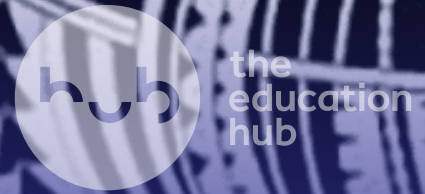


# Four strategies to effectively support Pasifika students



School resources

The term 'Pasifika' is used in educational contexts to refer to students and families who originate from the Pacific Islands or identify with the Pacific Islands in terms of ancestry or heritage. This means they derive from a diverse range of cultural and language backgrounds, identifying with one or more of the Pacific groups, including Samoa, Tonga, the Cook Islands, Fiji, Niue, Tokelau, and Tuvalu. There are, of course, many inter- and intra-ethnic variations between people of these groups, and while some identify common values and beliefs across these groups, not all people accept the label 'Pasifika'. Indeed, it would be mistaken to view Pasifika as a single ethnicity. An awareness of the diversity amongst Pasifika groups and individuals can help prevent stereotyping.

National data<sup>1</sup> demonstrates that Pasifika students achieve at the lowest level of all cultural groups, with Pasifika students tending to be in the lowest quartile for achievement, and generally remaining in that band of achievement for their school career. There is no single recipe for cultural responsiveness, and the diversity in Pasifika people makes it impossible to define a single pedagogy for Pasifika students. However, research has associated the poor achievement of Pasifika students with teachers having deficit views of Pasifika students and their potential for learning, failing to develop strong and positive relationships with Pasifika students and understand their identities, and using ineffective pedagogies<sup>2</sup>. Other research notes that high-achieving Pasifika students perceive the important factors contributing to their success to be the maintenance of their cultural identity, high expectations by teachers and parents, positive home-school relationships, parental support and love, the role of the church, and the effective use of digital technologies<sup>3</sup>.

## Hold high expectations for Pasifika students

Teachers' implicit and explicit beliefs and understandings about Pasifika students can be the biggest barrier to improving student outcomes. In research comparing teacher and student perspectives on poor achievement, teachers believed Pasifika students' low achievement was due to poor behaviour related to Pasifika values<sup>4</sup>. They often attributed poor behaviour to the discipline students received at home, believing it either not strict enough or too strict, so that students were unable to cope with the freedoms permitted at school. The students, however, said that negative relationships between teachers and students were a principal cause of poor behaviour and consequent low achievement. The same research also indicates that Pasifika students are aware of their teachers' low expectations.

Deficit thinking, generalised assumptions, low expectations, and stereotypical views of Pasifika students in particular may lead teachers to use pedagogical strategies which reduce cognitive demand and limit the complexity of their learning, including giving work that is too easy, doing students' work for them, giving simple instructions, repeating instructions, and singling Pasifika students out for attention. They limit students to simpler problems and do not engage them with higher order ideas or in thinking abstractly, so that students are unable to extend their knowledge.

Quality teaching based on high expectations and challenging learning tasks is more likely to support Pasifika students to make the greatest progress. Students are more likely to meet expectations to do well if they have **opportunities to take charge of their learning and are scaffolded to build on what they already know**. When schools and teachers have high expectations, parents are also likely to expect and support

high levels of achievement for students. Teachers should consciously reject stereotypical patterns of thinking and behaviour related to Pasifika students, and focus on students' personal and ethnic diversity, ensuring that what and how they learn reflects and reinforces their identity. It is important to understand students' behaviour as specific to the situation and influenced by social norms, rather than characteristic of a cultural group. Co-constructing the curriculum and involving students in assessment is a way of ensuring that teachers respond to individual students' specific strengths and needs.

## Know your students as individuals

It is essential that teachers know their students as individuals, the cultures they identify with, and what this means for them. Pasifika students want to have teachers who know their culture and know about them as people. They want to read, learn, and write about their own culture, and they want their teachers to care about them. Research shows that more than two thirds of teachers make a point of finding out which Pasifika culture their students and families identify with<sup>5</sup>. This is important as the label Pasifika, instead of Tongan, Samoan, Niuean, Fijian, Tokelauan, or Cook Islander, limits identity formation and disguises important differences. It also is important that teachers **affirm their students' diverse personal identities**. This does not only occur through the use of curriculum units or classroom celebrations that focus on different cultures, as these may reinforce an assumed and generalised identity for Pasifika students. Instead, teachers need to recognise that students have the right to construct their own identities.

