

---

# Celebrating Gifted Indigenous Roots: Gifted and Talented Pacific Island (Pasifika) Students

---

Taemanuolo Faaea-Semeatu  
Rutherford College, New Zealand

*We should see culture, not as a singular, but as layers of beliefs, knowledge, and experiences which both interact and intercede as the requirements of daily living demand (Anderson, Hoerberigs, Mackinnon, & Thwaites, 2006).*

## **Abstract**

This paper will examine notions of indigenous roots and what it means to celebrate them in our secondary schools/high schools. The context of Pasifika students is provided as a foundation from which to understand the nature and place of Pasifika students in the New Zealand context. The research landscape which underpins much of the philosophy behind the framework of identifying gifted and talented Pasifika students is provided by Cummins, Delpit and Anae. The process of establishing the cultural identifiers to reflect notions of Pasifika gifted and talented students and how these cultural identifiers are used will be explored. Inclusion of student voice from the induction into the program and their reflections during the course of the program will also be outlined. How these gifts were then nurtured to produce and heighten Pasifika students with their talents will also be discussed.

## **Introduction**

Culture and indigenous roots in Pasifika terms cannot be separated as the opening quote suggests. Just as Anderson, Hoerberigs, Mackinnon and Thwaites (2006) suggest, culture is a layer of beliefs, knowledges and experiences which both interact and intercede as the requirements of daily living demands. The prevalent use of the term 'Pasifika' is employed to align with the Ministry of Education definition of Pasifika people, those people who have migrated from the Pacific and live in New Zealand. The migrant experiences of Pasifika peoples to New Zealand have been highly documented by noted anthropologists such as Anae (1998) who discusses the "identity journeys" of New Zealand born Samoans. The issues that Anae highlights in terms of the diaspora understanding of these migrant people will be explored further in this paper with reference to the concept of the identity continuum. 'Indigenous roots' is used to refer to the native culture and protocols that are unique to Pasifika people, with commonalities amongst the people, specifically the universal ties that hold them together. But despite the similarities amongst Pasifika people, it is important to note that Pasifika people cannot be seen as a homogeneous group with

one language and one culture, as each Pacific nation has its own distinct culture and distinct language, or in the Cook Islands Maori case, distinct dialects of their language.

## **Differing contexts**

Identifying gifted and talented Pacific Island (Pasifika) students in Aotearoa (New Zealand) is new and foreign territory. The author of this paper recently completed a contract with the New Zealand Ministry of Education in 2009 to develop cultural identifiers for identifying Gifted and Talented Pasifika students. Nothing of this nature had been previously undertaken. The significance of the production of these cultural identifiers lies in the fact that the cultural strands that are woven together to reflect the multiple identities and varying essences of Pasifika students, lie in contexts *other than* their school contexts.

## **Establishing Cultural identifiers**

### **Gifted Pasifika is embedded within the family and community, not in the school**

The aim of this holistic teaching and learning framework, focuses on developing personalised learning programs and mentoring opportunities for Pasifika students. By valuing Pasifika students' indigenous roots in their culturally religious and wider community backgrounds to form the basis in bridging the gap between home and school, the affirmation of cultural leaders within the home context will flourish in the school environment.

### **Pasifika identifiers undertaken through interviews with students and parents**

Parents in the local Pasifika community of West Auckland affiliated to my school were invited to attend a Pasifika parents evening to discuss their notions of gifted and talented Pasifika students. The response from the parents was overwhelming, in the sense that it is not seen to be accepted to openly identify your child as being gifted, but that the idea of being the parent of a gifted Pasifika child was highly satisfying and a representation of prestige.

Factors to consider when establishing cultural identifiers include:

- Use context of the student's own culture and community to build programs of learning.
- Context for gifted behaviours is foremost within the family and community.
- Parents must understand the process and be active participants within it.
- Parents and students must have trust in the facilitator/teacher leading this process.

## **Cultural Identifiers**

### **Pasifika community groups consulted about notions of Pasifika giftedness**

Ten cultural identifiers were developed based on consensus gained from the parent community of our school, and were put to the test by consulting other Pacific

communities involved in local church networks and NZPPTA (New Zealand Post Primary Teachers' Association) Pasifika teachers from around the Auckland region.

*1. ADAPTABILITY (e.g. Strategically adapts to Pasifika or NZ thinking)*

Students are able to move between worlds depending on what is required of them, having mastered the shift between cultural capitals that allows opportunity for success. Students who are strong in their heritage languages are able to translate between worlds, whereas students who are not so strong in their heritage languages are at least familiar with the processes for socialisation in both worlds which steer them well for understanding expected behaviours and acceptance.

*2. MEMORY (e.g. Cites formal Pasifika customs, familial and village links)*

Students are able to formally recite customs, protocols, family/ancestral history and links to honorific addresses for village genealogy. This is similar to the Aboriginal emphasis on kinship and family ties, where relationships with family members and being able to memorise specific and detailed genealogy is highly prized as a status symbol.

