

Sabbatical Report

Term 3 2008

Schooling in Samoa: A Case Study

Catholic Principal's Conference: Adelaide September 2008



**Monica Johnson
Marist College
Alberton Ave
Mt Albert
Auckland**

Acknowledgements

Sincere thanks to the Ministry of Education for their wisdom in recognising the need for Principals to have time out. These precious 10 weeks enabled me to spend time reading and reflecting, experience the realities of secondary schooling and life in Samoa, attend a Catholic Principal's Conference and most significantly to have some 'dessert time' before returning to busy school life.

My gratitude to the Board and staff at Marist College for supporting my leave, and in particular to Mrs Cecilia Adams for so competently taking over as Acting Principal for the term, and the Senior Management Team that supported her.

Thank you to all staff and students at St Mary's College, Samoa for allowing me to be part of your special school for a few weeks.

Executive Summary

With Government initiatives to improve educational outcomes for Pasifika students the focus is increasingly on 'presence, engagement and achievement' for all. A significant part of this is increasing teacher's understanding of and empathy for Pasifika students.

In 2007 there were 115,000 Samoans living in New Zealand. 58% of the total Samoan population was born here. Almost 73% of the total Pasifika population live in Auckland making it the biggest Polynesian city in the world.

17% of the Samoan population here hold a post-school qualification compared to 32% of the total population (NZ Census). Tertiary enrolments of Pasifika students are low, especially in higher degree courses

Although Pasifika underachievement needs to be addressed in early levels of schooling, changes can also be made at secondary school. While improvements have been made to percentages of students passing Level 1 and 2 NCEA, supporting students to focus on achieving more level 3 qualifications is the next step. With NCEA entries achievement standard versus unit standard entries need to be analysed.

Improving outcomes for Pasifika students is a strategic goal of Marist College and Government as expressed in the Pasifika Education Plan 2008 - 2012. A greater understanding of Pasifika cultures, values and background is important as we plan and implement strategies for improved outcomes in our school.

The New Zealand Curriculum states that schools should "reflect New Zealand's cultural diversity and value the histories and traditions of all its people" (page 9) It goes on to state that students should be encouraged to

“value diversity, as found in our different cultures, languages and heritages”
(page 10)

Purpose

My sabbatical was in two parts. During the first part that I will be reporting on more fully, I sought to gain a greater understanding of a Pasifika culture. While I had planned to visit Tonga, due to circumstances beyond my control I ended up in Samoa.

As Principal of an Auckland school the starting point for me was immersion in one Pasifika culture, living within the school compound in the village community of Vaimosa, Samoa.

The second part involved travelling to Adelaide and attending the Australian Catholic Principal's Conference.

Overview

St Mary's College Samoa is a Year 9 – 13 Catholic Girl's College situated at Vaimosa, a few minutes from Apia. It was founded by the Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary in 1958. Sr Pelenatete Peni is the current Principal. There is a staff of 18 for the current roll of 355 students with three religious Sisters on the staff, including one from the Mission Sister's Order. The remainder are lay teachers. The Catholic schools operate under the Catholic Education Office that has jurisdiction over approximately 7000 students at Catholic Secondary and Primary Schools in Samoa. A'e'au Chris Hazelman is the Director of Catholic Schools. While the schools receive government funding for operations, the schools charge fees to pay for the teacher's salaries. These range from a starting salary in the Catholic system of approximately 15,000 Samoan Tala (2 tala equals \$1.00 NZ) The PTA's take responsibility for school maintenance.

The classes work in year level groups and this year, 2008, there are 38 Year 13 students, most with aspirations to go on to tertiary study, in particular the National University of Samoa. A few hope to gain scholarships to study in New Zealand. Senior students sit the Pacific Secondary Senior Certificate examinations from Fiji, although Samoa is moving towards replacing this with its own certificate from 2009. Approximately 40% of the certificate is internally assessed. A National syllabus is taught in all subjects. The school year has three terms, starting mid-January and finishing mid- November. Challenges facing the school include getting sufficient qualified staff, old resources especially text books, no day relief system when staff is absent, and very few computers.

