The promise of Appreciative Inquiry as a tool to developing home–school relationships for secondary Pacific students

Margaret Flavell¹

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Abstract

Crucial to the success of Pacific learners is the engagement of schools with the learners' families and their communities. This article reports on a small-scale study which focussed on home–school relationships for Pacific secondary learners in Aotearoa New Zealand. It explored good practice and further considered how schools might develop their home–school practices to better support Pacific students. An Appreciative Inquiry (AI) lens supported this strength-based approach. AI promotes positive change through the inclusion of multiple voices. This article argues that AI is a tool which schools could use to review and develop their home–school relationships with Pacific families and, in so doing, bring about structural changes that promote successful learning experiences for Pacific students.

Keywords Appreciative Inquiry · Pacific learners · Home–school relationships · Community engagement

Introduction

Research literature is overwhelmingly positive about the involvement of families in students' learning (for example, Biddulph et al., 2003; Bull et al., 2008), irrespective of age range (Bull et al., 2008; Desforges & Abouchar, 2003; Harris & Goodall, 2007; Jeynes, 2007), socioeconomic status or ethnic background (Jeynes, 2007). Furthermore, research literature identifies key features as to how schools can effectively work with families in order to support achievement. These include the development of interactions that are collaborative, two-way and focussed on students' learning (Bull et al., 2008; Goodhall & Vorhaus, 2011). That is, interactions should acknowledge the important role that parents play in supporting their children's learning, recognising that what they do is equally as valuable as teachers' efforts (Goodhall & Montgomery, 2014). Consequently, effective home–school

✉ Margaret Flavell
maggieflavell@hotmail.com; Maggie.flavell@vuw.ac.nz

¹ Victoria University of Wellington, Te Herenga Waka, Wellington, New Zealand

interactions are underpinned by values such as respect, equity and reciprocity (Bull et al., 2008; Epstein, 1995), where there is a strong culture of care and schools are sensitive to the needs of families (Epstein, 1995). Furthermore, good practice in home–school relationships entails a strategic, whole-school approach which is supported by school leadership and builds on existing good practice; it draws on and is inclusive of community strengths (Bull et al., 2008; Epstein, 1995; Goodhall & Vorhaus, 2011).

The purpose of this article is to describe a small-scale project which set out to capture good practice in home–school relationships for secondary Pacific learners, and to explore how these relationships can be further enhanced to promote successful outcomes for these learners. The study employed the conceptual apparatus of Appreciative Inquiry (AI), applying it to two New Zealand school sites, to help examine inter-relations between home and school for Pacific families. The application of an AI lens in this context is unique. AI is a form of action research that seeks positive change by recognising the strengths of the stakeholders involved (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000). It has the potential to show how family voices can contribute to decision-making processes to positively influence students' learning.

This article commences with a brief review of literature on the engagement of Pacific families with schools in New Zealand. An explanation and critique of AI is then given to clarify its use for this study. The methodology, which includes the researcher's positionality, follows. Key findings are provided, followed by discussion. The conclusion encourages the use of Appreciative Inquiry as a tool for reviewing and developing home–school relationships. This research is useful for educators who are seeking ways to promote engagement with families in home–school partnerships.

Literature review

The successful engagement of Pacific families with schools in New Zealand has been documented over time. Gorinski (2005) reported on the Pacific Islands School Community Parent Liaison project which reviewed how a cluster of schools developed strategies to promote family engagement. Examples include parents who worked with teachers to run after-school homework clubs, who attended meetings to learn about school policies and academic matters, and who trained for the Board of Trustees (the governing body of the school). An effective strategy was the deployment of a co-ordinator with a Pacific Island background who liaised directly with families. A conclusion from Gorinski (2005) was that home–school relationships were positively impacted by the strategic commitment from school leaders.

Effective strategies are further noted in a series of reports produced by the New Zealand Ministry of Education, focussing on three New Zealand secondary schools with strong academic results for Pacific learners (Spee et al., 2014a, 2014b; Toumu'a et al., 2014). All schools are acknowledged for their commitment to engage with families and the community, employing many practical and effective strategies. These include, for example, personal invitations to parent-teacher meetings with follow-up phone calls (Spee et al., 2014a); assistance from individuals within the

Pacific community to help with issues that students might be facing (Spee et al., 2014b); and a group of committed Pacific parents who advise the principal and act as a conduit between the communities they serve and the school (Spee et al., 2014a, 2014b).