Pasifika students develop multiple identities in regard to diverse contexts, including home, school, church, sports groups, music groups, part-time employment, and socialising with friends. Often these different contexts are quite separately associated with different identities. Students may sometimes choose to conceal cultural behaviours, including the use of their own language, in the classroom. However, valuing students' cultures and reflecting them in the curriculum and school culture will **enable students to engage openly in cultural behaviours and understandings**. It is important to **acknowledge students' choice in the ways in which they identify themselves and are identified**.

**Teachers can begin by** developing an awareness of their own cultural identity as an important tool for developing cultural understandings. This means critically reflecting on and coming to understand how identity, language, and culture influence an individual's life and identity, which helps to develop an appreciation of complexity rather than reinforcing stereotypical and essentialist understandings of cultural differences. Students also want to know about their teachers, and their lives outside school, so it is valuable for teachers to **share information about their own cultural identity and personal story**. **Set up activities which involve students in meaningful exchanges that enable the class to learn about each other, and encourage and support students to maintain their own cultural identity**, but beware of putting Pasifika students and their cultures on show, or developing a 'tourist' approach to diversity, in which students experience particular cultures in the same way as a tourist might, tasting foods, observing songs, music and dances, and learning a few words of the language or facts about a country.

Understanding and using the cultural knowledge and experiences of students is also a vital and integral part of planning curriculum and pedagogy. It is important that students see themselves reflected in the curriculum. Teachers can **construct learning tasks and activities on what students recognise and understand, such as** maths problems using ula lole, the lolly leis (garlands) that are given out at a celebration<sup>6</sup>. Another way to draw on and connect with **students' interests and prior knowledge** is to use the free reading texts provided by the Ministry of Education about different cultural groups that incorporate most Pasifika languages and cultures.

## Develop strong relationships with Pasifika students and families

All students, but particularly struggling and low-achieving students, require a positive relationship with their teacher. They need to feel that they belong and that they are connected to the group. Pasifika students prefer teachers who are responsive, reasonable, and available, who teach from their hearts and who regularly describe and frame them as competent. **Respect is important** and students report that when they feel they are not being respected by the teacher, they respond by ignoring the teacher and avoiding participation. Pasifika students want the teacher to be a strong authority figure in the classroom, so that there is order and discipline, but do not want teachers to act as substitute parents, which they see as an insult.

It is essential to **treat students with dignity**, speaking to them respectfully and pronouncing and spelling their names correctly. Treat every student as a unique individual, listening to them, and responding respectfully to their ideas, questions and concerns. Avoid interactions which assign blame and show distrust or disbelief of students. Do not use put-downs or impatience, or blame students for what they do not know, and avoid authoritarian actions and words (shouting, not listening, making accusations, and hurtful comments) which make Pasifika students feel as if they are being punished. Avoid singling out Pasifika students for help, and consider allowing them to ask for help or ask their friends for help instead.

**Pasifika parents want their children to have a good education and are committed to supporting them**, although the way in which parents support their children can differ from that which schools and teachers expect. As the teacher is seen as the authority in the classroom, parents believe it is their role to ensure that their children respect the teacher, behave well, and do their work. In other words, they focus more on behaviour, assuming that good behaviour will enable the teacher to teach them to achieve high levels of performance.

This total trust in the school and teachers can also work to disadvantage Pasifika students, as families are prevented from challenging the teachers, content, or teaching methods. If there is an issue with attainment, parents tend to blame their children rather than challenge the teaching, which may lead teachers to believe that the parents accept poor levels of learning for their children. It is important to **build relationships with Pasifika parents** to find ways to improve their understanding of, and confidence in discussing, school-related activities, but research reports that Pasifika parents feel uncomfortable and unwelcome in school<sup>7</sup>. The development of a shared perspective on student learning is hindered by the difficulties of cross-cultural communication, work and family commitments, second language use, and the structures of meetings, which reduce the capacities of Pasifika families to express their views.

