‘unknown’ and challenging are the student and family aspirations that are not grounded in experience – which for the majority of these students was the case as they would be ‘first in family’ to attend university.

It was evident from the participant stories that for some students this negative type of motivation and pressure from family expectations was a stronger driver than their own intrinsic motivation to do well. Whilst most of the students could distinguish between individual and collective goals and could explain how their individual aspirations would benefit the collective such as the family network; for others this was more unclear, usually because these students had not made firm decisions about their next steps in terms of university study and career aspirations. For these students their main driver (at the time of the interview) was to fulfill their family’s expectations of them; there seems to be a real disconnect and tension between their own individual goals and those of the collective.

The literature posits that various people have either ‘individual’ or ‘collective’ orientations (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Individuals with “collectivistic orientations” are motivated so they can fulfill the expectations and meet the demands of others – especially family; whereas those with individual orientation are largely motivated by personal reasons. It is evident that for some students in this study they had collective goals and orientations and that the individual aspect was not purposefully addressed. This complexity will be explored further in the next section which looks in more depth at how family can be both a ‘blessing and burden’ to Pasifika student success.

## **Family – The blessing and the burden**

Family involvement and engagement in schooling has long been identified as a key lever for academic success (Biddulph et al., 2003). In this study, the Pasifika student participants affirmed this notion and family were described as a source of support, encouragement and aspiration. Family also motivated students to succeed as success was very much seen as a collective endeavour. However it was also acknowledged that whilst family were a ‘blessing’, at the same time participants’ families’ could also be a ‘burden’ or barrier to students and their quest for success. The focus on the collective at times contributed to a lack of individual agency and was a constraint to individual expression.

### ***The blessing***

#### ***Motivation to do well***

Without exception, the students in this study reported that their families were very important to them and that they motivated them to want to do well at school and succeed in life. All the students spoke of their parents and families having very high expectations of them to do well in education. They agreed that education was very important and commented that this belief was instilled in them by their parents and families who highly valued education. A couple of students shared that the very reason they [Pasifika people] came to New Zealand was for education so it was important for them to fulfill the ‘migration aspirations’ of their parents and families. Students seemed to willingly accept these expectations and aspirations and

shared that by achieving success at school, they would be able to make their parents and the wider family happy.

Students rarely spoke explicitly about what success meant to them as individuals but rather focused on success in terms of ‘collective achievement’ – if they did well at school and in life, this would mean not only success for themselves but for their families. All of the students shared that they had a strong desire to help their families and it seemed that for these students their individual success was inextricably connected to that of their families.

*“All I want to do is to make my family proud....and do something to give back and show I am grateful for their support. (Evelyn)”*

This expectation to do well undoubtedly would have placed a lot of pressure on these young Pasifika students as they not only carried their hopes and dreams but the aspirations of their parents and families. The participants seemed to readily accept this responsibility placed upon them and seemed motivated to fulfill the expectations of their families.

### ***Support***

The students shared examples of how family provided critical social support which had contributed to their success at school. A key part of this support included their families having high expectations and helping develop their academic aspirations. In addition to this, students shared that their own experiences of ‘struggling’ and coming from disadvantaged backgrounds also provided inspiration and motivation for them to succeed. Students commented that their parents would often tell them stories from their own experiences about how their own lack of education had limited their options in life.

*“My parents told me not to be like them, they both dropped out in year 12...struggled to look for jobs and stuff...and the jobs they have now, they don't love but they do it because they have to...”(Tino)*

*“My dad said...don't end up in a factory; get higher education...that's why we came from Tonga”. (Lupe)*

It has been noted that parents of minority ethnic students often use ‘invisible strategies’ such as spoken and unspoken encouragement, tacit support and financial sacrifices to help their children (Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). What is evident from the present study is that however ‘invisible’ or indirect; parental and family expectations contributed to a deep sense of obligation in these young people. When asked how their families had supported them in education, most of the participants described the ‘sacrifices’ their parents and families had made in order for them to do well. The ‘sacrifices’ students spoke of were mostly related to witnessing their parents and families struggle financially to make ends meet and to provide basic necessities for them such as housing, food, clothing and transportation. It was clear from the students’ comments that they were well aware of the financial struggles their families had experienced and therefore did not take anything for granted. It would seem that the students felt ‘indebted’ to their families and ‘owed’ it to them to do well.

*“If it wasn't for my parents I wouldn't be here....they put food on the table for me and pay my train ticket...my dad works long hours...to give us a better life”. (Kali)*

*“If I do well, I will get mum and dad out of that misery of paying for our bills and stuff...I can look after them and they can stop worrying”. (Vai)*

By doing well at school, the students believed they would be able to ‘pay their parents back’ and make their parents hard work and sacrifices worthwhile. It was clear that helping their parents and families by doing well at school was a very strong driver for the students.

*“The idea of just paying back my family for their support motivates me to do well”. (Alapati)*

*“I want to make my parents proud and pay them back for all the sacrifices they have made”. (David)*

Most wanted to succeed so they could change the future situation of their family as well as become positive role models for other young Pasifika people. They expressed that if they did well, then they were likely to lead the way for other Pasifika students and young people to do the same. The students did not share that this was a heavy burden to carry but rather provided them with ‘motivation’ to do well.

*“Before there were no Pacific Island prefects...but now we’re starting to dominate...we’ve got like around 8-10 prefects that are PI...we’re leading the way”. (Lupe)*

### ***Academic Counselling & NCEA***

A key aspect of the current research study was to investigate the impact of Academic Counselling on the student participants learning and progress at secondary school. Interestingly, during the interviews when I asked the students about the programme, many did not understand what I was referring to when I asked about “Academic Counselling”. The majority of the students referred instead to the ‘parent-teacher-student’ conferences. Therefore the findings that follow focus primarily on this key aspect of the academic counselling initiative.

Nearly all of the participants shared positive feedback about the revised parent-teacher-student meetings at their school which was a key aspect of the academic counselling

programme. Students reported that the parent-teacher-student conferences had been particularly helpful as it enabled their parents and families to understand NCEA.

The participants shared that when their parents understood NCEA, they were able to ‘keep them on track’ and have learning conversations focused on NCEA credits and progress. One student shared that ensuring the focus was on ‘progress and achievement’ was positive because when his father used to attend parent-teacher meetings, he would always ask about his ‘behaviour’ rather than focusing on how he was doing academically.