The school day starts at 8.00, with 6 x 50 minute periods. Students start arriving from 7.00 to carry out their class duties and assist the grounds man keep the school tidy. Daily duties within the school compound, as it is referred

to, include gardening, cleaning the library, cleaning the toilets, sweeping classrooms, racking up grass and picking up leaves. The grounds are spacious, with many well established shade trees and native frangipani and hibiscus. There are also many fruit trees such as bread fruit and pawpaw. Buildings include classroom blocks with large verandas on each side, and louvre windows the length of the room on each side to allow for good cross ventilation of air. All windows have netting on the outside to protect the rooms from insects. There are 7 dogs that belong to the Sisters and they are very much part of the daily life at the school, often seen asleep in classrooms or playing with the students.

With a 30 minute recess after period 3, school finishes at 2.00 pm. Many students travel by bus or are collected by car. There is a school tuck shop that is well supported. Food is supplied by a local bakery and is served by senior students with staff supervision.

Students come from both town and rural areas. The village structure is very evident as you drive around, with churches of many denominations, and numerous meeting houses or fono fales part at the centre of the communities. In the rural areas it is common to see machete wielding men wandering along potholed roads carrying kits of coconuts or breadfruit, or the days catch of fish strung on poles. Pigs and chooks roam freely through the villages. The resorts are gated communities with security guards posted at the entrance, typically down a very long drive way. The Church bells in the village ring at 5.30 to signal Morning Prayer and again at 6.00 for evening prayer. Sunday is totally focussed around Church and family and all but a few essential shops are closed. The haze and smell of smoke from umus cooking the mid – day meal for the families after church fills the air on Sundays.

Bottled water is common as it is still not considered safe to drink tap water in most places, including some hotels in Apia. Open drains are still the norm with flooding common during frequent tropical downpours. Denghy fever is an on-going problem. The range of food available to purchase is limited, and fresh fruit and vegetables are expensive. Local bananas, coconuts and mangoes are the exception.

Student Comments about Life as a Teenager in Samoa

“We are 17 year old girls, born and raised in the heart of Polynesia, Samoa and this is our story. Life as a girl within Samoan society is quite challenging. Traditions state that girls are to be guarded and treasured within the family that means our every move; every step is watched by parents, family and brothers. That doesn't mean that we don't have our freedom. Girls being girls love to go out. Saturdays with our 'besties' is something we look forward to. Our programme includes catching a movie, eating at Macdees, hanging in town and of course a lot of laughter. But life is not all fun and games. At school we get down to business. Bell rings at 7.55am and we must be seated in class after our daily duties of cleaning our compound. Being late means staying to clean the library, weed the gardens or our personal favourite cleaning the 'palace' aka the toilet block. Yup life is hard! We have 6 subjects

a day each is 55 minutes. If you don't have a subject you have a study period. We love our study periods to finish up last night's homework, have an early lunch and retelling the movie from the night before."

"...Our lives as a teenager involves different parts like we are part of St Mary's College, part of our villages and churches. We also like playing netball, volleyball, reading etc. In our villages we have rules to follow like the curfew in the evening, and the bell to tell us the time for evening prayer. Our hopes are to achieve our aims like passing our exams, and to reach the next level of education."

"Life as a teenager in Samoa, we experience fun, experience life and our culture is as strong as a rock. Here in Samoa our culture plays a major role in our daily routine. We are both prefects and to us, it's a great honour to get the students full attention and also their respect for us is unexplainable. We sometimes think that it's the end of the world when we come to internal assessment. We are fully loaded with too much study. But mostly it is full of fun..."

"We as teenagers of Samoan descent, have many boundaries and barriers in our lives. For example, we don't have that much freedom, our parents are over protective. We as Samoan children in terms of our culture are meant to be seen and never heard. We value our culture and family as it is what holds us Samoan people together."

