

# Supporting Pasifika Literacy Education in New Zealand

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## Abstract

This literature review identifies the factors influencing Pasifika literacy education throughout a range of primary, intermediate, and secondary New Zealand schools. Literacy achievement outcomes for Pasifika students in New Zealand are increasing; however, Pasifika students are still below-average when compared with other ethnicities like European/Pākehā, Asian, and Māori. The factors that influence Pasifika achievement are the maintenance of home-school partnerships, cultural capital, library access, church-based literacy education, and the classroom environment. Two main conclusions about what teachers can do to improve literacy achievement are drawn from the research: teachers need to establish a positive partnership between the home and school, and teachers need to enact a culturally responsive pedagogy for Pasifika learners.

**Keywords:** *Pasifika, Literacy, Education, Achievement, New Zealand.*



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## Introduction

Literacy education was traditionally viewed as the acquisition of skills such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Vygotsky (1978) emphasised that language acquisition is dependent on social interaction and stressed the importance of explicit teaching (Fletcher, Parkhill, Fa'aoi, & Taleni, 2008; Taleni, Parkhill, Fa'aoi, & Fletcher, 2007). In a post-Vygotskian era literacy is seen as a social construction where critical literacy and sociocultural approaches need to be acquired (Cullen, 2001). In the past many Pasifika students in New Zealand were shown to be disengaged and underachieving in literacy at school (Alton-Lee, 2003). The Programme for International Student Achievement (PISA) statistics for 2015 (OECD, 2015) reveal that while there has been an increase in Pasifika achievement in reading, writing, and mathematics since 2013, Pasifika students are still underachieving in all three areas compared with their European/ Pākehā, Asian, and Māori counterparts (OECD, 2015). Taleni et al. (2007) found that ethnicity alone does not account for these statistics but ethnicity combined with low socioeconomic status does. *Pasifika peoples* is a term used to refer to all peoples from a range of unique cultural backgrounds: such as peoples from Samoa, Tonga, Tokelau, Niue, and the Cook Islands (Talení et al., 2007). The largest sub-group of Pasifika peoples in New Zealand is Samoan. This literature review refers to Pasifika peoples and has a particular focus on Samoan peoples. The factors identified that were shown to influence Pasifika literacy achievement were home-school partnerships, cultural capital, library use, church-literacy

education, and the classroom environment (Allen, Taleni, & Robertson, 2009; Alton-Lee, 2003; Dickie, 2010; Fletcher, Greenwood, & Parkhill, 2010; Fletcher, Parkhill, & Fa'aoi, 2005; Fletcher et al., 2008; Fletcher, Parkhill, Taleni, & O'Regan, 2009; Spiller, 2012; Taleni et al., 2007; Wilson, Madjar, & McNaughton, 2016). One conclusion from the literature is that teachers can maintain home-school partnerships focused on student learning and enact culturally responsive pedagogy in order to improve Pasifika achievement in literacy (Allen et al., 2009; Alton-Lee, 2003; Fletcher et al., 2009; Spiller, 2012; Taleni et al., 2007). This literature review focuses predominantly on the factors that influence achievement for under-achieving Pasifika students in New Zealand but there is also research that examines the factors influencing high Pasifika achievement in literacy which is cited in this review (Fletcher et al., 2008; Parkhill et al., 2005).

## Pasifika Literacy Education

### *Home-school partnerships*

In the studies cited in this literature review home-school partnerships were identified as critical when supporting literacy education for Pasifika students. Alton-Lee's (2003) synthesis for diverse learners was commissioned by the Ministry of Education in order to provide a comprehensive review based upon research to enhance educational outcomes for all students. The synthesis identifies ten key characteristics of quality teaching for diverse students in New Zealand. One of the characteristics identified is the importance of making connections between schools and the



additional cultural contexts students are situated in. Home-school partnerships that focus on student learning proved to have positive effects on student learning outcomes (Alton-Lee, 2003). Fletcher et al. (2010) is a small qualitative study involving thirteen parents across six New Zealand schools which explore parental perceptions of children learning to read in schools. In Fletcher et al. (2010) all thirteen participants agreed that having a rapport with the teacher and the school was important. A limitation of this study was that the six schools included were identified by literacy stakeholders as schools with effective reading practices (Fletcher et al., 2010). The school was also decile 5 which indicates that the socioeconomic area the school is situated in is relatively affluent. Fletcher et al. (2009) found two challenges when attempting to establish a home-school partnership: schools found it difficult to get parents to acknowledge their role in the home-school partnership and Pasifika parents did not have enough time to be involved. The study found that in three schools many adults in Pasifika families tended to be working in low-paid shift work or working multiple jobs, and were without the support of their extended family, which they would have had back home (Fletcher et al., 2009).