*“It’s really good coz now my dad is asking about my credits....how many more do you need? And what did you get? Go for Merits and Excellences...” (Tino)*

Similarly, another student said she thought the parent-teacher-student conferences were a beneficial aspect of academic counselling because her parents would regularly be updated with how she was doing in her subjects and this would motivate her to do well.

*[My mum would] give me a little growling which pushes me on...it’s really good [academic counselling] because before students would go home and parents would ask them how they were doing and they would say ‘yeah I’m getting Merits’...but really! Haha ...yeah because that’s what I used to do but now my parents know exactly how I’m doing. (Sina)*

Students also shared that it was helpful when parents understood the academic demands of NCEA so they could give them the time and space for their studies. One student described how his parents would regularly leave the family home and go to ‘aunty and uncle’s place’ so he could have ‘peace and quiet’ to study.

Another key aspect of the programme that the participants felt was beneficial was the explicit focus on NCEA credits and attainment across the school. Students reported that they ‘knew



exactly how many credits' they had at any given time and because of this, they were well on their way to achieving NCEA Level 3 and University Entrance.

One student who did not find the programme as helpful as the other participants shared why he felt the parent-teacher-student meetings were unproductive. This student said that as a high-achieving student, the type of feedback he and his parents always received at these meetings was "*Sione\* is doing well. He just needs to keep it up and he will be fine*".

When asked what type of information and/or support he would have preferred, this student expressed that he would have liked it if the school (designated academic counselling teacher) presented him with "alternative academic pathways and career aspirations" earlier in his secondary school years so he could have explored different tertiary study options and career pathways.

### ***The burden***

While family provided motivation for students to do well, it was evident that at times family could be a barrier to students' success. Challenges were specifically identified relating to the demands of meeting the high expectations of the collective, having aspirations that are not grounded in experience and the limited role models and mentors available to support students.

Around a third of the students acknowledged that at times, the high expectations of parents and families could be challenging as it placed a lot of pressure on them to succeed.

*"My mum has really high expectations of me, sometimes too high..." (David)*

*“There are times when I think, seriously just leave me alone...but then I think, nah my parents are right...I need to work hard so I can do well”.*  
(Vai)

When asked if they talked to their parents about the pressure they felt, these students commented that they did not but merely accepted that this was the expectation and it was their responsibility to do well at school. Some of the students described the challenge of having ‘old school island parents’ who were quite ‘strict and traditional’. A couple of them commented that it was hard to talk to their parents as in many traditional Pacific Island families’ open dialogue between parents and children was not encouraged. Many of the students seemed to accept this without question as they felt it was part of their culture to listen to and abide by their parents’ wishes. For these students, they accepted whatever their parents said and acknowledged that there was little room for discussion or negotiation. One female student who was the eldest in her family said it was difficult for her as her parents were strict and did not allow her to get involved in other extra- curricular activities such as sport.

*“I really wanted to play soccer in Year 11, I was even quite good...but my dad said not to waste time and to concentrate on my studies so I had to drop it...it was quite sad”.* (Mele)

I asked this student why she did not talk to her parents about how she felt and she simply shrugged and said she just ‘couldn’t’ and this was just the ‘way things were’. She did acknowledge though that her parents were much more flexible with her younger siblings and seemed more open to them getting involved in other aspects of school life.

Other participants expressed that they had a more open relationship with their parents but this was rare amongst the group. For most students, they stated that Pasifika parents needed to be more open, less strict, trust their children more and give (Pasifika) students a little freedom.

*“They need to understand that students need to have a little fun along the way!” (Tiare)*

*“It can’t all be about study, study, study...parents need to realise there’s more to school than that”. (Lupe)*

All students agreed that their families’ high expectations of them to do well exerted ‘pressure’ on them. Most students seemed to use this pressure positively as motivation to succeed. One student spoke about the “challenge of giving his family a good name”. This student said his grandmother would often counsel him and encourage him to do well as if he succeeded then people would know him as the ‘son of’ so and so...and their family name would be associated with a positive story of success. Whereas in contrast to this if he was to fail at school then accordingly their family name would be tarnished and because of this it was very important for him to ensure that he succeeded.

All of the students described how this ‘collective pressure’ to achieve and be successful influenced them in different ways and was not limited to just the eldest in the family but all Pasifika students. Some students who were the eldest described the challenge of ‘leading the way’ for their younger siblings and family members.

*“It’s hard because I’m the eldest... but my parents say if I do well then my sisters will do well”. (Vai)*

Others described “following in the footsteps” of an older brother or sister who had done well at school and conversely, other students spoke about having to be the ‘first’ in the family to succeed as older siblings and family members had not achieved in education.

*“I had some cousins who were at Uni but they dropped out...now both my mums and dads sides are waiting for me...”(Sina)*

*“I have an older brother but he didn’t really make it to university so then the pressure came down on me”. (Alapati)*

It would seem that for all of the students they felt a ‘collective’ duty to do well and that if they did not succeed, they would not only be disappointing themselves but their parents and families. Accordingly, students expressed that they were very motivated to succeed as their success would be celebrated as a collective achievement.

### ***Success as an individual versus success as a collective***

It was clear that parents’ and family expectations and aspirations exerted strong influences on the student participants. Students shared their families’ aspirations of them to achieve and succeed in education so they could provide a better life for themselves and for their families. All students hoped to pursue tertiary study and were very clear about what they needed to do to get there e.g., achieve NCEA Level 3 and University Entrance. However what students found more challenging was identifying their long term goals in terms of study and career pathways.

For most of the students in this study, their long term aspirations were not grounded in experience due to the fact that they would be the first in their family to attend university. Because of this, their parents and families would be unable to offer specific support and advice around suitable tertiary courses and careers. This was a particular challenge for both the students and their families as although some students and families had aspirations of what they hoped to do at university and in the future e.g., *‘I hope to do Health Science and see*

*where that leads to*', they lacked the 'stepping stones' of having an experienced family member who could provide advice and support around the reality of what it would actually take to achieve their goals.

Most of the students also did not have access to an experienced support person or mentor either from their immediate or extended network to help them make big decisions with regard to their future course of study and career aspirations. Because of this, many of the participants were unsure of their future plans especially those who would be the first in family to pursue higher education. Although families and students had high aspirations such as 'wanting to go to university' to obtain tertiary qualifications and knew what their long term goals were e.g. "*I want to be a lawyer*". They seemed to lack the knowledge and understanding of what interim goals were needed to achieve their long term goals e.g. What the tertiary enrolment requirements were at different universities, the types of academic subjects they needed to have taken at high school as well as where to access course specific advice and support from. This was of particular concern given that these should have been key aspects addressed in the academic counselling programme. It also emphasises the need for this type of academic support in secondary school.

