Agency and transformation: Pasifika teachers navigating the currents of change

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Abstract: The research study Voices from Manukau, which informs this article, was primarily concerned with the complexities of culture, identity, diversity and intercultural awareness, and the significance of context in a pre-service teacher education programme located in New Zealand's most ethnically diverse and fastest growing city. The participants were a total of 60 students who were drawn from four consecutive intakes at the Manukau Institute of Technology. These intakes were at 6-month intervals. The students were interviewed during each year of their programme and during their first year teaching. Half of the research participants were from Pasifika cultural groups. This article explores Pasifika responses to questions that asked them to reflect on what studying in their local community had meant to them as tertiary students and as teachers in diverse urban schools. The implications of their responses for educational inclusion are theorised as representing the cultural effects of globalisation, as cultural dynamics are played out in a multicultural context.

Keywords: agency, community; cultural globalisation; identity; Pasifika teachers

Introduction

Pasifika peoples hold a significant and special place in New Zealand's polyethnic society. The importance of economic and political factors in shaping this long and consequential history are reflected in the crucial contribution of migrant workers from the Pacific during the country's post-war industrial period; long-standing administrative, citizen and generational relationships; and the wider regional links peculiar to the contemporary period of globalisation. At the cultural level, ancestral links with Māori and the rich dimensions the different Pasifika groups add to New Zealand's cultural landscape are equally significant. Today, young people from Pacific Island ethnic groups constitute approximately nine percent of the total school population of Aotearoa New Zealand (TeachNZ, 2009). Projections indicate that this figure will double by the year 2051 (Wylie, 2003) and yet institutional and policy responses to recognising, respecting and incorporating Pasifika values, ideals and goals have been slow to materialise. The consequences of this and the implications for student experiences of education have been well-documented (Alton-Lee, 2003; Nakhid, 2003; Wendt Samu, 2006) and, when juxtaposed with demographic forecasts, raise serious questions about the future.

Systematic government and Ministry of Education attempts to address issues of participation and success for Pasifika peoples at the compulsory and non-compulsory levels of the education sector began with the publication of *Ko e Ako `a e Kakai Pasifika*: *Pacific Islands Peoples' Education in Aotearoa, New Zealand* (1996). Wendt Samu, Mara and Siteine suggest that more recent initiatives are a response to the fact that "Pacific demographics challenge the government's drive towards economic globalisation" (2008, p. 145). Continued poor performance by such a significant percentage of the country's population confounds neoliberal and neoconservative imperatives for excellence and competitive advantage in the global system. Despite the fact that the impact of late 20th century social movements from the political left, linked also to transnational and global processes (Stewart-Harawira, 2005), have seen equity imperatives gain

prominence on the agenda of education systems, the dominant mandate for education has been to ensure successful participation in the global knowledge economy (Dale, 2008). It is little wonder that negotiated expressions of the state's need to address contradictory economic and democratic objectives (Dale, 1989) have done little to address the core tensions which create barriers to success for Pasifika students in New Zealand (Anae, Anderson, Benseman & Coxon, 2002).

Increasing concern about differential learning outcomes has prompted considerable interest in the teacher as an agent of intervention. At the government level it has been acknowledged that "the key to raising education standards for Pasifika people is to have quality Pasifika teachers" (TeachNZ., 2009, p. 2). However, in 2008 Pasifika teachers represented a mere 2.7 percent of the teaching workforce (Ministry of Education, 2008), a statistic that stands in stark contrast to Pasifika student numbers, especially in communities where the concentration of Pasifika families is high. Recognising the advantage of the rich cultural diversity of south Auckland as a potential student and future teacher resource, the University of Auckland embarked on a collaborative venture with the Manukau Institute of Technology in 2000 to locate a student cohort of its Bachelor of Education (Teaching) programme at Manukau. In this article we introduce the voices of early career Pasifika teachers, all of whom completed their teacher education degree in this programme, as they reflect on what studying in their local community has meant for them as tertiary students and as future teachers in diverse urban schools.

