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**The relationship between lotu and ako for Pacific  
University Students in New Zealand**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of

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# ABSTRACT

Improving the educational achievement of Pacific peoples is an on-going development issue in Aotearoa, New Zealand. This thesis explored the relationship between *lotu* (spirituality/faith/church) and *ako* (formal education) amongst Pacific university students. *Lotu* is defined within the context of the Christian tradition. The value of *lotu* is used interchangeably throughout this thesis with spirituality, faith, and church. *Ako* as defined within the context of this study is a Tongan term signifying education or the formal process of learning. The primary objective of this study is to identify the mechanisms by which *lotu* influences academic achievement of Pacific university students. A blend of qualitative ethnography and the *Talanoa* approach provided the conceptual framework. Two focus groups and eight individual interviews of Pacific students and graduates were conducted. The findings suggest a positive relationship between *lotu* and educational achievement for Pacific university students. The participants described their spirituality as a personal relationship with Christ which was reflected in their active practicing of: prayer; reading, studying and meditating on the Word of God; and attending church fellowship. Spirituality for the respondents was also emulated in their relationships, with God, with their *kainga* and with other people. These relationships were key motivations for their desire to succeed in their academic pursuits. Linked to the significance of these relationships was the participants' definition of academic achievement which was beyond the mere attainment of a qualification but also about their ability to reciprocally give back to their *kainga* and increase their community's wellbeing. In the midst of the inevitable trials and tribulations of the respondents' social and academic journeys, their spirituality gave them hope, wisdom (*poto*) and courage to persevere in order to complete their studies. The findings suggest a need for continued support of Pacific students using the pastoral care model, as well as better collaborative approaches to policy making among tertiary institutions, key educational policy agencies and the Pasifika community.

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# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

*Lotu* is a central value for Pacific peoples. As a core value *lotu* is inextricably intertwined with Pacific cultures (Kamu, 1996, Kavaliku, 2007; Thomas & Postlethwaite), and is an important part of Pacific peoples' personal identity, of their beliefs and value systems. Similarly, *ako* or education is seen by Pacific peoples as the gateway to many possibilities. Higher education is the migrant dream and the vision of our parents' generation for their children and *kainga* (extended families) (Mila-Schaff & Robinson, 2010). Given the centrality of *lotu* and *ako* in the lives of Pacific peoples, and within Pacific cultures, the primary objective of this study is to explore the ways in which spirituality might contribute to the academic success of Pacific university students. It is about investigating how academic, and culturally appropriate support measures, might incorporate stronger provision of spiritual support. In that exploration, participants were asked questions which included the following:

- What does spirituality mean to you and how do you express it?
- Was spirituality something that you considered important in your student journey? Why or why not?
- What does educational achievement mean to you?
- Do you believe that your spirituality influenced your educational achievement? How or in what ways did it influence it?

This chapter outlines the background and rationale for the project; it discusses the justifications of the study and presents the material covered in the following chapters.

## **Background and rationale for the project**

Three primary reasons form the background and context for this research project. Firstly, there is a history of academic underperformance of Pacific peoples in Aotearoa New Zealand and is well documented in national statistics and research reports (Coxon, Anae, Mara, & Wendt-Samu, 2002; Ministry of Education, 2008, 2009a, & 2011; Statistics NZ & Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs (MPIA), 2010). Pacific peoples have experienced very limited success in formal education compared to the rest of the population across the three educational sectors. Over the last two decades, governments have invested significant resources towards improving the educational outcomes for Pacific peoples. Despite this, the progress is shown to be slow and immaterial compared to the rest of the population (Coxon et al., 2002; Ministry of Education, 1998, 2008, 2009a & b, & 2011). Current education policy initiatives are focused on developing the educational capabilities of Pacific Peoples through increased participation and achievement in the education sectors. For example, the Tertiary Education Strategy up to 2006 policy objective for Pacific Peoples was to “educate for Pacific Peoples’ development and success” (Tertiary Education Commission, 2004, p. 8). Also, the *Pasifika Education Plan 2009-2012*, outlines the priorities for the education sectors, in order to enhance educational outcomes for Pacific peoples. However, we have yet to see any significant improvements.

Secondly, the research topic was inspired from personal observations in my current roles as *Pasifika Achievement Facilitator* (PAF) and as a Massey Chaplain at Massey University. The primary objective of the Facilitator role is to provide both learning and pastoral support especially to students who are ‘at risk’ of failure and/or exclusion from the University. My chaplaincy role blended in well given that I was providing pastoral mentoring, which involved leading

and facilitating prayer and Bible study on both an individual and group basis with students. I had observed that a number of students who were supported had improved their academic performance. I also noted that the support provided to these students was 'spiritual' in nature. This indicated that spirituality might have an effect, either directly or indirectly, on the educational performance of Pacific students.

Thirdly, my personal knowledge and experiences, as well as my undying passion for the development and wellbeing of Pacific peoples form an important part of the background and context for this research study. I grew up in a *kainga* (Tongan term for extended family) where *lotu* (Tongan concept for spirituality, faith, church) and *ako* (Tongan concept for education) were key values that were embedded as essential elements to a future filled with hope and prosperity. These concepts were embedded into my value system and ideology. They are an inherent part of how I understand and make sense of the world. Thus, a primary objective of the study is to identify ways in which spirituality might contribute to the academic success for Pacific Peoples in New Zealand.

## **Justification for this research**

In the process of justifying the value of this research it is helpful to provide the purpose of this project. The primary aims of this study are therefore fourfold:

- To explore the role of spirituality in relation to academic achievement for Pacific University students
- To discover practical ways of how spirituality influences better educational performance

- To contribute to alleviating the ongoing issue of underperformance in education by Pacific peoples in New Zealand and ascertaining if spirituality is the missing link
- To add to the very limited information and knowledge regarding Pacific peoples and the relationship between spirituality and educational achievement

There are a number of reasons why this project is justified. It is justified on the basis of adding to the information and knowledge about a group of people. Moreover, the project is justified in terms of overall government vision and policy objectives for all New Zealanders as well as for educators and practitioners, particularly in the education and social services sectors (Ministry of Social Development, 2010; The Treasury, 2001 & 2002).

Any social and cultural study is valuable in adding to the theory of knowledge about a particular group of people. Gegeo and Watson (2001) advocate that “knowledge can be said to come about through critical reflection on the culture, history, knowledge, politics, economics in which people are living their lives” (p. 57). In this study information and knowledge are added as to the application of spirituality as an integral cultural value to the educational performance of Pacific students. There will also be a greater appreciation of how the spiritual dimension impacts upon Pacific peoples’ academic performance and life journey.

Linked to this is the view that the study is significant from an ontological perspective for two reasons. Firstly, that underperformance in education, relative to the rest of the New Zealand population, has increasingly become a reality for Pacific peoples (Baba, Mahina, Williams, & Nabobo-Baba, 2004;

Ministry of Social Development, 2004). Secondly, that spirituality is central to Pacific cultures. It is a reality of who we are as peoples (Statistics New Zealand, 1998). This reality is highlighted in the current census statistics showing over 90 percent of Pacific peoples affiliated to a Christian Church in New Zealand (Statistics NZ, 2006b).

Moreover, there is an increasing need for research demonstrating the diverse, rich and complex realities of Pacific peoples especially in Aotearoa where Pacific peoples are becoming an increasingly significant part of the nation in terms of population size (Baba et al., 2004; Ministry of Social Development, 2004 & 2010). The population of Pacific people in New Zealand in 2006 was 6.9 percent (265,974), 58 percent of whom were New Zealand-born. This figure is expected to double by 2051. It is also predicted that within the next 20 years, Pacific peoples working age population will increase by 65 percent (from 153,000 to 252,000) (Statistics New Zealand, 2006b; Tertiary Education Commission, 2004).

This demographic trend and population projections highlights the importance of this research project. It is justified because if the current trend of underperformance in education continues, then there are serious implications for the New Zealand economy as a whole. A well educated and a skillful labour force is paramount to sustaining high economic growth; social wellbeing and high living standards for all New Zealanders (Treasury, 2002; Ministry of Social Development, 2002, 2004, & 2010). This is reinforced by the Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs:

Projections to 2021 suggest that if the education and training levels of the current generation of Pacific children can be accelerated to that of

current levels attained by non Pacific, then Pacific wage incomes could be close to 96% of non Pacific rates by 2021. Economic convergence by 2021 would bring significant benefits to the New Zealand economy in the order of \$4 to \$5 billion. (2005b, p. iii)

There is also the justification of this study in terms of its potential contribution to public and social policy developments particularly in the area of education policy, pedagogies of teaching and learning methods. Spirituality is a key cultural value for Pacific peoples. The assertion by Richard Titmuss that policy and values are inextricably intertwined highlights the significance of this study in terms of policy developments. "There is no escape, from values in the welfare systems...not only is policy about values but those who discuss problems of policy have their own values" (Titmuss, 1974 p. 132 cited in May, 2001, p. 58). Benland (1988, p. 459) supports this argument by stating:

Many members of society in New Zealand, both non-Maori and Maori, regard spirituality or the *taha wairua*, as a major dimension of social wellbeing, which cannot ever be fully defined, and which resists measurement-biased evaluation by social scientists.

No definition of social wellbeing which excludes this 'S-factor' can be considered adequate. The corollary is that social policy makers who ignore or deny the S-factor endanger social wellbeing.

Linked to this social policy significance is the importance of this study from a macroeconomic perspective as well as for practitioners in the social science field. A New Zealand government developed a vision of enhancing the capabilities of all New Zealanders through community development, education and training (Ministry of Social Development, 2001 & 2002; Treasury, 2001 &

2002). Subsequent governments continue to dedicate significant resources into developing the educational capabilities of Pacific peoples. Moreover, policies in the area of education are being developed also to ensure that marginalized communities such as Pacific peoples are not excluded from society. These policy initiatives illustrate the significance of this study.

Furthermore, this study is important because of its potential contribution to educators and practitioners of Pacific peoples in the wider social services industry. It will enhance knowledge and understanding of the centrality of spirituality in the lives of Pacific peoples and how it impacts on their way of life. It is hoped that this information will translate to better cultural sensitivity in dealing with Pacific peoples in the social fields.

This study contributes to enhancing understanding and tolerance, and promotes an enhanced sense of social cohesion and social participation for all New Zealanders. Therefore, it is hoped that this research will provoke meaningful debates and discussions and strengthen the platform for change.

## **Definition of terms**

Given the broad area that this topic could cover and to avoid confusion and misinterpretations, it becomes necessary to define the following key terms.

- **'Lotu', 'spirituality', 'faith' and 'church'** are terms used interchangeably in this thesis. *Lotu* is defined within the context of the Christian tradition. It is defined as the "supernatural relationship a human being enjoys with God through the personal power of the Holy Spirit" (Inrig, 2001, p. 65). The two key dimensions of this definition are firstly, it is a relationship with God as the higher power and secondly, the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit equipping a person to live a life that is both meaningful and purposeful.

This definition is considered appropriate in this research study given the dominance of Christianity in the Pacific cultures. This definition is further elaborated in Chapter two.

- *Ako* within the context of this study is a Tongan term signifying the formal process of learning or education (Thaman, 1988). *Ako* can also apply to the ongoing process of learning from other social settings such as *kainga*, church and the wider community. The term *ako* is also used within the Maori setting representing “reciprocal teaching and learning” (Phillips, 2010, p. 127).
- ‘Achievement’, ‘success’ and ‘completion’ are terms used interchangeably in this study. It is acknowledged that these terms could have multiple meanings for different people. However, given the academic context of this research study, they are defined as the passing of a course of study and/or the completion of a qualification.
- ‘Pasifika’ and ‘Pacific’ are terms used interchangeably in this research. Pasifika is a collective term used in New Zealand to denote New Zealand residents who originate from the Pacific nations of Tonga, Samoa, Fiji, Cook Islands, Niue, Tokelau, Tuvalu, and others. This umbrella term is used by the Ministry of Education (2003) for convenience sake but by no means suggests homogeneity. It is well documented that Pasifika peoples are a diverse group, with similarities as well as differences in culture, language, and historical ties to New Zealand (Anae, Coxon, Mara, Wendt-Samu, & Finau, 2001; Coxon et al., 2002; Mara, 1996; Ministry of Education, 2009). Coxon et al. (2002) note that these diversities affect how Pacific learners and educational institutions interact. This study has taken a ‘Pacific’ focus in



terms of the participants, and not 'Tongan' or any other ethnic specific group. This is mainly due to the small size of the accessible study population; my desire to assess, whether there are any significant differences among the ethnic groups; and based on my background and experience of working with Pacific students. The utilisation of 'Tongan' examples and terms is however justified in the fact that there is no shared Pacific language, and meanings are best portrayed at the ethnic specific level.

## **Thesis format**

**Chapter two, The impact of *lotu* and culture on educational achievement,** explores the different perspectives and challenges in defining spirituality as well as understanding spirituality within the context of this project. In doing so, the overlap between *lotu* and culture is discussed from a Pacific perspective. The positive influences of spirituality as presented in the literature, is also reviewed. Furthermore, the integration between spirituality and educational achievement will be explored based on the literature.

**Chapter three, *Ako* and culture within a Pacific context,** begins by defining education and educational achievement from a global perspective. Pacific notions of *ako* or education and educational achievement are also explored from the literature. Current educational policies for Pacific peoples specifically at tertiary level will be discussed as well.

**Chapter four, Research methodology,** specifies the objectives of the research study. A combination of focused ethnography and the *Talanoa* approach are discussed. Thus, providing a framework for drawing out rich and meaningful data based on Pacific people's perceptions and experiences of spirituality

relative to their academic journey. The methods used for the collection of data are presented. In conclusion, the relevant ethical issues are discussed.

**Chapter five, Stories of Pacific university students and graduates**, presents the findings from the two focus groups and the eight interviews. It begins with the participants' understanding and experiences of spirituality, followed by what education means to them and their main motivations to succeed in their academic journey. Their views on how spirituality has impacted upon their educational journey are also presented.

**Chapter six, Analysis and discussion** of the data from the focus groups and interviews in light of the literature and the core research objective. It explores four themes: spirituality; the interface between spirituality and academic achievement; *lotu* and Pacific cultures; and *lotu* and *ako* and Pacific cultures. The implications of the findings on social policy development for Pacific peoples are also discussed.

**Chapter seven**, draws some **conclusion** from the data analysis, makes some recommendations and suggests some areas for further research.

## **CHAPTER 2: THE IMPACT OF *LOTU* AND CULTURE ON EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT**

### **Introduction**

This chapter explores spirituality or *lotu* within the context of this study. Some of the challenges of defining spirituality in contemporary contexts are discussed. The interface between *lotu* and culture from a Pacific perspective is also discussed. The positive influences of spirituality as reflected in the research and literature is presented. Finally, the interface between spirituality and educational achievement is explored within the following themes: Spirituality as a relationship with God; spirituality as prayer; spirituality and character development; spirituality and spiritual intelligence; and spirituality and pastoral care. These are the dominant themes emerging from the literature on the integration of spirituality and educational achievement and are relevant to this thesis.

### **Defining spirituality**

There are many definitions and understandings of spirituality within the western context. The concept of spirituality is a complex phenomenon, which can be interpreted differently by both individuals and communities of people. Although it is an area with varying meanings and interpretations it is a highly relevant and integral cultural value for Pacific peoples.

### **Challenges in defining Spirituality**

What is clear from the literature is that there are ongoing challenges for researchers in defining spirituality given its growing pluralistic interpretations. Some social scientists believe there are challenges of defining spirituality as it is often confused with 'religion', 'religious commitment' and other religious

terminologies. They note that religion has often been defined using Christian terminology and that this is not always appropriate (Hammond, 1976; Simel, 1996).

Nash and Stewart (2004) suggest that there is no clear distinction between religion and spirituality. They define spirituality with the context of both personal and community wellbeing. Nash (2002) further states that “definitions of spirituality and spiritual well-being vary, but recurrent themes indicate how this is an important aspect of human life, related to but different from religion” (p. 137).

Moreover the academic world is renowned for its emphasis on scientific, rational and evidence based research, and the characteristics of spirituality as a concept that is intangible and subjective (Benland, 1988) may not fit well with the assumptions associated with a positivistic research model. Another viewpoint is that spirituality is “ineffable”, that it is beyond definition; that it transcends human understanding, logic or reasoning. Plunkett (1990) advocates this view and states that:

The spiritual is that part of life which holds its mystery, and always will. Reason is not eroding the territory of the spiritual. We will never understand rationally the characteristic paradoxes of the spiritual life: of strength in weakness, freedom in service, completion in self-sacrifice, and life in death. The conclusions one reaches from reflecting on such themes may be binding, but not in logic, and their discovery is always a personal one (p. viii).

Despite varying interpretations and meanings, spirituality is an integral dimension of our humaneness as Holthaus (2003) and Plunkett (1990) have suggested.

Canda & Furman (2010) and Crisp (2010) reinforce this viewpoint and validate the significance of spirituality and its relevance to other dimensions of life - that it is a core dimension that cannot be ignored any longer. Tacey (2003) suggests that the world is in the midst of a spiritual revolution, and this is evident by humanity's enduring need to find answers to the demanding questions that face us in this post-modern era. A student taught by Tacey wrote this about spirituality:

By refusing to develop ourselves spiritually we are restricting our human potential and our capacity to transform the world. If we could focus more on spiritual realities, greed would no longer control us. Without greed, I think we could achieve greater happiness and peace of mind. Spiritual awakening could have a powerful effect on stopping the downfall of society (Scott, 2001 as cited by Tacey, 2003, p. 67).

Moreover, most researchers maintain that these hurdles are insufficient reasons to ignore this core dimension. Researchers see spiritual measures, especially if they obtain both internal and external measures of spirituality, as valid and helpful tools to more fully understand the effects of spirituality in peoples' lives (Nicholas & Durrheim, 1996; Vialle, Lysaght, & Verenikina, 2005).

### **Understanding spirituality within the context of study**

Given that there is no single, universally accepted clear definition of spirituality, it becomes necessary to define spirituality within the context of this study. In providing a definition the aim is not to provide an exhaustive description but to provide the boundaries for the study.

Christianity is the dominant religion amongst Pacific peoples, and on that basis, spirituality is defined and understood within the confines of the Christian tradition. Thus, within the context of this research, spirituality is defined as the “supernatural relationship a human being enjoys with God through the personal power of the Holy Spirit” (Inrig, 2001, p. 65). Christian spirituality is distinctive to other religions and other forms of spirituality in that it represents a grateful response to the conviction that in Jesus, God has reached down to us. In essence it is a definition which sets the platform to the values and beliefs which guide our personal identity, our worldviews, and gives meaning and purpose to our lives (Canda & Furman, 2010; Crisp, 2010; MacKinlay 2001).

This definition also embraces the concept of the unseen divine power of the human spirit to endure and to press on when the physical, emotional, and mental capacity cannot continue. Moreover, it is a definition that provides a framework that inspires a Pacific student to believe that the task ahead is never as great as the power within them. As one University student states: “...My spirit helps me to stay strong and never give up. My spirit also tells me that, once I give up, I am defeated...” (Herndon, 2003, p. 80).

This growing phenomenon is defined within the confines of a personal relationship with God as the higher power (Good & Willoughby, 2006; Mattis, 2000; Tiatia, 1998). This definition is grounded in the belief and understanding that Christ is God, and is THE higher power. Consequently the themes of spirituality as a higher power and the impact of that ‘Life-force’ within the ‘interiority’ of the individual will be explored.

One of the key dimensions of spirituality that aligns with the working definition used in this study is the notion of a transcendent power, a higher being, a Life-force, the meaning-maker, or a divine relationship (Hamilton & Jackson, 1998; Johnson, 1998; Lerner, 2000; Nolan & Crawford, 1997). It is the notion that central to our experience as individuals, is our experience of that which is beyond ourselves. This is a common theme in the literature. Tisdell (2003) broadens the definition of spirituality as not only an attitude of 'aware honouring' the Life-force but also suggests that the Life-force permeates through everything, the whole of life. Tisdell is advocating that the Life-force is primarily about wholeness, a wholeness that is beyond human understanding. This notion is very much related to the Maori concept of *Mauri* (Life force or life essence).

Moreover, a quantitative study which was conducted in the health department of the University of Utah defined the spirit in terms of the influence of a divine relationship. This study explored ways to measure the spirit and spiritual attributes of resiliency. The findings suggested that "all individuals share the core attributes of intuition, passion, love, hope, and faith" (Johnson, 1998, p. 123).

The notion of spirituality as an internal power is also an important aspect of the working definition of this study. Astin (2004) and Canda & Furman (1999 & 2010) defines spirituality as pointing to our interiors or our subjective life. It is essentially a search for meaning and purpose in life.