The students that had the support of a family member, mentor or support person that 'had been there and done that' in terms of university study and had succeeded and gained skilled employment were more able to confidently express what their future plans were and their next steps were. These students could clearly outline the process of applying and enrolling in their chosen course, accessing financial support such as scholarships and student allowances as well as what their future career pathway looked like.

*I have chosen to do a Bachelor of Sport and Recreation at \_\_\_\_\_; I also got a scholarship which covers all my fees while I am an undergraduate so I am pretty happy with that. In five years' time, I see*

*myself working as a qualified Sports Nutritionist with local and regional teams...maybe a national team if I'm good enough. (Ioane)*

For many of the participants in this study, there seemed to be a real challenge defining themselves as 'individuals' as well as locating themselves within the 'collective'. It seemed that many of the students found the process of identifying what they wanted as 'individuals' very difficult as their identity and belonging were inextricably connected to the family and the collective. Because of this many students did not seem to be able to separate their individual aspirations and those of their families and communities as for the majority these were one and the same. This strong connection to the collective seemed to present further challenges for students where they were not encouraged to be assertive and self-reliant. The focus on the collective was also unhelpful in this respect as for some students it unconsciously or consciously provided a way for them to avoid making their own decisions as well as taking responsibility for their next steps etc. In this way the focus on the collective was a constraint to individual expression and agency.

### **Being known as a person - *The important role of teachers***

All of the student participants expressed that their 'teachers' had contributed to their success at school. Students said it was of critical importance that teachers really 'know' them as Pasifika students and understand the worlds they live in. Students discussed the pivotal role teachers played in helping them achieve and succeed in education. There were three main aspects that the participants identified as being key levers for success: firstly, the importance of positive teacher/student relationships; secondly, teachers acknowledging and

understanding Pasifika student worlds and thirdly, effective teaching qualities that promote engagement and achievement.

### ***Positive teacher/student relationship***

All of the students expressed that having a good relationship with teachers was important and set the foundation for them to do well at school. Most students shared that an important part of this was knowing the teacher ‘cared’ about them and their progress. Students also identified the importance of teachers’ having ‘high expectations’ as part of this positive teacher/student relationship. The students shared that teachers’ expectations were made explicit in how they communicated with students and taught them.

When teachers had high expectations they motivated their students to do well as they expected ‘the best’ from them and accordingly would encourage students to work hard and achieve in their subjects. Most of the students described their teachers positively and shared examples of how they had helped them at school.

*“My teachers’ have been awesome. They believed in me and really helped me get my credits and stuff”. (Evelyn)*

*“Miss has been a big influence...she is always enthusiastic, motivating me to keep doing well and she just makes me want to work harder”. (Tino)*

Conversely, when teachers had low expectations this was reflected in how they both taught and interacted with the students. One student shared that many of his friends were in the lower stream classes and that they would tell him what their teachers were like. He described

an example where his friend was in English class and some Pasifika students started laughing during the lesson. In response to this the teacher said:

*“Aww that’s typical, that’s all you Islanders do, just laugh, have fun and muck around...now get out of my room”.*

This participant shared that because of this; most of the students in this class did not try as they knew the teacher did not care about them and had low expectations of them as Pasifika students. Similarly, a couple of other students shared that they found it very difficult to learn when they did not have a good relationship with the teacher.

*.. “If I didn't like the teachers then I found that I didn't really do well in that class”. (Sina)*

*“Some teachers wouldn't [persevere] with us [PI students if we misbehave], they would just kick us out... but the good teachers... they'll hold us back after class and they will offer to help and get you back on track. That's how you know they really want us to pass because at the end of the day they make money whether we learn or not”. (Kali)*

### ***Miss ‘really knows me’***

All of the students expressed that it was important that the teachers really ‘knew’ them and cared about them. A couple of students elaborated and shared examples of what this meant.

*“I was at school late one day after practice and I ran in looking for a towel and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ just chucked me a towel from his cupboard and opened the pavilion and let me have a shower. For me that just felt like home... because I went and asked and he did it...no question about it”. (Alapati)*

Another student shared that she really liked it when her teachers shared personal stories about themselves as it showed that they were willing for students to really get to know them.



Likewise, students shared examples of how teachers really got to know them. This usually included teachers encouraging them and understanding some of the pressures they faced as young Pasifika students.

*“Mr.\_\_\_\_\_ really encouraged me. I’d usually give up on the first go but he wouldn’t let me give up, he knew that I could do it... that really motivated me so kept going and I did it”.*(Tiare)

*“A lot of Pasifika students don’t put up their hands in class. So Miss always makes sure that we have one on one time either during class time or after class...it’s really helpful”.* (Lupe)

Many of the students reported that when they had a strong relationship with the teacher, they worked harder in their classes as it motivated them to do better. One student also shared that when a teacher ‘really knew him’, they could tell when he was not himself and would take the time to “have a little chat” and encourage him to keep going.

### ***Effective teaching***

Students were very clear about what they believed constituted ‘good teaching’ and how they identified both the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ teachers. They stated that good teachers ‘enjoyed teaching’, were positive and enthusiastic and that this was reflected in their teaching practice.

The participants shared that ‘good’ teachers were ‘passionate’ about their subject and prepared interesting lessons which were interactive, fun and catered to various student learning styles. Whereas the ‘bad’ teachers would not put much effort into their lessons so it was obvious that they did not care.

*“Some teachers don’t even teach... Like this one teacher we had would just sit on her laptop and do her own thing during class”. (David)*

*“It’s sad because you know you are lost, but they [bad teachers] are just sitting on the computer and they just make you copy off the board”. (Vai)*

Although some students mentioned pedagogical aspects of teaching that helped them learn, most participants emphasised teacher qualities and behaviours as being key to their engagement and achievement in school.

### **All dressed up with nowhere to go! *Preparation for university***

*“Success to me is striving towards your goal, raising the bar and doing whatever you can to reach your full potential. (Ioane)*

From the research findings and discussion, it is clear that the participants in this study were high achieving successful Pasifika students. By the end of their schooling journey, they had completed Year 13 and had gained NCEA Level 3 and University Entrance. All seemed prepared for the next steps in their educational journey. It was somewhat surprising then to discover that there was a real variance in student preparation for university. Although some students had clear plans in place for tertiary study, most of the participants did not. This was particularly concerning given it was late in the school year (November) when the interviews took place and students were hoping to begin university in the new year which was only a couple of short months away. This finding was unexpected and suggests that significant preparation and support is required for Pasifika students to successfully transition to tertiary study.