School life involves the usual routines of assemblies, house competitions and special events. One such occasion was the Catholic Schools Fun Sports Day where the 5 Catholic schools, Paul V1 College, St Mary's College, St Joseph's College, Don Bosco College, Chanel College and Catholic Senior College gathered at a sports ground for a morning of activities. The students were mixed - divided into teams according to their houses. It was thoroughly enjoyed by the students who whole heartedly entered into the spirit of the day competing in 8 events such as sack races, three legged races, egg and spoon, and the banana tree relay! The many vigorous chants that were part of the day were led by highly skilled fuataimais or timekeeper beating the rhythm. The day began with a march past, prayers and the National Anthem, and concluded in the same way.

Another special day was when a group of students and teachers from Wallis Islands visited. They were welcomed with cultural dances and singing and they in return performed items.

During my time at the school I took staff professional development sessions, spoke to assemblies and classes about New Zealand and filled in as a day relief teacher when staff were absent. Both staff and students were most welcoming and their hospitality was most generous and humbling.

Observations

1. Classrooms are very much teacher dominated with students very passive throughout the well structured lessons. The methodology was usually copying from the textbook (often very old) or from the blackboard. One Year 12 English class was using a very outdated text published in 1982. All of the teaching was directed to the whole class, with no evidence of any group work or inquiry-based learning.
2. The level of language in the available text books was often very difficult for students to understand
3. While all students learn English from the time they start school at 5, those who are in homes in which only Samoan is spoken often struggle with the English language
4. Respect for elders is very obvious with compliance the norm. They have a sound understanding of expectations and boundaries.
5. The school curriculum has a very limited range of subjects and is very prescriptive
6. The students have a cheerful and positive demeanour and are very eager to please.
7. Very little technology is used and access to the internet is minimal. However, mobile phone use is well established.
8. Classroom facilities are very basic and in the 5 schools I visited very old and often in need of maintenance.
9. The students are very proud of their Samoan culture and willingly share aspects of it with visitors. They are distinctly Samoan and prefer not to be classed as Pasifika students.
10. Television plays a major part in the daily routine at night, with a delayed broadcast of news from New Zealand available daily. However, newspapers and radio are very much local, so little world news available.
11. The schools are very mono-cultural, with very few ethnic minorities present.
12. The students are always fastidiously presented, with an enormous pride in their school uniform.
13. Wages in general are very low. Often families rely on money sent from overseas to subsidise living.
14. The majority of students live in villages with extended families and traditional lifestyles
15. Religion plays a major part in the lives of Samoan people. Catholic, Morman and Bahai churches were common, with large well-resourced complexes the norm.
16. It is very difficult to hire trained teachers and there is no day relief system. Some of the untrained teachers were paid as little as 10,000 tala (\$5000).

Challenges for Students Arriving in New Zealand

1. The climate, and cold winter temperatures, must be a significant challenge to those coming from Samoa. The temperatures seldom

- drop below 24 degrees, day or night, with the norm being around 30 degrees, with no winter.
2. The multi-cultural nature of our schools with rich cultural diversity
 3. Being referred to as Pasifika students. They are Samoan and very proud of their identity
 4. Teaching style with co-operative and interactive learning. This concept is not evident in Samoan schools as everything is teacher directed and dominated.
 5. A significant increase in the number and types of subjects available
 6. The freedom that New Zealand teenagers expect with families a less dominant influence.
 7. Religion not a dominant part of many New Zealander's life.
 8. Technology and the use of internet as part of daily life.
 9. Limited world view.

For the increasing number of students of Samoan descent born in New Zealand schools need to be cognisant of some of the identity issues facing Pacific youth growing up in New Zealand and be responsive to their needs.

Implications and Strategies for New Zealand Schools

1. Professional development for teachers. It is paramount that teachers respect and incorporate an understanding of Pasifika culture in their daily interaction with students. As with all students they respond positively to teachers who genuinely like and understand them. However, students must have clear expectations and boundaries as traditionally they are used to firm direction from elders.
2. Pasifika students generally have strong family and community links. It is important that the same strong links are encouraged with the whole school community. Traditionally, families view the role of the school separately from the home. Continually improving the dialogue and partnerships between school and home is a key factor in raising achievement for students
3. Role models and mentors that reinforce the value of educational achievement, and foster self-belief are important
4. Integration of Pasifika contexts giving students the opportunity for using material with Pasifika themes and incorporation of Pasifika aspects in dance, music, liturgy and visual arts to show that the school acknowledges the identity of the pupils. Other students should also be encouraged to understand and value the history and traditions of other cultures.
5. Educating parents about the different teaching styles and expectations of schools concerning homework, research and attendance is vital as is raising awareness of New Zealand qualifications and systems.
6. Teaching of cooperative learning strategies and using effective pedagogy is most significant for students who have not been in the New Zealand school system since starting school.