The complex relationships between culture, language, identity and state schooling are central to this article and to the choice of literature used to inform the discussion. In particular, because we recognise that the current phase of globalisation circumscribes significant constraints for policy change, but also provides possibilities for teachers to act as agents of change in resisting such structural constraints, theories of cultural globalisation are central. We find these theories useful also because they help make sense of comments the students make about the tensions they experience as a result of the multiculturalisation of societies (Kymlicka, 1995, 2001; Banks, 2004) that has been the outcome of migration flows across less defined borders (Castles, 2007; Kennedy & Roudometof, 2002). They also help us to understand the transformatory potential of Pasifika teachers in contemporary New Zealand classrooms. Despite pressures to conform to "a homogeneous national identity, represented by the language and culture of the dominant ethnie" (May, 2001, p. 307), Pasifika students/teachers in our research demonstrated tenacity in holding fast to their deeply embedded cultural norms, values and beliefs and in making them integral to their work with Pasifika students. Theories of globalisation support the view that a globalising world need not mean that cultural specificities are relinquished (Featherstone, 1990). The coming together of cultures in a physical sense and within a physical space may have an homogenising effect, but this does not necessarily mean that an homogeneous end-point will be reached. Those defining cultural characteristics that have constituted the framework for everyday living and practices, and have therefore been taken for granted in the home of origin, now have to be consciously practiced. As Breidenbach and Zukrigl suggest, "[l]iving in a globalised world goes hand in hand with a newly arising consciousness for one's own cultural characteristics" (1999. n.p.).

Researching a programme

The University of Auckland programme at Manukau was a welcome initiative for members of the community who would otherwise have been unable to access such a programme and also for the schools in the area, as they had some of the most diverse classroom populations in the country. Early indicators of student experiences of the programme were promising, but there were also some teething problems relating to both administrative (institutional) and personal (student)

factors. It was decided that if the difficulties were to be immediately addressed, the positive aspects further supported, and the future possibilities explored, an appropriate means of identifying and analysing the critical issues needed to be developed.

In the first group, 31 percent of the students were Māori and 35 percent Pasifika; 62 percent were mature age students, that is, students 20 years of age and over who do not have the usual university entrance qualification. It was clear that much could be gained by having regular focussed conversations with the students in order to capture a crucial dimension of understanding for the on-going development of an effective programme. Accordingly, class members were invited to attend informal meetings to reflect on their early experiences in the programme, to identify issues that needed to be examined and to consider how the process might best be approached. The decision to explore student views of the programme and of its relationship to their experiences in the schools through repeat interviews was formalised in the 'Voices from Manukau' project. All members of the first four student cohorts were invited to participate in the research. Those who became part of the study were interviewed throughout their teacher preparation and into their early teaching careers. One half of the 60 participants in the research were from various Pasifika communities and it is their voices that inform this article.

The teacher education experience

Many of the early career Pasifika teachers tell us that they enrolled in the teacher education programme with a great deal of uncertainty about their ability to undertake university study. It was, however, because Manukau was seen, in the words of one research participant, as "surrounding Pacific Islanders" and having "the big heart from the Pacific", that they were encouraged to take a chance. Despite the fact that some of them had pursued successful teaching careers in their island homes, their identities as students in New Zealand expressed the interplay of socially imposed stereotypical notions of 'the Pacific learner' that have come to dominate the country's educational discourse and their subjective sense of self. This was even more real for those who had experienced education in New Zealand in a negative way. As university graduates and early career teachers, however, they talked of the importance of breaking through the negative stereotypes to create classrooms in which Pasifika identities could be redefined, affirmed and nurtured. As one participant in the study explained:

> *I always blamed being a Pacific Islander for those problems within the communities, you know, under-educated, unemployed, end up in the factories, Pacific Islanders don't want to learn, always underachieve. ... I always blamed myself, because of being a Pacific Islander. This way – we're like this. It's my fault. [So, it's] very important to understand—being a Pacific Islander—to be a teacher to go out and minimise the problem. Help the Pacific Island students. Tell them it's not their fault. Encourage them - they can do better than what they think they are. And yeah. Build up their sense of believing who they are.*

The students spoke of valuing the opportunity of reflecting on their own educational careers in a critical way. For many, this was an important step in getting away from deficit understandings of themselves as learners (Shields, Bishop & Mazawi, 2005) and to reconceptualise possibilities for the Pasifika students in their classrooms. For example, when asked whether the teacher education programme had been what he had expected, this student endorsed an approach that went beyond skills and methods:

> *It's been more and I can say that. I was very surprised, very surprised. It's actually quite mind blowing because when you think about it, it answers a lot of the questions ...*