## *Completing school*

Completing school was a significant milestone that many of the participants reflected on. From the participants' feedback it was clear that the completion of compulsory schooling was seen as one indicator of success and an achievement. This was particularly true for around a third of students who spoke of peers and friends that had dropped out of school. For these students, finishing high school was not taken for granted nor was it seen as a given or entitlement.

*"I can't believe we are nearly finished [school]...we never thought we would make it, but we actually did". (Tino)*

For many of the students in this study, successful completion of secondary school was not straight forward or easy. Feedback from the students indicated that there were indeed challenges and barriers along the way, but despite this, the students in this study 'had made it this far'. This was particularly pertinent for the students that had experienced close friends dropping out of school. Although it was difficult, these students said that they used their friends negative experiences of secondary school and 'not making it' as motivation to do well and succeed.

*"Most of my friends have dropped out so I'm like one of the last ones here now. I want to be something when I'm older...so that drive has helped me keep going..." (Ioane)*

*"There are not that many Tongans in Year 13...I think there's only seven left but the rest have dropped out...so I want to do well". (Mele)*

### ***Success begins with further study***

Although finishing high school was seen as an achievement by the participants, it was clear that it was not an end point in itself but a necessary step in their educational journey. Without exception, all of the participants hoped to pursue further study at tertiary level and spoke of hoping to attend university or other tertiary institutions after completing secondary school. However what became evident was the varying levels of preparation students had for making this transition to higher education. Despite all students expressing that university study was important, only a few had confirmed plans in place with regard to what programme they intended to study at tertiary level.

Many factors seemed to impact on the students' preparation for tertiary study. A significant element was whether or not the students had access to an experienced support person that could help them make informed decisions about tertiary study. The students that had access to this type of support and guidance were more decisive about their next steps, whereas the students who did not were clearly disadvantaged as they were very tentative and unsure about their plans for university.

### ***Support is important***

As the majority of students in this study would be 'first in family' to attend university, most did not have access to a support person that would be able to advise and guide them through the transition process. Accordingly, this transition to tertiary would present many challenges for these participants. For a number of students, the mere step of pursuing tertiary study at

university was seen as ‘big’ and was not seen as a logical next step or something decided a long time ago and taken as a given. For these students, there would be no one to follow, talk to and learn from about their experiences at university.

*“Just the idea of making it to university would be big, because no one in our family has ever made it”. (Tiare)*

The few students that did have a clear idea clear idea of what they would study in 2012 had links to someone who had studied that discipline and in most cases the person was a family member. These students were more decisive about their plans for tertiary study and hence could name both the institution they had enrolled at and their intended programme of study. These students could also clearly link their programme of study to career aspirations.

*“I have enrolled in the Bachelor of Education Primary at the University of Auckland”. (Evelyn)*

*“I plan to study at AUT Manukau and gain a Bachelor of Sport and Recreation which will enable me to become a sports nutritionist”. (Ioane)*

Surprisingly, only two students (from the group of eleven participants) had applied for tertiary scholarships. This was of particular concern as all of the students in the study were considered the ‘top Pasifika students’ at their school. The two students that had applied for scholarships both had an older sibling at university and said they were able to access their support when they applied for financial assistance. One student also sought the support of the careers advisor at their school who he described as ‘very helpful’ in giving him scholarship information and support. The majority of the students in this study did not apply for scholarships and when asked why they did not, most stated that they were either unaware of the scholarships available and/or did not feel confident applying.

### *Following in their footsteps*

Many of the students that had access to a support person such as a family or community member decided to ‘follow in their footsteps’ and chose the same discipline/programme of study as this support person.

*“My mum worked her way up to become an Early Childhood teacher...and that’s why I want to get into Education”. (Evelyn)*

It seemed that for these students there may have been several reasons why they had chosen to ‘follow in their footsteps’. Perhaps for some, a clear pathway had been laid which seemed like a good path for them to follow – there is a precedent-setter who can lead the way for them as well as provide the necessary support and guidance. This may seem easier and safer in contrast to them opting for a different course or programme that is unfamiliar and therefore could be perceived to be more challenging and daunting.

### *First in family*

All of the students that had not made concrete plans about what they would study at tertiary level all shared similar attributes. Most would be ‘first in family’ to attend university; they also talked about ‘keeping their options open’ and having more than one area of interest. These students spoke about choosing broad subjects at school so they would have more choices at tertiary however ironically by ‘keeping their options open’, some students were

clearly disadvantaged as they had reached the end of year 13 and still had no firm plans in place for tertiary.

*“I might do social sciences and I’m thinking of either [studying at] Auckland, Waikato or Victoria”; “Plans for next year...I can either do Health Science or Archaeology...I’ve always been interested in History though.”(Sina)*

These findings highlight a critical need for Pasifika students and families to have access to appropriate information, support and guidance with regard to tertiary programmes of study, enrolment procedures, application deadlines, limited entry course requirements and financial matters. They also highlight an opportunity for initiatives such as academic counselling to address these key issues for Pasifika secondary school students and their families.

The next chapter presents the significance of the study findings. Implications for Pasifika secondary students, Pasifika families and communities, secondary schools and teachers and tertiary education providers are identified as well as opportunities for further research. A conclusion is also presented that evaluates the aims of the research project

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE SIGNIFICANCE AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY FINDINGS

In this study I have explored Pasifika student perceptions of success and learning at secondary school. A small group of eleven successful Year 13 Pasifika students participated in this qualitative research study and shared their perceptions of success and learning as well as key aspects they believed had positively impacted on their educational journey thus far.

Having set out to discover what constituted success for Pasifika secondary school students in New Zealand, I also wanted to find out what aspects of Academic Counselling (if any) they had found helpful to their learning and success.

The discussion that follows identifies conclusions that I have drawn from this research and discusses the significance of the study findings. The chapter concludes with a list of recommendations for Pasifika students; Pasifika families and communities; teachers and secondary schools and tertiary institutions. Opportunities for further research are also identified.