*3. CHURCH AFFILIATION (e.g. Knowledge and experience to benefit others)*

Students who are raised predominantly in a Christian religious environment, whether it is in a church which speaks their mother tongue, or an English-based faith, extol the virtues of using their knowledge and experience gained as an individual to benefit others. It is important for gifted and talented Pasifika students to be able to use their skills and experiences in church to be able to transfer to their school context, for example, public speaking, showing signs of respect, behaving in accordance to social norms and questioning for understanding or clarification.

*4. COMMITMENT TO EXCELLENCE (e.g. Seeks self-improvement)*

Pasifika students are continually motivated by their parents and communities to improve themselves in whatever context they are in. Talents are products of the gifts being realised, so Pasifika students when raised in a nurturing environment are able to seek opportunities for excellence and pursue excellence for family pride and also for personal achievement.

*5. RELATIONSHIPS (e.g. Uses talents to promote positive relationships)*

Pasifika parents encourage their children to use their talents to foster positive relationships with other gifted Pasifika students. Once Pasifika students are actively engaged in using their talents of music, sport, academic achievement, social experience, they are able to create events for themselves which will showcase these abilities.

*6. RESILIENCE (e.g. Reacts to situations with purpose and dialogue)*

Gifted Pasifika students are continually being supported to react to situations that have failed outcomes, to continue to persevere and show great determination. Rather than wallow in self-pity, Pasifika students see setbacks as opportunities to aim even higher and achieve to their personal best so that they are able to react more positively in any given situation.

**7. LINEAGE / BIRTHRIGHT (e.g. Family traditions shape experiences)**

Gifted Pasifika students are able to relate to family traditions which dictate the social and cultural protocols which highlight obedience, respect and humility. If Pasifika students are from families which have significant expectations that pertain to the maintenance of family titles or duties that are specific to their families, they endeavour to excel and maintain connections that will advance their families, village links and community status.

**8. LANGUAGE FLUENCY (e.g. Communicates in oral/written forms)**

The overwhelming response by parents is that gifted Pasifika students are able to speak, understand or write in their mother tongues. The identity continuum of language fluency shows that despite where New Zealand-born Pasifika may fall, that it is the school’s responsibility to value and cater for the needs of the differing types of gifted Pasifika students:

**IDENTITY CONTINUUM**  
**Based on Anae’s (1998) thesis**

**Fluctuating between**  
**Identity confusion ----- Secured identity**

NZ born Pasifika	NZ born Pasifika	Pasifika born Pasifika
No language fluency	Language fluency	Language fluency

**9. LEADERSHIP (e.g. Faithful service progresses to leadership)**

Gifted Pasifika students are seen as leaders once they have served faithfully in their church and family contexts. Once other members of the community or village have seen that they have served faithfully, expectations and obligations to lead follow.

**10. REPRESENTATION (e.g. Successful career pathways reflect on parents)**

As is the increasing case for gifted Pasifika students, their success in job pathways and career opportunities raise the status and prestige of the parents, as their success is seen as a reflection on the parents’ upbringing and social standing within Pasifika communities.

**Research landscape**

Cummins’ framework of bilingual education, Lisa Delpit’s power of dialogue and Melani Anae’s research on the identity journeys of New Zealand-born Samoans provide the research landscape for which Gifted and Talented Pasifika Education must be nurtured. The impact of Pasifika Languages being taught as a medium for instruction in secondary schools as a tool in which to further enrich the learning experiences of Pasifika students has now clearly seen to be a crucial tool for academic success. One important avenue through which Pasifika gifted and talented students will be able to enrich their learning experiences is through the maintenance of their heritage languages, such as Samoan, Tongan, Fijian, Niuean, Tokelauan, Tuvaluan and Cook Islands Maori.

Cummins (2003) highlights the important job for policy makers to support how teachers can best teach minority students. Teachers must examine avenues to reverse minority student failure. Cummins sets the policy context in which there is an urgency for students to have engagement with the school through incorporation of languages and/or culture into school programs, community participation is valued and included, intrinsic motivation is provided for students to succeed by valuing their first language, and finally curriculum advisors empower minority students through relevant assessment which targets prior knowledge and facilitates the shift from the students' known to embracing the "unknown" curriculum. The interdependence theory reinforces the value of first language to help transition second language learners into becoming more academically proficient in their second language. It is important to note here that educators see the continuum of being able to empower minority students, rather than disable minority students. Cummins alludes to the additive and subtractive bilingualism that educators can often unknowingly practise in their classrooms. Empowered students have a strong sense of their cultural identity, and have mastered appropriate school-based knowledge and interactional structures. Disempowered or disabled students do not experience cognitive/academic and social/emotional foundations. The disempowerment of minority students continues to occur with the presence of the "insufficient hypothesis" that is perpetuated by opponents of bilingual education. It is critical to note here that maximum exposure to English is seen as the only means to increase the acquisition of English.

There is an essential element called "cultural ambivalence" which is experienced by minority students, which refers to the minority students' lack of cultural identification. This is quite similar to the notion of "identity confusion" that Anae (1998) discusses in her doctoral thesis. This adds an interesting dimension to the continuum, because if minority students exhibit signs of being "culturally ambivalent", this raises questions of whether this is because they have chosen to not identify with their minority status culturally, or have been suppressed, and never allowed to fully engage in their minority culture. Is this a conscious, unconscious or uninformed decision made by the minority student? Who allows the minority student to be able to empower themselves? This leads to the notion that student empowerment being regarded as a mediating construct influencing academic performance or as an outcome variable of itself.