> *why we have the problems that we have today. Because if we just continue to be taught how to teach, well then, we're just transferring one form of knowledge. We just become robots within a factory that we're just reproducing the same thing over and over again. Whereas, if we're being more critical educators … it allows us to critically evaluate why we're teaching what we teach. You know, for whose benefit is it? What good is it for the students?*

The advantage of the Manukau experience most commonly spoken about in the interviews was studying in a community of ethnically diverse learners. Two issues prevailed. First, working closely with people from various nations with differing experiences of life in New Zealand, and issues such as cultural and linguistic continuity, raised questions about the way Pasifika peoples (and other groups such as Asians, refugees etc) have been homogenised in New Zealand. The implications of this on practice was recognised and students engaged in long discussions about the complexity of ethnic identification and what Nobutaka (1997, p. 10) characterised as the unsystematic " 'tangling' kind of way" that cultural interchange proceeds. These discussions were recalled in research interviews, for example:

> *The course on our first year, it really challenged me about who I was as a person and about my schooling and all the rest of it. And I had to figure out, my goodness, I've been in New Zealand all my life, and haven't been to Samoa yet, and yet I'm Samoan. And I went back to Samoa with my mum and dad, and a few of my other siblings and I couldn't believe their mindset, you know, why they left there to come here … But yeah, I reckon in doing that they lost everything else. I didn't even learn to speak my language.*

They talked of the contradictions they faced in strategically adapting aspects of the wider university culture in order to achieve their goals, but also of the way this was facilitated in a context that was "more like home", where they had a "sense of belonging". This included "questioning the teacher", which for most of the Pasifika students had not been acceptable in their culture. But at Manukau, where the stakes were high, and there was a wider agenda, "oh yes, yes, we question the teacher. Why like this? Why like that? How? Explain more please." They told us about working together as a multicultural group, but also resisting any taken-for-granted suggestion that they were an homogeneous Pasifika group, and of the need to return at times to members of their own ethnic group for support and assistance, especially in teasing out meanings of unfamiliar theoretical concepts in their mother tongue.

The second issue that was commonly raised was related to their recognition of the role of culture in the classroom. Bishop and Glynn (1999) suggest that educators often fail to recognise how culture–whether their own or that of their students—shapes educational interactions. This renders invisible the politics of power that allows the majority culture to dominate meaning-making systems in the classroom. Thus, the authors argue, educators must be able to critically evaluate the potential for their cultural traditions to be imposed on others. The students in the study suggested that they were developing this critical consciousness as the close connections with the diverse student body enabled them to see first-hand how their colleagues made sense of the world and of their learning. They saw this as a vast and invaluable knowledge base to take into their multicultural environments, making them better prepared to capitalise on a similar resource in their diverse classrooms.

> *Oh yes, I was well prepared to work within a culturally diverse classroom because I was in the multicultural group of students. You know what I mean? I was in the university, with a lot of people from different backgrounds. That's how we enrich one another. Samoan, Tongan, Fijians, Indians, other people from overseas; and so we sort*

of meet each other and we learn their cultures and their values. And for myself, I need to carry that out in my head. I'm not to keep just my own Samoan [way] and try to dominate my Samoan [way] to others. I need to be open to other people's cultures and values.

Teaching for change

The increasing multiculturalisation of society has led not only to critiques of an assumed homogeneous national identity, but also of the "ethnically exclusive and culturally and linguistically homogeneous nation-state" (May, 2001, p. 6). Will Kymlicka, pointing to the possibilities in globalisation for minority groups to retain their cultural distinctiveness and collectivity, suggests that "[g]lobalization has made the myth of a culturally homogenous state even more unrealistic, and has forced the majority within each state to be more open to pluralism and diversity" (1995, p. 9). Distinguishing between national minorities (such as indigenous people who have become a minority through such processes as colonisation) and ethnic minorities (immigrant groups) in relation to multinational and polyethnic states respectively, he argues for the rights of all minority groups to receive "public recognition and support for their language, practices and identities" (Kymlicka, 2001, p. 21). This, however, presents some major challenges for education. First, the universalistic ideology of public education as a neutral vehicle for national unity is called into question as is an understanding of what may constitute education for citizenship in multicultural societies. These challenges are exacerbated in a context where globalisation has generated a renewed sense of nationalism. As Banks explains, "[m]ulticultural societies are faced with the problem of constructing nation-states that reflect and incorporate the diversity of their citizens and yet have an overarching set of shared values, ideals, and goals to which all citizens are committed" (2004, p. 3).