It has to do with the values that we hold most dear, our sense of who we are and where we come from, our beliefs about why we are here...the meaning and purpose that we see in our work and our life...and our sense of connectedness to each... (Astin, 2004, p. 1)

Tacey (2003) suggests that 'internal' no longer connotes to what is private and tucked away, but 'interiority' refers to a depth or resonance in all parts of reality. That spirituality is not just about a personal subjectivity, but about the deep subjectivity of all things and the world. Tacey further suggests that the youth of today are seeking to rediscover the interiority of everything, where it is a philosophical attempt to rebuild the world from the inside after the collapse of meaning that has taken place through modernity.

Spinoza (as cited in Fay, 1996) distinguishes between active and reactive responses further supporting the internal power dimension of spirituality. Spinoza defines being active as behaviour that stems from one's personal inner needs and beliefs whereas a reactive response is behaviour that is influenced by one's perception of how others want you to behave. In being active our actions are generated from within; in being reactive they are a response to something outside of us. Spinoza's key distinction strongly suggests the subjective internal power that has the capacity to motivate a person to succeed.

Tisdell (2003) like Spinoza also defines spirituality within this concept of shifting towards a more "authentic self" where one's sense of self-identity is defined by one's own self as opposed to being defined by fulfilling other peoples' expectations. It is about having a more "authentic identity" which is strongly related to a sense of God-within, the Life-force, or spirit alive within. It is this idea that when an individual is grounded in one's own spirituality, one has a greater sense of embracing an identity which is compatible with who he/she is.



## ***Lotu* and Culture from a Pacific perspective**

Prior to exploring *lotu* and culture, it is useful to define what culture means from both a conventional and a Pacific perspective. The common themes that are coming out of the literature in terms of defining culture are “shared beliefs and values”, “lifeblood”, “ways of making meaning”, “a way of life” of a particular social group (Hofstede, 1997; Thaman, 2003; Tisdell, 2003;). In regards to Pacific culture, Thaman (2003) states:

In the Pacific Islands, culture is conceptualized locally as shared values and beliefs and ways of doing and behaving. Hence there is *faa Samoa* (the Samoan way), *faka Tonga* (the Tongan way) and *vaka Viti* (the Fijian way). Such idealised ways and emphases are commonly used by the people concerned to explain their (collective) values and behaviour, and those of others, as well as the way they see and organize their world. (p. 3)

Since the introduction of Christianity in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Christian tradition has been embraced by Pacific nations to the point where it has become the dominant religion. Moreover, Christianity has evolved as an integral value and is inextricably linked with Pasifika cultures (Kamu, 1996; Kavaliku, 2007; Mulitalo Lautu, 2001; Thomas & Postlethwaite, 1984; Tiatia, 1998). Christianity is a reality for Pasifika people and is an important part of their identity and value systems.

At the very heart of Pacific cultures are the key values of *lotu* (Tongan term for faith/spirituality/Christianity/church/prayer) and *kainga* (Tongan term for extended family). The term *lotu* has a broad meaning within the Tongan language. It refers to prayer, the church, religion and it is also used to describe

a person who is spiritual or a person of faith who believes in God. In most Pacific languages, *lotu* means church or prayer. *Lotu* in essence encompasses both religion and spirituality where not only does it refer to the institutionalized church but also refers to a personal relationship with God.

I grew up in a *kainga* (Tongan term for extended family) in Tonga where *lotu* and *ako* (Tongan concept for education) were key values that were embedded as essential elements to be earnestly pursued, for a future filled with hope and prosperity. I was constantly reminded that *lotu* and *ako*, when pursued together, would lead to *poto* (Tongan concept for wisdom) (Thaman, 1998, 2006). The values of *lotu* and *ako* are an integral part of who I am; my identity, my ideology and worldview. They are an inherent part of how I understand, and make sense of the world (O'Leary, 2004).

The significance of *lotu* in the lives of Pasifika people is strongly advocated by Pacific leaders: "...Tradition and religion have their place. They provide us with a sense of security, identity and well being – more so in a time of bewildering and rapid change" (The Pacific Cooperation Foundation, 2005, p. 6). Moreover, the following statement by Kavaliku is worth noting:

One of the paradoxes in Pacific societies is that they place so much importance on being a religious person and that everything done in the name of God is always supported and yet it has never been considered either by governments or development partners as an important part of the equation for individual and/or national development... being religious – or being perceived to be one – is an important part of leadership even though it is a personal matter. And I dare say that it is also true for Tongans in New Zealand, as well as Samoans, Niueans and other Pacific Islanders. (2007, p. 10)

For many Pacific people, wherever they are located, *lotu* is still an integral part of their identity (Statistics NZ, 1998). This is true of the Pacific people who have migrated to New Zealand. This fact was reflected in the 2006 census, which showed that over 90 percent of Pacific peoples living in New Zealand are affiliated with a Christian church organization (Statistics NZ, 2006).

The church has become much more than just a place of worship. The church community has become the substitute for the village setting back in the homelands. The place of *lotu* is a central communal place, where spiritual needs are met, cultural values and practices are developed and social values are nurtured and enhanced. This reality also applies to Pacific university students studying abroad, where, despite being assimilated and acculturated to western perspectives, they still value their religion (Thaman, 1988).

Pacific people are distinctive in the fact that the first place they will look for upon arrival in New Zealand is a church community. I remember clearly when my family first arrived in Wellington from Tonga in 1975, and that was exactly what my parents did. The centrality of *lotu* continued for our family upon migration (Statistics NZ, 1998). The church community provided a place of dignity, where amongst our *kainga* there was a strong sense of belonging (Benland, 1998), security, and significance.

Moreover *lotu* has become a pillar where relationships and cultural values and practices are developed and maintained. It is a safe-haven for reciprocal fulfillment of obligations and responsibilities; it is where friendships and relational networks are encouraged and nurtured. It is a place where Pacific people can learn and practice their language, songs, dances, weaving and so on. More importantly, it is a community home where spiritual values are

fostered and encouraged through the things that people do for each other and how they relate to one another (Tiatia, 1998; Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs, 2003).

The Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs (MPIA) was established to promote and create social and economic policies that reflect the cultural values and aspirations of Pacific peoples in Aotearoa New Zealand. The vision is “to achieve a quality of life that is consistent with the aspirations of Pacific peoples resident in New Zealand” (Statistics NZ, 1998, p. 138). The vision reflects the desires of Pacific communities to “do things in a way which reflects their uniqueness...and capitalize on cultural diversity and spirituality” (p. 138).

The significance of *lotu* also applies for many Pasifika young people living in New Zealand. Their faith is an integral aspect of their self-identity and provides them with a strong source of support and sustenance. A Pasifika young person describes the impact of a relationship with God in the following words:

Yeah family's important but it's not the central thing that holds us together, it's mostly our Christian relationship with God and just the fellowship we have with our Christian brothers and sisters...the church within my life is really important, I really enjoy it, helping me out in my *fa'aSamoa* (Samoan way). (Alefaio, 1999, pp. 39-40)

Another example highlighting how spirituality is very much interwoven with Pacific cultures are their national coats of arms and anthems. For example, in the Kingdom of Tonga their Coat of Arms is “*Ko e 'Otua mo Tonga ko hoku Tofi'a*”, translated as “God and Tonga are my inheritance”. Moreover the

national anthems of almost all of the Pacific nations exalt God as the pivotal reference point above everything and everyone else.

The other area which highlights the importance of *lotu* and the interconnectedness of spirituality and culture for Pacific peoples is in the field of health. There is a broad Pacific notion of health which incorporates the linkages between the wellbeing of community and society and those within it. Thus, Pacific definitions of health tend to go beyond the physical to include the social, spiritual and emotional aspects. Pacific notions of health are described in terms of relational self, holism, and spiritual components (Capstick, Norris, Sopoaga, & Tobata, 2009). For example, in the Kingdom of Tonga cultural constructions of health are associated within the family, with society and with God, and as such the concept of 'health' tends to be far more than just physical health (McGrath, 1999). Benland (1988) supports this holistic and inclusive view of wellbeing and suggests an important link between spirituality and social policy. She asserts that to accept the central role of spirituality "is to lay the basis for a holistic, cohesive approach to social policy" (p. 464).

The other key cultural value of Pacific peoples is the notion of *kainga* (Tongan term for extended family) or community. In Pacific cultures the notion of self goes far beyond the Western philosophy of self, entailing the notion of a bounded, autonomous individual. The concept of self is very much grounded in the notion of including others, particularly the *kainga* and the community (Ewalt & Mokuau, 1995). It is a philosophy that is grounded on Christian principles of living. As Saint Paul has stated: "...In humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Philippians 2: 3b-4 NIV).

Mulitalo-Lauta (2001) adds that the social structure (i.e. family, church, organization) to which a Pacific person belongs is underpinned by the notion of collectivism. In the Pasifika context, you are an individual within a collective group. The notion of communalism is reflected in the traditional value of the *kainga*.

Norsworthy (2008) developed a conceptual framework for the Tongan Institute of Education (TIOE), which provides an excellent example of an education system which aims to integrate culture and Christian spirituality. The expected outcome is to develop a personal philosophy for student teachers to help them in both their professional and life journey. It is a framework which seeks to equip graduates with a Biblical Christian worldview and to be grounded in the Tongan values of *fakatokilalo* (humility), *fetokoni'aki* (mutual helpfulness, reciprocity), *faka'apa'apa* (respect) and, most importantly, *'ofa* (love, compassion) and *tauhivaha'a* (nurturing relationships) (Mafile'o, 2004; Thaman, 2006).

The emerging Pacific literature on cultural models and key concepts of wellbeing are reflecting the cultural belief of Pacific peoples that they are “whole beings” comprising of spiritual, physical and mental dimensions (Tamasese et al, 2005). In attempting to theorise a Pacific-wide paradigm of health, Finau (1996) expresses the need to focus on cultural perceptions of wellbeing that encompass values and obligations centred around the notions of *kainga* and communalism.

One of the first theoretical models of Pacific health which attempts to frame cultural beliefs in a western context is the Samoan *fonofale* model which aims to integrate Samoan culture and its holistic view of health (Drummond & Va'ai-

Wells, 2004). This model is named after the traditional Samoan meeting house with the roof of the *fonofale* signifying cultural values and beliefs that constitute shelter for life; the floor or the base of the *fonofale* represents the extended family which is the foundation for social organization; the four pillars of the *fonofale* represent physical/biological well-being, spiritual well-being, mental well-being, and 'other' which includes gender, status and sexual orientation" (Capstick et al., 2009). As with the Maori *Whare tapa wha* model (Durie, 1994), the key message that is portrayed is these dimensions are equally important and are inter-dependent. Afeaki (2001) supports this and highlights the importance of adopting a holistic (ie., physical, social and spiritual) approach in dealing with Pacific youth in New Zealand.

## **The positive influences of spirituality**

There is increasing recognition of the positive effects of spirituality on other dimensions of life, and particularly in the key area of health. This is not to say that there is a dark side to spirituality but the focus of this study is the positive impact of spirituality on educational success. Some of these benefits include: Having the ability to deal with stressful and traumatic events more productively (Balk, 1983; Palmer & Noble, 1986; Pargament, 1990; Seligman, 1991); and have a strong positive relationship with family stability (Filsinger & Wilson, 1984; Shrum, 1980).

Thomas & Carver (1990) suggest that spirituality helps in the development of social competence. Spirituality encourages a sense of moral responsibility to others and fosters an attitudinal shift from self-centredness to displaying compassion, justice and care for the marginalized, the vulnerable and the oppressed. The outcome not only makes for a better and healthier individual

but also benefits the family institution, the wider community and the nation as a whole.

There is also the viewpoint that spirituality is a source of personal transformation (Wuthnow, 2004) and helps people, especially young people not to abuse their health and wellbeing by engaging in risky behaviours such as drug and alcohol abuse, and promiscuous sexual behaviour (Ferguson, Wu, Spruitz-Metz & Dyrness, 2007; Udry, 1988). Piezioso (1986) also notes that spirituality enhances self confidence and general wellbeing, which are strong protective shields against alcohol and drug abuse.

Jeynes (1999) and other researchers are arguing that if there are positive effects of spirituality then there is a case for advocating that a high level of religious commitment by students would lead to higher academic achievement. It is also well documented and common knowledge and experience of the positive correlation between good health and better educational attainment.

## **Spirituality and educational achievement**

The interface between spirituality and educational achievement will be discussed in this section.

### **Challenges in researching the interface between spirituality and education**

Prior to discussing the emerging themes within the literature on the inter-face between spirituality and academic achievement it would be useful to outline some of the challenges. Firstly, at a global level, there is a dearth of literature on this intersecting relationship. However since the mid-1990s we are seeing a growing literature based on research especially in relation to ethnic minorities



and the black populations in the USA and the UK (Byfield, 2008; Herndon, 2003)

Secondly, there has been very limited research examining this relationship at a micro-level (individual). Much of the research has been focused at a macro-level (religious schools), where the effects of religious schools on academic achievement is explored. Jeynes (1999) suggests that the individual or personal beliefs of students are just as important as, and perhaps more important than, the beliefs of the educational institution that they attend.

Finally, there is no explicit New Zealand and Pacific literature on the relationship between spirituality and academic achievement. However, it is implicitly discussed within the broader framework of health and holistic wellbeing.

A recurring theme from the literature is the positive correlation between spirituality and academic achievement (Byfield, 2008; Ferguson, Wu, Spruitz-Metz, & Dyrness, 2007; Glaeser, Laibson, & Sacerdote 2002; Glaeser & Sacerdote 2001; Jeynes 1999 & 2003). This positive relationship will be discussed within the context of the following themes: Spirituality as a relationship with God; Spirituality as prayer; Spirituality and character development; Spirituality and spiritual intelligence (SQ) and, spirituality and pastoral care.

### **Relationship with God and its impact on educational achievement**

One of the themes emerging from the literature on the interface between spirituality and educational achievement is the influence of having a relationship with God. Some of the studies have shown that students attributed their academic success to their sense of connectedness to God (Byfield, 2008). Students stated that this relationship not only enhanced their

self confidence but it also gave them a clear sense of direction, discipline and commitment. A University student in Herndon's (2003) study commented:

Spirituality remains the structure of my inner core. Without it, I would have no focus or sense of purpose in life. I feel that it is something that must be developed and appreciated over time. (p. 80)

Moreover, it motivated them to strive to their full potential as this is what God expects from them (Byfield, 2008; Glaeser and Sacerdote, 2001; Weir, 2000). As one student puts it:

Christianity has made me aware of my responsibility to make use of the talents I've been given by God... I believe it is a greater crime of those who do not achieve because they waste their potential through slothfulness, laziness or lack of interest, than it is for those who do not achieve because they don't have the potential to achieve. (Byfield, 2008, p. 192)

For the Christian scholar there is no biblical basis for an expectation that having a relationship with God is any guarantee of success in your study. The message that needs to be emphasised is that, for the Christian, God provides hope, strength, courage, and perseverance in times of adversity knowing that God is in control of life (Byfield, 2008; Herndon, 2003; Weir, 2000). Weir further suggests that in God's eyes, 'success' is reaching our God given potential and enjoying the moment irrespective of the outcome.

A Samoan Massey graduate wrote a poem on the futility of life without knowledge of God:

...We have lost our sense of awe  
gratitude, and ability to be amazed  
We have ceased to question, critic  
Of all we have ceased to think.

We cannot know the meaning of life  
Unless we know ourselves,  
Cannot know ourselves if we  
Do not know God (Westerlund, 2008, p. 2).

### **Prayer and its impact on educational achievement**

The literature also shows the influence of prayer as a valued form of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2007; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1973; Byfield, 2008). University students identified that through prayer they were able to seek support and draw strength from God. They see God as their rock and their fortress, in stressful and challenging circumstances. Students also viewed God as very powerful, very personable, loving and caring which gave them the confidence to turn to Him when the going got tough (Byfield, 2008; Cameron & Comfort, 2002; Channer's, 1995; Herndon, 2003; Pattilio-McCoy 1998;). University students from the USA and the UK put it this way (Cited in Byfield, 2008, p. 193):

...God is number one in my life; He is the Creator, He's why I'm here today. Every time I need something, I don't ask anyone, I go to Him and pray.

I didn't worry about things as much. If there was anything troubling me, I'd pray about it. It gave me a sense of being in control... I always prayed about my education and exams.

I definitely feel God has helped me to be academically successful. I feel He is behind me, developing my mental skills, just making sure that I am protected and safe. I pray with my mother every night.

### **Character development and its impact on educational achievement**

The development of character and values is another theme that is emerging from the literature (Byfield, 2008). In Byfield's study, University students shared how their Christian beliefs gave them a platform for developing their character and provided them with not only moral values but protected them from adverse situations. Students also spoke of how their faith prevented them from being involved in risky behaviours that are generally regarded as harmful to academic achievement. For example, behaviours such as drug and alcohol abuse, sexual promiscuity, and crime and gangs.

Moreover, this study also showed that students with a strong sense of religious and racial identity tended to be "highly resilient, socially skilled, intellectually competent, self-reliant and self-accepting" (p. 194). This is substantiated by the University students themselves (cited in Byfield, 2008, p. 193):

Christianity has contributed to my success because it has kept me out of trouble.

Without God, I wouldn't be here. Christianity has given me depth of character. I've looked at situations that my friends are in and know that I too could have been in them had it not been for God.

I feel I am able to resist peer pressure and I'm not as quick to jump into things because of my Christian values. I remain steadfast in what I believe.

### **Spiritual Intelligence and its impact on educational achievement**

A recent concept that has gained momentum in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century and is very relevant to this study is the notion of spiritual intelligence (SQ). This concept is akin to the Tongan concept of *poto* (wisdom) in its definition and key characteristic of connectedness. SQ is a concept which integrates the intelligence of the mind, body and spirit. Originally social scientists focused on 'rational' intelligence, then there was 'emotional' intelligence and now SQ is presented as the integration of these two notions of intelligence. It is defined as the intelligence with which we deal with and resolve issues of meaning and value; the intelligence that guides our whole being and behaviour in a wider, richer, and more meaningful context; and it is the intelligence with which we can prioritise different courses of action in our life journey (Zohar & Marshall, 2000, cited in Vialle et al., 2005).

Some of the indicators of high SQ (Zohar & Marshall, 2000, cited in Vialle et al., 2005) includes: A characteristic of being stimulated by vision and values; a greater sense of self-awareness; an ability to endure suffering and diversity; and the ability to be flexible. One can argue that such qualities suggests, a deep power of resilience and determination to succeed and ignite our passion for our work, study, love, and meaning making as Tisdell (2003) and hooks (2000) advocate.

The notion of connectedness is a central theme in this concept of spiritual intelligence. Connectedness is defined as both an internal and external connectedness, where it refers not only to connectedness to others, to nature or

the world but also to connectedness within the individual, integrating mind, body, and soul (Kessler, 1999 & Palmer, 1999 as cited in Vialle et al., 2005). Kessler (1999, p. 225) states:

Students who feel deeply connected don't need danger to feel fully alive. They don't need guns to feel powerful. They don't want to hurt others or themselves. Out of connection grows compassion and passion – passion for people, for students' goals and dreams, for life itself.

Advocates of spiritual intelligence are arguing that educators and educational institutions' need to take spirituality seriously, not only in terms of pedagogies and curriculum but also from the perspective of the student. That the ways in which students understand the integration of different dimensions of life and how they fit into that is a spiritual matter (Egan, 2000; Glazer, 1999; Palmers, 1999). Moreover, that education systems need to adopt an 'all inclusive' approach to incorporate spirituality, and where the development of the student's mind with facts and figures is not the only focus.

### **Pastoral care and its impact on educational achievement**

Related to this notion of spiritual intelligence is the concept of pastoral care. Pastoral care is commonly associated with the service of love and support that pastors, chaplains and other church leaders provide to members of their congregation. It is also commonly referred to as spiritual care. Pastoral care also refers to where people offer support and care, in the form of counselling, friendship, encouragement, or material needs, to others in the wider community. Additionally, it is a practice that is commonly applied to a teacher and student relationship where the student's physical, social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing is supported.

A key feature of an effective pastoral care approach is good relationships based on trust, respect and understanding (Grove, 2004). As Halapua (1997) suggests, if pastoral care is to be effective, the culture of the person needs to be taken seriously. Halapua highlights the importance of pastoral care from a Pacific communal perspective in terms of dealing with the socio-economic issues encountered by Pacific people in New Zealand. Butcher, Lim, McGrath and Revis (2002) support this view and suggest that pastoral care is a process which involves a deeper knowledge and understanding of the culture and worldview of the person that you are helping.

