Kāinga: an ancient solution for contemporary challenges of Tongan students’ academic achievement in New Zealand tertiary education

Telesia Kalavite

Abstract

There are many successful Tongans in academia but in New Zealand there is a concern about the low academic achievement of Tongan students in tertiary education. This paper discusses the importance and impact of kāinga (blood/kin or social relationships) between Tongan tertiary students and their supporters; the pule‘anga (bureaucracy), their famili (family), siasi (church) and fonua (wider community), towards their education. These relationships between Tongan tertiary students and their supporters can either enhance or constrain their academic achievement. Tongan students are academically successful when the different contexts of kāinga in terms of tā (time) and vā (space) intersect or interact harmoniously within and between each other. Thus, kāinga is an ancient solution for contemporary challenges for Tongan students in New Zealand tertiary education.
Introduction

Tongan students are enrolling in New Zealand tertiary education, but there is a concern about their low completion rates (Ministry of Education, 2008). To date, explanations for this are based on the cultural differences between Tongan students and the western education system (Fusitu’a & Coxon, 1998; Māhina, 2008; Manu’atu, 2000). This is because many Polynesians use an inclusive learning style that promotes the formation of integrated groups, feelings of solidarity and cooperation, while many Pākeha/Pālangi (European people) use an exclusive style that promotes individualistic and competitive life styles (Coxon, Anae, Mara, Samu & Finau, 2002; Finau, 2008; Graves & Graves, 1985; Taufe’ulungaki, 2003). Therefore, an understanding of both cultures and how they relate to the education of Tongan tertiary students in New Zealand would seem to be very important. Kainga is the very core of the Tongan culture, and when relationships within the kainga in terms of tā and vā are in serenity with both New Zealand and Tongan cultures they enhance Tongan students’ academic achievement; but when they are not, they become constraints. This paper draws on aspects of my PhD research on the views of 25 Tongan students, parents and academics on the ‘perceived sociocultural aspects that impact on Tongan students’ academic achievement in New Zealand tertiary education’.

The significance of kainga for Tongan students’ academic achievement

The concept of kainga is fundamental to understanding Tongan students’ academic achievement in New Zealand tertiary education. For this reason, a thorough understanding of the discourse of kainga in its multifarious but conflicting meanings and relationships at various levels is seen to be significant. Kainga as a Tongan construct of relationship is a common term for people to use in reference to blood or kin ties or living in an extended close-knit family or community lifestyle, which is uniquely different from Pālangi or any ethnic group construct of blood/kin or social relationships (Blamires, 1939; Bott, 1982; Campbell, 1992, 2001; Crane, 1978). It is acknowledged that not all Pālangi people and not all Tongan people are uniform or identical in thought or feeling, but there are some characteristics that are generally seen as aligning more to one culture than to the other. According to Māhina, (2008) the western culture is singular, individualistic, analytical and linear while Tongan culture is plural, collectivistic holistic and circular. Taufe’ulungaki (2000; 2003) suggests that western culture is based on individual rights and freedom, independence, justice in terms of equality and access, privacy, competition, consumerism and science, while the Tongan culture is based on cooperation and consensus, respect, generosity, loyalty, sharing, humility, reconciliation, fulfilment of mutual obligations and reciprocity. Taufe’ulungaki (2003) further asserts that the underlying purpose of western culture is to create personal wealth and individual wellbeing that is based on economic capital, while the underlying purpose of the Tongan culture, which is based on social capital, is to maintain good relationships and strong communities. These cultural differences have strong influence on education. In this state of affairs the Tongan society and civilisation is based on Tongan relationships within their kainga, where education is a shared responsibility in which parents and families or their kainga play a vital role in caring, nurturing and providing for the emotional, social and physical welfare of the individual as she or he grows and develops from infancy to adulthood (Tongati’o, 2006a, 2006b).
The importance and impact of *kāinga* in this research resonates with the literature on Pacific and Tongan students in New Zealand by such researchers as Anae, Anderson, Benseman and Coxon, (2002), Bishop and Berryman (2006), Coxon, Anae, Mara, Samu and Finau (2002), Fletcher, Parkhill, Fa'afoi, Taleni and O'Regan (2009), Fusitu'a and Coxon (1992, 1998) and Manu'atu (2000). The significance of *kāinga* in this research is first, its great importance as a concept in Tongan culture, because the overarching core value in the lives of Tongans is *mo'ui fakatokolahi* (living together in a cooperative lifestyle) and *fetokoni'aki* (helping each other): in this way, they *tauhi va* (keep good relationships) towards each other among their *kāinga*, through the cultural reciprocal roles of *faifatongia* (cultural obligations). Thus, the Tongan students are nurtured through their *kāinga*, where they are moulded to *tauhi va* within the practice of the Tongan core values of *fetokoni'aki, tokai'i* and *feveitokai'aki* (cooperation, consensus and maintenance of good relationships); ‘*ofa, fe'ofa'ofani* or *fe'o'aki* (mutual love, caring and generosity); *faka'apa'apa* or *fe'ofa'aki* (mutual respect); *fatongia, faifatongia, fua fatongia* or *fua kavenga* (responsibilities and commitments to fulfilment of mutual prescribed obligations); *mamahi'i me'a* and *talangofua* (loyalty, commitment and obedience); and *fakatōkilalo* (humility and generosity). These core values are the breath of Tongan society, in the homes, the churches and the schools. Everyone is expected to live these core values and believe that commitment to them will benefit their *kāinga*. Therefore, as Tongans, the goal for our education is to be able to help our *kāinga*. Education then, is a journey that suggests *tauhi va* and *fetokoni'aki* or *ngāue fakataha* (working together) through fulfilling certain *fatongia* towards academic achievement for the collective benefit of everyone in the *kāinga* (Wood, 1943; Wood & Wood-Ellem, 1977).