Fletcher et al.'s study (2010) is a qualitative study which explores teachers and parents' views of factors that support or hinder literacy education for Pasifika students. The strength of this study is that throughout the research process *matai* (Samoan chiefs) were consulted to co-construct the meaning of evidence used. A weakness of this study, however, was that the principals of each school selected the staff who participated in the study; thus principals could have chosen teachers who were more culturally responsive. In comparison, Allen et al. (2009) is a qualitative study that explored the journey of five teachers (from primary, intermediate, and secondary schools) who went on a trip to Samoa to find out more about their Samoan students' culture and background to help them as teachers in the classroom. One teacher found that Samoa every family member was supported and cared for, and this made her reflect on the different context Pasifika families are exposed to in New Zealand (Allen et al., 2009). Taleni et al. (2007) elaborates on the context of New Zealand: theirs is a qualitative study that surveyed 37 Pasifika students from a range of four different primary, intermediate, and secondary schools in the South Island. These schools were in the 1 to 5 decile rating and were identified to have a large number of Pasifika students. Taleni et al. (2007) found more than 50% of students said that they did not have enough time nor space to do their homework due to the fact that they had to look after younger siblings and cousins. In addition to this, fewer than 20% of students reported that their parents could read (Taleni et al., 2007). Fletcher et al. (2009) found that parents' abilities in reading influenced their children's reading at home as well. A limitation of Taleni et al. (2007) is the reliability of findings because children were selected as interview subjects which raises questions about the reliability of children's perceptions. Home-school partnerships are an integral part of supporting literacy education for Pasifika students.

#### *Cultural Capital*

The notion of *cultural capital* posits the view that if a student has values that are consistent with school norms and values then the student is more likely to be successful compared to those whose cultural dispositions differ (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

Alton-Lee (2003), Fletcher et al. (2010), Fletcher et al. (2009) and Taleni et al. (2007) all identify this notion of cultural capital as a factor influencing the success of Pasifika students in literacy education in New Zealand schools. This is problematic because Pasifika peoples have their own set of cultural values and beliefs which may not directly coincide with the school's dominant culture. Taleni et al. (2007) found that over 60% of participants preferred to read stories about Pasifika peoples, however, in school the reading material provided was predominately about European peoples. Cultural capital can be understood in relation to socioeconomic status. Wilson et al. (2016) completed a study that looks at the achievement rates of secondary Pasifika students in 34 secondary schools across New Zealand and examines teacher practices of teaching literacy. Wilson et al. (2016) found that opportunities to learn were significantly decreased if families were situated in a lower socioeconomic area versus living in a higher socioeconomic area. The Wilson et al. (2016) study is a sizable study of 34 schools from a range of decile ratings. However, a limitation of the study is that 34 schools entered the study between 2011 and 2012 and there was not a check for possible variations in findings between the schools that entered in the two different years. The studies mentioned above found that generally schools with a high percentage of Pasifika students tended to be lower in decile (Alton-Lee, 2003; Fletcher et al., 2009; Fletcher et al., 2010; Taleni et al., 2007). Cultural capital is important to Pasifika literacy education because the amount of cultural capital Pasifika students have can hinder their literacy development in New Zealand schools.

#### *Library Use*

Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) refer to the importance of students and families having access to social and cultural resources. Alton-Lee (2003) found that limited access to library resources was a barrier to learning for low-achievers in New Zealand. This is supported by Taleni et al. (2007) who found that student access to libraries was a critical resource for students and their families. Taleni et al. (2007) reported that fewer than 50% of low-achieving Pasifika students used the library. In comparison, the Fletcher et al. (2010) study found that most parents used the school and community libraries, no matter what reading ability their child had. Fletcher et al. (2008) focused on the factors influencing Pasifika students' achievement in literacy. The researchers interviewed achieving and high-achieving Pasifika primary students about their literacy education. Fletcher et al. (2008) found that all the achieving and high-achieving Pasifika students belonged to the community library and visited it regularly whether with their parents, peers or themselves. Fletcher et al. (2005) found that the addition of Information Communication Technology (ICT) use was important to School A in the study; a specialist in ICT was employed as a teacher to help students with their use of technologies. The limitation of the study was that it was a small (only two Christchurch schools were involved) (Fletcher et al., 2008). Pasifika students who have regular access to a library are more prepared to success in literacy education in New Zealand schools.