The pastoral care model is widely used within religious schools, and it is a growing area of interest within the wider education sector, particularly in dealing with international students. The New Zealand Ministry of education has adopted a Pastoral care code of practice to be used by Universities for working with International students since 2002. This policy requirement suggests a growing awareness of the benefits of pastoral care especially in achieving better educational outcomes. As supported by Klineberg and Hull (1979), who suggest that high involvement in a pastoral care community, leads to higher levels of academic achievement as well as physical and mental wellbeing. Furthermore, Benland (1988) states that “access to pastoral care and the opportunity to minister spiritually to others and to transmit received and inspired wisdom” (p. 460) is one of many links between spirituality and social policy.

There is also an increasing recognition in the area of student support services within tertiary institutions, of the importance of pastoral care in mentoring students. Massey University among others in New Zealand since the early 2000s has employed Learning Support staff to provide both learning and

pastoral support for Pacific students. Moreover, Massey University has adopted a holistic model in its student support services with the primary aim of enhancing student success (Shillington et al, 2011, *in press. internal publications*). The model highlights the significance of other “non-university” factors in influencing student success such as family support as Zepke et al. (2004) have found.

I experienced first-hand the positive influence of pastoral care within my role as Pasifika Achievement Facilitator at Massey University. My primary responsibility was to provide both learning and pastoral support to Pacific students. What I learned was that in order to influence the student academically, an important pre-requisite was to engage with them at a personal level. I needed to understand their cultural background and to establish trust and rapport before I can attempt to help them with their study. In adopting this holistic approach and acknowledging that Pacific students have a different learning style I was able to support them more effectively academically.

## **Conclusion**

Spirituality is a phenomenon which can no longer be ignored in this post-modern era. It is an essential part of our humanness and as social scientists and educators have argued, spirituality needs to be integrated into the education system from both the learning and the teaching perspective. Given the limited research literature on the intersecting relationship between spirituality and academic achievement, the positive effects of this relationship does however suggest the growing need for further research in this area.

The next chapter discusses the interface between *ako* or education and Pacific culture and explores Pacific notions of education and educational achievement.



Furthermore a general overview of Pacific peoples' socio-economic status and their educational performance as well as current policy initiatives within the tertiary sector is discussed.

## CHAPTER 3: AKO AND CULTURE WITHIN A PACIFIC CONTEXT

### Introduction

It is recognized that *ako* or the learning process is a complex one to which many factors, both academic and non-academic are central, however this study focuses on how faith might influence educational achievement for Pacific university students. This chapter explores the notions of *ako* (education) and culture from a Pacific viewpoint. Specifically, *pasifika* notions of educational achievement are discussed. Current educational policies for Pacific peoples in Aotearoa, New Zealand are presented with a focus on the tertiary sector.

### Defining Education

It cannot be denied that education is the key to social and economic mobility and a key basis for the distribution of possibilities (Giddens, 1998; Mila-Schaaf & Robinson, 2010). There are many definitions of education beginning with the view that it is about learning the skills necessary to provide security of employment. There is also the perspective of educationalists such as Kieran Egan (2001), who presents a new approach that values both the spirit and the imagination. He reinforces Plato's belief that the primary role of education is to encourage learners to question their customary beliefs about experience and the world. Egan (2001) consequently defines education as:

The maximizing of the students' acquisition of the cultural artifacts generated by other human beings, so that they become what may be, inadequately, called cognitive tools. The more of these we have available for making sense of the world and experience, the better

chance we have of appreciating those visions of human experience we collectively call Spirituality (p. 7 as cited in Vialle et al., 2005, p. 226).

Berman (2007) advocates for the need for Christian scholars to develop Christian theoretical frameworks within the academy. He states that we need to bring back into the classroom the simple truth that the world's cultural and intellectual heritage originated from our religious and spiritual beliefs. Berman further advocates:

From a Judaic or Christian standpoint, intellectual understanding is intimately connected with faith, with hope, and with love. There is a faithful, a hopeful, and a loving mode of scholarship which it is the task of the scholar to cultivate. (p. 294)

## **Pacific notions of *ako***

Pacific people learn differently because of their cultural background. Prior to colonization of Pacific cultures, the processes of learning were based on indigenous ways of knowing and learning by observation and practical ways. Education involved passing on practical skills and cultural values from one generation to the next. The means of achieving this was through practical demonstration and using storytelling rather than a structured schooling system with professional teachers (Thaman, 2003; Thomas & Postlethwaite, 1984).

As discussed earlier, I grew up in a culture where *lotu* and *ako* were embedded into my psyche as something worth pursuing. Like many Pacific people, the primary reason for our migration to the diaspora was for better educational opportunities. I grew up in a family where my parents had no formal educational qualifications, but my father was a man of vision. Like many of his generation, he came to the land of Aotearoa with a huge dream, to provide

better educational opportunities for his children. *Ako* or education was seen as the 'way out' of poverty that would provide better employment opportunities and consequently higher living standards compared to the lifestyle of our parents back in their homelands.

*Ako* is a Tongan term, which broadly means learning or general education not only within the formal educational environment but also the ongoing learning from other social settings such as *kainga*, church and the wider community. *Ako* for Pacific people is not an individual endeavour. It is a collaborative effort where there are supportive networks by the *kainga*, consisting of one's parents, grandparents, aunties and uncles, sisters, brothers and cousins. This philosophy stems from the communal upbringing of Pacific people where everything is done in the interest of the collective rather than the individual. In fact, the notion of individualism is not a quality that is necessarily accepted within the Pacific culture (Baba et. al., 2006; Thaman, 1988).

Closely related to this concept of *ako* is the Tongan notion of *poto*. "*Poto* may be translated as wisdom and experience and has intellectual, emotional and spiritual connotations" (Thaman, 2006, p. 3). Being *poto* within the Tongan culture "not only implies achievement in formal education but also the ability to know who you are...in relation to other people, of knowing what to do, and doing it well" (Thaman, 1998). Moreover, a person who is *poto* is one who nurtures relationships (*tauhivaha'a/feveitoka'I'aki*) with others through fulfillment of his/her social responsibilities (Thaman, 2006).

Being wise is a highly valued quality within Pacific cultures (Kavaliku, 1966; Thaman, 2006) and "the overarching aim of socialization" (Morton, 1996, p. 6 as cited in Norsworthy, 2008, p. 5). Wisdom in this sense is about applying

knowledge (*'ilo*) wisely to life. The significance of wisdom is underscored in the biblical scriptures as the most worthwhile quality to be pursued: "Blessed is the man who finds wisdom, the man who gains understanding, for she (wisdom is referred to in the Bible as "she") is more profitable than silver...than gold" (Proverbs 3: 13-18, NIV).

There are similar notions for *poto* in other Pacific cultures. In the Fijian culture there is the term *yalomatua* or *yalovuku* referring to the culmination of learning or *vuli*. In the Samoan culture, the concept of *poto* refers to a person who uses *iloa* or knowledge in a useful and beneficial way. Similarly, within the Tuvalu language, someone who is skilful and knowledgeable and is highly esteemed in the community is referred to as *poto*. *Wanawana* is the similar term in Kiribati which implies a strong sense of responsibility. Also within the Solomon Islands, wisdom is referred to as *manatha* (Thaman, 1998 & 2006).

The process of learning is viewed by Pacific people from a whole person viewpoint which incorporates the physical, cultural and spiritual dimensions. As Thaman (1998) notes:

My own study of Tongan notions of learning, knowledge and wisdom revealed that the concept of *poto*, or the ideal/smart person, refers to those who use *'ilo* (knowledge and skills), acquired through *ako* (learning) for the benefit of the groups to which they belong, and with which they identify. Such notions reflect basic Tongan cultural values and emphases which people continue to use to justify their behavior as well as that of others. These include emphases on: the supernatural and spiritual; context-specific behavior; kinship and interpersonal relationships; conformity to group norms' *'ofa* (compassion) and restraint behavior. (p. 12 as cited in Norsworthy, 2008, p. 8)

Mila-Schaaf & Robinson (2010) conducted a study which reinforces this holistic approach to enhancing the educational success of Pacific learners. Mila-Schaaf & Robinson explored the relationship between culture and educational outcomes for Pacific second generation or New Zealand born Pacific peoples. A number of cultural variables were used including pride in cultural values; speaking one's native language; acceptance by own ethnic group and by others; and church attendance and spiritual beliefs. The findings suggests that "having Pacific cultural capital as well as capital sourced to dominant social spaces assists in realizing cumulative advantage and may be associated with improved education outcomes" (p. 1).

Underpinning Pacific cultural notions of education is the centrality of maintaining good relationships or the process of relational connectedness. Mafile'o (2004) discusses the importance of this notion of connectedness or *fakafekau'aki* in her research of Tongan social workers.

The process of *fakafekau'aki* occurs between the social worker and others so that they establish association with, connection with and belonging to each other. This connection maybe based on genealogy, church affiliation, which schools one attended or shared knowledge of people or places. *Fakafekau'aki* then becomes a foundation for change. (p. 246)

The importance of relational connectedness is rooted within the Tongan cultural values of *tauhivaha'a/feveitoka'I'aki* (nurturing relationships), *'ofa* (love, compassion) and *fetokoni'aki* (mutual helpfulness, reciprocity) (Norsworthy, 2008). Maintaining good relationships amongst people and between people and nature is "a core value of indigenous education...and are central to personal as well as group identities and they provide the framework for

appropriate behaviour” (Thaman, 2006, p. 3). Pacific notions of education are centred on the concept of giving back to the *kainga*, and to the wider community.

Thaman (2003) presents a Tongan cultural framework which highlights Pacific cultural contexts of teaching and learning. This framework is based on a Tongan process of weaving a garland or *kakala* to be gifted to a special person or a special occasion. The *kakala* model symbolizes some key Tongan cultural values such as respect, collectivism, generosity, sharing and mutual helpfulness. This process is similar to other Pacific cultures like the Hawaiian *lei*, the Fijian *salusalu* and the Cook Island and Tahitian *hei*.

There are three stages involved in weaving the garland. Firstly, the *toli* process which involves the collection of appropriate flowers and fauna required for the garland. Secondly, the *tui* stage represents the act of weaving the *kakala*, by skillful and knowledgeable people. The form of the *kakala* can either be a more traditional one or a contemporary design depending on the occasion. The final process is *luva*, which is the act of giving away, or gifting of someone special with the *kakala*. For example, it can be gifted to a student graduating from high school or university; or a special guest in a celebration ceremony; or a keynote speaker at a conference. Within the Tongan culture the *kakala* is always given away signifying the cultural values of ‘*ofa* (compassion or love) and *faka’apa’apa* (respect).

Thaman suggests that although the *kakala* model is based on the Tongan culture it can be adapted both as a philosophy and a conceptual framework to other cultures and contexts. *Kakala* is symbolic of the process of sourcing knowledge and understanding from both cultural and global contexts and being able to

weave a 'garland', that is meaningful, relevant and worthy of being given away. Thaman advocates for the usefulness of such a framework for not only engaging with Pacific students but also for teachers on ways to ensure that their content is more "culturally inclusive".

## **Pacific notions of educational achievement**

The motto that I was continually reminded of growing up in Tonga was: *'Tokanga ki he lotu mo e ako ke ke poto ka ke 'aonga ki he famili mo e fonua'*. This literally means to pay attention to faith/spirituality/church and education so that I can be wise in order to be useful to the family and the nation. This motto which has become a personal philosophy implies that educational achievement is far more than just receiving a qualification. It is about having the quality of *poto* in order to make a useful contribution to not only my *kainga*, but also the wider community and the nation. This philosophy is true for many Pacific people where success at university is viewed as a collective accomplishment rather than an individual one (Thaman, 1988). As Mila Schaaf aptly said, in her speech to *Pasifika* graduates at Massey University's *Pasifika* graduation ceremony, 2011: "*Tangata poto* (a wise person), do not grow by themselves, they require families and communities to nurture them".

My Christian beliefs, and *'ofa* for my *kainga*, continues to be primary motivators for my desire to succeed at university or any other endeavours. In addition to being motivators, the values of *lotu* and *kainga* were important means of sustenance throughout my educational journey. These traditional values, provides the framework that inspire, and encourage me to persevere, despite the inevitable setbacks experienced through the journey.



The concept of *'ofa* is closely linked to educational achievement within Pacific cultures. There are equivalent terms within the other Pacific cultures. The Samoan language uses the term *alofa* for example. Fijians describe agape love as *loloma*. *'Ofa* in the Tongan translation means love, compassion, kindness, empathy, caring. A person who has achieved in formal education is also referred to as a person who possesses the quality of *'ofa*. It also applies within the teaching school setting, a Tongan teacher said: "If I have *'ofa*, I will work hard, help the pupils, as well as perform all of my other obligations to my family and society" (Thaman, 1988, p. 119).

## **General overview of current socio-economic status of Pacific peoples in New Zealand**

It is useful to provide a general overview of the current socio-economic status of Pacific peoples in New Zealand prior to discussing the details of current policies for the advancement of Pacific peoples within the tertiary sector. The negative socio-economic status of Pacific peoples continues to be widely publicized in government reports and the media. Indicators of wellbeing remain relatively poor for Pacific peoples in a number of key areas, particularly in health, education and economic standard of living. It should be noted that statistics have their limitations, and do not always portray a true picture. Therefore they should always be viewed and interpreted with caution. The following bullet points paint the picture as painted by NZ government publications (Statistics NZ & MPIA, 2010; Ministry of Education, 2008, 2009b, & 2011; Ministry of Social Development, 2004, 2006 & 2010; TEAC, 2001):

- Pacific peoples (PP) have some higher achievers but still not enough on a comparative basis
- PP have high enrolments, but relatively low completion rates
- PP have the highest unemployment in every age group

- PP are more likely to need government assistance for housing and income
- PP have higher rates of criminal conviction and prosecution
- PP perform poorly at school
- PP have poor health and lower life expectancies

Clydesdale (2008a & b) reinforces this by saying that Pacific peoples are creating an “underclass” and a “drain on the economy”. He also warns that Pacific peoples display “significant and enduring under-achievement”.

Mila’s (2001) statement helps to demystify any stereotyping of Pacific peoples:

Our Pacific community in Aotearoa is diverse and increasingly complex. Despite the myths that abound, we do not all eat *povi masima*, shop at the fleamarket, go to church and live in South Auckland. Some of us are relatively wealthy. Some of us are anorexic. Some of us are gay. Some of us have PhDs. And some of us live in the South Island. Our social workers must reflect, understand and be open to the complexities. (p. 23)

## **An overview of Pasifika educational performance across the three educational sectors**

As previously mentioned in chapter one, historically Pacific peoples are underperforming in education compared to the rest of the general population (Coxon et al., 2002; Nash, 2000). In the early childhood sector, despite an increase in participation, Pasifika new entrants still have the lowest prior participation rates (84.8 percent overall, and only 78 percent in Papakura and 80 percent in Manukau). In the school sector, the National Certificate in Educational Achievement (NCEA) results show an improvement from 2004 for

Pacific learners, but still achieve significantly less well at all NCEA levels. The same trend is shown in the tertiary sector. Although participation in the tertiary sector has shown signs of improvement, especially at post-graduate level, Pacific students' completion rates are still relatively low (Coxon et al., 2002; Statistics NZ & MPIA, 2010; Ministry of Education, 1998, 2008, 2009b, & 2011). Moreover, Phillips, McNaughton, and MacDonald (2001) said that Pacific learners show low success in literacy upon entering the school sector and continue to perform poorly throughout their school years as they live in communities and attend schools with fewer resources compared to mainstream New Zealanders.

### **Current policy initiatives for Pacific peoples within the tertiary sector**

The current *Pasifika Education Plan 2009-2012* was built on the *Pasifika Education Plan 2001*. This current plan basically outlines a strategy for enhancing achievement for Pasifika learners through increasing participation, retention, and completion, across the three educational sectors (Ministry of Education, 2001, 2008, 2009b, & 2011). The current plan includes emphasis on:

- Effective teaching strategies in early literacy and numeracy
- More effective connectedness with parents
- Increasing participation and completion in higher education

More specifically for the tertiary sector, the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) established a Pasifika tertiary education strategy to “educate for Pacific peoples’ development and success” with the primary focus of ensuring that the needs, issues and aspirations of Pacific peoples are addressed (TEC, 2004, p. 8). TEC’s Pacific peoples strategy includes providing equity funding for tertiary institutions for recruitment and facilitation for achievement purposes; the employment of specialised Pasifika staff for both recruitment and learning

support purposes and the provision of a Pasifika space within universities where a learning community that is culturally appropriate is fostered (Ministry of Education, 2001 & 2003; TEAC, 2001).

Massey University's Pasifika@massey strategy is a response to the TEC's policy objective for enhancing Pacific peoples' educational success. This strategy is "the first written and explicit declaration of academic intent developed at the highest level of any university in Aotearoa" (Durie, Tu'itahi, Finau, & Pasifika@massey network, 2007, p. 62). It is a strategic document that illustrates an effective collaboration of the Pasifika community at Massey, as well as the wider Pasifika community in Palmerston North, Auckland and Wellington. The primary aim of the Pasifika@massey strategy is to enhance social and economic gains through teaching, research and consultancy services within Massey University (Durie et al., 2007).

Massey University's response to the policy direction of the TEC is to be commended. However, the slow progress of achievement rates at tertiary level is still an ongoing concern. Perhaps, there needs to be a monitoring system, which ensures that there is commitment by the tertiary sector, and alignment of educational policies and implementation.

In reading, studying and analysing educational policies aimed at enhancing gains for Pacific peoples, one cannot help but notice that underlying these policy initiatives are western theoretical frameworks. The dominant philosophy that has prevailed within social policy frameworks over the last two decades is the neo-liberal approach (Cheyne, O'Brien, & Belgrave, 2004; Esping-Andersen, 1996; Shaw & Eichbaum, 2005). This ethos is characterised by individualism; dominated by market forces; user pays; and each citizen

taking responsibility for his/her own destiny. This approach is contrary to Pacific cultures where traditional values of *lotu*, community, reciprocity and strong sense of belonging are central. There is a real sense that Pacific peoples have to fit their particular worldviews into current policy settings. One has to wonder why so much resource has been committed to enhancing the social and economic wellbeing of Pacific peoples, and yet the progress is still comparatively immaterial. At a strategic policy level, the words of Tuiatua Tupua Tamasese Efi ring true, and suggest a pathway that is worth noting:

If you seriously want better outcomes for Pacific young people and their families, then policy settings that impact upon them need to be congruent with this world. You need to be drawing upon the strengths, understandings and meanings of this world. That will require engaging many more Pacific policy makers, researchers, evaluators and practitioners who are accorded the space to develop their own paradigms around that which is meaningful to them. (TEC, 2004, p.13)

At a policy implementation level, Pasikale's statement about the inclusion of Pacific indigenous knowledge is highly relevant and appropriate for better educational outcomes for Pacific peoples:

Better academic outcomes will only be achieved with better understanding of the learning behaviours of Pacific Island learners and the incorporation of this knowledge into the teaching practices within New Zealand learning institutions. (Skill New Zealand, 1998, p.118)

I share the sentiments of Pasikale (1996, 1998, 1999) and other Pacific educators (Nabobo, 2000; Sanga, 2000; Taufe'ulungaki, 2000; Thaman, 2000 & 2002) who

argue that in order for education to achieve its objectives for Pacific peoples in New Zealand, the education sector needs to be seen as an environment where ethnic groups can embrace their own culture and different ways of learning.

## Conclusion

*Ako* or education for Pacific peoples goes beyond the conventional meanings of education. Education is not only about receiving a qualification to provide a well paid employment it is very much also about using that knowledge to give back to one's *kainga* and the community. A Pacific person who fulfils this is referred to as *poto* or wise. Underlying this ethos for living are the Christian principles of '*ofa* (love) and *tauhivaha'a* or *feveitoka'I'aki* (maintaining or nurturing good relationships).

Policy development for Pacific peoples' tertiary educational advancement is still in the early stages of development. Although culturally sensitive policy, educational and training programmes are increasing there is still a long way to go in terms of constructive and effective change which will ensure that Pacific peoples contribute to their full potential without losing touch with cultural roots.

The next chapter will reiterate the thesis objectives and discuss the relevant methodological approaches used in this thesis.

## **CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Introduction**

This chapter will state the thesis objectives, and discuss the theoretical perspectives that are relevant for this qualitative study. The research design and methods and what actually happened in the process of gathering the data are described. Ethical issues relevant to this project and experienced by the researcher are also discussed.

### **Thesis objectives**

This qualitative study explores the relationship between spirituality and educational achievement among Pacific university students in Aotearoa New Zealand. It is motivated by the increasing need, to contribute to alleviating the ongoing issue of underperformance in education, by Pacific Peoples in New Zealand. In exploring the links between spirituality and academic achievement, the hope is to identify ways in which spirituality might contribute to academic success. Additionally, the research aims to add to the very limited knowledge regarding Pacific peoples and the relationship between spirituality and educational achievement.