Secondly, research to date suggests that Tongan tertiary students are trying to be successful in their learning in New Zealand, which has a different *tā–vā* (time–space) reality to them as Tongans in this postmodern age (Māhina, 2008). The Tongan students learn through constructing and co-constructing knowledge within their sociocultural context or *kāinga*, where they position themselves in multiple realities. In their tertiary education in particular, they are operating within such multiple positioning and this has a profound impact on their achievement.

Thirdly, some people understand in a general sense that Tongan culture does have an impact on education; but fewer people understand that amongst the Tongan society, *kāinga* are the focal point of Tongan culture and that has a crucial impact on students’ academic achievement. No one has stressed the importance for the students of working within certain cultural limits of maintaining good relationships (*tauhi va*) even in their efforts to maximise academic success. People have to understand that there are certain limits of *tauhi va* within the *kāinga* that students need to adhere to in order to succeed in academia. Thus the important question that remains unanswered is ‘what is the nature of the impact of *kāinga* on academic achievement?’

Fourthly, Tongan students’ academic achievement in New Zealand tertiary education is vested in their capabability to cope harmoniously within the interface of the Tongan and New Zealand cultures. The harmonious interface between the two cultures depends on Tongan students’ judicious practice of keeping good relationships within their personal, group and universal cultures, especially within their *kāinga*. When relationships in terms of *tā* and *vā* are in serenity with both cultures they support Tongan students’ academic achievement but when they are not, they become constraints.

Finally, *kāinga*, is the core of the Tongan culture that amalgamates all aspects of their human existence. In a more practical way throughout my research on Tongan students’ academic achievement in New
Zealand tertiary education, *kāinga* have been explored between Tongan students and their Tongan and non-Tongan supporters who create the context for their relationships in their New Zealand homeland. These reasons were found to give meaning to the ‘perceived social cultural aspects that impact on Tongan students’ academic achievement in New Zealand tertiary education’.

