

Culturally Responsive Pastoral Care: Creative Strategies for Embracing Learner Diversity

Anamua Lole, Manukau Institute of Technology, New Zealand
Krishan Mani, Manukau Institute of Technology, New Zealand

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Abstract

New Zealand Pacific peoples make up the third largest ethnic group in New Zealand, representing a significant and growing demographic playing a crucial role in the nation's future. The study highlighted that there is a lack of consistency in high-quality teaching and learning necessary for all Pasifika learners to succeed. This research project aims to identify effective pastoral care strategies to support Pasifika students to complete their tertiary studies in a culturally responsive context. The research team used a pragmatic methodology combining Pasifika and Western perspectives, starting with a literature review and beginning talanoa (conversations) through an online survey. The aim is to foster meaningful conversations to understand and improve pastoral care for Pasifika learners. The overall project phases include firstly defining pastoral care, secondly identifying best practices, and thirdly outlining its core components. The focus of this paper will be to report on the first phase of the project. Findings from the first phase identified initial key elements in effective pastoral care for Pasifika learners that included inclusivity, cultural respect, community collaboration and staff training. Additionally, the findings indicate the need for the education sector to recognize and address historical and structural inequities affecting Pasifika students and to provide additional resources and support as necessary. This study could have a significant impact, especially if it leads to culturally responsive changes to policy/practice.

Keywords: pastoral care, Pasifika learner, tertiary education

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Introduction

Pasifika learners represent a significant and growing demographic in New Zealand, playing a crucial role in the nation's future. Education policies and frameworks such as the Education Act 1989 and Te Whāriki curriculum, go only so far as to address the challenges that hinder the academic achievement and wellbeing of Pasifika learners (Ministry of Education, 2019). This research project is an exploration of the perspectives of Pasifika learners, with the aim of identifying innovative pastoral care strategies that are culturally grounded and learner-informed for enhancing educational outcomes.

Literature Review

Pacific cultures are predominantly formed on oral tradition and as such, the transmission of history and culture is done so through oral expression. This literature review is therefore representative of the written and published works pertinent to the aims and goals of this project to do with Pasifika culture and pastoral care strategies.

Physical, Social, Spiritual and Cultural Needs of Learners

Pastoral care in New Zealand schools should aim to support the overall well-being of students, addressing their physical, social, spiritual, and cultural needs. This holistic approach ensures that students feel valued and supported in their learning environment (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2022).

The Education (Pastoral Care of Tertiary and International Learners) Code of Practice 2021

The Education Code of Practice 2021 outlines the responsibilities of educational institutions to provide a safe and supportive environment for all learners. This includes proactive monitoring and responsive practices to ensure student well-being (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2021).

Inclusive and Supportive Environments for Learning

The curriculum, school culture, and physical spaces should reflect, affirm, and celebrate Pacific identities – valuing indigenous languages and cultures as vital for identity development, and enabling students to “see themselves” in their learning environment. This includes correct pronunciation of names and integrating Pacific cultural content (Alkema, 2014).

Student Voice

Pastoral care also involves the student voice – incorporating student feedback and responding to their concerns leads to more effective support systems. Actively engaging with families and communities is an essential part of maintaining reciprocal and trusting relationships with students, their parents, and families (Chu-Fuluifaga & Ikiua-Pasi, 2021).

Methodology

This study utilises Talanoa research methodology. Talanoa is a widely used methodology applied in Pacific research that provides a culturally responsive context for meaningful

engagement and dialogue (Vaiotei, 2006). Talanoa methodology is based on Pacific cultural values and traditions that are familiar to many parts of the Pacific and enables significant conversations about important matters. Talanoa is used in this study as a dialogue-based, interactive and participatory approach to research, involving personal conversations with participants to gain insights on effective pastoral strategies for Pacific learners. Talanoa also allows for ongoing dialogue so that participants and co-researchers can revisit previous stories and points, to extract meaning or to discover ideas perhaps missed in the initial talanoa. This re-visiting or ongoing dialogue is termed “talatalanoa” (Vaiotei, 2016).

Results

Learner Perspectives on Pastoral Care

The initial survey data from 17 Pasifika learners reveals that pastoral care is conceptualised as a nurturing support system that addresses emotional, cultural, social, spiritual, and academic needs as depicted in Figure 1. When asked “What is pastoral care?” responses frequently included terms like “spiritual care” and “personal and emotional care.” Learners also emphasised the importance of face-to-face interactions, one-on-one conversations, and dialogical relationships in pastoral care approaches.