### **Methodology**

A blend of qualitative focused ethnography and Pacific approaches was applied in this research study. These combined approaches provide the conceptual framework for drawing out rich and meaningful data based on Pacific peoples' experiences of spirituality relative to their academic journey.

It is purposeful and meaningful to apply Pacific approaches to this research study given that the participants are of Pacific descent and the focus is on Pacific peoples. The *Talanoa* approach was used. Morrison & Vaoleti (2008) define *Talanoa* as “a traditional reciprocating interaction which is driven by common interest, regard for respectfulness and are conducted mainly face to face” (p. 11). It is an approach which is underpinned by Pacific cultural values such as respect and humility. There are many ways that one can apply respect and humility in approaching the participants. In the following paragraph, some examples are given.

*Talanoa* required me as the researcher to approach the participants with an attitude of humility (*fakatokilalo*). Humility in this sense involved me removing any misguided misconceptions that I am the researcher or the professional, and as such the person who seemingly knows it all. Instead, I approached each person with the attitude that I was the research student who is open and willing to learn from their stories. The value of respect (*faka'apa'apa*) required me to approach the participants with cultural sensitivity. For example, when their response to a question seemed inappropriate or irrelevant, respect prevailed and I chose not to interrupt. The underlying beauty of following this approach of humility and respect is that not only does it maintain good relationships but it also most definitely encouraged open, honest and insightful dialogue (Health Research Council of New Zealand, 2005; Pacific Health Research Council, 2003). Consequently, the data obtained is richer and more meaningful.

As there are many interpretations about ethnography, this qualitative study applied focused ethnography as this approach is consistent with the overall aim of this research study. Morse & Richards' (2002) argument about focused



ethnography validates the use of ethnography in this particular study. They state that “focused ethnography is used primarily to evaluate or to elicit information on a special topic or shared experience” (p. 53). Spirituality and its impact on the academic achievement of Pacific University students is a specific topic and involved the process of drawing out rich and in-depth descriptions of the students’ experiences.

An important part of qualitative ethnography is the narrative or life-story approach. The life-story approach is about accessing the experiences of the participants and therefore it is qualitative ethnography. This approach highlights what the researched “views as the most important influences, experiences, circumstances, issues, themes, and lessons of a lifetime” (Atkinson, 1988, p. 24 quoted in Lowery, 2005, p. 326). The life-story approach is also analogous with the *Talanoa* approach. It is similar in the sense that both processes require, in-depth, interactive, intuitive understanding and insightful dialogues. Moreover, both approaches require a strong sense of connectedness in the relationship between the researcher and the researched.

At the very heart of qualitative ethnography is the generation of ‘thick descriptions’ that builds an understanding of the underlying frameworks that produce both behaviour and meaning. It enables the “rich and in-depth exploration of values and beliefs” of cultures (O’Leary, 2004, p. 119). It is an approach which involves active self-reflection by the researched as Lowery (2005) and Morse & Richards (2002) have advocated. These key strengths of the ethnographic approach, embraced this research study, in exploring the phenomenon of spirituality, which is an integral cultural norm for Pacific peoples.

## Methods

The use of one to one interviews and focus group discussions were used as they are consistent with the *Talanoa* approach as well as with qualitative ethnography. One of the benefits of these methods is the opportunity it provides for triangulation. A key feature of *Talanoa* is the face to face interaction and the conversational aspect. Both the narrative interviews and focus group techniques are in line with the *Talanoa* approach. Interviews and focus groups are the methods commonly used in qualitative ethnography.

The focus group method of collecting data was also used in order to generate both breadth and depth rich data in this qualitative study. In a personal conversation with Mason Durie about my research project, he advised that the use of focus groups can sometimes stimulate more interesting and relevant questions that encourage others to communicate more openly and honestly (2007). I found this to be true in the two focus group sessions that were conducted prior to the one to one interviews. The focus groups were held first, so as to clarify and inform the pre-determined list of questions for the one to one interviews.

One of the key aspects involved in the interviews was that they were one to one and face to face. In this method, it allowed for a more personal connection between the researcher and the researched. It enabled me to “establish rapport, gain trust, and create a more natural environment conducive to open and honest communication” (O’Leary, 2004, p. 164). The face to face interview also allowed me to sense by sight and intuition any discomfort felt by the participants with the questions that were asked. This technique is ideal given the nature of the topic requiring the researched to reflexively share their

personal feelings, understandings, beliefs and experiences of spirituality relative to their educational journey.

An important aspect of these methods is the ability of the researcher or the facilitator to listen well, despite the use of the recorder. The ability to listen well is even more pertinent where English is the second language for the participants, which was the case for the majority of this research study respondents.

The interviews were semi-structured where open-ended questions were prepared in advance along with prepared probes (Morse & Richards, 2002). Unplanned and unanticipated probes were also used in situations when the participant did not fully understand the questions that were asked. The semi-structured interview process was ideal because it allowed for some flexibility when interesting tangents arose. Moreover, having a plan and predetermined open questions not only gave me as the researcher confidence (which was very much needed given that it was my first research process experience) in approaching the interviews but it provided direction to the process, and ensured consistent coverage of the topic.

Furthermore, the technique of semi-structured interviews emphasized the dialogic approach to the interview or conversation where the interviewee is encouraged to adopt a reflexive approach on various aspects of their descriptions. This method involved going to a deeper level with the participants where both parties “are co-creators of a narrative that is both descriptive and interpretive, and is often rich, poetic, and full of metaphor” (O’Leary, 2004, p. 124).

These key characteristics of the interview process: with one to one and face to face; use of open-ended questions allowing for a conversational dialogue; of using ones senses (or intuition); and of having to listen more and talk less are all consistent with the combined approaches of *Talanoa* and qualitative ethnography. These techniques enabled “thick description and rich and reflexive interpretation” as supported by O’Leary (2004, p. 121)

## **Research Design process**

This section describes what actually happened.

### **Participant selection and recruitment**

Given the small sample in both the focus groups and interviews, the selection criteria for the participants were limited to the following factors:

- Pacific descent
- Current Massey university student with two or more years university study experience and/or
- Recent University graduate (ie., within 1 year)
- Living in Palmerston North

To avoid conflict of interest given the researcher’s role at Massey University, the Pacific learning consultant (PLC) was approached to provide a list of potential participants for the selection of current students for the focus group sessions, and also for the one on one interviews. In recruiting the graduates, the researcher initially recruited through her personal networks and then a snowball sampling method was applied to recruit additional participants as needed.

The PLC made the initial contact via email to 17 students to gauge potential interest in the research study. The email specified that their response would signify consent to the researcher contacting them to confirm participation. Ten of these 17 students responded, and the researcher worked together with the PLC to screen these 10 potential participants. The researcher then emailed these 10 participants with information inviting them to participate in the study.

**Table 1: Participants background information**  
(Pseudonyms used)

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>University level/Graduate</b>	<b>Island born/NZ born</b>	<b>Church affiliation</b>
<b>Focus Group 1</b>					
Timote	26-30	M	Undergraduate 2 <sup>nd</sup> year	NZ born	Yes
Loisi	21-25	F	Undergraduate 4th year	Island born	Yes
<b>Focus Group 2</b>					
Mosese	>40	M	Postgraduate	Island born	Yes
Paula	31-35	M	Graduate	Island born	Yes
‘Eseta	36-40	F	Postgraduate	Island born	Yes
<b>Interviews</b>					
Tepola	31-35	F	Undergraduate 2 <sup>nd</sup> Yr	Island born	Yes
‘Elisapesi	31-35	F	Undergraduate 3 <sup>rd</sup> year	Island born	Yes
Ma’ata	21-25	F	Undergraduate 1 <sup>st</sup> year. 2 <sup>nd</sup> time to university	Island born	Yes
Lesieli	21-25	F	Undergraduate 3 <sup>rd</sup> year	NZ born	Yes
Lute	26-30	F	Graduate	Island born	Yes
Mele	>40	F	Postgraduate	Island born	Yes
Lepeka	>40	F	Graduate	Island born	Yes
Pita	31-35	M	Graduate	NZ born	Yes

As mentioned earlier, the use of both focus group sessions and interviews were the methods used to collect data. The pool of potential participants needed to represent a balance of current students and graduates. There was also an attempt to represent each of the seven Pacific ethnic groups which fall under the umbrella term 'Pacific peoples', in New Zealand. However, given limitations of sample size and the location, the majority consisted of Samoans followed by Tongans which are the two largest ethnic groups in terms of population size. This is reflected in Table One.

### **Conducting the focus groups**

Five undergraduate students were invited to the first focus group session. Four confirmed attendance but on the day, only two participants attended, as one was injured after a rugby game, and the other had a personal reason for her absence. The second focus group session consisted of two post-graduate students and one graduate. Five were invited and four confirmed attendance, but on the day only three attended as the fourth participant pulled out at the last minute.

Both of the focus group sessions were held in the researcher's home on different dates, and lasted for about two hours including morning tea. It needs to be noted that even though a time limit was required in the ethics application and the information sheet, when working with Pacific peoples it is culturally inappropriate to end the sessions if the time is up. The focus group sessions were held in my home for convenience and privacy for the participants and to provide a relaxed and informal environment to ensure a more open and honest dialogue. The researchers' family took the morning out thus allowing privacy and no interruptions for the focus group sessions.

The hospitality of a morning tea also was offered in both focus groups. The use of food is always a good enticement to encourage attendance as well as creating a warm, friendly and relaxed environment which are all essential elements for open and honest discussions. In the first focus group session, the morning tea took place prior to the session to help break the ice and to set the scene transitioning to the discussions. The morning tea continued while the discussions were held. In the second focus group session, the morning tea was held after the session because the researcher gave the participants the option of having it prior or after the session and the three opted for the latter.

A checklist was used prior to the arrival of the participants, consisting of:

- Taking the phone off the hook
- Set up and test the digital recorder
- Participant consent forms
- Authority for release of transcripts
- Background information sheets
- Spare information sheets
- Pens

It was noted by the researcher that the most important task that was overlooked was starting the focus groups with prayer as this is the culturally appropriate practice. Prayer would have definitely helped in calming my nerves down. I attribute this oversight to a combination of anxiety about having my first focus group session as well as perhaps unconsciously following the conventional ways of conducting research.

### **Conducting the interviews**

Different participants from the focus groups were interviewed individually mainly to allow for a broader range of responses and more in-depth richness of



data. Ten potential participants were invited and eight participants were interviewed. The eight participants consisted of four undergraduate students; one post-graduate; and three graduates (see Table 1).

The first question I asked was “What are the key motivators for your desire to succeed at University?” (see Appendix one). This was a question which was intended to softly introduce and transition them to the *Talanoa* or conversation. It is a question which does not require much thinking and it allowed them to speak from their heart (Perry, 2000). All eight interviewees knew beforehand from the information sheet my topic of interest. Therefore, the questions around their experiences of spirituality were not unexpected.

Once the participants began to share their inner-most thoughts and feelings the interview became a conversation about their life journey (Berg, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). In some of the interviews I found myself having to share some of my own personal journey in order to encourage them to share their own thoughts and feelings. Holstein & Gubrium (1995) suggest that “active interviews,” involving “mutual disclosure,” are desired in qualitative research. As they noted:

The interview should be an occasion that displays the interviewer’s willingness to share his or her own feelings and deepest thoughts. This is done to assure respondents that they can, in turn, share their own thoughts and feelings. The interviewer’s deep disclosure both occasions and legitimates the respondent’s reciprocal revelations. (p. 12, cited in Perry, 2000, p. 102)

The eight interviews were held in a private room at Massey University and lasted for about 45 minutes to one hour. All of the participants were offered either a morning tea or lunch with the researcher depending on the time the interview was held. The same checklist used in the focus groups was applied for the eight interviews.

### **Data analysis**

Qualitative data analysis system was used by which I examined the data repeatedly, constantly looking for and highlighting themes, patterns, concepts, cultural values and issues from each participant transcript (Morse & Richards, 2002). O'Leary (2004) defines qualitative analysis as:

A process that requires you to: manage and organise raw data; systematically code and enter your data; engage in reflective analysis appropriate for the data type; interpret meaning, uncover and discuss findings; and, finally, draw relevant conclusions. (p. 185)

The participants' responses were grouped under each interview question. This made it simpler to highlight common themes, concepts, Pacific cultural values and key issues (Patton, 1990). Divergent issues that emerged from the focus groups discussions were also categorized separately.

This method is consistent with the combined approaches of focused ethnography and *Talanoa*. This traditional qualitative data analyses tool is ideal because, instead of conducting a comparative analysis between individuals, what was explored is the range of experiences relating to the phenomenon of spirituality. This process allowed for the reduction of "unimportant dissimilarities and integrate the essential nature within various descriptions" (O'Leary, 2004, p. 125). Common themes were constantly looked for by

“bringing together components or fragments of ideas or experiences, which are often meaningless when viewed alone” (Leininger, 1985, p. 60).

### **Limitations**

There are both general limitations as well as specific limitations of this study. As with any qualitative study, there is the usual issue of the results being generalisable only to the small sample used in this thesis (Dantis, 2008; Herndon, 2003). This limitation was minimized by the diversity of Pacific ethnicities of the participants as well as the use of both focus groups and personal interviews. The specific limitation of this study was the selection of participants restricted to Pacific university students and graduates within the Palmerston North area. This was unavoidable given time and resource constraints. However, despite these limitations, the findings of this study addressed the centrality of spirituality not only in the lives of Pacific peoples but also as a motivation for educational achievement.

### **Ethical issues**

Ethical approval was obtained from the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (See Appendix two). To ensure the “dignity and well-being” (O’Leary, 2004, p.50) of the respondents and the integrity of the research process, two key ethical considerations required careful management. Firstly, the management of any researcher bias, and secondly, the principle of maintaining participant confidentiality. These key issues will be discussed further below.

### **Researcher stance**

The fact that I am a Tongan, working at Massey University and also a student researching Pacific university students presented a number of ethical considerations that needed to be managed responsibly. There were ethical implications of my three roles at Massey as a Pacific Achievement Facilitator

(PAF); a tertiary Chaplain; and co-teacher of a Pacific wellbeing paper. In qualitative research and especially researching Pacific peoples, establishing good relationships is vital to ensure candid *Talanoa* of experiences (Health Research Council of New Zealand, 2005; O'Leary, 2004). I believe that being a Tongan and wearing these three hats was more beneficial rather than harmful to the research process. One can argue that being an insider might have influenced the participants to be less open and honest or provided information that they thought I wanted to hear. However, in reality, being Tongan and working at Massey gave me access to the participants. Moreover, I had the cultural competencies required to deal with any cultural issues which may have surfaced. Additionally, the fact that I had already had an established rapport and trust with many of the Pacific students was a bonus to the research process. This meant that there can be mutual trust and confidence in the researched and researcher relationship. However, to avoid any potential conflict of interest, students that I taught and counseled on a regular basis were omitted from the pool of potential participants. In good faith, I had to rely on my good reputation to have spread through word of mouth for potential participants to accept the invitation to participate in my thesis study.

### **Maintenance of confidentiality**

The principle of respect for privacy and confidentiality is to safeguard the identity of the participants in the research study. The Pacific student community at Massey, Palmerston North, and the wider community, is relatively small. So there was the possibility of recognizing some of the participants, based on the information they provided. However, the participants were reassured through the information sheet and a follow up email during the data analysis process. They were informed via the information sheet (see Appendix three) that all identifying data (ie, tapes, transcripts) will remain solely with me as the researcher. Every possible

attempt has been made to ensure that publication of research findings will not include personal identification of participants. Moreover, tapes and transcripts were stored in a locked cabinet in my home for a period of five years. That consent forms were locked away in a separate cabinet in my home as well. Additionally, participants were given the opportunity to see and edit the transcripts of interviews and focus groups if requested.

The next chapter will present the stories told by the participants on what spirituality means to them and its influence on their academic journeys.

## **CHAPTER 5: STORIES OF PACIFIC UNIVERSITY STUDENTS AND GRADUATES**

### **Introduction**

This chapter presents the findings from the two focus groups and the interviews with eight participants. The questions for the focus groups discussions and the personal interviews were based around three broad themes: Firstly, spirituality; secondly, education and motivations to succeed; and thirdly, spirituality and educational achievement. There are no separate descriptions of the findings of the focus groups and the interviews given that there were no substantive differences. However, some of the divergent issues which came out of the second focus groups' discussions will also be presented. For data integrity, every effort has been made to include as much of the participants' responses as possible.

### **Theme one: Spirituality**

Participants were asked three questions:

- What does spirituality mean to you?
- How do you express your spirituality?
- Do you believe that spirituality is an integral cultural value for Pacific peoples? Why or why not?

These questions were aimed at exploring the participants' personal definition, concept, understanding and experiences of spirituality. It was also about encouraging them to go deeper and share some of the practical ways that they develop and express their spirituality. Their personal beliefs in whether

spirituality is a central cultural value for Pacific peoples were also explored. The five sub-themes that were evident from the respondents' understanding and experiences of spirituality were:

- Spirituality as a personal relationship with God
- Ways of growing spiritually
- Spirituality as a whole of life experience
- Relationship with others as an important aspect of spirituality
- Spirituality as a central cultural value for Pacific peoples

### **Spirituality as a personal relationship with God**

Six of the interview participants regarded spirituality to be a personal relationship with God. Spirituality was about a committed relationship with Christ, as God as the higher power. This sub-theme also came through strongly in the focus group discussions. The following quotes illustrate this sub-theme.

*Spirituality... for me it's about our relationship with God, through Jesus Christ...it is about a committed relationship (Tepola)*

*It's [Spirituality] connecting with a higher power... ('Eseta)*

*...It's faith in God who is a higher power...it's about believing in God and having a relationship...(Lute)*

*Spirituality is about giving your heart to God and not about giving of material things...(Paula)*

*...Growing up my faith was based on my parents faith and it was based on what I was told, rather than a personal experience with God...but it wasn't until I*

*studied the Bible that I realized then that God is a personal God and he wants an intimate and personal relationship with me rather than through church or my family...or through just knowledge of God... (Lute)*

### **Ways of growing spiritually**

Based on this understanding and experiencing spirituality as a relationship with God was the acknowledgement that this important relationship needed to be developed at a personal level. For the majority of these participants this development included: staying connected through prayer; fasting; reading and studying the Christian Bible; having daily devotional; attending church; and worship through music. The following quotes are illustrative of this sub-theme.

*How it changed, to make it short, there is a verse that explains it well, "faith comes from hearing and hearing by the Word of God", and so with that, studying the Bible was the key for me, the key that helped me to change. Before growing up and going to church and of course heard Bible stories...it was a great foundation, because He really laid a foundation in my heart, that God exists and He is God... (Lute)*

*The practical things...I need to do in order to keep that relationship strong is having a daily quiet time, it is just like meditation you know, people meditate, I meditate on God's word, I pray, I listen to gospel music, worship songs, and in stressful situations like an overwhelming assignment that looks like I can't do it,...I just rest on God's word by reading it, by praying and just sensing his presence,...and also that is reinforced by going to Church on Sundays...(Tepola)*



*Because it is a relationship for me it's about just resting in everything that God has accomplished on my behalf, because it is a faith based thing, it's a humility repenting thing, so I have to just rest in who God is and all the external things that I express, it all comes from within for that connectedness...(Tepola)*

*...I try to go to Church every Sunday, I also...always have evening devotion every day...we go over 'The Word for Today' [daily spiritual devotional]...I pray and fast...sometimes when I think there is no one else who can help me, to me only God, because I have been through a lot and God always helps me what I have gone through. ('Elisapeti)*

### **Spirituality as whole of life experience**

The theme of spirituality as a sense of wholeness and wellbeing came through strongly in the two focus group discussions. Also four of the interview participants referred to spirituality as having that sense of wholeness of mind, body and spirit.

*...I think as a Pacific Islander we have been brought up to be holistic or related to the Maori setup of Hauora, where it talks about the body, the physical and spiritual things like that...(Pita)*

*It [Spirituality] is a way of life, it's 24/7...(Mosese)*

*It's [Spirituality] your whole wellbeing as a person...it's the whole package...(Lute)*

*Spirituality to me is what makes us complete...('Eseta)*

Moreover for these participants, the way that you live your life is a testimony of your values and beliefs – in essence your spirituality. Spirituality was not about living a life that compartmentalizes the spiritual and the secular. This was clearly stated by Lute:

*I express it [Spirituality] by living it, by walking in it, like growing up learning about God and going to church and everything...it wasn't until I sat down and studied the Bible that's when I knew there is so much to God than what I knew, there wasn't just the religious, go to church or try to do good things or try to be a good person, it's so much more...its more like living the life of what the Bible says, and yeah walking it not just talking about it, living it out so people see it and we become evidence in life.*

This sense of spirituality as a daily experience which involves everything that you do on a daily basis was also expressed by Paula:

*Spirituality to me is all about everything you do during the day, and at the end of the day if you make a mistake, you have to ...humble yourself and admit you have done wrong and then move on...because God would like you to move on and not sit on your mistakes...*

Two of the focus groups participants referred to spirituality as a personal decision and suggested that there is no distinction between spirituality and religion: "Spirituality is a personal choice...a personal way of life...a type of wellbeing...spirituality and religion, are both ways of life..." "...Religion and spirituality and family for me are ... intertwined."

