Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.
'O mātou 'o le fatu 'o le fa‘amoemoe – fesili mai!

We are the heart of the matter - ask us!

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Lynda Knight-de Blois
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Abstract

This study explored the perspectives of junior secondary school students of Pacific heritage and asked them what enhanced their learning. A qualitative, interpretive framework was used for this multi-site case study and grounded theory was used to analyse data. Three groups of Year 9 and 10 students from three North Island city schools, representing a range of Pacific nations, socio-economic areas and genders, participated in focus group interviews and questionnaires. Pacific concepts, values and research methodologies were explored and integrated into both the research process and discussion of the findings. An innovative approach was trialled which involved “insider” research assistants facilitating the focus group interviews: four Samoan teenagers worked with the researcher to draw out the opinions and ideas of the participants about what helped them to learn. Data analysis led to the identification of ten pedagogical attributes and strategies. The voices of the participants in this study echo the findings of earlier New Zealand research, which demonstrate that the key factor for successful Pacific learning is the strength of the relationship between teachers and learners.
Acknowledgements

Ia ō gatasi le futia ma le ‘umele

*Let there be unity, for in unity there is strength*

The literal translation of this ancient Samoan proverb is *Bring together the sennit ring and the stand*. These words, from a fishing context, refer to the stand on which the fishing rod sits and the ring which fixes the rod to the stand. This proverb was found for me by Fanaafi Winona Hewitt who has been the cultural advisor for this thesis research. The words are applicable to this work on many levels; they are about people working together. They signify strength of relationships that are needed for Pacific students to engage, learn and succeed: the sennit ring as the teacher, the stand the learner and the rod the learning which thrives if the ring and the stand are bound firmly together. The proverb also reflects the team work that underpins this study and the collective orientation of the Pacific cultures; in contrast to the individualistic orientation of most western cultures.

Thanks to Fanaafi Winona Hewitt for her constant friendship, translation work and advice. We spent many hours discussing “the learning of our Pasefika children” as well as the practicalities and theories related to this research. Winona and the Hewitt family have embraced our family as their own and we are honoured to be called the “pālagi family with brown hearts”. I am grateful for the insights you have given me into Samoan culture and values. I am particularly grateful that you have lent me your children to help with this work. Thank you Eitiare for the enthusiasm, advice and leadership you have shown as you have supported me with this work and attended all the focus group interviews as well as other meetings. Thanks too to Jimmy Jnr, for giving up your time for this project. It was clear the Pacific boys we worked with looked up to you and respected your gentle leadership.

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To the students at the heart of the matter, thank you for being the central focus of this study. You have cheerfully given up your time to take part, and you have contributed your words, thoughts and ideas to be the basis of my work. It has been a joy getting to know you all and I support the words of one of the participants at the final meeting: Can we do this more often? This is fun. If, as a result of this thesis study, some teachers of Pacific students consult their students more often and respond to their feedback, then all the time spent on this project will have been worth it.

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