Strong and positive relationships with Pasifika parents encourage parents to feel comfortable coming into school, getting involved, and sharing views. **Share data with families** to increase their knowledge of the school system and their child's achievement within it, so that they can advocate for their child, for example, by inquiring about outcomes and demanding better outcomes. Where possible, schools might consider having a Pasifika liaison person in school or in a cluster of schools, and support families to use their first language in meetings, which aids their confidence and willingness to ask questions and express their views.

## Utilise effective pedagogies that are discursive and collaborative

Research finds that learner-centred and discursive classrooms, which provide students with **opportunities to actively listen, support and question one another**, lead to more meaningful conversations, better student-teacher relationships, and greater engagement and achievement<sup>8</sup>. A discursive approach can help students make connections between the meanings they gain from their own experiences and the meanings they gain from their school learning, which strengthens

their understanding of school concepts. Pasifika students report that they want challenging work, opportunities to do the work for themselves, and space and time to think. When students feel powerless over their learning, they may display silence, compliance, and conformity, while simultaneously disengaging from the curriculum, **so it is important to empower students to take control of their own learning**. This could involve using a system in which, after class teaching, students break into groups that 'feel able to work by themselves', that 'feel confident but would like to tag back with the teacher at the end of the lesson', or that 'want to continue working with the teacher'.

It is essential to avoid applying a one-size-fits-all teaching approach for all Pasifika students or constantly trying to identify and categorise Pasifika ways of learning. For example, it would be wrong to assume that all Pasifika students enjoy group work as a result of being Pasifika. Most important for improving Pasifika students' achievement is to **listen and respond to students and their actions**. This means hearing students' perspectives and acting on them, as well as examining data to make decisions about staffing, resources, teaching approaches, and programmes. **For example, take note of students' responses to different activities** – do they become animated in discussion of certain topics, more engaged when they use their own language, when they are challenged, or when they play interactive games?

Pasifika students can be fearful of making mistakes or situations in which they might display a lack of knowledge. They may not be assertive or take risks in the context of a whole class or group discussion for fear of the ridicule and shaming that accompanies failure, which might mean that they do not ask questions or ask for help. Research claims Pasifika students prefer to fit in with cultural expectations to listen passively and obey, and can be concerned by noisy and disruptive behaviour or ineffective classroom management, which hinders their ability to learn<sup>9</sup>. **It is important that students do not feel failure or are singled out** and put on the spot, although ensure that this does not involve minimising discussion or reducing the complexity of work.

As some Pasifika students have to navigate and transition between different worlds, they have competing demands placed on them which may affect their achievement. Teachers might be able to draw on Pasifika students' understanding of cooperative venture, respect for elders and the church, and values of reciprocity, service, spirituality and family within their teaching practices. **For example, teachers might draw explicitly on Pasifika students' understandings of the concept of family** to shape expectations for positive and collective interactions in class, drawing a comparison between sharing chores at home and sharing the work for equal participation and collective responsibility in group work at school.

The use of students' own languages has been found to promote successful learning experiences, increase students' engagement and enable them to gain a more sophisticated understanding of concepts. For example, research in mathematics found students demonstrated more sophisticated higher level reasoning when learning incorporated their social customs, values, and language<sup>10</sup>. Using a home language can support students to better understand the teacher's questions or the set activity, and to find the right English words to represent what they want to communicate. This provides students with equitable learning opportunities and also helps equalise power relations in the classroom, especially when students are empowered to help each other because they can use a language the teacher doesn't understand. The aim is to support students' expression in their indigenous language, and preserve students' languages as a source of interest and pride for the student. Even the slightest recognition of students' first language helps to build students' confidence and their sense of being cared for. It is also important to **value the literacies and skills that Pasifika students have gained in their first language**, and make clear connections with school literacy so that students can build upon these. For example, Pasifika

students often acquire and practice literacy skills in the context of their church, therefore using the processes and texts that are familiar from church can support students in gaining school literacy skills.

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## Endnotes

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