### **Relationship with others as an important aspect of spirituality**

A sub-theme that is closely related to spirituality as wholeness of life is the important aspect of relationships with other people. Within the context of conversations around the question of how they express their spirituality, there was an overwhelming response that spirituality was more than just the religious practice of attending church on Sundays. That it was very much about how you live, your attitude, your behaviour and how you relate to other people, including your families, friends and work colleagues.

Some of the younger students shared of how their spiritual values were important in deterring them from the influence of alcohol and drugs and reinforcing their deep desire to be a good example and role model not only amongst their peers but also their siblings. "I express it through my actions and being a good example...as a testament of my beliefs..." The following quotes highlight these points:

*Spirituality, personally I see myself as a spiritual person because of how I relate to other people, how I relate to my creator, to God, and my spirituality gives me a sense of identity...my identity as a child of God, I value that and I think that forms a very important part of my wellbeing...(Mele)*

*...also through the way I appear and the way I talk to people...I was taught that my body is a temple...(Lesieli)*

*...Spirituality kind of makes you want to be that better person, trying to always be friendly and polite to people and courteous and respectful, kind of you know everything that your culture teaches you, it works with spirituality as well...(Ma'ata)*

*You got to like make a difference by working alongside them [family] and grow with them at the same time...and its not just going to church, I do my prayers, treat other people with respect in my line of work...(Lepeka)*

### **Spirituality as a Pacific cultural value**

There was unanimous agreement from the focus groups and interview participants that spirituality is an integral cultural value for Pacific peoples. Participants described spirituality in the Pacific cultures as a: “core strength”, a “central philosophy”, a “thread” and a “connecting point” to cultural values. There was also an inherent understanding that we are spiritual peoples even before the Missionaries brought Christianity to the Pacific.

*... Christianity is a very important thing for us, we can't separate Christianity from culture because culture is Christianity and Christianity is culture to us, so it is the central thing of everything that we do as Pacific Island people...Christianity was taught to us from an early age... It is a central philosophy because we were made to fear God...(Mosese)*

*...We are spiritual people, even before the Gospel of Jesus Christ was brought to the Islands, we already had our own Gods and everything around us, we have connected to the land to everything that we have, our environment, so it is a very big part of Pacific Island culture in values as well, it shapes our values.(Tepola)*

*...Missionaries...went to Tonga...but before that people had their own beliefs and own way of worshipping that time...and I believe that [spirituality] is a core strength, because that's what keep us within the family, that's what link us not only families but the church... (Lepeka)*

*We grew up in a culture where there was this sense of worship to the spirits...there was a higher power there all along, we did not know what it was, but it was there...('Eseta)*

Spirituality was also commonly associated with Christianity and the church body as illustrated by the following quotes:

*... Christianity is a very important thing for us, we can't separate Christianity from culture because culture is Christianity and Christianity is culture to us, so it is the central thing of everything that we do as Pacific Island people...Christianity was taught to us from an early age... It is a central philosophy because we were made to fear God...(Mosese)*

*...Church is an integral part of our makeup and it's very important that if you are going to study at University that you keep that spiritual faith up... I have never met a PI (Pacific Islander) who hasn't been brought up in the church... (Pita)*

*...In the Pacific today the churches are very very important for all...('Eseta)*

A young graduate had a particularly sensitive view of spirituality and culture and spoke of how: "...There is so much traditions in our culture and sometimes we get caught up in our traditions rather than acknowledging the higher power or acknowledging God..." (Lute) This statement suggests either a perception or an experience of tension between culture and spirituality.

## **Theme Two: Education and motivations to succeed**

In this section, three questions were asked:

- What are the key motivators for your desire to succeed at University?

- What does education mean to you?
- What does educational achievement or success mean to you?

The following sub-themes emerged from the participants' responses:

- *Kainga* as a key motivator for educational success
- Role modeling as a motivator
- Relationship with God as a motivation to succeed
- Education as a gateway to many possibilities
- Education as a lifelong journey
- Educational achievement as the ability to give back to one's *Kainga* and community
- God as the source of educational achievement

### ***Kainga* as a key motivator for educational success**

All of the focus groups and interview participants believed that their family was a key motivator for their desire to succeed with their studies at university. Within the Pacific context, family almost always refers to the *kainga* or the extended family. It was evident that these participants were well aware of the better opportunities in terms of job prospects and higher remuneration that comes with higher education. However the focus of the discussions was more about their desire to use that knowledge to give back to their families. It needs to be noted that there is some overlap of this sub-theme with the sub-theme of 'educational achievement as the ability to give back to one's *kainga* and community'. Despite the overlap, the different emphasis of each sub-theme is worth bringing out. The following quotes from some of the participants highlight this sub-theme.

*As a Pacific Island person...we are all about families...they are a big support network...(Tepola)*

*...I have a strong sense of responsibility and desire to succeed in order to support my loved ones ... ('Elisapeti)*

*...I want to succeed for my parents...[and for] my brothers and sisters...(Ma'ata)*

*[Education is]...a way that will help my family in future...it will get me a good job and...earn some good money...(Lute)*

*...I desire to succeed in order to give back to my family and my community...(Tepola)*

One of the participants shared how being away from the comfort and protection of her parents has heightened her appreciation of the wise counsel and spiritual guidance of her parents and that has motivated her to do well in her studies. There was also this desire not to put her family to shame whilst she is at university and away from them. As she said:

*...I think because my parents...and how they trust me so much, I think the trust goes a long way...I don't ever want to put my parents in a situation where they have got to be ashamed, not that they would be ashamed if I was to get pregnant now but, the guilt that I would feel...(Lesieli)*

Two of the research participants openly shared how their mothers provided the main motivation to succeed. They had both made a pact with their mothers when they died to finish their education. They had to be very disciplined, in keeping things in balance; with study; family responsibilities; and physical and personal wellbeing. As one of them said:

*...So I think the discipline from swimming...motivation from the death of my mother, kept me focused and also surrounding myself with like minded people who wanted to finish the course...but I think coming back as an adult student I knew what I wanted to do, to finish off...(Pita)*

A post-graduate student spoke of how in his first degree it was more of an obligation for the sacrifice that his parents have made. However, over the study period and as a more 'mature' student the motivation is more about the sense of satisfaction in one's achievements.

*It's for my parents... because they sacrificed a lot so I shouldn't be so ungrateful, and do nothing with my life, I should get something at least they can feel that their sacrifice wasn't for nothing, that's the way I saw education... Initially it was an obligation but now it's about fulfillment... (Timote)*

### **Role modeling as motivation for educational success**

Two of the focus group participants and four interviewees also referred to how another motivation for them is to be a role model for their children. One of the interview participants openly shared how she was the oldest child in her family and she was also motivated by her desire to be a good role model for not only her younger siblings but also her wider extended family. For many of these participants they are the first generation within their extended families to have attended university. Consequently, there was a strong desire to model the significance of hard work in education with a hope that their children will pass that legacy on to their children and so forth. The following quotes are illustrative of this point.



*I want to succeed for my family, and to be a role model to my children...(Mosese)*

*...I want to be a role model...I want my children to see me really studying hard and they can also study hard... ('Elisapeti)*

*...As a mature student, I want to succeed for my children... (Lepeka)*

Three of the participants were international students so for them there was an added motivation to succeed to give their children the opportunity to attend schools in New Zealand. As stated by this post-graduate student:

*For our children and to continue with their education and we would be able to give them a better life, better future, better chances at attending schools in New Zealand...(Mele)*

### **Relationship with God as a motivation to succeed in the academy**

Four of the interview participants referred to their relationship with God as one of the main motivations for their desire to attend university and to succeed. This sub-theme was also evident in the second focus group discussion. One of these participants spoke extensively about the struggles that she initially experienced coming as an international student to do a PhD and how it was only her relationship with God that sustained her and gave her motivation and a sense of purpose to continue.

*...I think one of the main motivations for me to continue my study was to show that I believe in a God who gives wisdom, but my PhD had to be grounded on God's rationale for bringing me from the islands to New Zealand.(Mele)*

*Gratefulness ...God has put a desire in me to come to University and do my best because he did give me an ability to do this...we are meant to be his [God's] hands and feet and that's why he has given every human being the ability to be able to be educated, because that's how we can reach out to people, and also to bring glory to his name, to draw people's attention to him, through our actions and our attitudes and our achievements as well...God wants us to get educated because that is how we can effectively spread his love and compassion and his message out there, if we are in a position of influence, with being educated...it gives you credibility...in the eyes of society...(Tepola)*

### **Education as a gateway to many possibilities**

All the participants explicitly and implicitly acknowledged the significance and value of education. They knew and understood that in order to help their families and communities they needed to work hard and develop their knowledge and skills, as stated by the following graduate:

*It [Education] gives you that extra mile...in terms of jobs...it's the beginning of knowledge to help you go to places...where you have never dreamed of...I wanted to do teaching to help our people...education is not easy but you've got to keep pushing through it, you know nothing in life comes easy...I got here because of hard work...(Lesieli)*

The respondents were well aware that education was an important “doorway” to the many opportunities that will enable them to help, provide and be a role model to their families and wider community. This is demonstrated by the following quotes:

*Education...does empower people to do great things...it gives you that leverage over people...(Ma'ata)*

*Education is...understanding yourself in who you are and why you believe the things you do, and then relating it to what I am learning here...and it is not just limited to this institution...its like a doorway...or like a step that I can stand on and then go further in life to help my family, to help my community and also to help myself, so...it's very important to me. (Tepola)*

*From a secular point of view, education is knowledge, and knowledge is power...it will take you to places...(Moses)*

*...It [Education] allowed me to open doors, teaches you to be literate, be an abstract thinker, allows you to express yourself...education allows you to progress in different areas in the world...it allows you to look at things with multiple perspectives...it allows you to work with different people from different multi-cultures too...I think education is a beautiful thing, it says in the Word to embrace education and knowledge so there is a reason for that particular Word...(Pita)*

### **Education as a life-long journey**

The sub-theme of education as a life-long journey also came through strongly in both the focus groups and interviews. There was a strong sense that education is not just limited (although an important aspect of their journey) to the formal educational setting. We continue to learn throughout our lifetime. This is illustrated by the following quotes:

*It [Education] means learning...I believe our life is a forever learning journey, we can end up getting a high paid job but I believe we still learn and education still carries on through whatever aspect of life you end up at.(Lute)*

*...It [Education] is to learn what I need to know in this life...it's something that never stops, we keep learning... (Mele)*

For the following participant, education is also about challenging yourself to learn new things and the more knowledge gained the better equipped you are to help others:

*For me education like, it used to be about money, but now I think that we as human beings always need to be challenging ourselves and growing, like emotional and mentally, and always learning new things.... (Timote)*

### **Educational achievement as the ability to give back to one's *kainga* and community**

All of the participants believed that educational achievement is something that is so much more than graduating and receiving your qualification. It is not denied that there is a sense of satisfaction in reaching that goal and "having the knowledge or the confidence that you can do it...", as Tepola stated. However, the long term goal for these participants is using that knowledge and experience not only to impact their own lives but also the lives of their loved ones and the wider community. For Timote, the more knowledge gained the better equipped you are to help other people:

*...plus I think the more you know as well, like the more you can help other people, that's probably one of the ways that I see education as being important to me...*

One graduate with children saw educational achievement as growing in your spiritual journey and being content with your life:

*...Yeah, success in education is not just getting a degree, a good job, it's more than that, you know you got to not only reach your goal, you have got to be happy within you, your spiritual life has got to grow as well, and there should be a balance in whatever you do... (Lepeka)*

Moreover, success for this mother was about passing on that sense of achievement to her children, and for them to pass on those aspirations to their own children. "... It's like you've got to run the ball and pass it onto your kids and hopefully when they have their own kids in the future they will do the same thing..."

### **God as the source of educational achievement**

Four of the interview participants attributed their success to their faith in God. There was a conviction from these participants that God is the source of all things and when he is not part of the equation of life, educational achievement is futile. This is illustrated by the following quotes:

*...I'm happy that it's done [graduated], and it's opened doors...I think if I didn't have that faith it wouldn't of happened. So yeah if I look back it was really hard, but well worth it, and the experiences I went through...(Pita)*

*Educational achievement ...is having that sense of maturity, wisdom and the ability to meet your cultural obligations to your people, acknowledging that God is supreme...and that at the end of this life...the only thing that stands out is God, and know that, otherwise all that education is nothing.(Mele)*

*It means a lot... it's everybody's dream...to one day walk across that stage, and that would be a beginning for whatever God has called you to do...because it*

*would show the world...what God can do, and it be such a great feeling to have come to the beginning, not the end, to the beginning of a journey...(Tepola)*

### **Theme three: Spirituality and educational achievement**

In this third and final section, the aims of the questions were to explore how the participants' concept, understanding, and experiences of spirituality impacted on their educational journey and ultimately their achievement at the end. Three questions were asked in this section:

- Is spirituality something that you consider important in your studies? Why or why not? And, how would you rate it compared to other contributing factors such as family, commitment, diligence for example?
- How do/did you incorporate your spirituality into your studies? or Can you share some examples of how spirituality may have impacted your studies in both a positive or negative sense?
- Do you think that your concept of spirituality has changed at University? Why or Why not? If it has changed, how has it changed?

All of the participants said that spirituality was a very important part of their academic journey and rated it just as equally important as family as a contributing factor to academic achievement. One participant summed it up aptly by saying "Spirituality teaches us to do the best and be the best..."

After studying the data from this section on the impact of spirituality on their academic journey, the following sub-themes emerged:

- Spirituality as a source of hope for the academic journey
- Spirituality as a source of wisdom for the academic journey

- Spirituality as a source of courage for the academic journey
- Spiritual support provided by the Pacific community on campus
- The role of the church community
- University experience strengthens spirituality

Participants shared that it was primarily through spiritual acts of prayer, reading the Christian Bible, claiming Bible promises, reading inspirational writings and church attendance that they were able to have hope, courage, and wisdom in their educational journey.

### **Spirituality as a source of hope for the academic journey**

The first sub-theme that was evident from the findings under this theme described spirituality as a source of hope. Hope in this sense has to do with trusting in one's relationship with God and who he is, having confidence in his enabling power, and having peace of mind that the creator of all things is above all the challenges encountered in one's academic journey. This is strongly portrayed in the following quotes:

*...The papers I took last year I just had no idea what the lecturer was talking about, I struggled...and I found that praying and reading God's word and just doing my part, that helped me and I ended up enjoying the paper...my relationship with God gives me hope and I know that I am going to be ok, and that is a positive thing that comes out of it, it encourages me, it reinforces me and it reminds me...(Tepola)*

*...Gods humility and his peace keeps me humble and keeps me happy and at peace and the [hurtful] comments [about Christian faith] doesn't hurt me or annoy me as much as it should.(Pita)*

*...Just trusting in who my God is and what he has already accomplished for me, it makes me want to work hard, it makes me, it motivates me, it's what helps me to keep going when I just want to give up, when assignments are coming left and right...(Tepola)*

*...I think with God things seem easier, burdens seem a bit better, they just seem so much lighter and then so when I was studying and no matter how stressed out I could be, if I prayed, even though praying doesn't give you the answers to your exams or something, you just feel better, you know you just feel better for it, because you kind of think there is this person, this is a person that has created all of us, that has created this whole world and he is the person that is going to help me, so you just have that reassurance...(Ma'ata)*

*When I face difficulties in my studies, I pray and fast to ask God to help me...I also had some marital problems...but I always pray...there is hope in God...I think it's to do with prayer...faith and then also hard work...(Elisapeti)*

### **Spirituality as source of wisdom for the academic journey**

In the second theme, research participants related spirituality as a source of wisdom. Wisdom in this context refers to knowledge and understanding that only God can provide, as Mosese puts it: "...Wisdom only comes from God..." Wisdom also refers to knowledge of who you are and your values and beliefs, and about making the right choices. The following quotes are illustrative of this theme.

*...Being a Christian...I think that spirituality is really important in my studies because I'm not...really smart...but I think praying for God to help me and especially to give me wisdom and knowledge, it really helps me a lot too...(Elisapeti)*



*...It's [Spirituality] very important...I always feel that whatever I do with my study how I perform and the kind of work that I do for my supervisor, how I relate to other students, it paints a picture of my own relationship with God ...God creates everybody the same and whatever he gives us we have to make use of it and whatever we are doing to glorify him...my relationships and my responsibilities, how I behave and how I think, even what I say ...I also do a lot of Bible study, listen and watch inspirational Bible teachings...when I can't explain things anymore because English is a second language, sometimes I can't find the right word or the right line of thinking, ...to try and analyse what people say and that is when I really have to kneel down and ask God for His help...He is like a sounding board, He is my guide, He is my everything...(Mele)*

*I think it's important, like your values come under your spirituality too, and what you believe in...if you don't have spirituality then you don't know who you are...you don't know where you came from or what's your purpose on earth...(Lesieli)*

*...I was distracted by a lot of things, friends and socializing and drinking and partying and all that, so I got caught up with that and kind of lost focus on study...but when it came to that point of pursuing my spirituality...I came to that understanding of who God is...one verse that really stood out for me was "Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added to you". I came to the understanding that God wants us to be successful and to lead a prosperous life...(Lute)*

*...Church is an integral part of our makeup and its very important that if you are going to study at University that you keep that spiritual faith up, because...you will find at University it is very cut-throat and...if something*

*happens you can always fall back to the spiritual of you know, praying to God for his grace and his wisdom...(Pita)*

### **Spirituality as a source of courage for the academic journey**

In the third sub-theme, the research participants spoke passionately how through prayer and claiming the Christian Bible promises was an important source of courage. Courage as described by the respondents includes, possessing inner strength, motivation to persevere and not to give up, and having a “can do” attitude.

The participants with children also shared the challenges of having to juggle many personal responsibilities. These daily challenges wore them down through tiredness and fatigue. The added task of having to complete assignments becomes so overwhelming that God becomes their source of inner strength. Consequently it draws them to their knees to solicit help, strength and perseverance.

One of the focus group participants was a private international student (ie., personally funded and not on government scholarship) from the Islands. He shared how in the midst of facing challenging circumstances in having to work (to help pay for exorbitant international fees) as well as studying full-time, he found strength, courage, patience, and endurance, from claiming God’s promises in the Bible. As he said:

*I remember Philippians 4: 13 was one of the verses that encouraged me “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me”, and even as there were a lot of pressure, like academic pressure, financial pressure and also immigration pressure... (Paula)*

One of the focus group participants was an international student on NZAID scholarship. She shared her struggles in having to leave a very sick child at home, and it was her faith in God that has given her the inner strength to persevere with her post-graduate studies. Some of the ways that she kept her courage and determination strong included prayer, Bible study with a spiritual mentor on campus, and claiming Christian Bible promises.

The following quotes from Tepola re-enforces this theme:

*...Spirituality is very important for me being away from my family, I feel that I'm not really alone, so I would rate it just as important as family...when family relations are not going well then I am not, my wellbeing is not complete...and if I'm not being fed spiritually that affects my ability to study, just like how my family relationships breakdown, I can't really concentrate and focus on my work and I get discouraged, my spirituality plays a big part, if I'm not connected to God, to Jesus, if I feel that I'm not connected there then I don't have the strength to do all that is required of me in my degree...*

*...Another practical thing, I learn [Bible] memory verses with my children and I find that it has helped to stimulate my mind that I can remember things better because I have to learn all these Bible verses...because it's important for my daily strengthening of my spirituality to remember scriptures...I know without a doubt that nothing is impossible with God and that gives me the self confidence to just go out there and do it, I can do it, I can pass these papers.*

Courage is also portrayed as having the character trait of humility - humility to learn from other people. This is described by Tepola in the following words:

*[Spirituality]... also keeps me humble, it keeps me humble enough to learn, to be open to learning from lecturers, from classmates, from anyone really...it helps me to focus...it gives me perseverance and it gives me courage and confidence to just keep going and knowing that as long as I do my part, do the work I need to do, I will be ok, so its like a rock for me.*

### **Pastoral support provided by Pacific community on campus**

The participants shared how the Pasifika community on campus was an important support network that supported and encouraged them to stay on track with their studies and to achieve. This is stated by Pita, "... The Pasifika faculty...helped me to pass my education..." Pasifika staff, Christian staff and mentors and the Pacific Christian fellowship on campus were gratefully acknowledged for their contribution to their overall development and wellbeing. Mosese from the second focus group paid tribute by saying that "they [Pasifika networks] have now become part of our story..."

