

JOHN ROHS
ARANUI HIGH SCHOOL
PRINCIPAL'S SABBATICAL REPORT 2011
(deferred to 2012)



Background:

Aranui High has a significant and growing Pasifika roll (20% of the total school roll) which is almost exclusively Samoan, with a very small representation of Tongan and Cook Is families. I am fortunate that I enjoy a very close and positive working relationship with the Pasifika community in Aranui and beyond. At level 1 NCEA our Pasifika students are the highest achieving ethnic group in the school. While this tapers off past level 1, the school is looking at ways of continuing to sustain the success which Pasifika students enjoy at this level. Many Pasifika students at Aranui High move into our Aranui Academy programmes, particularly in year 13 and above, because of their love of sport, music and culture. The school employs a part time Samoan language teacher and pastoral care worker. Students prepare themselves annually for their involvement in the Christchurch Polyfest, which consumes a lot of their focus and time during term 1.

I was awarded my Principal's sabbatical in 2011, to take place in term 2. The devastation of the February earthquake created turmoil for Aranui High School and its community. It was not appropriate to take leave in 2011 as the second term was then followed by further disruption to the life of the school, with another major quake in June, and the loss of essential services for some time. I was very grateful to be able to defer my sabbatical to term 2, 2012.

In 2011, as I was not able to take leave to complete my sabbatical, I visited Samoa twice during vacation breaks, to familiarise myself with the country and to meet with Ministry of Education personnel there. On my

second trip I was able to make a complete tour of Savaii and visit four colleges, in order to meet with the principals and to donate a Christchurch earthquake book to each school. This familiarisation process proved to be invaluable in terms of getting a better ‘feel’ for what working in Samoa might be like.

Sabbatical Objective:

“To enhance professional knowledge and understanding of the Pasifika community, and to engage with the Samoan community to improve fluency in Samoan language, gain experience working with Samoan educational professionals and to make an educational contribution through a project.”

In early May 2012 I set off for my professional learning adventure to Samoa. I had been able to identify Lepa-Lotofaga College as the school of choice for my work, as it most resembled Aranui High School in terms of a post-disaster context. Lepa Village is on the southern coast of Upolu in the Aleipata area, which was devastated by the September 2009 tsunami, which claimed almost 200 lives, mostly in this specific area. The school is still in a recovery phase from this disaster in terms of infrastructure. It has no internet access or working phone system. The school has approx 200 students.



Lepa-Lotofaga College

At Lepa College there is a shortage of trained and qualified teachers, which means that some courses are taught by teachers with a very limited knowledge of the subject matter. For instance, the Science programme was taught in the main by an English teacher, and the Art programme was taught by a Mathematics teacher. During the period of my stay at Lepa College, the whole school was engaged in the annual Science project. For most students this involved making a poster. The theme for the year was climate change. The two year 13 Biology students were able to make an acceptable model of climate change on the environment. (pictured below) The school is poorly equipped in most regards although has a sizeable library, which is quite impressive compared to that of other schools I have

visited on previous visits to Samoa. A number of staff did not appear to be very friendly initially, until I discovered that this was reticence related to poor English rather than anything else. In actual fact, it was easy to build up warm relationships with both staff and students at the school.



Science Fair projects

The school environment was a very orderly one, with all students wearing their school uniform. The Principal and Vice-Principal Mrs Tuputala Lene keeps very strict order, although curiously, a very large number of students are late for school. This is apparently due to transport issues in terms of getting to school from the more remote outer villages. I also noted that some students walked enormous distances to get home in the afternoon. (Up to a two hour walk home or longer still) Physical punishment was commonplace, either by teachers striking students, mainly in the face, or with the use of a stick or strap. At the moment, the issue of the continuation of corporal punishment in Samoan schools is a very contentious issue. Many teachers fear that all law and order in schools will disintegrate if corporal punishment is discontinued. The “spare the rod and spoil the child” mentality is still strongly supported, especially by the churches.

The day at the college began and ended with long assemblies. In the morning, the students who were there on time sat on the floor in the room used as an assembly hall. There was always a Bible reading, student recitation of a psalm, a long sermon of some kind related to the Bible passage, and the singing of hymns. The singing was of overwhelming beauty. It is hard to imagine New Zealand students being able to sing collectively in this manner. The school day was long – five hours with one very short lunch break, and often unbearably hot. Students and staff struggled with the heat as much as I did. A lot of rote learning could be heard around the classes. The rooms were equipped with very worn blackboards, but many staff chose to use large pieces of paper taped over these rather than using chalk on the boards. Large passages of work were also on display around rooms, which were also for memorising.

