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FACTORS AFFECTING EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT OF TONGANS IN AUCKLAND

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ABSTRACT

Tongans have always experienced difficulties achieving in the New Zealand education system and it is still very much the case today. Some Tongans have managed to succeed but still a considerable number of them have failed.

This research study examines factors that contribute to the academic success and failure of former Tongan secondary school students in Auckland. It focuses on their experiences at home, the support they received and other external factors that affected them, in an attempt to provide an explanation for 'achievement' and 'underachievement' of Tongan students in Auckland.

A qualitative case study approach was used to study the experiences of twenty former Auckland secondary school students. The main methods of data collection were semi-structured interviews for student participants and questionnaires for parents.

Three main issues emerged from the findings. Firstly, parents and the home environment played a most significant part in determining the academic success or failure of their children. Secondly, certain aspects of the Tongan culture influence the values parents place on education and thus affect their perception of support for their children. Thirdly, the parents' degree of affiliation

with the church affects their decisions which gradually has an impact on their children.

As a consequence, the study recommends that parents need to realize the significance of the role they play in their children's education. Failure to recognize this could mean that 'underachievement' will continue to exist.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE SCOPE OF THE RESEARCH

1.0 Introduction

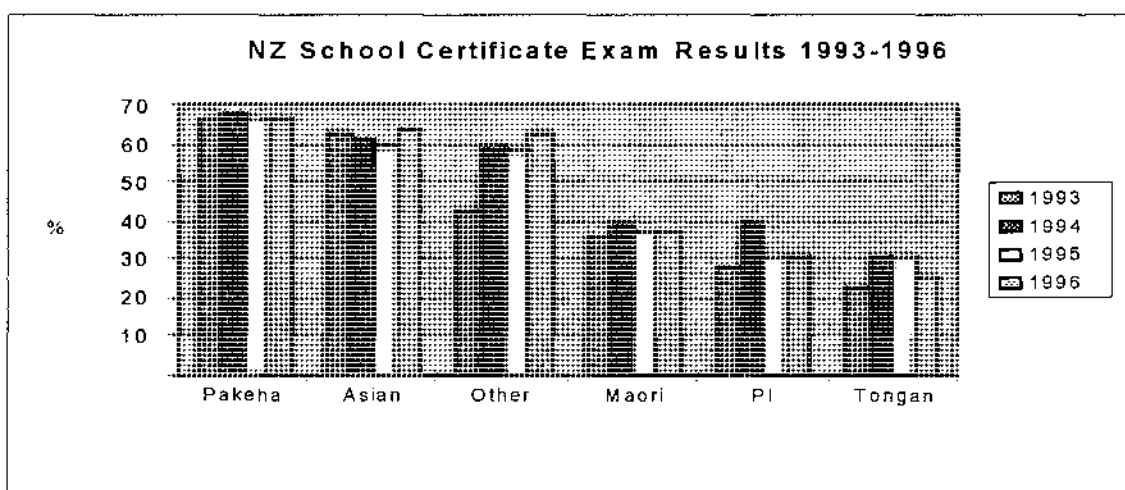
Underachievement in New Zealand secondary schools has been a problem for Pacific Island people for a long time and unemployment over the years is testimony to the presence of underachievement. (Apart from Hawk and Hill's (1996) study, limited research has addressed this problem). Underachievement is closely associated with a person's socio-economic status and ethnic background. It has been a stigma that has been associated with Pacific Island and Maori people in New Zealand for a long time. Their children's academic performance in School Certificate and Bursary exams throughout the years has confirmed that Tongan students' achievement is below that of other ethnic groups in New Zealand.

Fig. 1.1 and Table 1.1 and 1.2 illustrate that underachievement is indeed a problem associated with Pacific Islanders and judging from the graphs, it seems that it is going to persist into the twenty-first century if nothing is done to address it. For instance, Figure 1.1 shows that Tongans have consistently been located at the bottom of the New Zealand School Certificate Examinations between 1993 to 1996, compared to other ethnic groups. Tables 1.1 and 1.2 also indicate the low level of academic achievement of Tongan students in both

University Bursaries and School Certificate examinations in terms of the grades obtained between the period 1993 to 1996. What is disturbing is the fact that not all Pacific Island students are underachievers. Of course there are a considerable number of Tongan students who fail the exam or drop out of school, but there are others from low socio-economic backgrounds who do extremely well. This contrast made the researcher realize that a person's socio-economic status is not the sole contributing factor to the underachievement of Tongan students in New Zealand.

This thesis will attempt to identify the factors that contribute to underachievement and those that facilitate educational achievement, based on the past educational experiences of Tongan secondary school leavers in New Zealand.