### **The role of the church community**

All of the participants have openly shared the importance of the wider church community in providing a spiritual family environment for their growth. Attending church is one of the ways that these students express their spirituality. One young participant who is living away from home to attend university shared how her home church played a key role in her spiritual development. This was in relation to providing biblical teachings for youths on dealing with sexual and relationship issues. She spoke of how being away from home has made her appreciate even more these spiritual instructions and these principles have given her wisdom to make the right choices at university.

## **University experience strengthens spirituality**

With the exception of Pita, all of the participants spoke of how the challenging experiences at university have strengthened their spirituality or faith. One international student spoke of how her personal struggles and the challenges of university life have really strengthened her faith. "...Before I used to depend on people, like put my faith in people, but now it seems no... I should just trust God alone, because they [people] can fail me but God no" ('Elisapeti). This same theme was strongly reflected in the following quotes:

*It [Spirituality] has changed a lot...because I have had more struggles...and it's made it more of a relationship rather than just a sense of principles to live by, going through all these struggles and not just with my studies but in my personal life has brought me to where I am today...now it is more of a relationship, of a dependency...on who God is...(Tepola)*

*...the only person I could hold on to was God, so I think leaving that behind [very sick daughter in the Islands] and coming over here, with the experience that I was going through actually made me stronger, that whole experience strengthened my faith. ('Eseta)*

*Yes for sure...it [faith] changed for the better...I started with a little faith...but through the positive influence of other Christian people, it grew stronger...(Lepeka)*

Pita, spoke of how his concept of God remained the same at University:

*My concept of God never changed, he is still a loving and forgiving God that I know when I first started my studies, and the God that loves me no matter what I do during the day or whatever I say during the day he still loves me.*

It is worth noting that even though the question asked related to their concept of spirituality and whether it changed at university, their responses referred to their spiritual experiences rather than their conceptual thinking. This suggests that spirituality for these participants is part of their everyday experiences; it is part of their personal identity, their values and beliefs.

### **Divergent issues from focus groups discussions**

There were two divergent issues that emerged from one of the focus groups discussions which are worth noting. The first one is the growing tension of culture and spirituality for many Pacific youths in New Zealand. The issue was raised around the context of how there is a growing trend of NZ born Pacific young people not attending the more traditional churches of their parents' generation but are attending more charismatic churches. One of the participants was a graduate with teenage children and the general consensus from the group was that the parents ought to give their adolescent children the freedom to choose which church they attend. This suggestion was made on the qualification, that the main issue is whether the gospel of Jesus is still the central philosophy within both the traditional and charismatic churches. A related issue that came up also is perhaps the more traditional churches of our parents' generation needs to review their approach in capturing the young generation.

The second issue of interest related to the negative perceptions and attitudes towards some educated people upon their return to the Islands, particularly with the church environment. This negativity is related to the practice of some people returning and asking questions (through the kava party context) about some of the practices of the church. There was no resolution reached apart from acknowledging that this issue is also linked to our Pacific culture where

we were taught from a very young age to obey and never to question authority (which includes our parents).

## **Conclusion**

All of the participants believed that their spirituality or faith is very important in their whole life journey as well as their educational pursuits. The overarching theme that has emerged from the findings of this research is the importance of relationships - relationship with God and relationship with *kainga* and other people. For these Pacific university students and graduates, spirituality was not just a concept; it is something to be lived out and demonstrated by how you live; your attitudes; and how you relate to other people. How you live shows your values and beliefs. As one participant, Paula said: "Spirituality to me is all about everything that you do during the day..." There is no separation of the spiritual from working diligently to achieve your goals in education. One's faith or spirituality is reflected in your achievements and your ability to give back to one's *kainga* and the wider community. What stands out about the spirituality of these participants was how in the midst of both personal and academic struggles, it was their spirituality that sustained them and gave them the courage, wisdom and hope not to give up.

Spirituality is Christianity or faith in God for the participants. The findings reinforce the inter-twining of faith and culture for Pacific peoples. It also reiterates the strong inter-connectedness of culture and education. The participants belief in spirituality as a personal relationship with God meant that this relationship was strengthened not only through prayer; reading, studying, meditating on the Bible; claiming Bible promises; reading Christian inspirational literature but also through the personal and academic bumps and hurdles of the journey.

Some participants highlighted how motivations to succeed changed overtime and through the course of their education. Where initially it was about getting a well paid job or having a sense of obligation to your parents, but over the course of study, the knowledge and experiences gained has changed it to be more a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction.

The next chapter will provide an in-depth analysis and discussion of the stories of the participants in regards to the relationship between spirituality and educational achievement.



## CHAPTER 6: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

### Introduction

This study explored the relationship between spirituality and educational achievement amongst Pacific university students. As stated in chapter four, the primary objective of this qualitative study is to identify the mechanisms by which *lotu* might contribute to the academic achievement of Pacific university students.

The findings showed that Pacific University students experience a positive relationship between spirituality and educational achievement. This chapter is divided into four main themes with analysis and discussions of the themes and sub-themes that emerged from this exploration. In addition, a discussion on the implications of the findings for social policy development is presented. The themes are as follows:

Theme one – Spirituality

Theme two – Spirituality and educational achievement

Theme three – *Lotu* and the Pacific cultures

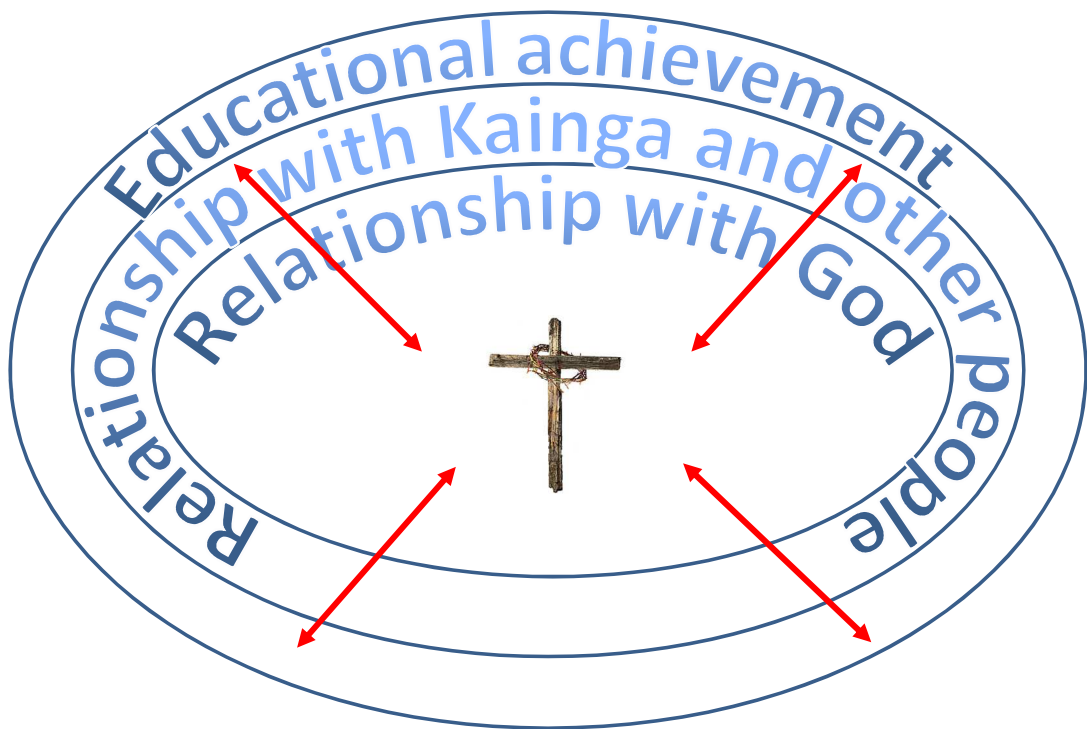
Theme four – *Lotu* and *Ako* and Pacific cultures

This theme structure is adopted for consistency with the data and cohesiveness with the research objective. Spirituality is the over-arching theme and the primary aim is to explore how spirituality influences educational achievement, hence theme two, 'spirituality and educational achievement'. Theme three is the inter-twining of *lotu* and the Pacific cultures. Theme four will be discussing the relationship between the dimensions of *lotu*, *ako* and Pacific cultures.

It needs to be stated at the outset that these themes do not stand alone. They are all interrelated and work together to produce a positive relationship between spirituality and educational success for Pacific university students.

The following illustration provides a summation of the whole analysis chapter highlighting what spirituality means for the participants. Their love for God as expressed in the relationship is the anchor. Their love for their *kainga* and for other people is the fruit expressed in their relationships with them. Similarly, flowing from their relationship with God and with their *kainga* is a positive effect on their educational achievement. The model is also interactive in the sense that one's educational achievement and relationships with *kainga* and other people can also flow back to strengthen one's relationship with God.

**Illustration one**



## **Theme one: Spirituality**

The participants' understanding and experience of spirituality is discussed in theme one. Consequently, the sub-themes that emerged are:

- Spirituality as a personal relationship with God
- Ways of staying strong spiritually
- Spirituality as a whole of life experience

### **Spirituality as a personal relationship with God**

All of the participants spoke of the significance of spirituality in their lives. The majority of the participants understood and experienced spirituality as a personal relationship with God. Spirituality is not a concept or an abstract idea for the participants. It is about God and about faith in God and developing the relationship with him. It is a relationship that is real and active. This relationship is with God through Jesus Christ. At the very heart of this relationship is *'ofa* or love. Christ died and rose again based purely on His love for mankind. In response, the reciprocal love expressed by the participants in the form of a committed relationship is based upon a grateful heart.

This is consistent with Pacific peoples' belief in Christianity and in line with the definition of spirituality within the context of this study. It is a definition where a relationship with God through Jesus Christ is central. Consequently, God, through His Holy Spirit empowers us to live a life that is both meaningful and purposeful. The rippling effect of this relationship is displayed in our relationships with our *kainga* and with other people. Moreover, spirituality in the form of a relationship with God has a positive flow on effect to educational achievement. This is clearly illustrated in illustration one.

This understanding and experience of spirituality is also consistent with literature where Inrig (2001) and Tiatia (1998) amongst others define spirituality as a personal relationship with God as the higher power. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this is true for many Pacific peoples. When you ask a Pacific person about spirituality, generally, they will immediately talk about their faith in God.

This sub-theme suggests that there is a sense of purpose and meaning not only in one's academic journey but also the whole of life. In Herndon's (2003) empirical study, university students referred to how their spirituality is an embedded structure of their inner core and the absence of it leads to a directionless life. Moreover, a person's relationship with God provides a firm foundation of one's identity, beliefs and values. The outworking of this relationship is assurance of his guidance, wisdom, hope and courage in whatever situations we face during our academic journey.

I fully endorse this sub-theme and the findings of Herndon and others where spirituality means a relationship with God through his son Jesus Christ. I made this personal commitment to Jesus when I was 25 years old. Like many Pacific peoples, I grew up in a Christian family. I knew and I was taught that there is a God. I went to Sunday school and attended church. It was very much a mind or a conceptual relationship. My life was transformed when I made the decision to have a heart relationship with God. I dedicated my life to him. He is my Lord and Saviour. This was one of the most important milestones in my life journey. I acknowledge that I am still a work in progress but that firm foundation of having Jesus in my life and developing that key relationship gives meaning and purpose in my life.

## **Ways of staying strong spiritually**

A sub-theme that was conveyed strongly by the majority of the participants in relation to their experience of spirituality as a relationship with God was how they developed that relationship. A relationship with God is only the beginning of the spiritual journey for the participants. They acknowledged that they needed to grow spiritually. Moreover, that their spiritual growth is dependent on the Holy Spirit, who provides the power to follow Christ, in every aspect of their behaviour (Scott, 2008). Like any type of relationship it needs dedication, commitment, love, intimacy, and trust in order for it to grow and be appreciated as something that is of value (Herndon, 2003). Many of the participants spoke of how they kept their faith strong through prayer; reading and meditating on the Bible; claiming the promises of God's word; attending church; and listening to gospel music.

There were a number of references to the Bible and two participants quoted Bible verses that have encouraged them in their study journey. Lute cited: "But seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6: 33, NIV). There is a strong sense of conviction conveyed by this student that in putting God first in her life, everything else (including the academic journey) will fall into place. Putting God first in one's life means involving or partnering with God in all aspects of our life. Paula quoted Philippians 4: 13 "I can do everything through him (referring to Christ Jesus) who gives me strength" (NIV). This university graduate expresses a great sense of empowerment to do anything for he knows that his relationship with God gives him that inner strength to do anything that he puts his mind to.

The practice of memorizing and claiming Scripture is how many Christians remain strong in their spiritual walk. Bob and Debby Gass said: "Nothing pays greater spiritual dividends than memorizing scripture" (2011, p. 36). Many Christian writers agree that some of the benefits of memorizing scripture includes, making your mind more alert; having a more positive outlook on life; enhancing your confidence; and strengthening your prayer life. These benefits all have a positive spin-off on the academic journey of university students.

Byfield (2008) and Herndon (2003) showed in their research study the impact of "abiding acts of spirituality" (Herndon, 2003, p. 79) such as prayer, church attendance, reading Christian scriptures or inspirational literature, upon the lives of university students. These acts of spirituality served as coping mechanisms against "the stresses and strains of life and caused them to excel in the face of academic and social adversities" (Herndon, p. 79). Perry (2000) agrees and expresses that having a relationship with God provides a new dimension to one's "own repertoire of coping resources" (Perry, p. 99). Through these spiritual acts, these students were able to draw strength and courage to persevere with their studies in the midst of adversity. Prayer also provided a strong sense of peace and was a shield against anxiety, depression and risky behaviours. This study coupled with Byfield's and Herndon's research findings suggests that through these spiritual acts, the participant's relationship with God is strengthened and as a result they are empowered to study more effectively.

On a personal note, in my own experience, I too acknowledge the significance of my relationship with God and the need to stay committed to that relationship through prayer; through reading, studying and meditating on God's Word; and being in fellowship with my church family on a regular basis.

I have found that there is a reciprocal positive relationship between staying committed to my relationship with God and my academic studies. The wonderful outcome of this commitment includes growth in peace, strength and wisdom. I find that it is not only beneficial for my study journey but my whole life journey.

It is evident from this research study, the literature and my experiences that spirituality has a positive influence in the lives of university students. Their relationship with God which is developed overtime through prayer, and claiming God's promises gives them peace and strength, stabilizing them through the inevitable adversities of the journey. The positive result of building this relationship through these spiritual acts is character development which ultimately bears the fruits of love, peace, joy, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5: 22, NIV). The evidence shows that these spiritual fruits will have a positive correlation to educational success.

Moreover, this commitment to God provides wisdom and understanding when the assignments are too difficult. Their spirituality helps to keep their minds sharp and focused. As one participant, Tepola stated, she saw a connection between memorizing Bible verses and the development of memory retention skills.

### **Spirituality as a whole of life experience**

The earlier sub-theme of spirituality as a relationship with God is closely linked to this theme of spirituality as a wholeness concept. The notions of wholeness, holism, wellbeing and completeness were expressed by the participants. As depicted in illustration one, many of the participants spoke of spirituality as a whole of life experience and the essence of that is expressed in one's

relationships - your relationship to God, to your *kainga* and to other people. There was a strong belief that your spirituality is expressed in your sense of connectedness to God and to other people.

Spirituality as a wholeness concept is consistent with the Pacific cultural models that have emerged in the last decade especially in the area of health and wellbeing. In the Fonofale model (Drummond & Va'ai-Wells, 2004), it represents Pacific notions of wellbeing which are centred on the belief that we are "whole beings" comprising of spiritual, physical and mental capacities (Finau, Tamasese et al., 2005). The key point of this model is that all of these dimensions are equally important and are inter-dependent. If one aspect is problematic then the rest are also negatively impacted. Similarly if the spiritual dimension is nurtured and developed then this will have a positive effect on the rest of the other capacities. What is suggested here is that wellbeing for Pacific peoples is about wholeness. The Pacific culture is founded on the belief that God created us as whole beings, with body, spirit and mind. In order for the Pacific person to be in good health and wellbeing, these dimensions must be kept in balance.

Moreover, this sub-theme is supported by the pastoral care model and educationalists such as Tisdell (2003) who defines spirituality as a Life-force which permeates through everything, through the whole of life. Frankel & Hewitt (1994) conducted an empirical study showing a positive relationship between spirituality and health and wellbeing. There is a causal effect of greater faith to wellbeing and it is found among men and women of all ages and Christian denominations. Frankel & Hewitt's (1994) finding does suggest a positive relationship between spirituality and educational achievement.



The other dimension of this sub-theme that emerged from the findings was spirituality as a lifestyle, as a way of life. Some of the participants saw no distinction between spirituality and religion. They were “both ways of life” and are intertwined. The “ways of life” that were expressed by some of the participants was embodied in a person’s relationships - relationship to God and to other people. It is an active relationship rather than a passive one. This argument is supported by Spinoza’s active and reactive theory. How you behave or your actions are governed by your beliefs and values. Additionally spirituality for the participants gave them that sense of identity, of who they are and their values and beliefs.

This sub-theme is consistent with the concept of spirituality, as defined within the context of this research. It is a definition which is grounded in a relationship with God and establishes the platform which gives us our identity, our worldviews, and gives depth of meaning and purpose in our everyday lives. Moreover, this eternal relationship is reflected in one’s life, thought patterns, conversations, and in the way that one relates to other people.

## **Theme two: Spirituality and Educational Achievement**

All of the participants believed that spirituality is an important part of their educational journey. Theme two discusses the positive influence of spirituality upon the educational journey of the participants. It is noted that none of the participants spoke of any negative influences of their spiritual beliefs, even though the question was raised. The sub-themes that emerged are:

- God as a source and a motivation for educational success
- Spirituality as a source of hope for the academic journey
- Spirituality as a source of wisdom for the academic journey

- Spirituality as a source of courage for the academic journey

### **God as a source and a motivation for educational success**

Psalm 35 verse 27 states that “The Lord...has pleasure in [our] prosperity” (NKJV). Some of the participants were very much aware of this truth and were motivated to succeed academically as this is part of God’s plan and purpose for their lives. These Pacific peoples see their relationship with God as an important part of every aspect of their life journey, including their academic pursuits. There is clearly a sense of being driven to do well in one’s academic pursuits out of a deep gratitude to God who is the source of all wisdom and knowledge. Pita attributed his educational success to his faith in God. Mele believes that there is a positive relationship between acknowledging the sovereignty of God and educational achievement.

Furthermore, there is a strong desire to achieve in education in order to fulfil God’s perfect plan and purpose for one’s life. Tepola spoke of how educational achievement is the beginning and not the end of a journey. That it is an exciting beginning of God’s plan and purpose for her life journey. These convictions acknowledge the supremacy of God in this student’s life. That God has a perfect plan and purpose for every person, a plan for prosperity and not for harm (Jeremiah 29: 11). There is a strong sense that success is not just limited to educational achievement. True success is also about knowing and fulfilling God’s plan and purpose for one’s life. There is also the motivation that God desires for us to succeed and to prosper as it not only equips us but places us in a position to have a positive influence on the lives of other people.

Another aspect of this sub-theme that came out of the findings was a desire to achieve excellence for the glory of God. What is evident from this research study is that the participants’ spirituality or their relationship with God gives

them a desire to pursue excellence as this act characterises the excellence of Jesus. That educational success is a form of excellence that gives glory to God. This is true in the lives of so many Pacific graduates. When one has the privilege of attending a Pacific graduation ceremony one finds that many (if not all) give glory to God first and foremost for their achievement.

### **Spirituality as a source of hope for the academic journey**

The participants spoke of their spirituality providing them with hope in the midst of the struggles of the academic journey. With these Pacific peoples their faith or their relationship with God provided them with a deep sense of confidence that they can overcome the temporary hurdles and press on to achieve their academic aspirations.

Within the Christian literature, much is written about hope. The primary source of this hope is in God as shared by many of the participants. From a Christian perspective, hope draws its power from a deep trust, and confidence of who God is. The all-loving, all-powerful and all-knowing Creator God. The respondents had a strong sense of the hope of Christians that comes from the promises of God and rooted in the work of Christ. The beautiful exhortation from Saint Paul comes to mind: “Love always...trusts, always hopes, always perseveres” (1 Corinthians 13: 7 NIV). Thaman (2006), Mafile’o (2004), and Norsworthy (2008), wrote about the Tongan value of *’ofa* or love and compassion. The origin of *’ofa* is from the Bible. The hope that these Pacific peoples in this study have expressed is closely connected to their *’ofa* or love for their *kainga* or families. It is out of their love for their *kainga* that they are motivated not only to achieve their educational goals but also to give back to their family.