Conclusion

My time in Samoa was both challenging and special. Challenging living in a school compound within a village with few modern conveniences (such as hot water), temperatures of around 30 degrees with very high humidity, lots of mosquitoes, other insects and free roaming dogs. Challenging watching teachers work in very basic, old classrooms with very few resources. Special because of the wonderful hospitality received the delightful happy students and proud Samoan culture I experienced.

The pedagogy, curriculum and school routines are very different from that in New Zealand schools, but the values and philosophy in the school was testimony that the Marist Charism is the same world-wide, and in that sense the school was very similar to Marist College. The experience was a huge learning curve and I gained significant insight into the Samoan way of life.

Pasifika student numbers are increasing at Marist College and we need to make sure that we put strategies in place to ensure that achievement continues to improve, that the type of education they receive fits their needs, their culture and their aspirations, whether they were born in New Zealand or have recently arrived. Good learning strategies, sound study practices, empathetic teachers, and regular attendance are some of the key factors to achieve positive outcomes. A supportive partnership between family, student and school is the starting point.

The second part of my sabbatical was a trip to Australia to spend time with my son, and to attend a conference.

Catholic Principal's Conference Adelaide September 2008

The Conference was about our shared mission with the Catholic Church in the twenty-first century and the implications for Principals as leaders.

The range of Australian and International speakers included Dr Gemma Simmonds from Heythrop College in London whose address was titled "Joined up Living for the New Milenium". One of the interesting notions she spoke about was about how secularisation privileges individual well-being over the notion of the common good. She asserted that profit and efficiency have become higher values than the survival of human persons and individuals.

Brother Vincent Mallya, from Tanzania Christian Brothers Eat Africa talked about sustainability and how Africans view themselves as part of the environment. At his school animal and human waste has been converted to biogas for heating and for cooking food for 200 boarders. All rain water is collected and treated grey water used to irrigate gardens.

Rev Doctor Richard Leonard directs the Australian Catholic Office for Film and Broadcasting. He stated that after the family and school, the media culture is the third largest influence on the formation of our students. E-mailing, texting, blogs, bebo, face book, google, podcasts are here to stay so he urged us to consider the benefits and to embrace this technology in our schools. He asserts that we are now educating a visual culture, so in his view we need to be teaching ethical responses, critical consumption and healthy balance in student's lives.

As always the opportunity to talk with many Australian counterparts about a wide range of educational issues, visit schools and also spend time with New Zealand colleagues was invaluable. I was most interested in models of staff professional development. Questions included things such as length of time, time of day, frequency, compulsory or optional, cluster groups or school based, school-lead or outside facilitators / presenters, department based or across curricular. My quest to find a suitable model for Marist is no closer to being solved. I am still experimenting and refining what we do. I am even more convinced however, that regular, targeted, on-going school-based learning conversations are fundamental for continuous school improvement.

Conclusion

I am grateful for the time that I had away from the demands of school. It enabled me to read, reflect, synthesise, consider perspectives, gain new insights, and have many discussions with colleagues and others who I encountered. The venture into the intriguing world of Samoan culture was invaluable but most of all a chance to "recharge the batteries" was wonderful.

References

Mila – Schaaf K, Robinson E, Schaaf D, Watson PD. (2008) A Health Profile of Pasific Youth: Findings of Youth 2000 – A National Secondary School Youth Health and Wellbeing Survey. Auckland. The University of Auckland.

Ministry of Education (2008) Pasifika Education Plan 2008 – 2012

Ministry of Education Northern Region Pasifika Fono Feedback (June 2008)

New Zealand Curriculum Ministry of Education 2007