Whilst good practice has been noted in literature, barriers to parents' engagement continue to be reported. Barriers include parents' long working hours; their lack of confidence with and knowledge of the school system; and language barriers (Flavell, 2014; Gorinksi, 2005; Green & Kearney, 2011). The experience of Covid-19 highlights how a lack of time and knowledge impedes Pacific families' support for children's learning in the home (Riwai-Couch et al., 2020). Furthermore, Pacific families in New Zealand continue to be reflected in statistics relating to low socioeconomic conditions, such as poor housing and health (Duncanson et al., 2018). Such conditions negatively impact the quality of learning, making it hard for students to succeed in their education, although it is through education that the chance of a better life exists (Wylie, 2013). It is for a better life that families have migrated to countries such as New Zealand and Australia (Siope, 2011). Parents have high aspirations for their children, and want them to succeed at school as they perceive this will pave the way to a prosperous future (Flavell, 2014; Mila-Schaff & Robinson, 2010; Siope, 2011). However, these aspirations remain in doubt, according to the conclusion of a report on New Zealand schools which claims that Pacific (and Māori) learners remain the most poorly served within the education system (Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce, n.d.a.).

Recent New Zealand studies highlight how these aspirations can be nurtured through closer collaboration between home and school which acknowledges Pacific families' perspectives. Togatama-Otto (2019), in her exploration on the perspectives of Niuean secondary boys, notes the disparity between family aspirations for their children's career and teachers' focus on qualifications. Consequently, students are unclear of tertiary pathways. She argues that reciprocal dialogue between home and school is essential in order for students' aspirations to be met. Rimoni & Averill (2019), in their exploration of Pacific and non-Pacific secondary teachers' perspectives on the value of respect, note how non-Pacific teachers' understandings of Pacific values are enriched through closer collaboration with families. Cunningham & Jesson (2021), in their exploration of Pacific students' transition from intermediate to high school, note the cultural knowledge which learners bring with them from stories passed through the generations. They recommend the nurturing of home-school relationships so that teachers benefit from the cultural strengths upon which learners draw.

Prioritising home-school relationships is evident in New Zealand Ministry of Education documents, such as the Pacific Education Plan 2013–2017 which sets out key goals for raising Pacific learners' achievement (Ministry of Education, 2012) and Tapasā, a cultural competencies framework for teachers of Pacific learners (Ministry of Education, 2018). Both emphasise the engagement of families to support students' learning. However, the more recently published Action Plan for Pacific Education acknowledges that previously published plans have fallen short in their delivery (Ministry of Education, 2020). The 2020–2030 Plan promises more success, arguing that it prioritises a contextualised approach which calls on schools

to engage with and respond to the needs of the diverse groups of Pacific peoples that they serve (Ministry of Education, 2020). That is, this plan emphasises that success results from inclusive processes that engage with the local community rather than from adherence to a national-driven agenda.

However, if schools are to engage with and respond to their local communities, there are challenges to overcome. Maintaining strong partnerships with families requires a sustained effort and financial commitment (Gorinski, 2005). It is challenging to meet the diverse needs of Pacific peoples who identify with one or more Pacific Island countries, and encompass recent migrants as well as those born in their adopted country. Furthermore, school decision-making processes may not respond to community needs and interests even if that is the purported intention (Fiske & Ladd, 2017; Gobby & Niesche, 2019). In New Zealand, school boards hold the decision-making responsibilities which enable schools to act with autonomy. Whilst the inclusion of parents on these boards is meant to enable parents to participate in decisions, in practice parents have limited understanding and tend to support leadership decisions (Fiske & Ladd, 2017; Gobby & Niesche, 2019). If the Plan for Pacific Education 2020–2030 is to have more success than its forerunners, schools have to consider what actions they will take to genuinely empower Pacific families and their communities.

Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry is founded on a socially-constructed world view which acknowledges multiple perspectives, and places a strong emphasis on inclusiveness and collaboration (Cooperrider, 1986). AI advocates that a positive slant be given to contexts to avoid a focus on problems that may only find short-term solutions and, in effect, simply maintain the status quo (Cooperrider, 1986). AI encourages individuals to reflect on successes and to think creatively how to build on these successes; the more that different voices are heard, the more likely that innovative ideas can be included and incorporated into new and effective ways of doing things (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000). This means that those who are most impacted by the matter under investigation can contribute to decisions on the way forward which is critical when considering the needs of a Pacific community. If positive outcomes are to eventuate for Pacific learners, then collaboration and reciprocity are key in order to minimise any negative consequences relating to power imbalance and to maximise the benefits of “collective knowledge” (Airini et al., 2010, pp. 13–15). If solutions are made on behalf of Pacific families without collaborating with the communities in which they live, then voices are marginalised and families distanced from the learning processes of school.