This deep sense of hope in their relationship with God in achieving their academic goals was also expressed by the students in Byfield's (2008) and Herndon's (2003) research study. Students shared of how their relationship with God gave them a sense of direction and purpose. Hope gave them a "can do" attitude. It gave them belief in their God given potential. The gift of hope, made them view obstacles, whether large or small, as opportunities for growth.

The sentiments of these University students and the participants of this thesis project, resonates with my own experience as a mature student doing post-graduate study with a family of three teen-agers and working part-time. Sometimes when the demands of the family, and the study becomes so overwhelming, it is really my faith that sustains me and gives me hope that everything will be fine. It is my relationship with God that encourages me to persevere in the knowledge that this situation is only temporary and that God is still in control.

### **Spirituality as a source of *poto* or wisdom for the academic journey**

The sub-theme of spirituality as a source of wisdom in the participant's quest to achieve their academic aspirations also emerged from the focus groups and the interviews. There is a strong sense that the wisdom that only comes from God provides knowledge and understanding of different types of learning and literature. The gift of wisdom allowed the participants to overcome obstacles that may prevent you from attaining your academic goals. Spiritual wisdom gives you moral values to differentiate between right and wrong. Wisdom also develops depth of character and enables you to know who you are, your social responsibilities and making wise choices. Being wise also is likened to a person who has a 'teachable spirit', a willingness to learn from anyone irrespective of

age, gender or level of experience. Wisdom is commonly associated with someone who is religious or spiritual and a person who is wise is teachable

The Tongan concept of *poto* or wisdom is consistent with this finding. As Thaman (1998) said, *poto* “not only implies achievement in formal education but also the ability to know who you are...in relation to other people, of knowing what to do, and doing it well” (p. 12). The definition of spiritual intelligence is also consistent with this sub-theme as it is about having the wisdom to guide our whole being and behaviour in a wider, richer, and more meaningful context. Spiritual intelligence is closely akin to the concept of *poto* or wisdom in the sense that they are characterized by being inspired by vision and values and having the capacity to endure suffering and diversity (Zohar & Marshall, 2000, cited in Vialle, 2005).

Another key characteristic of possessing wisdom or *poto* or spiritual intelligence is the ability to make the right choices. A person’s course of action is almost always driven by their inner values and beliefs. In Byfield’s (2008) study, students spoke of how their faith gave them the wisdom to restrain from risky behaviours that are generally regarded as detrimental to academic achievement. I can strongly identify with this as I know that I need God’s wisdom everyday to guide me to make wise decisions. Christian students know that true wisdom comes from God who gives it freely and without reproach.

Berman (2007) further advocates for the source and power of spiritual wisdom which is synonymous with the definition of spirituality within the context of this study:

Christian wisdom...seeks God's guidance, the guidance of the Holy Spirit, in order to discover the relationship between what we know and what God intends for us. God is the Lord of our minds as much as he is the Lord of our "hearts." Nothing is discovered without his help. I believe that if we open our minds to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and pray for his guidance in intellectual matters, we shall discover new truth which will astound those who believe that God's existence is irrelevant to scholarship. (p. 293)

I can certainly identify with the participants with this gift of spiritual wisdom. In the journey of completing this thesis, there were often times I struggled with not only critically analysing the literature but also the actual writing process. These are the situations where I need to be on my knees and seek God's wisdom and guidance. I have had to claim Gods faithful promises in Daniel 1: 17 and Jeremiah 33: 3 (NIV) which respectively states:

"...God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning."

"Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know."

I can confidently say that God is faithful and is true to His Word and has given me wisdom to understand the literature and to be able to express this knowledge and understanding in a way that is meaningful.

### **Spirituality as a source of courage for the academic journey**

This sub-theme emerged from the study where some of the participants maintained that their spirituality was a source of courage. Through spiritual

acts of prayer, meditating on the Scriptures, and claiming Bible promises in his Word these students and graduates were able to solicit inner strength to keep on keeping on with their studies. Their spirituality gave them the inner strength and courage to press on with their studies even in the most stressful and traumatic circumstances. 'Eseta shared how it was mainly through her faith that gave her the strength and courage to continue with her studies despite leaving behind a terminally ill child back in her homeland. It is scriptural promises like James 1: 3-4 which students like 'Eseta stand on to keep them going to the end of their studies despite adverse situations. "...When your faith is tested your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it...for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be strong in character and ready for anything..." (NLT).

Courage was also portrayed as humility by some of the participants. There was a sense that their relationship with God gave them the courage to stay humble and be open to learn from other people. This character trait is closely akin to having a 'teachable spirit' as referred to in the 'spirituality as a source of *poto* or wisdom for the academic journey'.

One student spoke of how her spiritual values gave her a strong foundation to resist peer pressure to risky behaviours such as drunkenness and sexual immorality. This theme is compatible with other research exploring the impact of spirituality on educational outcomes. In Herndon's (2003) and Byfield's (2008) studies, students spoke of how spirituality enhances their desire to persist to achieve even in the midst of academic and social trials.

What is evident from these empirical studies as well as other studies conducted on the interface between faith and education is how the students' Christian

faith has provided them with a firm foundation to shield them from behaviours that are counter-productive to academic success. Their faith has the power to transform their lives and gives them depth of character to be strong and courageous in the midst of negative pressure from their peers.

In my own study experience I have found courage and strength of character to persevere through Bible encouragements such as “Be strong and courageous...for the Lord your God goes with you, he will never leave you nor forsake you” (Deuteronomy 31: 6, NIV). During the course of my master’s thesis, I went through a dark experience. I was diagnosed with chronic fatigue syndrome which quickly spiralled to depression. As a result, the thesis was suspended for one year. I honestly believe that my faith in God, and the prayers of my *kainga* and my church family were the main contributors to my prompt healing. In returning to the thesis after one year I felt a greater sense of peace, passion, focus and purpose to complete the thesis.

This sub-theme strongly suggests that there is a positive impact of spirituality on the educational success of Pacific university students. The combined effect of God as a source of hope, courage and wisdom is a student that is well equipped to successfully complete their academic studies. Spirituality is an important part of Pacific university students’ academic journey especially in times of trials and tribulations. This point is reinforced in Herndon’s (2003) research study where students say that during the difficult times, their spirituality encourages them to persevere with their educational journey.

### **Theme three: *Lotu* and Pacific cultures**

The third theme discusses the relationship between spirituality and the Pacific culture. The sub-themes that emerged are:



- Spirituality as an integral part of Pacific culture
- Pastoral support provided by the Pacific community on campus
- The role of the church community

### **Spirituality as an integral part of Pacific cultures**

All of the participants agreed that spirituality is a “central philosophy” of the Pacific culture, that culture and spirituality are inter-twined. This finding is consistent with the literature which shows that since the introduction of Christianity by early missionaries, this faith tradition has become an integral part of Pacific people’s cultures (Kavaliku, 2007; Thomas & Postlethwaite, 1984). *Lotu* has become a shelter or refuge for life, as signified by the roof of the Fonofale model. The roof is symbolic of Pacific cultural values and beliefs. *Lotu* encompasses both the internal relationship with God as well as the external substitute for the village setting providing a place of spiritual, social, educational, and cultural development (Tiatia, 1998; Mulitalo-Lauta, 2001).

A different perspective was presented by one participant, Lute, which perhaps conveys a possible tension between Christianity and culture within the Pacific context. She said that: “...There is so much traditions in our [Pacific] culture and sometimes we get caught up in our traditions rather than acknowledging the higher power or acknowledging God...” Perhaps this sentiment reflects the sentiments of many Pacific young people. In my own personal experience, I sense a feeling of tiredness and weariness of tradition and ceremony permeating churches to the point where culture has overtaken the true meaning and purpose of Christianity. Tiatia (1998) reinforced this argument and wrote: “This...connection between culture and the church has been criticised by the youth, partly because the dominance of cultural influences is

perceived by them to conceal the calling of the church to cater for its members in spiritual affairs” (p. 7).

This sub-theme illustrates the significance of spirituality in the lives of Pacific peoples and strongly suggests that this dimension needs to be taken seriously when working with Pacific peoples. As Thaman and other Pacific educationalists have advocated, the formal education system in terms of both a teaching and learning perspective, needs to take into consideration this core value.

### **Pastoral support provided by the Pacific community on campus**

As some of the participants’ shared, the role of the Pacific community on campus is invaluable to the ongoing spiritual and academic development of Pacific students on campus. Pacific groups such as Pasifika staff, Student mentors, and the Pacific Christian fellowship fulfil an important role in their continuous support of Pasifika students in a culturally safe environment. There is growing satisfaction with the student services at Massey University which includes the support services for Pasifika students (Massey University, 2011). Studies have shown that students thrive in an environment where they are supported and encouraged in a culturally safe way (Butcher et al., 2002; Coxon et al., 2002; Halapua, 1997).

This sub-theme is supported by the pastoral care model that is increasingly being adopted by Universities. The research by Klineberg and Hull (1979), have shown the positive influence of the pastoral care approach on academic achievement. This is also consistent with the holistic approach or viewing the student as a whole person with physical, cultural and spiritual needs as

advocated by Pacific educationalists such as Thaman (1998) and Taufe'ulungaki (2000).

This sub-theme also suggests the importance of the mentoring approach to student success. The literature shows success stories of this model and is currently widely adopted within the educational sectors (Bozeman & Feeney, 2008; Fields, 1996). The success of this approach is due to its holistic approach in not only meeting the academic needs of the student but also the non-academic needs (Zepke, Leach, & Prebble, 2004). Furthermore, the success of this model is due to the relationship dimension. In working alongside a student on an ongoing basis and connecting at a personal level will more likely lead to better educational success for the student. I have experienced this first hand in my roles as a tertiary chaplain and a Pasifika learning adviser at Massey University. I have found in some cases a positive connection between regular spiritual support (in the form of prayer and Bible study) of students, and academic achievement.

An example of a successful holistic based approach is the *Te Rau Puawai* Maori Mental Health Workforce Development programme, at Massey University. This programme adopts a holistic framework and is distinctively based around Maori principles and practices. A mentoring practice model is followed with the integration of Maori values of caring, helping, respecting and nurturing relationships. This proactive model has proven to be effective and successful in increasing the pass rates of Maori students involved in the programme.

### **The role of the church community**

With respect to the research participants, the church community is an integral part of their spiritual development. Out of the thirteen participants, eleven are affiliated with Christian fellowships, whereas two of the respondents attend

the Mormon Church. Six of the thirteen participants attend multi-ethnic churches and seven are members of their own ethnic group church. These facts strongly suggest the significance of the role played by the church community in the lives of these Pacific university students and graduates.

This sub-theme is consistent with the New Zealand literature on Pacific peoples. In the 2006 census, it showed that over 90 percent of the Pacific population resident in New Zealand are affiliated with a Christian church community (Statistics NZ, 2006). The significance of *lotu* or the church community for Pacific peoples is also shown by the growing recognition of the New Zealand government in its attempts to work co-operatively with church leaders in the policy-decision making process (Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs, 2003; Ulugia-Veukiso, 2008).

The university students in Byfields and Herndon's research studies also spoke of the important role played by the church community. The students expressed the positive influence on their academic studies of the spiritual encouragements by their church family. There is a sense that the church community is an essential component of the students' educational journey. The church not only encourages them to stay at school but also to do well and to put God first. Additionally the church encourages them to make good choices and use their time wisely to keep them from being over-burdened and having a negative impact on their learning.

This sub-theme suggests the importance of the church community for the ongoing spiritual development of the students. The likelihood of achievement is higher when spiritual growth is encouraged and fostered. The majority of the participants were away from their home environment. Some were

international students, which means that they are away from their normal support networks. Therefore the church community plays a vital role in not only providing spiritual support but also being a family community for the students. This is particularly important for both international students and students from outside of the vicinity of the university.

The important role of the church community also suggests that spiritual growth and educational development is not just an individual endeavour. It is a collective responsibility of the student, the church community and the educational institution.

#### **Theme four: *Lotu* and *Ako* and Pacific cultures**

The final theme discusses *lotu*, Pacific culture and implications on educational achievement. The sub-themes that emerged and discussed are:

- ‘*Ofa* for the *kainga* as a key motivator for educational success
- Role modelling as a motivator
- Educational achievement as the ability to give back to your *kainga* and community

##### **‘*Ofa* for the *kainga* as a key motivator for educational success**

With all of the participants, their family was a key motivator for their aspirations to succeed with their education. Internalisation of satisfaction that comes with good education is common amongst Pacific peoples. Many Pacific families migrated from their Pacific homelands in the pursuit of the migrant dream. That is, to pursue better educational opportunities for their children. As, Mila-Schaff and Robinson (2010) have shown, many New Zealand born Pacific peoples are motivated by the migrant dream to do well in education. Pacific parents had made many sacrifices not only in leaving behind their loved

ones but also having to endure working long hours in low skilled and low paid tasks. There is a strong sense of duty and obligation in a loving and positive way not to allow these sacrifices to be in vain.

In the days when things appear dark and grim, it is this shining vision of Pacific parents that will motivate the Pacific student to fulfil this migrant dream. Pacific peoples have a beautiful ancestral legacy which will continue. The concepts of Pacific parents having a vision and making sacrifices for the future of their children are founded on Christian principles. The Christian tradition believes that visions come from God. Moreover, the sacrifices that my parents and other Pacific parents have made in leaving behind their loved ones and their comfort zones, is underpinned by the Christian value of *'ofa* or love (Mafale'o, 2004; Norsworthy, 2008). Mila Schaff beautifully expresses this sacrificial love and the migrant dream of many Pacific parents in the following poem:

We are the seeds of the migrant dream  
The daughters supposed to fill the promise  
We stand on the broken back of physical labour  
Knowing the new dawn has been raided

But we are the seeds of a much greater dream  
That goes back across oceans of memory  
A vision still held in the hands of humble men  
Buried in humble villages  
Who chant clear out paths  
With every lost breath (2011, PhD speech in Massey Pasifika graduation ceremony, Palmerston North)

An important aspect of this sub-theme relates to the Pacific cultural value of communalism or collectivity. As Mulitalo-Lauta (2001) noted, the notion of communalism is reflected in the traditional value of *kainga* or the extended family. Consequently, *ako* or education is always a collective and not an individual pursuit. Furthermore, the cultural value of *tauhivaha'a/feveitoka'I'aki* or nurturing good relationships underpins the traditional values of *kainga* and collectivism (Norsworthy, 2008). As Thaman stated: Maintaining good relationships is "a core value of indigenous education...and are central to personal as well as group identities and they provide the framework for appropriate behaviour" (2006, p. 3). The importance of *tauhivaha'a/feveitoka'I'aki* suggests that for Pacific students to engage more effectively within the learning environment, he/she needs to know that the teacher is interested in her/his values and is proactive in showing it.

### Illustrations two – Personal images



As depicted by these images, completing my first degree was the dream of my parents. It was the wish of my parents when I completed my BCA (Bachelor of Commerce and Administration) from Victoria University that we (my immediate family – mum, dad, two sisters and one brother) return to Tonga to celebrate my achievement with my *kainga*. Despite my initial hesitation, out of love (*'ofa*) and respect (*faka'apa'apa*) for my parents I chose to grant their wish (Mafile'o, 2004; Norsworthy, 2008; Thaman, 2003).

These pictures provide a snapshot of my celebration in Tonga, showing my *kainga* - some of my uncles, aunties and cousins celebrating the occasion. There was huge feasting and music and dancing. There were tapa cloths, fine mats and beautiful Pacific decor signifying the importance of the celebration.



Upon reflection, I am glad I said yes for the celebrations with my extended family, friends, relations and the village of Ha'ateiho was awesome beyond words. It is a joy that cannot really be explained. It was a real community celebration. The achievement was not mine alone. It was the success of my parent's dream, my *kainga* and my village community.

I include this personal vignette because this is typical of Pacific student experiences. What these images have not shown though are the formal religious procedures that always takes place in any Pacific occasion. My celebration started and ended with thanksgiving prayer to God by one of the local church ministers. It was accompanied with the singing of hymns. This religious celebration signifies the importance of God and *lotu* in the lives of Pacific peoples. It is an acknowledgement of God's glory and wisdom which has enabled me to successfully complete my education. Many Pacific peoples recognise that without God nothing much is achieved.

### **Role modeling as a motivator**

A related sub-theme is the notion of role modeling as a motivator for educational success. Some of the participants' spoke of how part of the reason they desire to succeed is to model the outcome of having a vision combined with hard work. This is their heart's desire for their siblings, their children and for the wider community. For many Pacific peoples, their desire to reciprocate this form of giving is underpinned by the cultural values of '*ofa* and *tauhivaha'a/feveitoka'I'aki* (Mafile'o, 2004; Norsworthy, 2008; Thaman, 2003). They are values which are founded on the Christian principles of love, service and giving.

### **Educational achievement as the ability to give back to your *kainga* and community**

*Kainga* or family not only motivates Pacific students to achieve but they are also driven by their deep desire to give back to their *kainga*. All of the participants spoke of educational achievement as something which is beyond completing a qualification. For these Pacific peoples, educational success means having the ability to give back, to contribute or to make a difference in the lives of your *kainga* and the community. There is a strong sense of contentment and fulfilment associated with the knowledge that the achievement will place you in a position to help and support your *kainga*. The support is not only in material aspects but also in the social, spiritual and emotional wellbeing of one's *kainga*. This sense of contentment and fulfilment is underpinned and reinforced by maintaining good relationships (*feveitoka'i'aki/tauhivaha'a*) with God and with one's *kainga*.

One of the Pacific values underpinning this sub-theme is reciprocity or mutual helpfulness (*fetokoni'aki*) (Norsworthy, 2008; Thaman, 2003). Reciprocity within the educational context is the act of giving back to one's *kainga* is a reciprocal gift of love for the *kainga's* support and encouragement during the student's study journey. This cultural value is clearly highlighted in Thaman's *kakala* framework outlined in chapter three. This conceptual framework signifies the student trying to gain skills and knowledge with the primary goal of gifting that knowledge back to the *kainga*. This value of reciprocity is an important aspect of the Pacific cultural value of *tauhivaha'a/feveitoka'I'aki* or maintaining good relationships. Reciprocity is also closely connected to the cultural value of *'ofa* or love.

A central theme within the value of *kainga* is the notion that you are part of the community and everything that you do is for the benefit of the *kainga*.

Pacific educationalists such as Thaman (1988) and Taufe'ulungaki (2002), have written widely on this embedded cultural value. All accomplishments, including success at university are always viewed as a collective accomplishment and never an individual one. This theme is also closely connected to the concept of *poto* or wisdom. The person who is *poto* or wise, is someone who, not only has achieved academically, but also has the capacity, to contribute to the wellbeing of their *kainga*, and the wider community (Thaman, 1998).

This sub-theme is connected to spirituality in the sense that an important characteristic of Christian spirituality is seeking the common good or looking to the interests of others. As Saint Paul said: "...In humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Philippians 2: 3b-4, NIV). The act of helping or serving others is a spiritual gift and the desire of Pacific students to give back to their *kainga* and the wider community is a spiritual act which gives them a deep sense of fulfilment.

The following quote sums up, what educational achievement means to many Pacific University students and graduates:

We are rarely here to learn for learning's sake. We are here to realise the dreams that have been laid down before us, to use our knowledge and our skills and to advance our families, to advance our communities, to advance our people, whom we don't just carry with us, but who push us all the way. (Mila-Schaaf, PhD graduation speech at Massey University, Palmerston North, 2011)

## **Implications of findings for social policy development in the area of tertiary education for Pacific peoples**

The findings of this study emphasises the centrality of *lotu* or spirituality within Pacific cultures. Additionally, the findings suggest a positive correlation between spirituality and educational achievement for Pacific university students. The question then that arises is: What are the implications of these findings for the social policy field, particularly for the development of Pacific peoples in the area of tertiary education? As stated in chapter three, the over-arching political framework that has prevailed in New Zealand since the 1990s is the neo-liberal philosophy (Cheyne et al., 2004; Esping-Andersen, 1990 & 1996; Shaw & Echbaum, 2005).

The current tertiary educational policies for Pacific peoples are underpinned by this centre right, neo-liberal framework. This theoretical approach is dominated by the logic of the market. Castles & Pierson (1996) describe this regime as “liberal, market-oriented and comparatively ungenerous” (p. 234).