#### **Pasifika success – the expectation!**

The students who participated in this study can be described as ‘successful’ Pasifika students. By the end of their secondary schooling years, they had attained NCEA Level 3 and University Entrance and were well on their way to making important decisions about their future academic and career pathways. Given that Pasifika achievement and success is a



national priority, there is much we can learn from these students and their experiences at school.

The findings of this research project indicate that there are certain interconnected conditions that promote Pasifika student success at secondary school. Key aspects identified by the participants include the critical role teachers, schools and Pasifika families play in supporting Pasifika student success.

The evidence from this study shows that significant support is needed for Pasifika students to successfully transition to tertiary study. The findings also suggest that a ‘mutually shared understanding’ of success is needed between Pasifika students, families, teachers and schools. This could firstly include an explicit focus on what *long term* ‘success’ might mean in *tangible* terms for Pasifika students and families; and secondly, what tailored support and guidance is needed so that Pasifika students can achieve their personal, academic and career aspirations. This is particularly pertinent given that the findings show that there is disconnect between student and family aspirations of success and the practical steps that are actually needed to get there.

### **Pasifika students’ conceptions of success**

There are three key findings that emerged from the research study with regard to Pasifika students’ conceptions of ‘success’. Firstly, the Pasifika student participants viewed ‘*success as a process*’, secondly, ‘*success as a collective endeavour and achievement*’ and thirdly, ‘*success as the achievement of [mostly] short-term goals*’.

### ***Success as a process***

One of the significant findings to emerge from this study is that the majority of Pasifika student participants viewed success as a ‘process’ rather than an ‘outcome’.

‘Success’ was not necessarily seen as the attainment of an actual *outcome* but was more about the *process* students believed they needed to undergo in order to achieve their goals. Accordingly, students expressed that ‘success’ was about “*trying their best, working hard and giving 100 percent*” and emphasised ‘qualities’ they believed were needed for success – these included the importance of self-motivation, hard work, perseverance as well as family and school support.

The participants did not define success as the accomplishment of a particular goal such as getting into a specific programme of study at university, obtaining a scholarship or fulfilling certain personal or career aspirations. In this respect, the participants’ definition of success seemed to be more about their motivation, personal development and satisfaction, as well as the perceived progress they were making towards their goals.

Because the participants did not think of success as an outcome or destination, but rather as a ‘journey’, this impacted on the types of goals and pathways they had set for themselves. Success was about ‘making their parents and their families proud’ by ‘making it in to university’ and ‘getting a good job’ in the future but when probed for further detail as to what this looked like – in terms of goals they had set with regard to university courses and future career pathways, many could not state what tangible outcomes they hoped to achieve.

This difficulty describing what long term success might mean in tangible terms seemed to be connected to two key aspects. Firstly, the fact that for many of these students they were ‘leading the way’ for their families and communities and would be the first person to attend university. Consequently they did not have access to an experienced support person within their family or community who could provide relevant advice and guidance about tertiary and career pathways. Secondly, this difficulty also seemed to stem from the tension between the participants defining themselves as ‘individuals’ as well as locating themselves within the ‘collective’ (family/community). Overall, these students live their lives connected closely to the collective and find it difficult to separate their own aspirations from those of their families. Although this strong connection to the collective offers valuable support to students, it also limits their ability to envisage individual goals and hence success as a clear personal outcome.

### ***Success as a collective endeavour and achievement***

The findings indicate that the student participants were very clear about ‘why’ they wanted to be successful. Being successful meant ‘having a purpose’ and being able to ‘give back’ to their parents, families and communities. This was an integral part of what success meant for these young Pasifika people, because without exception, success was seen as a collective endeavour and a collective achievement. If they succeeded, so too would their families. Conversely, if they did not succeed, they would have primarily failed their families and subsequently, themselves. Although this seemed like a huge burden to carry, the student participants expressed that they used this ‘pressure’ of family and community expectations as further motivation to succeed.

### ***Success as the achievement of [mostly] short term goals***

All of the student participants shared aspirations of going on to further study at tertiary level and were well aware of the essential educational requirements they needed to fulfil in order to achieve this goal. Consequently, students were very clear about ensuring they gained their NCEA Level 3 and University Entrance qualification in their final year of school. At the same time, they did not necessarily aim to complete specific subjects or to achieve at Merit or Excellence level in subjects that might be critical to their enrolment in a particular course or university.

For many of the participants, success (at the time of the interview) seemed to be primarily focused on the short term outcome of '*getting into uni*'. Many of the participants had not confirmed what tertiary course or programme they intended to study nor at which institution, despite it being the end of their final year at school. This was particularly concerning because the students in this study were 'academically-successful' and needed to have clear plans in place for the future, to help them make a successful transition to the next rung of the education ladder.

There was no doubt that these students 'wanted' to be successful, but that any of them should lack the knowledge of 'specific steps' they needed to take in order to 'be' successful is both significant and troubling. Without a clear, tangible goal, and a plan to achieve it, they and students like them are at risk of losing their way and moving away from the pathway that would see their aspirations fulfilled.

## **Key levers for learning and success**

The research findings indicate that teachers, parents and families were ‘key levers for learning’ that contributed to the success of the Pasifika student participants at secondary school. In relation to this, the participants also identified aspects of the academic counselling initiative at their school that they believed were beneficial to their learning and success.

Teachers and families were important in providing critical support which enabled students to succeed. Although teachers and families have different roles, what is important is that they work together to support Pasifika students. Therefore, when the participants were asked what they thought of the ‘academic counselling’ initiative at their school and whether it was helpful or not – nearly all of the students stated that the very ‘nature’ of academic counselling whereby teachers, parents and students were required to work together was beneficial. The ‘3-way conversations’ helped in bringing parents, teachers and themselves as students together, so that they were ‘all on the same page’ with regard to their progress and achievement at school. Specifically, through the regular meetings with the teacher and school, their parents and families had a better understanding of NCEA and accordingly could better support them at home.

Families were described as providing high expectations, motivation, encouragement and helped students develop aspirations of success. Families also supported students by getting involved at school and attending school meetings that were focused on learning e.g. Parent-teacher-student conferences. Families also supported students by giving them time and space, being flexible and understanding the demands of NCEA and other school commitments.

Teachers provided critical support which enabled students to achieve their academic goals. The participants spoke fondly of their teachers and discussed the pivotal role their teachers’

played in helping them achieve and succeed at school. The students stated that their foundation for learning and success was strong when they had positive teacher/student relationships based on their teacher 'really knowing them', 'understanding their worlds' and using teaching strategies that enhanced Pasifika students learning.