AI, therefore, encourages opportunities for listening. Very often, in busy school environments with tight timescales, time for listening to families becomes scarce (Flavell, 2017). Yet, for Pacific families, listening is a fundamental aspect of building respectful relationships (Tuafuti, 2010). With AI, there is space to “talanoa”. “Talanoa” is a Tongan word which refers to informal conversation that flows freely, allowing participants to share stories and express what is on their

mind (Vaiotei, 2006). It encourages open and honest dialogue where individuals listen to one another respectfully and voice disagreement without fear of repercussion (Vaiotei, 2006; 'Otunuku, 2011). It is a conversation built around mutual trust (Vaiotei, 2006; 'Otunuku, 2011), enabling meaningful knowledge to be exchanged (Vaiotei, 2014). "Talanoa" creates opportunities for building relationships that promote mutual engagement and lead to shared decision-making. It has become a popular research method for interviewing Pacific participants (Tunufa'I, 2016), and it aligns well with the enactment of AI with Pacific participants. It is a reminder to conduct interactions with Pacific families that respect relational values that resonate with Pacific peoples. Inattention to such values only hinders Pacific voices and prevents reciprocal dialogue. Therefore, when implementing AI, attention to power dynamics in interactions is important.

AI has been successfully used in a wide range of contexts. Examples in educational settings include AI used to help teachers evaluate their programmes (Clarke et al., 2006), to help students engage in self-directed learning (Vaart & Masselink, 2017) and help students contribute ideas towards school improvement (Bergmark & Kostenius, 2018). Its use in different educational contexts shows its adaptability, suggesting it can also be applied to the context of home-school relationships.

AI can be actioned through a practical strategy, known as the 4D cycle (see, for example, Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000). The first D of the cycle is discovery where the aim is to discover what is working well. The second D is for dream where participants are asked to imagine what would be their ideal dream for the future. The third D is to ask participants to collectively design a vision for the future which they believe would enhance the current situation. It is an opportunity for participants to come together to discuss their aspirations with the aim of agreeing on a collective vision for the future. The fourth D is for destiny where participants plan how to work towards this desired vision. It is an opportunity for individuals to take personal responsibility and take practical steps that will help

Fig. 1 4D cycle

bring the desired vision to fruition. This cycle is an iterative process, providing a vehicle for continued reflection and development as below (See Fig. 1):

The aspirational nature of AI has been, however, criticised for advocating consensus that denies individuals the opportunity to speak their mind (Bushe & Kassam, 2005; Dematteo & Reeves, 2011; Grant & Humphries, 2006). That is, rather than encouraging empowerment and inclusion, voices are suppressed if they are not permitted to say anything negative. AI then becomes a tool to reinforce the existing status quo (Dematteo & Reeves, 2011). Grant & Humphries (2006) argue, though, that AI allows for rigorous discussion that sheds a critical lens on power structures which then precipitates thinking as to what might be better. Ridley-Duff & Duncan (2015) believe that AI provides the opportunity to relate negative experiences so that individuals can map out new possibilities. The key to finding solutions, argues Paton (2003), is to enable discussion where participants are permitted to speak freely. Sharing ideas encourages individual growth which leads to collective growth (Wenger, 1998). AI aims to capture collective growth as a stimulus for transformative action (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000).

Methodology

This study drew on the 4D cycle of AI for gathering data. The context was a rural town in the North Island of New Zealand with two secondary schools where Pacific learners constitute approximately 10% of the student population. A qualitative case study was chosen to explore home-school relationships in this specific context, drawing on different viewpoints to build a detailed picture (Thomas & Myers, 2015). Data were gathered over the course of an academic year. Ethical approval was granted by Victoria University of Wellington.

