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HAVING THEIR SAY:

Six Pacific girls talk about their experiences in a New Zealand Secondary School

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ABSTRACT

The problems faced by Pacific students in the New Zealand education system have been examined over the years, but very often the analysis of learning problems has been complicated by factors associated with wider issues such as socio-economic background (for instance, Hawk & Hill, 1996). The participants in this present study generally come from professional backgrounds, have succeeded well in their home schools and are studying in New Zealand on scholarships. They live in the secure environment of a hostel where after-school study is actively provided for. Thus, by removing socio-economic and home factors from the situation, it is possible to focus more on the learning situation itself.

The factors that contribute both positively and negatively to the learning situation are explored by following the progress of six, secondary school girls through an academic year; four were new arrivals to New Zealand and two were in their second year here. Through a series of interviews, the year is seen through their eyes, as closely as possible describing the girls' experiences as they saw them. Teachers are also interviewed, their interpretation of the classroom situation presenting interesting points of comparison and contrast to the girls' perceptions.

The results of this study indicate that both teachers and students can underestimate the problems faced by Pacific students. The teachers, misled by the students' very fluent communicative ability, are not sufficiently aware of the problems that the students face when working with academic English. Further,

the girls' quiet demeanour in class can be interpreted as passivity or lack of ability. The students on the other hand, applying their own cultural experiences to a New Zealand classroom, misunderstand the rules in play. They see nothing to emulate in the New Zealanders' behaviour, yet are frustrated and bewildered when these students do better than them. Academic expectations in New Zealand are different and the extent of these differences are not fully appreciated by either teachers or students and require greater changes both in teacher delivery and in student study habits. There are also affective factors such as leaving home, culture shock and stress which can further impede learning.

The study maps the factors that appear to contribute most as constraints on learning and proposes a two-way model which recognises and addresses these factors. Additionally, it makes some recommendations for schools, recognising not only the constraints but also the factors that appear to facilitate learning. The study suggests that in proposing this model, it may be possible to better understand the learning situations of other Pacific students which are currently often overshadowed by socio-economic concerns.

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