One cannot dispute that the aims of the tertiary educational framework for Pacific peoples are good and use the right words of needing to enhance the capacity and capability of Pacific peoples, recognising the need to connect better with the Pacific communities (Ministry of Education, 2011). However, the key question still remains: Why is there still the lack of academic success for Pacific peoples despite these developments?

Based on my own personal and professional experience of working within the university environment for almost a decade, I believe there is a growing tension between universities and government policies aimed at enhancing Pacific peoples’ educational development. This tension relates to the

increasingly challenging policy and economic environment that the tertiary sector is operating under. Universities are now operating in a fast changing and uncertain environment of financial and resource cuts. Universities such as Massey have enjoyed Pasifika support staff and services aimed at enhancing Pasifika achievement since the early 2000s. However, in the current depressed economic climate with a change of policy from funding based on the number of enrolments to funding based on completion rates, the prospects for Pacific peoples looks particularly gloomy. As already described in chapters one and three, historically Pacific peoples have under-achieved in education across the three sectors. Therefore, the ramifications for Pasifika of this new educational policy are bleak.

Moreover, in this economic climate the needs and aspirations of ethnic minorities such as Pacific peoples are at risk. This is because, when tertiary education systems are being restructured and reduced, economic priorities inevitably sideline the philosophical and holistic approaches to learning and teaching for Pacific peoples. Thus a tension arises in terms of social policy directions which should arguably focus on the promotion of a fair and just society, yet leave many ethnic minorities struggling to achieve in a western cultural and educational environment. Notions of justice underpin all policy issues and are inherent in the various theoretical approaches to meeting need and achieving equality. Furthermore, notions of justice are inseparable from notions of wellbeing and the 'good society' (Cheyne et al., 2004; Rawls, 1971; Sandel, 2005).

The implications of the findings of this study for social policy development of Pacific peoples are, in a real sense constrained by the challenging policy and economic environment that the tertiary sector is currently operating under.

The strategic direction that universities have for Pasifika peoples are restricted by a political framework that is dominated by capital and the market system. Policy analysts need to be mindful that economic priorities do not overtake the social and cultural distinctiveness of ethnic communities such as Pacific peoples. Also, the current neo-liberal regime which promotes less government intervention poses serious implications for the cultural distinctiveness of Pacific peoples, especially their core values of *lotu* and *kainga*. As Pierson (2001) and Esping-Andersen (1996) have argued, the welfare state is the only institution qualified and able to establish and to maintain this key value of social citizenship or social solidarity.

In terms of possible ways forward, perhaps adopting some of the Communitarian theoretical approaches to social policy is feasible. It is essentially an approach where there is a collective and mutual responsibility, where there is mutual obligation of citizenship and mutual respect. In a nutshell, it is an ethic of caring, of sharing, and of reciprocity (Sandel, 2005; Walzer, 1982). This is in line with Benland's (1988) argument in discussing the links between spirituality and social policy. She states that one of the many links between these two dimensions is having a "sense of reciprocity and relationship among human beings" and "a sense of connectedness with other people..." (p. 462). Pacific cultural values of *lotu*, *kainga*, communalism, reciprocity and others are in synergy with the Communitarian philosophy and with Benland's arguments.

We cannot deny that in the global context, there will always be the inevitable impacts of social, economic, environmental and political factors which will shape the social policies of individual nations. Policy-makers and governments will need to adjust and adapt to the new challenges in such a way that the

traditional social democratic values of equality and social justice for all people are not compromised.

Prospects for the future of Pasifika education within the tertiary sector may seem dark and gloomy given the current policy environment and national and global economic and environmental challenges. However, let us all be encouraged by the findings of this study which showed that through the inevitable trials and tribulations of the participants' social and academic journeys, they found hope, wisdom and courage through their faith in God to persevere with their life and academic journey. The words of Peck (2008), the American psychiatrist and best-selling author are also pertinent and encouraging and give a sense of hope.

Problems call forth our courage and our wisdom

Indeed, they create our courage and our wisdom.

It is only because of problems that we grow mentally and spiritually.

It is through the pain of confronting and resolving problems that we learn. (p. 16)

## **Conclusion**

All of the participants valued spirituality in both their own life journey and their educational aspirations. Spirituality does have a positive influence on the educational achievement of Pacific university students. Spirituality as understood and experienced by the participants of this study is based upon a relationship with God. There is a recognition of the need to develop that relationship through the spiritual acts of prayer; reading, studying and meditating on the Bible; listening to inspirational music; and attending church. Some of the participants referred to spirituality as a whole of life experience which is manifested in everyday living and where a key component relates to

one's relationships with God, with one's *kainga* or family, and with other people.

According to the data, how this understanding of spirituality influences better educational achievement is answered in the three virtues of hope, wisdom (*poto*) and courage. God is not only a source of educational success but also a motivation for success in their educational pursuits. These Pacific university students and graduates shared how their relationship with God is an important source of hope, wisdom and courage. These character virtues equipped them to overcome the inevitable obstacles of the academic journey allowing them to persevere in order to successfully complete their studies.

Spirituality is a core value in the Pacific cultures and this is reflected in the significance of *lotu* for Pacific peoples. One dimension of *lotu* is the church community. The church fellowship plays a vital role in supporting the educational achievement of Pacific university students. The Pacific community on campus also provides invaluable pastoral support which is important in helping Pacific students achieve their academic goals.

Educational success for Pacific peoples is much more than the completion and attainment of a qualification. Achievement in education is more meaningful and fulfilling when it is demonstrated in one's ability to give back to one's *kainga*. Underpinning their desire to succeed in the academy are the cultural values of '*ofa* (love, compassion) and *feveitoka'iaki/tauhivaha'a* (maintaining good relationships) for their *kainga*. The participants' love for their *kainga* and their desire to be a role-model to their *kainga* are motivators for them to succeed in their educational pursuits.



In regards to the social policy implications of this study's findings, any policy framework used for Pacific peoples' academic development must be made with the intention of keeping a balance between economic wellbeing, and retaining cultural values of *lotu* and *kainga* and interdependence. Embedded in these core values of *lotu* and *kainga* are the Pacific cultural values of: '*ofa* (love), *faka'apa'apa* (respect), *fetokoni'aki* (reciprocity), *fakatokilalo* (humility), and *feveitoka'I'aki/tauhivaha'a* (nurturing good relationships) (Tertiary Education Commission, 2004).

I would argue that this study has added to existing knowledge especially in relation to the continuing centrality of *lotu* to Pacific peoples. Moreover, it has added to existing knowledge in terms of the positive relationship between spirituality and educational achievement for Pacific university students, and how this is lived out and practised in daily living.

## CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

This thesis has explored the ways in which *lotu* or spirituality might contribute to the educational success of Pacific university students in Aotearoa New Zealand. This investigation was through the shared experiences of Pacific university student, and graduate participants. The findings suggest a positive correlation between spirituality and their educational achievement. In this study, it was found that at the root of the participants' spirituality is a relationship with God. This relationship is developed through the spiritual acts of prayer; reading, studying and meditating on the Bible; claiming Bible promises; and attending church. Their spirituality is demonstrated in the way that they live their lives – in their relationships with their *kainga* and with other people. *Lotu* for the participants is also reflected in their educational achievements. It is demonstrated in active, persistent, and diligent study with the primary goal of achieving. Educational achievement for these Pacific participants is so much more than completing their qualification. It is also about the satisfaction of knowing that they can contribute to the social, cultural, spiritual and economic wellbeing of their *kainga*. Their spirituality gave them hope, *poto* (wisdom) and courage to overcome the inevitable social and academic hurdles of the educational journey in order to complete their studies.

This study emphasises the centrality of spirituality in the lives of Pacific peoples. *Lotu* is an integral part of Pacific peoples' culture, identity, values and beliefs. This thesis also showed how students perceive the key role played by both the Pasifika community on campus and the wider church community in providing learning and pastoral support. The study findings show that for these participants, spirituality is real and relevant not only for their life journey but also in their academic pursuits. It shows the inseparability between

religion and culture. This indicates that to encourage and develop educational achievement through nurturing cultural practices, spiritual practices need to be supported as well. In light of these findings, the following recommendations and suggestions for further research are made.

## **Implications and recommendations**

This study has social, practice, curriculum, training and policy implications which highlight the significance of spirituality in both the lives of Pacific peoples and in their academic aspirations. The focus of this research has been less on social policy and more on finding out what helps the students, so that this finding can inform social policy. The findings have implications for key stakeholders starting from micro through to macro level. The responsibility is a collective and co-operative one starting with the individual Pasifika student, right through to key educational policy agencies. Consequently, the findings of this study suggest the following five areas which could be introduced or further developed to enhance academic success for Pacific university students.

### **1. Encourage Pacific university learners to continuously review their spiritual motivations for academic success.**

As this research study showed that spirituality is an important cultural and religious motivation for educational achievement, it does imply the need for Pacific learners to gain insight into their spirituality for the hope, courage, and *poto* (wisdom) to persevere. This positive connection between educational achievement and spirituality, linked as it is to cultural belongingness, also suggests the need for students to be able to develop their spirituality or their relationship with God through prayer; reading, studying, and meditating on the scriptures; claiming God's Bible promises; and to attend church fellowship.

**2. That church communities are encouraged to continue supporting students who are part of their church family**

Recommendation two naturally follows from recommendation one given the practical ways that participants expressed their spirituality and their need to develop their connectedness to God. Attending church was one of the ways that participants expressed and developed their spirituality. Therefore, given the positive link between spirituality and educational achievement, it is recommended that church communities are encouraged to continue supporting students who are part of their church family.

**3. Pastoral support continues within tertiary institutions**

The reference by the participants to the positive impact of the learning and pastoral support provided by the Pasifika network on campus does suggest the need to continue using this approach. The relationship building aspect of the pastoral care model is closely akin with the Pacific cultural values of *'ofa* (love and compassion) and *feveitoka'I'aki/tauhivaha'a* (nurturing good relationships). Therefore it is highly recommended that the pastoral care of *Pasifika* students continues within the tertiary environment.

**4. To encourage teachers in higher education to appreciate the significance of *lotu* within Pacific cultures and to find ways of applying it in engaging with Pacific university students.**

The findings that spirituality is an integral value within Pacific cultures, as well as having a positive influence on academic achievement, does have implications for teachers within the classroom context. The relationship dimension of spirituality as expressed by the participants ought to be explored and fostered by educators of Pacific university students. Pacific peoples are relational people and need to feel that they can relate to their teacher at a personal level. Thus, the recommendation to encourage

teachers in higher education to appreciate, the centrality of *lotu* within Pacific cultures, and, find ways of applying it in engaging with Pasifika university students.

**5. Improved collaboration amongst key policy agents (such as Ministry of education, Tertiary education commission, and Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs) and Pacific communities in integrating the centrality of *lotu* into its policies regarding Pacific educational development.**

There are also implications for educational policies at a macro level given the positive influence of spirituality in the educational success of Pacific peoples. As discussed in chapter 6, there is growing tension between tertiary education providers and government policies. This is fuelled partly by financial problems, but also by ideological differences concerning how to invest in tertiary students and whether or how to set aside resources to enhance Pacific peoples' academic development. This is attributable not only to the neo-liberal frameworks underpinning current policies but also to the increasingly challenging policy and economic environment that the tertiary sector is operating under.

Moreover, as indicated in recommendation four, an important aspect of the participants' spirituality is their relationships, not only with God but also with their *kainga* or family. Both of these relationships were key motivators behind the participants' desire to complete their studies. The successful holistic *Te Rau Puawai* programme that was referred to in chapter 6 would be a good model for policy makers at tertiary or government level to develop for Pasifika students as well. Therefore there is a need for this recommendation of improved collaboration amongst key policy agencies and the Pasifika community in incorporating a role for *lotu* into educational policies.

## **Suggestions for further research**

It is clear upon reflection on the findings that this research adds to the limited information, knowledge and literature concerning Pacific peoples, particularly the centrality of *lotu* in their lives and its impact on their academic aspirations. The perceived and experienced positive effects of spirituality on the academic success as shown by this study suggest the growing need for further research in this area.

However, there need to be smarter and more collaborative efforts in researching the Pacific community as anecdotal evidence suggests that many Pacific peoples are tired and weary of being researched. There are a number of ways that this can be avoided as I have experienced in this research study. I believe that our motivation for conducting research is important, because it is that motivation, which will guide our approach in conducting research with the Pacific community. Nurturing good relationships underpins Pacific cultural values. Pacific peoples can identify and sense a person's genuine interest and passion for conducting research for Pacific peoples' wellbeing. I believe that this growing issue of research fatigue can be minimised by checking our motivation for undertaking research. Moreover, this issue can be avoided by reciprocating of gifts, and keeping a clear line of communication in researchers keeping the Pacific community informed of the findings of the research and the implementation process (Health Research Council of NZ, 2005; Thaman, 2006).

Consequently, only two suggestions for further research are made as follows:

**One: Culture and *lotu* amongst Pacific young people of the age group 16-19 years, and its impact on their educational success.**

In recent years, the New Zealand government has committed large amounts of resources to try and understand and to devise programmes and initiatives to support youths more effectively (Barwick, 2006). The scope of this research project was limited by restricting the data collection, analysis and interpretation to the understanding and experiences of 13 Pacific university students and recent graduates within the age bracket of 21 to over 40 years old. Moreover, the growing tension between culture and *lotu* for Pacific youths in New Zealand was one of the divergent issues, which was raised in the focus group discussions. Therefore, it would be worthwhile to conduct a larger scale study of Pacific young people to investigate the impact of this tension on their general wellbeing and their educational success. This is the ideal age group to explore spiritual development, perception and ideologies given the high intensity and emphasis in life experience that accompanies a coming of age passage (Dantis, 2008).

## **Two: Practical ways of incorporating *lotu* into learning and teaching approaches at tertiary level**

It would be invaluable to conduct research to devise practical mechanisms of including this important dimension of spirituality into both the learning and teaching approaches. Pacific educators such as Thaman (1988) and Taufe'ulungaki (2002) have advocated for the need for Western educational institutions to be more culturally inclusive in teaching practice and content, and curriculum development. The support can be inclusive but should avoid exclusivity, for some students may not wish to pursue a spiritual decision as part of their cultural support system.

This research study emphasises the significance of spirituality in the lives and cultures of Pacific peoples. Upon reflection, I believe that my being a Pacific

person as well as someone with passion and experience in working with Pacific students has contributed to the honesty and openness of the participants in sharing their perceptions and experiences of spirituality and its impact on their educational journey. Therefore I can vouch for the robustness of the research process as well as the integrity of the data findings. It is hoped that the findings of this study will promote meaningful discussions and debates amongst Pacific students, Pacific communities, educators, social practitioners and policy makers on how *lotu* can positively impact better educational outcomes for Pacific peoples.



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## GLOSSARY

ako	education or formal learning process
fa'aSamoa	the Samoan way
faka'apa'apa	respect
fakafekau'aki	connectedness
fakatokilalo	humility
fakaTonga	the Tongan way
fetokoni'aki	mutual helpfulness/reciprocity
hei	Cook Island and Tahitian garland
'ilo	knowledge
iloa	Samoan for knowledge
kainga	extended family
kakala	Tongan garland
lei	Hawaiian garland
lotu	spirituality/faith/prayer/church
luva	act of gifting someone special with a kakala
manatha	Solomon Island term for wisdom
'ofa	love or compassion
poto	wisdom
povi masima	Samoan term for salted beef
salusalu	Fijian garland
talanoa	informal conversation or dialogue
tangata poto	wise person
tauhivaha'a/feveitoka'i'aki	nurturing or maintaining good relationships

toli	the process of collecting flowers and fauna
tui	the act of weaving a kakala or garland
vakaViti	the Fijian way
wanawana	Kiribati notion of wisdom
yalomatua/yalovuku/vuli	Fijian notion for wisdom

## **APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE**

### **Topic: Spirituality and Educational Achievement among Pacific University students**

1. What are the key motivators for your desire to succeed at University?
2. What does spirituality mean to you? I'm interested in your definition, concept, and experiences of this phenomenon?
3. How do you express your spirituality?
4. Do you believe that spirituality is an integral cultural value for Pacific Peoples? Why or why not?
5. Is spirituality something that you consider important in your studies? Why or why not? How would you rate it compared to other contributing factors? For example, family, commitment, diligence
6. How do you incorporate or integrate your spirituality into your studies?
7. Can you provide some examples of how spirituality may have impacted your studies in both a positive or negative sense?
8. Do you think that your concept of spirituality has changed at University? Why or why not? In what ways has it changed?
9. What does education mean to you?
10. What does educational achievement or success mean to you?
11. Do you have any questions?

Thank participants and ask if it might be possible to contact them again for any further questions or points of clarification.

## APPENDIX 2: MASSEY ETHICS APPROVAL LETTER



**Massey University**  
AUCKLAND

OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT  
TO THE VICE-CHANCELLOR  
(Research Ethics)  
Private Bag 102 904  
North Shore 0745  
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11 December 2008

Sesimani Havea  
c/- Associate-Professor M O'Brien  
College of Humanities and Social Sciences  
Massey University  
Albany

Dear Sesimani

**HUMAN ETHICS APPROVAL APPLICATION – MUHECN 08/064**  
**"Spirituality and Educational Achievement among Pacific University Students"**

Thank you for your application. It has been fully considered, and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Northern.

Approval is for three years. If this project has not been completed within three years from the date of this letter, a reapproval must be requested.

If the nature, content, location, procedures or personnel of your approved application change, please advise the Secretary of the Committee.

Yours sincerely

Dr Mark Hennickson  
Acting Chair  
Human Ethics Committee: Northern

cc: Associate-Professor M O'Brien  
College of Humanities and Social Sciences

## **APPENDIX 3: INFORMATION SHEET**

### **Spirituality and Educational Achievement among Pacific University Students**

#### **Researcher(s) Introduction**

My name is Sesimani Havea and I am conducting research exploring the links between spirituality and academic performance among Pacific University students and graduates. This research is not only towards the fulfillment of my MPhil (Masters of Philosophy) in Social Policy but also my passion for the development and wellbeing of Pacific Peoples.

Please do not hesitate to contact me at any time about any aspects of this project. I can be contacted at:

Email: [REDACTED]  
Phone: ([REDACTED])  
[REDACTED] [REDACTED]

Alternatively, if you feel that there is a personal issue that you need to discuss in regards to this project, please feel free to contact either one of my Supervisors, Dr Mary Nash and Dr Tracie Mafile'o:

Dr Mary Nash: Email: M.Nash@massey.ac.nz  
Phone: (06) 356 9099 Ext 2827

Dr Tracie Mafile'o: Email: Tracie\_Mafileo@pau.ac.pg  
Phone: +675 3280279

#### **Participant Recruitment**

You are invited to participate on the basis that you are of Pacific descent and that you are a current University student or a graduate from University. Moreover, you have been invited based on my personal networks and based on my strong belief that your knowledge and experiences will make an invaluable contribution to this research.

I am conducting 2 focus groups sessions with approximately 4-6 participants and one on one interview with approximately 8-10 participants. I have selected this number to allow for information rich data providing a solid base for useful data analysis.

### **Project Procedures**

You are invited to participate in either the focus group session and/or a one on one interview. The focus group session will be held in my home and the one on one session can be conducted at a venue of your choice.

If you are concerned about confidentiality of your identity in regards to the use of data obtained please be assured that all identifying data (ie, tapes, transcripts) will remain solely with me as the researcher and that publication of research findings will not include personal identification of participants. Moreover, the tapes and transcripts will be stored in a locked cabinet in my home. The consent forms will also be locked away in a separate cabinet in my home as well. Moreover, you will be given the opportunity to see and edit the transcripts of interviews as soon as they are transcribed by me and before analysis of the data takes place.

Data from the focus groups and interviews will be used to complete my MPhil Thesis. A summary report of the main findings will be made available and can be obtained from me upon request.

### **Participant involvement**

You are invited to participate in either a focus group session and/or one on one interview. The focus group session will take approximately 1-1.5 hours and around 45 minutes to an hour for the one on one interview.

### **Participant's Rights**

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you accept this invitation, you have the right to:

- decline to answer any particular question;
- withdraw from the study two weeks after the interview and/or focus group has been conducted. Please understand that withdrawal from the study also signifies withdrawal of your data from the study.
- ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher;
- be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.
- ask for the audio tape to be turned off at any time during the interview.



**Support Processes**

Referrals will be made to Massey University Student Services as required and if requested by the participant.

**Project Contacts**

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact either myself or either one of my Supervisors, Dr Mary Nash and Dr Tracie Mafile'o via the contact details stated above.

***Committee Approval Statement***

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Northern, Application \_08/\_064\_. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Mark Henrickson, Acting Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Northern, telephone 09 414 0800 x9050, email [humanethicsnorth@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethicsnorth@massey.ac.nz).