Research with Pacific peoples

As a non-Pacific researcher (originally from England), it is important to heed advice on how to conduct research with Pacific peoples (Airini, et al., 2010). I appreciate I may not fully understand the perspectives of Pacific learners and their families (Rimoni & Averill, 2019), and that my role is a delicate one in which minority views can be subsumed through the privileged position of a white researcher (Britton, 2020). However, I position myself as someone willing to learn from Pacific peoples (Flavell, 2017), and who wishes to support Pacific peoples actively participating in educational discourse (Airini et al., 2010). Advice emphasises that collaborative relationships with Pacific participants commence from the outset of the investigation, allowing time to build relationships and to understand the local context (Airini et al., 2010; Vaioleti, 2017).

Accordingly, I began with an introduction to a Pacific committee (the Fale Pasi-fika) whose remit is to support the social and educational needs of the local Pacific population. The chair of the committee granted approval for my study and initiated contact with the schools on my behalf. Committee members supported me in the

recruitment of Pacific participants and in making connections with the local Pacific communities. I accepted invitations to community events and church services. I was further supported by a leader from the Samoan community who perceived that she could help other Pacific families by assisting me with the study and, therefore, offered to become my cultural advisor and helped with participant recruitment. In addition to the support received from Pacific supervisors, my advisor also assisted with cultural knowledge, and with interpretation of data (done whilst maintaining confidentiality).

Participants and procedure

Purposive sampling was used to seek the perspectives of those whose experiences might be relevant to the research (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The criteria for selection included: Pacific parents, or members of the Pacific community in a leadership role; members of staff from either school; and Pacific students. In total, there were 61 participants. Data collection occurred through one-to-one interviews, interviewing in pairs, or in groups, according to participants' needs and context. Semi-structured questions were used to encourage free-flowing, Talanoa-style conversation as much as possible.

The discovery and dream phases of the cycle were conducted in three stages. First, I met Pacific parents and community members. I wanted to hear their perspectives before speaking with teachers. Recruitment occurred through a snowballing process, enabling access to participants with whom I might not otherwise have had contact (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). This produced a bias towards Samoan participants, followed by Tongan participants, which reflects the Pacific cultural makeup in the town. (See Table 1.) It also meant that some participants were related with three from the same Samoan family (the largest extended family in this town), a Samoan couple and a Tongan couple. Given that Appreciative Inquiry is an inclusive process, I was prepared to meet with anyone who expressed an interest and did not, therefore, discriminate against family members taking part.

Table 1 Parent/community participants (18 in total)

Cultural identity	Number of participants identifying with this culture
Samoan	12
Tongan	5
Fijian	1
Cook Island Māori	1
New Zealand born	Born overseas
5	13

Table 2 Staff participants (20 in total)

Involvement with Pacific Learners	Number of participants
Subject teacher (inclusive learning support)	5
Head of department	4
Dean for Pacific students	3
Senior leader	2
Whānau tutor (form tutor)	2
Tutor for service academy programme	2
Social worker	1
Retired principal	1
A Tongan teacher and two teacher aides (one Tongan and one Samoan) are included as Pacific/community participants	

Table 3 Student participants (23 in total)

Cultural Identity	Number of participants identifying with this culture
Samoan	10
Tongan	5
Kiribati	4
Tuvaluan	3
Fijian	1
Solomon Islander	1
New Zealand born	Born overseas
14	9

Second, I met with members of staff. Staff members encompassed a variety of roles, from leadership to support. (See Table 2.) I made myself available in the schools on key dates where staff self-selected to attend interviews; on separate occasions, I met with a teacher and two teacher aides who had all expressed an interest in participating.

I met students last, considering when I would have least impact on their studies. Within each school, students were selected for interview by the teacher with whom I liaised. Except for one young person who declined, all students were willing to attend. One other student met me outside of school through a prompt from the secretary of the Fale Pasifika. One of the students was the nephew of my cultural advisor. (See Table 3 for student profile and Table 4 for data collection procedure.)

For the design and delivery aspects of the 4D cycle, I had to bear in mind my role as a researcher. It was not up to me to draw together individuals from the schools and Pacific communities for discussions that would lead to an agreed

Table 4 Data collection procedure

Phase 1 - term 1	Phase 2 - term 2	Phase 3 - term 2/3	Phase 4 - term 4
Discovery and Dream	Discovery and Dream	Discovery and Dream	Design and Destiny
Parent / community participants	teacher participants	student participants	Report process

vision and future planning. Instead, my cultural advisor helped me construct a report which summed up participant perspectives. After consultation with the Fale Pasifika and the liaison teacher from each school, my advisor and I attended the schools to present the report. I hoped this process might strengthen understanding between schools and families, stimulating positive change.