Given that teachers have been identified as a key lever for Pasifika students' progress, achievement and success at school, it is vital that this type of teacher-student relationship is fostered. If these factors are missing it is much more difficult for Pasifika students to learn and do well in these classes.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

There are limited although important implications that can be drawn from a small, qualitative study conducted in one school. Nevertheless the findings of this study have implications for Pasifika students and their families, secondary teachers and schools and tertiary institutions. As the findings of this study show, Pasifika student success is dependent on a range of interconnected factors which firstly, influence Pasifika student learning and academic achievement at secondary school and secondly, impact on their successful transition to tertiary level study and the associated career pathways.

## **Pasifika students**

The research findings highlight the tension that exists for Pasifika students in terms of being able to define their own individual aspirations as well as fulfill the aspirations and goals of the collective. It is clear that Pasifika students need support and guidance with regard to navigating this complexity as the very essence of their identity and belonging is inextricably connected to that of their families. It is important that students are able to identify their own individual goals and aspirations that are based on their skills, strengths and passions and then be given support to connect these with possible study and career pathways that will benefit both themselves and the collective. The findings indicate that students who could confidently express their individual goals firstly were more likely to be able to connect their aspirations to tangible outcomes.

In addition to this, the findings also indicate that it is helpful if Pasifika students have clear academic goals that are not only connected to their aspirations but critically to a long term plan. The long term plan should identify 'achievable steps' that outline what interim goals need to be achieved to ensure that the student is 'on track' to achieve both their long term goals and aspirations.

It is acknowledged that many Pasifika students and their families have limited access, knowledge and understanding of the various educational and careers options available, therefore, it is important that personalised opportunities are provided for this purpose at secondary school and tertiary level.

## **Pasifika families**

This study has shown that Pasifika families significantly influence Pasifika student success and can provide critical support to students by having high expectations; motivating and encouraging students as well as helping them develop academic aspirations.

Families are able to provide key learning support when they understand the New Zealand schooling system and in particular NCEA and the academic demands it places on students. Alongside this, Pasifika parents and families need to have realistic expectations of students in terms of their time and commitments outside of secondary school. Parents and families need to provide appropriate time and space to students so they can focus on their academic goals.

The findings also suggest that Pasifika parents and families need to be more open and flexible in terms of their cultural and academic expectations of Pasifika students. Students reported that it was important that they be given opportunity to be involved in extra-curricular school or community activities of their choice and/or events that can provide a welcome 'break' from their academic studies.

Families should also be provided with and have access to appropriate and relevant information and resources so that they can help their children to make good, informed decisions with regard to tertiary study and career pathways.



## **Teachers**

It is clear that teachers play a pivotal part in ensuring Pasifika students experience success at school. A key element identified in the study which promotes Pasifika learning and success is the importance of really ‘getting to know the learner’ and making meaningful connections with Pasifika students and their worlds. When teachers understand Pasifika student worlds, they can confidently use the unique cultural capital of Pasifika students in the classroom to facilitate learning and achievement. The findings also emphasise the importance of developing positive teacher-student relationships as a solid foundation for learning and success.

Another key aspect which is identified is the importance of teachers working in partnership with Pasifika students, parents and families. Students reported that when their teachers, parents and families worked together towards mutually shared goals based on student achievement and progress, then Pasifika students were more likely to succeed. The nature of this relationship should be strength-based and reciprocal with teachers learning from parents as well as imparting knowledge and advice about how parents and families can support their child’s learning.

## **Schools**

It is obvious from the study that secondary schools need to provide more tailored support to Pasifika students and their families with regard to subject choices, tertiary study and potential career pathways. This is particularly important for Pasifika students and families with limited

access to resources and networks in their communities that can provide appropriate advice and support with regard to these decisions.

Conversations with Pasifika parents and students regarding academic pathways needs to begin as early as possible in the secondary schooling years so that students, parents and teachers can work together to set relevant academic goals based on students skills, strengths and aspirations.

Another finding which has important implications for secondary schools was that these Year 13 Pasifika students were not prepared for their imminent transition to tertiary study. This was particularly so for students who would be ‘first in family’ to attend university and had no close family or community role models or mentors with personal experience of university education. In this respect, schools have an opportunity to provide practical workshops at school to Pasifika students and their families which assist with the transition process to tertiary study.

## **Tertiary Education Providers**

Although the context of the study was secondary schooling, there were a number of aspects identified by the student participants that have relevance for tertiary institutions.

It is clear from this study that Pasifika students would benefit from programmes/initiatives that offer students a ‘taste’ of certain programmes – particularly experiences in ‘non-traditional’ university subjects and programmes as many Pasifika students were not aware of the range of study options available to them at different institutions.

As Pasifika students are closely bound to their parents and families, it would be helpful if more relevant and appropriate tertiary information could be provided to Pasifika families and communities. This information could be in the different Pasifika languages and be delivered in ‘Pasifika friendly’ ways such as face-to-face at community fono and/or through established Pasifika networks such as churches and other community organisations. Parents and families could then be better equipped to support their children prepare for transition to tertiary study.

## **OPPORTUNITIES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

- Given the complex relationship which exists for Pasifika students in negotiating their individual and collective orientations, it would be worthwhile for research to investigate: How can Pasifika students develop a stronger sense of *agency* (capacity to act and own one’s decisions and actions) and *self-efficacy* (capacity to organise oneself, problem solve, etc.) while retaining (or perhaps renegotiating) close family ties and positive ethnic identity?
- It would also be of value to conduct a longitudinal study with similar Pasifika students who have experienced success at high school and track their transition and progress through to tertiary study and subsequent career options. What key supports are needed for Pasifika students to successfully make these transitions? Does success at secondary school translate into success at tertiary level and thereafter?
- Further research could also look in more depth at the academic counselling initiative from the perspective of Pasifika students who have ‘not met challenging targets in NCEA’.

What do these students identify as barriers to learning and success? What can we learn from these students' experiences?

## **FINAL CONCLUSION**

The findings of this research project confirm that there are certain interconnected conditions that promote Pasifika student learning and success at secondary school. These conditions reflect the key themes identified in the review of the literature and emphasise the critical role teachers, schools and Pasifika families play in supporting Pasifika student success.

