

# Multiage Education: Allowing Connections for Pan Pacific Islander Students of Polynesian Background

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## Abstract

*This paper identifies multiage education as an approach that will effect improved learning outcomes for students from Polynesian migrant families. It argues that the collective orientation and socialisation practices shared by these families are compatible with beliefs and values that underpin a multiage approach. As such, young Polynesian students in multiage classrooms experience familiar ways of feeling and doing, both at home and at school. They make connections between home and school and build on expertise developed in the home to advance as learners at school.*

In the last two decades, significant numbers of Pan Pacific Islander migrants of Polynesian background<sup>1</sup> have relocated as diasporic communities in areas of South East Queensland. This has resulted in increasing numbers of students with a Polynesian heritage within school populations and has raised concerns about the best way to support these students as learners. Research conducted in these schools (see Kearney, Dobrenov-Major & Birch, 2005; Kearney, Fletcher and Dobrenov-Major, in press) suggests general academic underachievement within the Samoan group<sup>2</sup>, a finding that is consistent with those of other empirical studies conducted in diasporic Polynesian communities located in the United States (Janes, 2002) and New Zealand (McCaffery & Tuafuti, 2003; McNaughton, Phillips & MacDonald, 2003).

The purpose of this paper goes beyond explanations of Polynesian students' general underachievement to suggest strategies that will encourage their success. Strategies associated with teaching practice have deservedly received attention in the literature. For example, Airini, McNaughton, Langley and Sauni (2007, p. 35) profiled an effective 'high gain' teacher as having: *clarified high expectations, pushed students with complex tasks, introduced more complex and less familiar language including idiomatic uses, created a classroom community that enjoyed the use and study of oral and written language, exposed students regularly to rich and varied texts, and was able to incorporate student cultural and linguistic resources, as well as clarifying areas of confusion.*

This profile suggests the need for explicit and scaffolded instruction that is culturally and socially meaningful for students, and grounded in teachers' intercultural awareness. Therefore, teachers of children from Polynesian migrant families need to be aware of the types of beliefs and practices that inform patterns of socialisation with the children's

home and within the community beyond school. Two key understandings are essential.

First, Polynesian communities have a collectivist or communal orientation (Mafi, 2005). As a collectivist community, Polynesian family groups exhibit: loyalty to the group with the group providing care for its members; emotional dependence on the group with acceptance that group decisions take priority over individual preferences; and acknowledgement of interdependence within the group with concern and action that benefits its best interests collectively. This collectivist orientation encourages a sense of self that is relational, in contrast to westernised notions of self as individual (Bush, Collings, Tamasese & Waldegrave, 2005).

Second, Polynesian families' understanding of childhood responsibility differs from that which dominates mainstream Australian families and so they socialise their children in ways that are very different from the dominant Anglo-Australian culture that largely defines school practices. Research of Samoan families by Duranti and Ochs (1996) identified four guiding principles in the socialisation of children within families: (1) care giving is hierarchical and distributed, with many tasks achieved collectively rather than individually; (2) socialisation practices are situation-centred rather than child-centred, with the child expected to accommodate to social situations; (3) socialisation is conducted through repeated demonstration, prompting and action imperatives; and (4) task completion is emphasised rather than individual performance.

A multiage approach to schooling involves children of different ages placed together intentionally as a community of learners. In contrast to a lock-step graded approach, a multiage approach is underpinned by beliefs of the need for co-operative learning,

positive relationships and needs-based teaching where curriculum is adapted to suit the individual needs of students (Standen, 2002). A major strength of the multiage approach for children of Polynesian migrant families is that it values relationships and draws on practices such as co-operative learning, which are familiar attributes of informal learning situations for Polynesian children outside school.

The familiarity of ways of feeling and doing in a multiage context enhances opportunities for Polynesian children's future learning as they proceed through school. McNaughton (2002, pp 26-28) emphasised the value of making connections for students, at school, by building on familiar expertise that they bring from home, and by using these connections to unlock what is unfamiliar.

Polynesian students will find much that is unfamiliar at school without many of their teachers and families in a position to assist them. Most of their teachers will be white, middle-class and monolingual and likely to have cultural backgrounds and life experiences that are very different from those of the Polynesian children whom they teach (Thomas & Kearney, 2008). Many of the migrant parents will have been raised to believe that family participation in children's schooling is neither encouraged, nor expected (Onikama, Hammond & Koki, 1998). When teachers have limited understanding of the non-alignment between home and school for Polynesian children, and when families do not see advocating improved learning opportunities for their children as part of their role, school will continue to involve much that is unfamiliar and students will struggle to realise connections between home and school.

Non-alignment between home and school is a major factor contributing to Polynesian children's underachievement at school (Kearney, Fletcher & Dobrenov-Major, in press). As these children struggle to locate the familiar and to make connections within classrooms, many fail to unlock the unfamiliar. This is why so many Polynesian youth remain caught between cultures, shifting between dual roles while trying to meet competing expectations associated with their island heritage lived out in their families, and the westernised society associated with their schooling (Kearney, 2008).

Multiage education schooling is a sensible way to support children of Polynesian migrant families, especially in their early years of schooling. This approach allows young learners to make connections between home and school and to use familiar expertise related to collectivist behaviour and a sense of self that is relational. Multiage education has the potential to unlock much that is unfamiliar for young Polynesian children at school with the effect of improving their learning outcomes. ■

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Pan Pacific Islander migrants of Polynesian background include people from Samoa, Tonga, Tuvalu, Tokelau, Niue and the Cook Islands.

<sup>2</sup> While data suggest the presence of high achievers as well as low achievers, there is over representation within the low achieving category.

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