**Research methodology**

The methodology used in this research is described as **Tongan** (Thaman, 2002; Ka’ilī, 2008; Māhina, 2008; Manu’atu, 2000a; Vaioleti, 2006; Prescott, 2008), **Pacific** (Tamasese, Peteru, Waldegrave & Bush, 2000; Kupa, 2009; Nabobo-Baba, 2006; Bishop, 1996; Smith, 1999a; 1999b), **qualitative** (Merriam, 2001; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007), **phenomenological** (Merriam, 2001; Bernard, 2002; Holmes & Earcus, 2005), **ethnographic** (Crang & Cook, 2007; Bernard, 2000), and **auto-ethnographic** (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003a, 2003b; Crang & Cook, 2007; Jones, 2005). It involves Tongans, as participants (phenomenological ethnography) and also includes the Tongan researcher’s experiences as one of the participants (auto-ethnography). Therefore, although the research is driven by Tongan and Pacific methodologies, it has also borrowed from western methodologies. Using both Tongan and western methodologies was appropriate, as the Tongan participants are operating within a New Zealand context and these methodologies provide a way for both making use of and gaining insights into both cultures.

The research method for data generation was basically **formal** and **informal** talanoa, through **semi-structured** and **unstructured interviewing**. In Tonga, *talanoa* literally means to talk or to tell stories or relate experiences (Churchward, 1959). The *Talanoa* method captures Tongan traditions and protocols, and is ‘consistent with the conveyance of knowledge, stories, views and feelings both in the personal and formal sense’ (Prescott, 2008, p. 128). The Tongan method of *talanoa* led the research but worked alongside semi- and unstructured interviewing.

**Research results**

In the Tongan students’ struggle for academic success they experience both support and constraints through their relationships with the *pule’anga*, their *fāmili, siasi* and *fonua*. The differences between the Tongan and the New Zealand physical and social environments mean students find themselves in a different *tā–vā* relationship that is ordered individually rather than collectively, for in the New Zealand ‘big picture’, the *pakeha* culture is the dominant one (Māhina, 2008). It becomes clear that the differences between these two cultures affect Tongan tertiary students’ academic achievement, as their relationships in terms of time and space either support or constrain them in academia.

1. **Tongan Students’ relationships with the pule’anga**

The bureaucratic support for Tongan tertiary students is provided by government organisations such as the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Social Development, Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs, Tertiary Education Commissions, and Tertiary Education Institutions. Thirteen participants interviewed explicitly recognised the support that government agencies give Tongans to complete their degrees successfully. All the participants connected to tertiary education institutions talked about all the support offered in their institutions, such as the Pacific learning centres, Pacific and
non-Pacific staff members and also Tongan student associations. These services provide pastoral, cultural, learning and academic support to students, as one of the participants who was a lecturer at one of the universities said:

Here at the university there are many supports such as mentoring programmes in each school, to support Pacific Island students, which includes Tongans. I am sure that all tertiary institutions have many support [services] but my question is whether our students are making good use of it or not. I think it is their own choice and lecturers should reiterate the importance of utilising these support systems. (Parent and academic No. 7)

Although there is support for Tongan students through government agencies, participants identified some constraints. Some of them believed that government support might not be sufficient or might be misplaced or misdirected because the donors may not have sufficient knowledge about the problems in order to target the assistance needed. As one of the participants who was an academic educator pointed out:

The support that government agencies give might not be sufficient or [might be] misplaced or misdirected because the donors may not know the source of the students’ problems and the government needs to be very clear on these things so as not to confuse the people. (Parent and academic No. 4)

The government needs to be very clear on the kind of support that they give, to minimise confusion.

2. Tongan Students’ relationships with fāmili

The Tongan students’ relationships with their families are familial and are constructed in the Tongan culture as a total commitment or obligation to the welfare of the family through the core values of the Tongan society. The support that students get from their families is pastoral, cultural and moral, and spiritual too, which gives them confidence and belief that they can achieve their goals. All the participants discussed how their families had supported them through providing appropriate resources, motivation and expectations, as exemplified by what one of the student participants indicated:

My greatest support and motivators were my parents. They always talked to me about good education. They always said that good education is the key to success in life. It would give me more job opportunities as well as a better lifestyle. (Student No. 2)