#### *Church Literacy Education*

Many Pasifika students in New Zealand experience their out-of-school literacy education from the Church (Dickie, 2010). Dickie (2010) examines the out-of-school literacy experiences of

14 Pasifika students. The study focused on whether Church-based literacy helps or hinders Pasifika students' literacy education. The students were trained as junior ethnographers to document their own out-of-school experiences with literacy. A limitation of this method is that students may not be able to recognise all the times where they were using literacy outside of school or students could manipulate the material to make it look like they were doing more literacy than they actually were or vice versa. The two main types of church literacy education identified in the study was reading passages out from the Bible with accuracy and *tauloto* which is reciting passages from the Bible on White Sunday in Samoan or English (Dickie, 2010). Pasifika church literacy education also involves the comprehension of texts, because it is very important that students understand what they are reading (Dickie, 2010). Although memorisation of a text is important, students are encouraged to offer their own explanations about what the passages mean to them (Dickie, 2010). One hindrance of church literacy education that was identified in the study was that students were taught not to question the Bible, and therefore students are not exposed to critical literacy skills. Fletcher et al. (2009) states that questioning the Bible is like challenging *fa'asamoa* (traditional Samoan knowledge), therefore it is not encouraged. Fletcher et al. (2005) study supports Dickie's (2010) argument that Church-based literacy education that does not involve critical literacy is a hindrance for schools: because students are unable to question the Bible this could be counterproductive for the development of critical literacy skills.

#### *Classroom Environment*

New Zealand school practices and Samoan school practices differ: for example, in Samoa children are taught to respect the teacher, not to talk back directly to the teacher, and are told what to do (Fletcher et al., 2009). In contrast, New Zealand encourages collaboration, discussion on contemporary issues and the development of critical literacy skills (Ministry of Education, 2006). The Taleni et al. (2007) study found that over 60% of students wanted a quiet room over a noisy room at school because it was easier to concentrate. Spiller's (2012) qualitative study identified the effects that the classroom environment had on students: researchers followed a group of Year 9 Pasifika students across a range of their classes and found that they displayed a wide range of behaviours in different classroom contexts. A limitation of the study was that it was a small sample in that only one school was involved in the study. Spiller (2012) found that when Pasifika students displayed poor behaviour in their classrooms, teachers blamed Pasifika values. Teachers in the study additionally held the view that Pasifika parents do not support their child's learning, however, it has been found that one of the main reasons for Pasifika people migrating to New Zealand is for their children's education (Spiller, 2012). Therefore, teacher assumptions about Pasifika students can be dangerous and affect what Pasifika students experience in the classroom which can ultimately impact upon achievement.

## **Supporting Literacy Development**

### *Establishing home-school partnerships*

Studies by Allen et al., 2009; Dickie, 2010; Fletcher et al., 2010 and Spiller, 2012, identify teachers establishing and

maintaining home-school partnerships as something that teachers can do to support literacy education for Pasifika students in New Zealand. Fletcher et al. (2010) states that teachers and schools can facilitate relationships between parents and school in a number of ways: for example teachers can invite parents into their classrooms, have individual discussions, parent interviews, and talk through school reports. In the Allen et al. (2009) study teachers said that they would try to make a larger effort to contact families, participate in cultural activities and to organise activities that would attract Pasifika families, now that these teachers saw the power of relationships particularly in Samoan culture (Spiller, 2012). Dickie (2010) found that it would be beneficial for teachers in Church sites to know what is expected of students at school regarding critical literacy education. In addition, Fletcher et al. (2009) found that teachers and schools needed support when breaking down language barriers; the employment of a Pasifika liaison officer that could liaise with the school and Pasifika families would benefit Pasifika students in their literacy education. Implications for practice identified included a strengthening of home and school communication and to put adequate structures in place for this to happen (Fletcher et al., 2010).

### *Culturally Responsive Pedagogy*

Teachers should also incorporate culturally responsive practices in their teaching because it is shown to enhance student learning outcomes (Alton-Lee, 2003). Alton-Lee (2003) found that when learning was made relevant to students' lives, cultural practices were valued, and when new information was linked to student experiences student learning outcomes were improved. Spiller (2012) states that teachers need to make sure they can support literacy development by going over basic literacy and comprehension skills where required. Taleni et al. (2007) found that teachers need to find "culturally appropriate resources and contexts for learning." (p. 66). Allen et al. (2009) found that teachers started to acknowledge students' prior knowledge, to use basic Samoan and Pasifika languages in their classroom, and they found and made culturally appropriate resources. Similarly, Spiller (2012) identified that teachers in the study found that Pasifika students wanted their lessons to be active which included discussions, videos, and games. The study also found that teachers need to be respected and know how to manage the classroom because a noisy classroom disrupted student learners (Spiller, 2012). Therefore, teachers need to be self-reflective and examine how their beliefs may impede upon Pasifika students' learning (Spiller, 2012), and to enable a culturally responsive pedagogy. In these ways teachers are able to respond to Pasifika students' literacy education needs effectively.

## **Areas for Future Research**

There appears to be a lack of research on Pasifika literacy education in higher decile schools. Taleni et al., (2007) state that they had difficulties finding higher decile secondary schools with an adequate number of Pasifika students to research. This could be due to the fact that in higher decile schools (ranging from 5-10) there is a significantly lower proportion of Pasifika students (Wilson et al., 2016). Across this decile range 11 out of 34 schools had an average of 7% Pasifika students in total (Wilson et al., 2016). These findings appear to remain largely the same for

primary and intermediate schools (Fletcher et al., 2009; Taleni et al., 2007).

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