This study has also provided a new understanding of what 'success' means to Pasifika students and how this influences their beliefs and actions. The Pasifika students defined 'success' as a journey rather than a destination and this impacted on their ability to 'see' what success could look like in the future. These young people clearly knew that success was important and that they needed to work hard to get there but were less confident about where they were going (destination) and why (individual versus collective orientations).

This research has identified an urgent need to develop a 'mutually shared understanding' of success between Pasifika students, families, teachers and schools. Given the identified benefits of academic counselling which promotes 'productive learning partnerships' between Pasifika students, families and teachers; there is an opportunity for the initiative to explicitly address what 'success' could mean in tangible terms for Pasifika students and families; and secondly, provide tailored support and guidance so that Pasifika students can achieve their personal, academic and career aspirations.

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## APPENDIX A:



### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET - Students

#### Individual & Focus Group Interviews

**Project Title:** Pasifika students' conceptions of success & learning at secondary school

**Name of Researcher:** Rosemary Mose

**Supervisors:** Dr Irena Madjar & Professor Elizabeth McKinley

Talofa lava, Malo e lelei, Kia Orana, Fakalofa lahi atu, Ni Sa Bula Vinaka and warm Pasifika greetings.

My name is Rosemary Mose and I am currently undertaking a Masters in Education at The University of Auckland. I am writing to invite you to participate in a research project.

#### **Research Aims:**

The aims of the project are to explore Pasifika student ideas about success and learning when they have met challenging targets in NCEA, and to find out how helpful the experience of academic counselling might have been to their learning and success.

I would like to invite you to participate in this research project. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you must give your written consent in order to participate. If you choose to take part (or choose not to) your grades or standing within the school will not be affected in any way.

**If you choose to take part, you will be asked to:**

- 1) Participate in an individual interview that will take about 30 – 45 minutes.
- 2) Give your permission for me to be provided with a most recent copy of your Record of Learning by the school.
- 3) Allow me to contact you in 3-4 weeks time to invite you to take part in a one hour focus group (group discussion) with other students who have taken part in the study. The focus group will be conducted only if needed to clarify the information collected during individual interviews or to add new information. Agreeing to take part in the individual interview does not mean that you have to take part in the focus group.

The interviews will take place at the school early in Term 4, at a time that suits you and does not interrupt your normal classes and learning activities. With your permission, I would like to audio-record the interviews and the focus group. You will be free to ask for the recording to be stopped at any time, and if you would like, I will send you a copy of the transcript of your interview for you to check over and correct if needed. Transcript of the focus group discussion will not be made available, in order to protect the identity of students taking part and the confidentiality of information shared during the discussion.

I will make every attempt to ensure that your identity remains confidential. Your name will not be used in any research reports and all focus group participants will be asked to keep each other's identities and discussions confidential. However, because all participants are from the same school and known to each other, it may be possible for others to identify you. The

recorded tapes will be transcribed and if a transcriber is used, this person will be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement.

You have the right to withdraw from this study at any time, and to withdraw information contained in your Record of Learning and information you have provided in the individual interview (but not the focus group) up until 31 January 2012.

Transcripts and consent forms will be stored separately and securely for six years in my research supervisor's office at the University of Auckland Epsom Campus and then destroyed. Audio tapes will also be destroyed after 6 years.

**Research findings:**

Information gathered will be analysed and reported on around common themes. At the completion of the study, if you wish to, you will receive a summary report of the main findings. It is hoped that a summary of the research findings will also be presented at a staff meeting if appropriate. The final report will be submitted for assessment for the Masters in Education degree from the University of Auckland and a copy of the thesis will be available from the University of Auckland library. Research findings may also be used for publication and conference presentations.

Thank you and fa'afetai tele lava for considering taking part in this research. If you have any questions or need further information about the proposed research project please contact me or my supervisor by email or phone below:

Rosemary Mose (student): [ryat001@aucklanduni.ac.nz](mailto:ryat001@aucklanduni.ac.nz) Telephone 09 269 7696

Dr Irena Madjar (supervisor): [i.madjar@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:i.madjar@auckland.ac.nz) Telephone 09 623 8899 ext. 48582

If you have any concerns or complaints about this project, you may contact:

Associate Professor Graeme Aitken: Dean, Faculty of Education [g.aitken@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:g.aitken@auckland.ac.nz)  
Telephone 09 623 8899 ext. 48821

For any queries regarding ethical concerns you may contact the Chair, The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee, Office of the Vice Chancellor, Private Bag, 92019, Auckland 1142. Tel (09) 3737599 extn 83711.

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS  
ETHICS COMMITTEE on 28/10/2011 for (3) years, Reference Number 7610.

## APPENDIX B:



### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET – Principal

**Project Title:** Pasifika students' conceptions of success & learning at secondary school

**Name of Researcher:** Rosemary Mose

**Supervisors:** Dr Irena Madjar & Professor Elizabeth McKinley

Talofa lava, Malo e lelei, Kia Orana, Fakalofa lahi atu, Ni Sa Bula Vinaka and warm Pasifika greetings.

My name is Rosemary Mose and I am currently undertaking a Masters in Education at The University of Auckland.

I am writing to seek your permission to invite a small group of ten (10) Year 13 Pasifika students to participate in my research project. Student participation in this study is entirely voluntary and all students will need to give written consent to participate. Your assurance is sought that whether or not students decide to take part in the study this will not affect their relationship with the school.

**Research Aims:**

This research will be undertaken in conjunction with the Starpath Project. The aim of the project is to explore Pasifika student conceptions of success and learning when they have met challenging targets in NCEA.

The project will explore:

- Pasifika student perceptions of learning and success when they have met challenging targets in NCEA
- Aspects of the Academic Counselling programme that Pasifika students believe are most helpful to their learning and success

**Participant selection:**

With your approval, I would like to ask the Year 13 Dean to identify students who meet the following criteria:

- male or female
- identify as Samoan, Tongan, Cook Island Maori, Niuean, Tuvaluan, Tokelauan or another Pasifika group are regarded by their teachers to be on track to achieve NCEA Level 3 and UE this year, and to achieve at least some credits with Merit or Excellence,

I would like to ask the Year 13 Dean to identify the students who meet the inclusion criteria, to pass on to them the information pack about the study, and to inform them that I would be happy to meet with the students, individually or as a group, to provide more information about the project and to answer their questions.

**Student records:**

I would also like to have your permission to obtain copies of the participating students' NCEA records of learning held by the school. This will be subject to individual students'

written consent. Access to students' records of learning will enable me to obtain a fuller picture of their academic progress and performance at senior secondary level.