Much of the literature on globalisation and education has recognised these tensions and the need to incorporate such understandings to inform practices for the future. As Eleni Oikonomidoy argues "[i]n the era of globalisation and vigorous social transformation, schools are increasingly becoming not only microcosms of the society in which they belong but also of the global world" (2009, p. 23). Oikonomidoy's interest is in the role of schooling in creating the academic identity of migrant students whilst mediating the impact of migration and relocation; the dual processes of adaptation to the host country and retention of authentic cultural beliefs and practices; and the ways in which past and present fuse to create possible futures for newcomers to a society. Advocating the need for schools to create an opportunity for ethnic minority groups to come together as a distinct cultural group, she sees this not only in terms of creating a personal support network, but also as public recognition of their place in the school culture.

Recognising an important role for Pasifika teachers in creating culturally inclusive spaces, we asked the teachers whether they felt it was important to have teachers from the Pacific nations in classrooms. Without exception they replied in the affirmative, adding comments such as "most of our children in South Auckland are from Pasifika groups" and "it would be good for them to see their own Pacific teachers as role models for them, just helping them along the way". One of the group now has an ESOL position with year 7 pupils. They are, she says, "island kids" with a reputation in the school as "naughty kids". But, she says, "they are not naughty when I am in the classroom". She explains how she reaches the children by making links to home. "My strategy for those kids, I talk about a myth and a legend lesson from the island—how the old people learn, how they went to school, and they were interested to listen about it". Other teachers commented on the fact that they are able to provide an authentic model for the cultural practices that they incorporate into the school programme.

> *I taught the Samoan culture entertainment. It is the way to welcome all the visitors to Samoa. It is part of our culture. To make the visitors at home we have to put the leis around their necks and welcome them in the Samoan songs that are specially for visitors. And also some action songs that are meaningful. For example, I taught the children how to clap and how to mix the water with kava. And that the lady in Samoa used to sit in the middle of all the chiefs and mix the kava with water for special guests.*

Both Oikonomidoy (2009) and Kymlicka (2001) have argued that schools need to create opportunities for students to connect with others from their cultural group for support, where they can feel a sense of familiarity in their collective identity and shared cultural experiences. As did Nakhid (2003), they acknowledge that it is crucial that children are given recognition in the school culture, and that they are able to see themselves reflected in that culture.

The early career teachers tell us some of the ways in which their access to their cultural knowledge allows them to support such objectives. One woman spoke of the school's (and her own) responsibility to "adjust, validate; validate us; validate our cultures". Validating the culture of the children for this woman includes allowing the language of the children to be used in the classroom when that resource is available. As a multilingual teacher, she explains the importance of using her language skills as both a communication and learning resource for the children.

> *You see, I have several Pacific languages that I can speak well. In the classroom this is such an important thing. I talk to the children in their own language and their faces – they just light up! If there is an idea they find hard to understand, I start in their language, just to help them get the idea clear.*

The value of language is recognised in a number of ways in the teachers' voices. We hear that student efforts to use their language in the classroom are endorsed because "that tells me that you are very proud of where you come from". As an affirmation of identity and a tool for successful learning and communication with parents, language is also seen as particularly invaluable in the early years.

> *Being a strong Samoan speaker … I've got the juniors and they're still learning. Some might not understand English. I can just sit down with them and just translate things in Samoan to them to be able to reply. And also with parents who are not sure about the school policy I can just sit down and just explain that to them and stuff like that.*

The importance of the Pasifika teachers with skills in Pasifika languages in mediating between home and the, often culturally alienating, school (Wendt Samu, 2006) was seen by a number of the group as a major factor in ensuring school/parent communication and collaboration in supporting the children's education. This is something that the parents welcome.

> *I'm teaching in a bilingual school and there are a lot of new Pasifika teachers to be among the Pasifika children because of the language barrier and the relationships. Also the languages that they use. The first language is the Samoan language. When they come it's amazing because they want to talk in Samoan and they even build a culture as well … their cultural values, the family values and Christian values - because a lot of the Pacific children go to church. And from there I believe when I went to teach I always had that vision of people waiting for us and there is a big need for all of us … and that vision brings courage to us. We can make the difference when we go out there and the parents really need us.*

For this woman, being Samoan was important also for her own early career development. Beginning in a classroom that had faced several staffing changes meant that she struggled initially in getting to know the children whilst establishing routines and consistency. She explains:

> So I think with the help of the Samoan background, because I was able to communicate with them in my own mother tongue ... because it was a Samoan bilingual ... that helped me a lot too. Because I can communicate, and apply some of my own cultural background to the background of these children, to what they were already exposed to.