For most of the time which I worked at Lepa-Lotofaga College, I assisted with the English language programme. While all secondary education is

required to be delivered in English, this is rarely the case, even though the external examinations are written in English. Most students that I taught struggled with the demands of the language in the English programme and even more so, with the level of difficulty of the examinations. The year 13 English examination was as difficult as the equivalent NCEA Level 3 papers. The biggest obstacle to student progress was poor vocabulary knowledge combined with a lack of intuitive understanding. Part of my stay at Lepa coincided with the beginning of the vacation period. Senior students were required to come to school during at least the first week of the break. I had double periods organised for me to work intensively with the Year 13 students, to help them with their examination preparation. The work with the students was laborious and challenging, as the students' capacity to think intuitively was extremely limited. The ability to deal with a piece of text and to unpack its meaning and, as well as inferring the writer's intention, was hard work, but very rewarding. I enjoyed take steps back to scaffold the learning from basic literal meaning through the levels required to help students make intuitive judgements about a piece of written text.

Another major hurdle I was confronted with was evaluating the effectiveness of my teaching and getting feedback from students about their understanding and their learning. Among the senior students there was an anxiety to please me, as well as shame about admission of ignorance and I discovered that students would not reveal a lack of understanding of the subject matter being taught, when I stopped to check their learning. The question "Did you understand that?" would always be greeted with every hand being raised, or a chorus of "Yes Mr Rohs." This discovery was a very valuable step forward in my effectiveness as I found that my questioning regarding their comprehension needed to be guided in a way that made students understand the reasoning behind my questioning and also that my questioning could not be open-ended, but rather very specific and precise. Drawing on local examples and illustrations from my growing familiarity with Samoan life and culture was helpful in this regard. The plentiful supply of Biblical passages on the walls in classrooms also proved to be very helpful. I was very pleased that by the time I left, students were asking me questions and checking out their understanding of what I was teaching. This was very encouraging.



*Prefects at
Lepa-Lotofaga
College*

My observation about the teaching and learning process at my school was that there was a strong emphasis on the rote learning of factual information and the memorisation of such. Classrooms around the school had posters with long Bible passages (in English) which were expected to be fluently memorised. I was very impressed with the capacity of students to memorise these passages. This was also evident in the morning assemblies, where students recited long Scripture passages out loud as well as prayers. The Bible and the church clearly play a major role in Samoan education and provide a frame of reference for the educational world view of young people growing up. However, this also means that in terms of the approach of young people towards their learning, students do not question teachers or challenge their learning in any way. Students that I was teaching simply believed everything I told them – there was no precedent for them to evaluate this or to think critically about their learning. Taking learning at face value meant it was hard to engage in open discussion. Questioning the teacher's knowledge and authority would be unthinkable as a total lapse of the Samoan cultural concept of *fa'aaloalo* (respect) This culture of respect manifests itself in a range of ways from the delightful to the most profound: Year 13 students vied for the privilege of taking my bag to the staff room and carrying my teaching things around the school, to the more important cultural learning in the family context of how to arrange my feet when sitting on the ground as a guest in the fale.

The concept of gifts and giving in Samoan culture is a complicated one for *palagi* to learn and understand. On the one hand I found that a lot of Samoans thought that as a *palagi* I had an inexhaustible supply of cash to provide for every charitable cause imaginable, but on the other hand, I found even small gifts, while expected, were always reciprocated in differing ways. My gift to the school at the request of the principal was a laminating machine. It was her dream for the school to own one, and as they are readily available for purchase in New Zealand it was a reasonable and manageable gesture to make.



Students posing for the official school photo

Return to Lepa-Lotofaga College

In October 2012 I was able to return briefly to Lepa-Lotofaga College. It was a thrill to be able to do so. I presented a book to each of the Head Prefects from their counterparts at Aranui High School and was able to make a donation to help a year 13 student with their Year 1 University fees. While these fees do not appear to be exorbitant by New Zealand standards, they are well outside the reach of an average Samoan family to be able to afford. (approx 2,000 Tala for the fee for most non-specialist 2 semester year programmes)



Head prefects with the books I presented them with in October

It was a great privilege to be able to spend time in Samoa in 2012. In terms of my objectives, I felt a pleasing degree of success. I was able to quickly integrate into the life of the school, and was able to provide useful support to the teaching and learning programme, which I had been keen to do. I was equally pleased with the connection I was able to make with the students and staff at the college.

The bonus of the time there was the fact that I was able to develop friendships with local people in the area where I was staying and working, and had my first experiences of being invited into family homes, which is a totally different experience to visiting Samoa and staying in a resort. I greatly appreciated these invitations and feel indebted to these families for their hospitality and friendship.

In terms of my objective, I was also able to make progress in my learning of many Samoan phrases and words, which, despite the difficulty of the language, was encouraging. I enjoy using these in my local context at Aranui High and with Samoan families I meet here. I also gained an understanding of the complexity of the Samoan language, as it has a formal "respect" or matai language which is a complete layer of higher language quite unlike any of the other languages I ever learned in my

career as a foreign language teacher in the past. I find this fascinating. Equally interesting is the way in which particular consonants are interchanged in Samoan, depending on the formality level of the conversation. In particular, the constant exchange of t and k , which was initially bewildering to me, has started to make some sense. I feel as if Samoan is finally starting to make some sense to me!

My experience of working and relating to the young people of Lepa-Lotofaga College was an extraordinarily valuable one, and I am hoping that at some stage in the future, I will have the opportunity to be involved in this kind of professional contribution again.