**Student participation in the study will involve:**

An individual interview that will take about 30 – 45 minutes and, if needed, one focus group discussion will take about 1 hour. These will be audio-recorded. It is hoped that these interviews will take place at school at an agreed date and time that minimises disruption to the students' studies and the school's core business of teaching and learning.

Students' real names will not be used in any research reports and, if a focus group is conducted, participants will be asked to keep student identities and discussions confidential. However, because student participants are from the same school and a focus group might be used, students will be informed that it may be possible for others to identify them in the study. The recorded tapes will be transcribed and if a transcriber is used, they will be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement.

Students will be given the opportunity to review the transcript of the individual interviews and will have the right to withdraw from this study at any time, and to withdraw information they have provided in individual interviews and contained in their records of learning up until 31 January 2012. Transcripts and consent forms will be stored separately and securely for six years in my research supervisor's office at the University of Auckland Epsom Campus and then destroyed. Audio tapes will also be destroyed after 6 years.

**Research findings:**

Information gathered will be analysed and reported on around common themes. At the completion of the study participating students will receive a summary of the main findings. I would be happy to present the main findings at a school staff meeting if appropriate. The final report will be submitted for assessment for the Masters in Education degree from the University of Auckland and a copy of the thesis will be available from the University of Auckland library. Research findings will also be used for publication and conference presentations.

Thank you and fa'afetai tele lava for considering my request. If you have any questions or need further information about the proposed research project please contact me or my supervisor by email or phone below:

Rosemary Mose (student): [ryat001@aucklanduni.ac.nz](mailto:ryat001@aucklanduni.ac.nz) Telephone 09 269 7696

Dr Irena Madjar (supervisor): [i.madjar@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:i.madjar@auckland.ac.nz) Telephone 09 623 8899 ext. 48582

If you have any concerns or complaints about this project, you may contact:

Associate Professor Graeme Aitken: Dean, Faculty of Education [g.aitken@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:g.aitken@auckland.ac.nz)

Telephone 09 623 8899 ext. 48821



For any queries regarding ethical concerns you may contact the Chair, The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee, Office of the Vice Chancellor, Private Bag, 92019, Auckland 1142. Tel (09) 3737599 extn 83711.

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE on 28/10/2011 for (3) years, Reference Number 7610.

## APPENDIX C:



### CONSENT FORM - Students

(This Consent Form will be held for a period of six years)

**Title:** Pasifika students' conceptions of success & learning at secondary school

**Researcher:** Rosemary Mose

**Supervisors:** Dr Irena Madjar & Professor Elizabeth McKinley

I, ..... (name) agree to take part in the above research project to be conducted by Rosemary Mose, and give my consent freely.

I understand that the project will be conducted as described in the Participant Information Sheet, a copy of which I have read and retained.

I have had the opportunity to have questions about the project answered to my satisfaction.

I understand that I can withdraw from the project at any time without having to give a reason, and that I can also ask for the information I have provided (in the individual interview and contained in my Record of Learning) to be withdrawn from the study.

I understand that my personal information will remain confidential to the researcher, research supervisor and the transcription service. I also understand that because of the nature of the



or Email:.....

**Part 2: To be completed at a later date, if invited and agreeing to take part in a focus group**

I .....(name) agree to take part in a focus group with other students who have taken part in this study.

I agree to the focus group discussion being audio-recorded.

I agree to keep the information shared in the focus group discussion confidential to the group.

I understand that I can withdraw from the focus group at any time, but that it will not be possible to withdraw the information I might already have provided.

I understand that the researcher cannot guarantee to keep my identity confidential, and cannot guarantee the confidentiality of the information shared during the discussion, if any of the participants break their promise to keep this information confidential to the group.

Student signature: .....

Date: .....

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE on 28/10/2011 for (3) years, Reference Number 7610.

## APPENDIX D:



### CONSENT FORM - Principal

(This Consent Form will be held for a period of six years)

**Title:** Pasifika students' conceptions of success & learning at secondary school

**Researcher:** Rosemary Mose

**Supervisor:** Dr Irena Madjar

I, ..... (name) agree to the above research project being conducted by Rosemary Mose, and give my consent freely.

I understand that the project will be conducted as described in the Participant Information Sheet, a copy of which I have read and retained.

I have had the opportunity to have questions about the project answered to my satisfaction.

I understand that students can withdraw from the project at any time without having to give a reason, and that they can also ask for the information in their records of learning and provided in individual interviews to be withdrawn from the study.

I understand that students' personal information will remain confidential to the researcher, research supervisor and the transcription service.

I agree to the researcher being provided with a most recent copy of the *Record of Learning* for each participating student who agrees to have his or her Record of Learning released by the school.

I would like to receive a copy of the brief summary of the research findings:      Yes      No

Signature:

.....

Date:

.....

If you answered "Yes" to the question above, please provide your email address below:

Email:.....

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS  
ETHICS COMMITTEE on 28/10/2011 for (3) years, Reference Number 7610.

## APPENDIX E



Project Title: Pasifika students' conceptions of success & learning at secondary school

Researcher: Rosemary Mose

### **Individual Semi-structured Interview Schedule – Indicative Questions**

(Students)

1. You have been identified by your teachers as a student who is doing very well at school. Can you tell me about your experience here at school? *What has gone well? What do you think has helped you do well at school?*
2. What are your plans for next year? *What about your plans for the future?*
3. Can you think of a successful person you know – are you able to tell me a little bit about this person and describe what makes this person successful to you?
4. What role do you think 'natural ability', 'family', 'mentors', 'friends', 'school' etc. play in helping you succeed? *What are some things that have helped you the most?*
5. Do you think it is important to be successful? *Why? Why not?*
6. Many Pasifika students are achieving good results at your school, can you explain what support is in place to help students achieve? *What do you think has been most helpful in supporting you and other students at school? What do you think is needed for Pasifika students to do well at school?*
7. Do you think it is easier/harder for Pasifika students/people to succeed? *Why?*
8. Success to me is...

### **Possible/Likely Topics for the Focus Group**

1. Several students mentioned that personal determination/a particular teacher [or some other factor] was really important to their success at school. Would you agree? Why/how is this important? Can you provide some personal examples?
2. Some of you mentioned personal friendships/church youth pastor [or some other factor] as having an influence on your study habits and learning, but I did not get enough detail to understand why/how this is important. Can you tell me more about that? Can you share some examples from your experience?