Fig.1.1



(Based on statistics supplied by NZQA, 1997)

Table 1.1

UNIVERSITY BURSARIES 1993-1996*Tongan Candidates living in New Zealand Grade Distribution Percentages*

YEAR	Total	A	B	C	D	E
1993	645	4.7	10.4	27.1	41.2	16.3
1994	642	5.1	8.4	34.1	36.8	15.1
1995	562	4.1	14.4	35.2	35.4	10.3
1996	657	1.2	5.8	13.4	32.3	11.1

(Based on statistics supplied by NZQA, op cit)

Table 1.2

SCHOOL CERTIFICATE 1993 - 1996*Tongan Candidates living in New Zealand Grade Distribution Percentages.*

Year	Total	A	B	C	D	E
1993	1757	1.4	6.9	15.1	42.8	33.9
1994	1629	2.4	6.4	18.5	42.1	30.6
1995	1909	1.2	8.1	21.9	40.3	28.5
1996	1601	1.0	7.9	17.6	37.9	35.5

(Based on statistics supplied by NZQA, op cit)

1.1 Researcher's Story

The choice of research topic arises from the researcher's curiosity and distress at seeing Tongans not doing well in a country that seems to have everything a Tongan student needs. The researcher's primary and secondary education was spend in Tonga. After primary school he attended a state boarding institution for boys in the 1980's. The food was of poor quality; students were often hungry; the manual work in the farm (after school and early in the morning) was hard, and he was away from his family five days a week. Sometimes he had to pretend to be sick just to go home and eat something good. Regardless of the difficulties he faced as a high school student, he was still able to achieve.

His interest in the academic achievement of Tongan students in New Zealand originated from the fact that he was a secondary school teacher in Tonga and have always believed that good facilities assist educational achievement. He only came to realize the contrast been Tongan and New Zealand schools when a friend invited him to her high school in South Auckland early last year. What shocked him as an outsider was the fact that the facilities in South Auckland schools were not what he expected. He heard stories upon arrival in New Zealand that South Auckland schools were mainly for Pacific Islanders and that they were not good. To his surprise, they had all the facilities that a Tongan high school principal could ever want - good library, computers, cafeteria, self contained staff room, gym, and well facilitated class rooms.

The researcher has taught senior forms for three years and helped prepare his students for the national exams. English was and still is a major problem for students in Tonga because it is a second language. It often becomes a barrier that prevents some of our students from achieving at school. The facilities at his school were very limited compared to the schools that he saw here in Auckland. The Encyclopedias in their library are long out of date and there were few good reading books available for their students. Staff resources were limited and he had to ask some of his friends who taught in government schools to lend him some of their materials.

The cold season in Tonga was difficult for students. Their classrooms had a lot of missing louvres and the students were often cold when he used to run extra classes at night or early in the morning. However, one of the things that he admired was their effort as they turned up - braving the cold for the sake of knowledge. Not all of them passed, though, but the effort shown by these students was exceptional.

On the contrary, the standard of living in New Zealand is higher and Tongan children have access to good quality and well facilitated schools, whose resources are of much better quality than the one the researcher had been to. In addition, these children are exposed at an early age to the English language, something that is regarded by most parents in Tonga as the key to success. New Zealand offers the necessary tools for effective learning, yet a lot

of Tongan students still underachieve. The researcher's visit to this South Auckland school made him aware that there is more to educational achievement in New Zealand than just well facilitated schools. This visit was what really stimulated his interest in this study.

Gibson and Ogbu (1991) propose that the traditional explanation of ethnic minority underachievement has failed to consider the perspectives of the groups themselves. This is because the dominant group evaluates the behaviours of minorities from the perspective of the dominant group's perceptions of their own social reality or from the perceptions and interpretations that the dominant group members have of their own social reality of minorities (cited in Callender, 1997:14). The researcher has decided to do this study on Tongans in order to ascertain, from their own perspective, the factors affecting achievement and underachievement.

As a Tongan scholar, the researcher believes he has a responsibility to his people in finding ways that will help them better understand the problem of underachievement. He believes that this is a very important study because it attempts to reveal the factors that assist and hinder educational achievement of Tongans in New Zealand. The outcome of this study is hoped to provide Tongan parents with information that will help them better understand their children's educational needs, more aware of the problems that their children face at school, realize the impact their own priorities have on their children's

achievement and help them facilitate a home environment that is conducive to success.

1.2 Research Questions

1. What factors appear to contribute to the success of Tongan secondary school students in Auckland?
2. What are the obstacles/barriers that prevent them from succeeding?
3. What support do parents provide for their children to enable them to achieve their goals ?
4. Is this support sufficient and relevant to their children's need ?
5. Does the amount of parental influence and control over their children have any effect on their academic achievement and personal adjustment ?

1.3 Thesis Outline

This thesis consists of eight chapters. Chapter Two reviews the literature that is related to this study. It also provides a definition of underachievement and a discussion of the of the life of Tongans in New Zealand and their impact on the educational achievement of their children.

Chapter Three provides the context for this study. It deals with the culture and life of Tongans in Auckland and how they have adapted to their new environment. Chapter Four discusses the methodologies used for data collection and analysis in this study, with an emphasis on the procedures

followed during data collection. Chapter Five is the presentation of the findings arising from the interviews and questionnaires. Chapter Six consists of a discussion on the analysis of data collected. Chapter Seven discusses the implications of the findings and also includes recommendations for future research.