Data were examined initially using a grounded theory approach in order to categorise themes as presented in the data rather than rely on prior conceptions (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Findings were further shaped using the 4D cycle to reflect the affirmative stance of this research yet also provide insight on how to develop existing practices. Thus, findings resulted from what Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) call a “hybrid approach” in that coding was part inductive because themes emerged from participants’ wording; and part deductive because themes were refined through the framework of Appreciative Inquiry.

Trustworthiness was established in a number of ways which included triangulation of data, use of participants’ words to support grouping of themes, an extensive period of time in the field, and use of a reflective journal to record observations (Lub, 2015). Member checking to confirm understanding was conducted by regularly recapping in interviews (Lub, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2016) and by sending email summaries to participants. Regular feedback to my Pacific supervisors and cultural advisor helped with understanding Pacific perspectives.

Findings

The discovery and dream elements of the 4D cycle influenced how participants’ wording was thematically coded. Findings focussed on the discovery of strengths that teachers and families bring to the development of home–school relationships, and on participants’ dreams—that is, what they believe would make ideal relationships. Interviews also captured participants’ perceptions of barriers to home–school relations. These perceptions may appear counter to the positive focus of Appreciative Inquiry but their inclusion honours the voices of participants, an important principle in both AI and research with Pacific peoples (Airini et al., 2010; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000).

Discovery

In interviews, participants related experiences which they felt contribute to positive learning outcomes for Pacific students. Data reveal the commitment which teachers and families both make to support students' learning.

Teachers' strengths

Both schools are active in supporting their Pacific learners, with dedicated staff taking responsibility for their academic progress and wellbeing. Homework clubs and Polynesian cultural clubs are on offer. External agencies are involved to deliver extra support, such as with mentoring. Teachers give extra time to help with academic work or to engage in co-curricular activities. As this student confirms, "The teachers are very helpful and give me extra help if I need it and I can stay back after class or after school and get extra help from them." Similarly, this student explains how a teacher has "been helping me a lot with scholarships that you don't really see... it's really good and handy."

Teachers value relationships with family members, through activities outside school like church or rugby, by welcoming families at school for celebratory events, or through conversations about learning. This teacher believes that the "strong contact and relationship from year 10 with his [student's] parents helped facilitate that [Excellent grade]." Another teacher sums up the general approach adopted in his school to nurture home-school relationships: "That connection between family and home is something that is really valued here. We are expected as teachers and tutor teachers to make those connections home on a regular basis."

Findings illustrate teachers' strong commitment to relationship-building with students and their families in order to support successful learning outcomes.

Family strengths

Data reveal how Pacific families support student success. Their commitment manifests in different ways. Parents assist with academic learning, time management, or with general encouragement. Students appreciate the support received from family. For example, this student articulates how "my dad helps me with Maths, since it's his main subject, and my brother—he helps me with Chemistry and Physics." This student explains how she and her brother "write up a timetable ... so we can see what free time we have for study and all that and Mum just keeps on top of that," whilst this student appreciates conversations at home where "my mum's always telling me about my homework—how I'm going, and we always have like family chats on Sundays, to see where we're at..."

Some individuals give help beyond their immediate family, such as those parents who run cultural practices at school or help other parents with language barriers. This parent, in his capacity as a social worker, has connected with families on behalf of the school: "And both [Name] and [Name] have approached me on numerous

occasions to support them with problematic stuff that's come up. You know, with students and parents and things like that."

Certain parents have upskilled themselves so they can participate knowledgeably in school matters and improve their communication with teachers. For instance, this parent reports how he has "been the parent that didn't understand the process, transferred now to the parent [who does] and I see the big difference... I'm the one who is doing the questions ...". Likewise, this parent believes his children "did really well simply because of the transparency of process. Because I understand the system. I understand how to contribute to it and participate within it."

During the year of data collection, a small parent-teacher committee formed at one school. This was at the initiative of a parent who chaired the group with Pacific parents acting as secretary and treasurer. The committee helped run and fund the Polycultural group, and worked with teachers on ways to improve communication with parents. This committee illustrates the commitment of Pacific parents to engage with teachers for the benefit of students.

