Pasifika Lens:

The position of Pasifika Education within the New Zealand Education system at times has continued to sit in the ‘other’ category. However the reality is Pasifika people have a long relationship with New Zealand and therefore the presence of Pasifika people within the communities and within the Education system must be acknowledged. The education system presently does not serve our Pasifika learners as seen clearly in levels of underachievement.

Our parents and grandparents made the journey from their homes with the dream and expectation of a better life for them and their children and grandchildren,”..a better education…”is a key lever and a sentence in our migration stories.

In my experience working with Pasifika students I have noted that Pasifika students are not looking at being singled out, in fact they avoid it. Drawing attention to oneself is not a Pasifika trait, unless within the accepted cultural confines that is recognisable and understood by Pasifika. These cultural traits are not unique solely to Pasifika and fortunately we find many parallelisms within the tangata whenua culture, which are also of Pasifika origin. Pasifika peoples will engage in ‘Māori cultural practices’, and will readily especially when they also feel respected and culturally safe. They feel more affinity to Māori cultural practices as it reminds them of their own cultural practices which have been imbued and nurtured traditionally. Things that may seem small have a profound affect when soliciting Pasifika engagement. Greetings in the different Pasifika languages can add to the environment of inclusion and respect, correct pronunciation of names will also generate positive feelings of inclusion and cultural safety. If Pasifika culture and reasons for migration could be incorporated into any delivery of the curriculum, again this would reaffirm the Pasifika identity and engage the student in the activity. It is a quality that Māori and Pasifika cultures share, that the culture by its own nature tends to be inclusive and aspires toward social cohesiveness and purpose.

Key to any social unit, which Pasifika cultures tend to promote, are the relationships that are formed and the ways in which this is done. Essential to cultures, if distinction should be made, is the affirmation and recognition of ‘Spirituality’ and the importance placed on its acknowledgement as a precursor to beginning events and entering into relationships. This focuses the student on their own belief and understanding of spirituality. There are ceremonies that needn’t be intricate, but play a vital role in shifting dynamics, especially relationships. In this general address, the use of Pasifika greetings should be used as a means to appease, accommodate then connect with Pasifika students, and recognise this country’s geographic location as part of the Pacific. When done appropriately, this may secure a student’s commitment and involvement to an activity. Pivotal is the scaffolding of this situation, when introducing oneself from a Pasifika there is acknowledgement of God, family then name. It is important that the names are pronounced properly, as these names could carry ancestral status and title with them. Shakespeare wrote, “What’s in a name? Would a rose by any other name smell so sweet?” Each member of the group offers this personal information and relationships build due to the trust, empathy and recognition of common attributes and situation.

From the basis of forming relationships we can begin to build the means which bind the Pasifika student with the school and their culture. Culture dance groups (Poly Club) which promote Pasifika culture and acknowledge their significance by their establishment can enhance the learning experience of the student and ease their transition into a group identity. Such vehicles legitimise the position of Pasifika students by elevating the profile of their culture, and at the same time raising their esteem in themselves and pride in their background. This promotes engagement by Pasifika students and celebrates them. Furthermore, the incorporation of proverbs, language, concepts and ideas can be transmitted and transferred amongst the community and across generations, enhancing the material being performed by the cultural groups.

I believe that Pasifika students are best served when teachers have a clear sense of understanding the Pasifika traits and our families, each part of it from the ministry to the teacher in the classroom must be accountable for their Pasifika learner, Pasifika competent and capable.

 In my experience, engaging Pasifika learners is a process yet it has also been very rewarding.

* Homework club: Encouraging Pasifika students the benefits of attending homework club and balancing this with sports, cultural , talking to coaches, managers and parents about time management and balancing all chosen activities. Pasifika learners who are academically challenged prefer to do what they ‘want’ to do as opposed to what ‘needs’ to be done. Communicating with parents with updates of their child’s academic standing, strengths, weaknesses and expectations from all involved. Also how the school can assist and what they can offer. Communication is vital to this success.
* Inclusion and a common element that can culturally bind the Pasifika student to the activity.
* Parental and family involvement within the activity or support. Pasifika parents, families, community or church give guidance and bring a reality of how Pasifika have been taught and encouraged to behave within the dynamics of our aiga-family. Pasifika participants discipline and use of Pasifika concepts –tautua-service, onasa’I-patience, fealofani-togetherness, fa’aaloalo-respect. This can be a hook in for their engagement at school or part of school.

The education system must deliver on the Pasifika Education Plan and deliver on the 5 key areas which will enable Pasifika Success:

1 Effective teaching

2 Transitions (e.g. ECE to school)

3 Governance and Leadership

4 Strong engagement with parents, families and communities

5 Better literacy and numeracy achievement

To do this there needs to be strong attention paid to the learners identity, language and culture. Know our kids, their families and their cultural capital, what they come in with, what will hook them in, engage them etc and make sure this is reflected in those 5 key areas and the policy and practice of the school.

The teacher creates the environment that supports the student by utilising their culture for them to engage, enquire and press themselves to go further. If a student is culturally located within the learning process, they are safe and confident enough to take the next steps, which is to engage with the culture of the school and the nation.

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