Delpit (1988) argues that teachers must teach students the explicit and implicit rules of power to move towards a more just society. I am familiar with the five rules of power and see it on a daily basis in my professional setting and other groups which I am involved in that show hierarchical structures. The five rules of power that Delpit refers to in the article can be viewed not just from a literacy perspective, but also from a sociological, anthropological, ethnographic standpoint to show how New Zealand society operates:

1. "Issues of power are enacted in the classroom". Delpit goes so far as to acknowledge the textbook publishers as they have the power over what content is being valued in the classroom by the teacher, but if not by the teacher, then by the administrators who value this knowledge.

2. There are codes or rules for participating in power, that is, there is a “culture of power”. The power relations that exist between parties is evident in a classroom setting, in the staffroom, in an assembly. There are procedures that must be followed, who can, why and how people participate in the setting.
3. The rules of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power. Official meetings in schools follow the process of the dominant culture, New Zealand European/British models for meeting procedures. The only place in which the model will differ is for powhiri or pohiri where Maori tikanga will be observed or Pasifika culture when prayers are observed to begin and close a meeting. The rules of the culture of power is maintained because there is no challenge given to how it can be conducted otherwise, and also because as a communication strategy in itself, everyone is a participant in New Zealand style meetings and is fluent with the protocols.
4. If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture make acquiring power easier. Explicit instruction is definitely the best tool to use when guiding and facilitating the understanding of bilingual learners. Valuing the process-oriented rather than skills-oriented.
5. Those with power are frequently least aware of — or least willing to acknowledge — its existence. Those with less power are often more aware of its existence. Those with less power are acutely more aware of their dominated state because they always see the deficit. It is difficult to negotiate because it is how society has always been, there is the host society and migrant settlers. The overall issues and implications for my professional setting include the oblivious nature of those who are in power. Those who have the “culture of power” are unaware of their importance in providing better opportunities for bilingual students in the school context. The direct implications for my teaching will insist that I explicitly teach all students who have English as their second language, the rules of the “culture of power” to engage. Nash (2000) is in alignment with Delpit who discusses issues of codes of power, as he outlines the necessity for cultural capital to be valued and the perpetuation of deficit theory in reference to Pasifika student achievement.

## **Implications for secondary education of Pasifika students**

Other schools around New Zealand have shown immense interest in developing such programs of giftedness for Pasifika students in their schools. More research and raising the awareness of culture in gifted and talented education will be the key to understanding how Pacific Island students and more importantly, how other indigenous students, can utilise their innate sense of selves to master and navigate through their conflicting worlds.

Low achievement rates for Pasifika students across all education sectors in New Zealand continue to be reported on. However, government agencies have seen the need to introduce strategic plans such as the Ministry of Education’s Pasifika

Education Plan 2009-2012 and the New Zealand Qualifications Authority Pasifika Strategy 2009-2012 to cater for the improvement of the overall achievement of Pasifika students, so the deficit reporting model prevails. It is interesting to note, however, that Pasifika students are the highest ethnic group that pursues postgraduate study in tertiary institutions.

## Conclusion

In the development and monitoring of the programs for gifted Pasifika students, the following factors have been crucial in its success:

- Intra and interpersonal skills must be valued.
- Our students are at the heart of the learning process.
- Gifts sometimes need a helping hand if they are to be transformed into talents.
- Identify passions, strengths and weaknesses in a holistic manner.
- Identify intrinsic and extrinsic motivators.
- Create opportunities and goals to achieve the goals with the indicators.
- Identify roles of key support people to achieve outcomes.

Traditionally in gifted and talented education, cognitive models and frameworks are used to identify gifted and talented students in mainstream secondary schools. Celebrating indigenous roots of Pasifika students (New Zealand-born Pacific Islanders or Pacific Island-born Pacific Islanders) helps to support the extension of familial links and community groups into the secondary school community to foster academic success.

## References

- Anae, M. (1998). *Fofoa-i-vao-'ese: Identity journeys of New Zealand born Samoans*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Auckland, New Zealand.
- Anderson, E., Hoeberigs, R., Mackinnon, L., & Thwaites, T. (2006). *Culturally inclusive arts education in Aotearoa.New Zealand*. Accessed at [www.dramanz.decanter.com/?p=246](http://www.dramanz.decanter.com/?p=246).
- Cummins, J. (2001). Empowering minority students: A framework for intervention. In C. Backer & N. Hornberger (Eds.), *An Introductory Reader to the Writings of Jim Cummins* (pp. 175-194). Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Delpit, L. (1988). The silenced dialogue: Power and pedagogy in educating other people's children. *Harvard Educational Review*, 58(3), 280-290.
- Nash, R. (2000). Educational inequality: The special case of Pacific students. *Social Policy Journal of New Zealand*, 15, 69-86.