Dream

Data not only captured existing strengths but also what teachers, parents and students felt would constitute the ideal home-school relationship. A strong desire from participants (teachers, parents and students) is for clear communication and mutual understanding so that the best support for the learner can be provided. One teacher refers to the metaphor of a triangle:

Once you've got that kind of triangle between schools, teacher and home, the kids seem to go well. It seems to intrinsically motivate them a lot more, even though it's kind of extrinsically, coming from the outside, they can instil that within themselves from that and internalise, "Ah so this is why we come in here. I'm here to do well, my best."

Participants emphasise that the needs and interests of the student are foremost in communication as this teacher explains, "There's no point meeting with the family, there would be no point ... sorting out what we are going to do, where we're gonna go, without that kid having buy in." Students, too, prioritise their own needs since, "there is no point going to school not knowing and then when you finish you are kind of stuck and I don't want to be stuck." Another confirms that, "It's about knowing what you want to do in future, and it's probably best to start early."

This parent, who works as a careers' guidance counsellor for Pacific young people, sums up the ideal support:

If schools can identify [students' career interests] with their learners, and support them and wrap the support around the pathways that they choose ...if parents have a good understanding, then they can support their kids, schools know how to support their students and then students will build pathways that they can come out of at the end and be successful.

Whilst participants indicate that ideal relationships consist of teachers and families working together to nurture the career goals of the learner, they also share perceptions on barriers which prevent these ideal relationships. As previously noted in research literature (for example, Green & Kearney, 2011), participants note parents' long working hours, lack of confidence with the school system, and with language. Families may be dealing with social issues related to low-paid work, overtaking the focus on learning. A retired headteacher reflects that:

As winter draws in and the picking season is over, families struggle financially. They may have to double up in accommodation. Families can be cold, and suffer from sleep, food, and health deprivation. All this can be happening for families at exactly the same time as key learning is expected in the academic year...

Parents complain that communication from school is not always inclusive: such as, schools delivering letters via the student which parents never receive; sending messages by email when parents do not have access to a computer; or neglecting to consult as this parent states, "The decision's being made, or the incorrect decision is being made, for you without you even knowing."

However, Pacific participants do have a solution. They believe home-school communication would be greatly enhanced through the engagement of a co-ordinator, whom they call a *so'ataga**. Relationships could flourish with someone reaching out to families, visiting them at their convenience in their home or community location where "the school contact will explain everything to the community, and to the family, and they will love to support." Another participant explains it this way, "If this child is not doing well at school ... that person will go to the home and have a conversation ... Let's look at other pathways. What does the child want?... That person will come back to school."

The role of a *so'ataga*, therefore, could help schools better understand the needs of the student and their family, and help convey important information to families. The two-way communication afforded by a *so'ataga* would be an important step towards ideal home-school relationships. **so'ataga* - a Samoan word meaning connection

Discussion

This section discusses the delivery and dream aspects of the findings, the report which represented design and delivery, and the use of AI for exploring home-school relationships.

Discovery and dream

Data captured a range of recommended strategies that both schools employ to support Pacific learners, such as dedicated staff, homework clubs and Polynesian cultural clubs (Gorinksi, 2005; Spee et al., 2014a, 2014b). Moreover, teachers'

commitment to their students aligns with research that the academic confidence of Pacific learners grows when schools foster a sense of belonging and purposeful atmosphere (Siope, 2011). Teachers also appreciate the value of building relationships with parents (Cunningham & Jesson, 2021; Rimoni & Averill, 2019; Ministry of Education, 2018), appreciating that student success is supported by two-way, purposeful conversations between home and school (Bull et al., 2008; Flavell, 2014; Togiata-Otto, 2019).

Furthermore, data captured parents' commitment to their children, wanting them to succeed at school (Flavell, 2014; Mila-Schaff & Robinson, 2010; Siope, 2011). Their commitment is evident in the aspiration for partnerships with teachers, wanting to be involved in decision-making. The dream for ideal home-school relationships, which both teachers and families share, acknowledges the need for reciprocal and purposeful dialogue between home and school to benefit learners, as noted in literature (Bull et al., 2008; Flavell, 2014; Tongiatama-Otto, 2019).

A further strength of parents is the relational way in which Pacific families conduct their lives. Across Pacific cultures, relationships are prioritised in order that positive outcomes ensue (Airini et al., 2010; Vaioleti, 2006). Findings show how Pacific individuals commit to the education of Pacific students by offering their support to others, such as volunteering to run the Polycultural clubs or joining the parent-teacher committee. Some parents are particularly knowledgeable about the school system, through their profession or conscious effort. Whilst literature has reported Pacific parents' lack of confidence in interacting with schools (for instance, Gorinski, 2005; Green & Kearney, 2011), it is worth noting those who are confident and willing to help others.