However, it cannot be assumed that the transition for Pasifika teachers into multicultural classrooms is unproblematic. In the first instance, for many, exposure to critical awareness of the cultural bias of schools in Aoteroa/New Zealand does much to shape their determination to establish transformatory educational spaces for their pupils. This aspiration is not necessarily easily realised, where educational conservatism remains buried beneath a shallower layer of the discourse of minority rights. A new teacher told us of her frustration in having to conform to a set of rigidly defined pedagogical practices which the school had decreed best fitted the learning needs of its students. Her frustration was exacerbated by the fact that there was no room for compromise, and she had to struggle to achieve the dynamism of the teaching act between students and teacher, or to draw on the multiple experiential resources to be found in such a rich environment.

> I came from an institution where my voice mattered ... I went in with a "we" mentality and got hit with an "I" mentality. It's all about "me" and if you want to go up the ladder... you've got to play it their way. No, but I'm not made like that. I'm from Manukau. Everything's got to be a togetherness, or I just don't do it.

One of her concerns was that, despite the predominance of Māori and Pasifika children, the books in the school bore little resemblance to their world. Stories about Pasifika peoples and their world, she felt, would do more than prompt engagement with the text. It would establish a more inclusive representation of Pasifika children in the New Zealand classroom which, in turn, would recast the definition of the identity of 'the New Zealand learner'. Her response epitomises the spirit of these inspired young practitioners and bodes well for the future:

> Well okay God, you've got to do your thing here. Because I'm not a very patient person, so you've either got to give me some patience, or make a way for me to start writing books.

Conclusions

From the voices of the Pasifika teachers we have gained insights into how their teacher education experiences at Manukau have prepared them for their roles in Auckland's diverse urban schools and their perceptions of those roles for Pasifika learners. By reading the interview transcripts through the theoretical lens of cultural globalisation, we are able to make sense of the multiple factors that have contributed to identity formation, to shaping the educational contexts under discussion, and teacher responses to them.

As a diverse capitalist democratic nation attempting to establish competitive advantage in the global world economy (Dale, 1989, 2008), New Zealand is faced with the challenge of ensuring the rights of Pasifika peoples as ethnic minorities (Kymlicka, 1995, 2001) to maintain aspects of their community languages and other cultural specificities. At the same time there is the challenge of re/creating the nation as an inclusive national community to which all member groups feel an affinity, are afforded respect and recognition, and feel accepted (Banks, 2004). Securing the

social contract, a key task for education and readily defined in earlier eras, has become very much more complex. This article has reaffirmed a key role for education in constructing the citizen-subject, and identified the importance of Pasifika teachers in upholding the rights of Pasifika students as notions of citizenship are renegotiated.

Educational institutions are not simply sites of regulation. They are also sites of struggle with the potential to bring about change. In today's world they must educate for cultural diversity as well as for national unity (Banks, 2004). We suggest that the Manukau site, a microcosm of the local community and also the global world (Oikonomidoy, 2009), acts to interrupt, in some measure, the alienating aspects of palangi education (Wendt Samu, 2006) and to present different possibilities for the future. As an intermediary space where minority identities and practices are recognised and respected (Banks, 2004; Kymlicka, 2001), cultural interchanges are variously met to adapt cultural differences in a pragmatic way (Featherstone, 1990), to accommodate new practices or to reinforce cultural distinctiveness (Breidenbach & Zukrigl, 1999).

We have argued that Pasifika teachers can play an important role in making schools successful for Pasifika students. The teachers in the study have seized the opportunities available in their teacher preparation to celebrate and learn about their cultural differences as something to be valued and respected. In sharing cultural knowledge and understandings, they have created possibilities for cultural specificities to be appreciated and reinforced at the level of the school. In beginning with an understanding of the wealth of the cultural resources within diverse classrooms, rather than with the problems of management and knowledge transmission this incorporates, they hold the potential to create a shift in attitude, and thus to bring about wider transformation.

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