However, Tongan students’ relationship with their fāmili could also be a constraint depriving them of time and space for their studies. These constraints are family issues, poverty, the intergenerational gap and the students’ wider family and community networks. One of the participants said: ‘More family contacts means more fatongia and more spending, which drains our resources’ (Student No. 12). Unrealistic cultural demands from the fāmili can distract the students: as one of the student participants said, ‘I cannot keep up with all the family demands and it is a big hassle, it is very frustrating’ (Student No. 4).
3. Tongan students’ relationships with siasi

Christianity and the church are very strong in Tonga and religious beliefs and faith were noted as having a strong impact on students’ academic achievement. All the participants acknowledged being Christians and they discussed the spiritual relationships between the students and siasi as their nā with both God and the people in the church. Tongan students have a strong belief and hope that God will answer their prayers and help their studies. Most of the participants said that they were successful academically because of their prayers and the prayers of their families. One academic educator, who is a daughter of a church minister, said her father’s prayers engendered a sense of confidence in her that she could succeed:

I trusted that I would be fine with my studies because my father prayed for me. Every exam I rang home or wrote saying that these are the dates and times of my exams so please pray for me. My success in life is also dedicated to God and looking at my current situation, the success of my business was a blessing from God. Now, I come to realise that anything that I need is actually provided by God, like the work and knowledge that he blessed me with. (Academic No. 2)

All the participants said that the support that they received from the church was mostly spiritual, but sometimes there was some financial support.

Although participants talked about all the support they received from the church they also commented on the tremendous efforts that their families put into meeting church obligations throughout the year, which negatively affected their studies. Eighteen of the participants mentioned how church obligations such as misinale (Protestant, especially Methodist, church annual donation), katoanga’ofa (Roman Catholic Church annual donation) and other commitments caused financial problems for some Tongan students. Eleven of these participants said that some parents had prioritised their kavenga fakalotu (church obligations), and as a result neglected their children’s educational needs, such as not providing stationery, lunches, uniforms, school and fieldtrip fees. As one of the participants stated:

One of our research showed that Tongan children in some schools were the most likely group not to have any stationery, lunches and uniforms; other research shows that Tongan youths are the most violent, committing the most crimes in New Zealand. (Parent and academic No. 5)

4. Students’ relationships with the fonua

Eighteen participants in this study commented on the value of their social environment, as such community support, both psychological and economic, increased their confidence through expectations and encouragement. One of the parents, who is also an academic, said: ‘We were well supported by all the people in our village so we are responsible to do well in our studies to meet their expectations. We carried all these and it motivated me all along’ (Parent and academic No. 3). All
the participants commented on some social constraints that could affect students, such as students’ commitment to community fundraisings that could drain them in terms of time and money. Seven of the participants mentioned this aspect quite strongly and one of the academic participants illustrated the point in these bitter terms:

Fundraisings from Tonga are far too many. I wondered whether people in Tonga ever considered the number of fundraisings that they do in New Zealand especially when all of these are coming to the same people all the time. I don’t think that they ever thought about the impact of these fundraisings on our people here, on all aspects of our lives. Many families are financially hard up, which leads to many youth crimes. Many of these crimes are related to financial problems. (Parent and academic No. 2)

However, escaping from these community functions is often not an option because of the small and clustered Tongan communities around New Zealand, and students always had to pull their weight in doing their fatonga – ‘that is the Tongan way of reciprocity’ (Student No. 13).

**Conclusion**

Tongan students’ academic achievement results are markedly affected by the different contexts of kāinga, through the intersection or interaction of tā and vā. This tā–vā interface can be harmonious or disharmonious within and between the Tongan and western cultures, especially between the students and pule'anga, their famili, siasi and fonua, referred to jointly as their kainga. Furthermore, inflexibility or flexibility within the two cultural relationships in terms of tā and vā by all parties could at the least elicit social tensions, which, if not addressed, present obstacles to learning. There is a need to support Tongan students to enable them to move freely yet carefully within the two cultures and to understand how the varying senses of tā and vā are manifested in tensional kāinga meanings and relationships within their learning environments. Kāinga, at different levels, are significant for Tongan students’ academic achievement because their lives are interwoven within their spiritual, social and physical environments in their relationships with pule'anga, their famili, siasi and fonua.

**References**


## Appendix – Participants’ Profiles

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