Such parents demonstrate how Pacific expertise can provide answers that help progress education for Pacific learners (Airini et al., 2010; Ministry of Education, 2020). Appreciating that Pacific peoples seek relationship-building opportunities that allow for time to build trust (Vaioleti, 2006), parents from this study propose a co-ordinator (so'ataga) to help engage families. A so'ataga facilitates knowledge-brokering, bringing the worlds of home and school closer together through the sharing of information (Airini et al., 2010). These informed parents are knowledge brokers themselves with the capacity to influence others who, in turn, may also become knowledge brokers (Wenger, 1998). Thus, it is possible for a momentum of knowledge exchange to enable Pacific communities to become more proactive with enhancing educational success for Pacific learners (Airini et al., 2010). The Action Plan stipulates that schools reach into Pacific communities to better understand their needs (Ministry of Education, 2020). These findings emphasise the capacity within Pacific communities to foster knowledge-sharing, and provide schools with answers.

The report process (design and destiny)

The report highlighted strengths from the schools so that parents could be aware of work done to support Pacific learners (for example, homework clubs, mentoring, and parent meetings); and it highlighted strengths from the community, emphasising to schools the knowledge and commitment that existed. The report contained a

recommendation to fund a so'ataga, respecting Pacific participants' wishes. Whilst one school warmly welcomed the report, it caused tension at the other. The Principal, more than willing to work with the Pacific community, was unsure who to work with on funding for a co-ordinator since different individuals had approached him on this matter.

One way to interpret this confusion is to appreciate the challenge of bringing families' voices into the school domain (Fiske & Ladd, 2017; Gobby & Niesche, 2019). Despite the many positive strategies that schools put in place for their Pacific students, it does not mean that Pacific families know how to communicate their needs and ideas. When school systems prioritise teacher-led decision-making (Finn, 2019; Fiske & Ladd, 2017; Gobby & Niesche, 2019), it can lead to tension (both within the Pacific community and in communication with schools) as members of the Pacific community grapple to make their views known. What is required is a system which enables families to be heard in an equitable and collaborative manner, so that they know how to influence and contribute to decision-making within schools. Without an effective system to include Pacific perspectives, the potential for answers to come from their communities remains untapped.

Appreciative Inquiry

Adopting an Appreciative Inquiry process in research does not necessarily mean that transformative action is evident (Bushe & Kassam, 2005). However, AI is still worth pursuing because ideas are encouraged and individuals inspired to act, stimulating change after the AI process is officially complete (Grant & Humphries, 2006). If negative narratives emerge as in this study, it points to what transformation is required (Grant & Humphries, 2006). This study illustrates the need for school systems to facilitate Pacific voices.

AI highlights strengths. This research highlights Pacific individuals who are supporting other families to advance the educational needs of young people. As schools are required to collaborate more with the Pacific communities, these individuals are paramount. If schools seriously want to engage with their families, an Appreciative Inquiry process makes collaboration a reality.

Limitations

This small qualitative case study cannot be generalised to a wide population due to its specific context and sample size. Limitations include participant recruitment where procedures influenced whose perspectives were sought and Pacific understandings which were filtered through the lens of a non-Pacific researcher. Nevertheless, insights gained from this study may be applied to other similar contexts, informing how schools work with families.

Final words

The Action Plan for Pacific Education 2020–2030 calls for shifts that recognise “the significant role that families and communities play in supporting their children and young people” (Ministry of Education, 2020). This study highlights the need for schools to consider, at a systemic level, how teachers and Pacific families can participate in collaborative dialogue that enables Pacific expertise to effectively contribute to learners’ success. If schools are serious about responding to community voice, they must find a way to make it happen. Appreciative Inquiry is a promising tool for this purpose. The 4D cycle provides a participatory structure which enables students, families and teachers to work together. The inclusion of voices, which might otherwise struggle to be heard, provides rich possibilities for schools to review and develop their practices so that Pacific learners thrive.

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Margaret Flavell completed her doctorate at Victoria University of Wellington in 2019. She has a background in secondary school teaching and in tertiary education both in England as well as in Aotearoa New Zealand. Margaret has been living in New Zealand since 2008. Her research interests encompass Pacific learners, family and community engagement in education, and the application of Appreciative Inquiry to school settings.