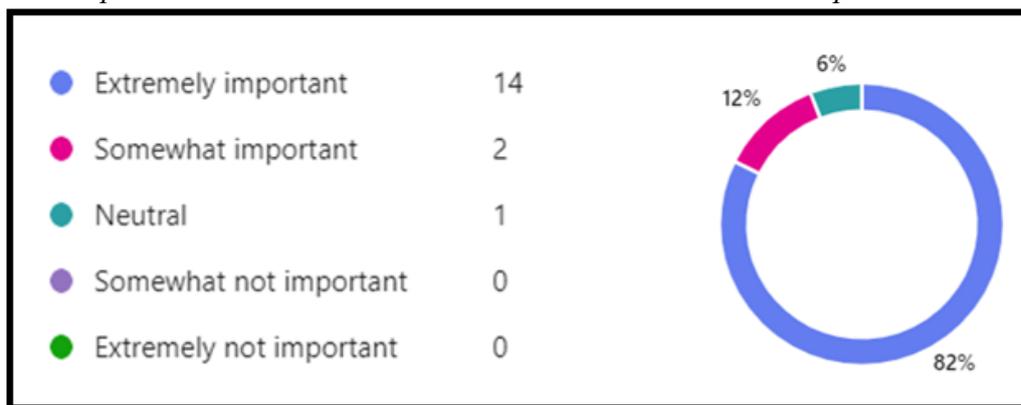
Figure 1

Pastoral Care From the Perspective of Pacific Learners



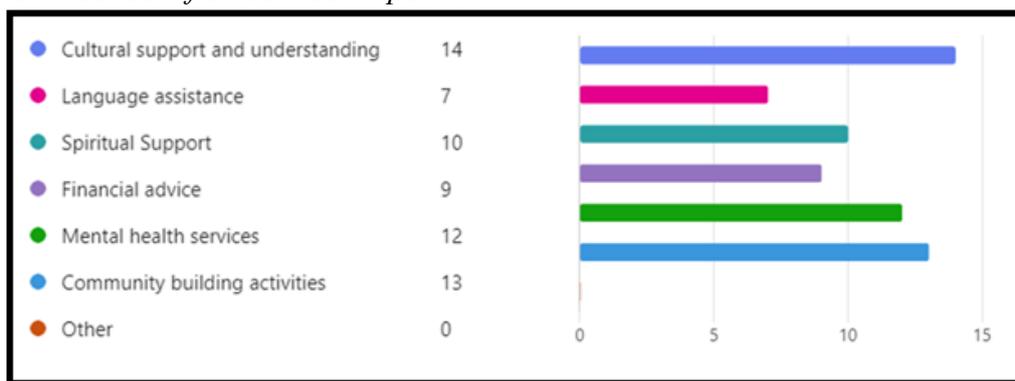
Of significance, 82% of respondents rated pastoral care as “extremely important” to their overall educational experience as depicted in Figure 2.

Figure 2
How Important Is Pastoral Care to Your Overall Educational Experiences?



The top four services identified as most important were cultural support and understanding; community building activities; mental health services and spiritual support, as ranked by Pasifika learners and depicted in Figure 3.

Figure 3
Services Identified as Most Important



These findings suggest that Pasifika learners value culturally and spiritually grounded support systems over transactional services such as financial advice or language assistance.

Key Pastoral Care Services

Cultural Support and Understanding

Pasifika learners bring rich traditions, values, and ways of knowing into the classroom. To help them feel included and respected, schools and tertiary providers need to use teaching approaches that reflect Pasifika cultures. This means training staff to be culturally competent, using Pasifika languages where possible, and including cultural practices such as ceremonies, celebrations, and storytelling in learning spaces (Fletcher et al., 2009; Hargraves, 2018). When learners see their culture valued, they feel a stronger sense of belonging and are more engaged.

Spiritual Support

Spirituality is an important part of life for many Pasifika learners. Providing spaces for prayer, connecting students with spiritual advisors, and weaving spiritual values into teaching can

support their overall wellbeing (Chu-Fuluifaga & Ikiua-Pasi, 2021). Recognising spirituality as part of holistic education helps learners feel respected and cared for.

Mental Health Services

Good mental health is vital for success. Pasifika learners may face stress, anxiety, and other challenges, so institutions need to offer professional counselling services, promote mental health awareness, and create safe spaces for peer support groups (Marshall et al., 2008). These supports help learners manage pressure and stay connected.

Community Building Activities

Building a sense of community is key for Pasifika learners. Social events, mentoring programmes, and group projects create opportunities for students to connect, share experiences, and support each other (Chu et al., 2013). These activities help learners feel part of an aiga (family) within the education setting.

Discussion

Innovative Pastoral Strategies

This study identified five innovative pastoral strategies; each aligned with relevant literature.

Cultivating Intentional, Nurturing, and Reciprocal Relationships

Strong, authentic relationships between educators and Pasifika learners are central to effective teaching and learning. Research shows that these relationships often matter more to learners than the course content itself (Chu et al., 2013; Southwick et al., 2017). When educators teach with “heart” and go the extra mile, they create culturally safe spaces that protect students from discrimination and encourage engagement (Nanai et al., 2017; Siope, 2011). These relationships are reciprocal, affirming learners’ identities and supporting their sense of belonging.

Affirming Diverse Pasifika Identities, Languages, and Cultural Capital

Recognising and valuing the cultural capital Pasifika learners bring to education strengthens confidence and belonging. Culturally responsive pedagogy goes beyond acknowledging diversity—it actively draws on students’ languages, traditions, and lived experiences to improve outcomes (Anderson, 2025; Easthope-Harper, n.d.; Ministry of Education, 2013). Embedding Pacific worldviews in curriculum design ensures learners see themselves reflected in their education, which fosters engagement and achievement.

Establishing Collaborative and Reciprocal Home–Educational Partnerships

In many Pasifika cultures, learning is understood as a collective responsibility. Effective pastoral care therefore includes families and communities as partners in education. Institutions can build these partnerships through culturally appropriate communication, church-based liaison activities, and workshops that demystify the education system for families (Chu, Glasgow, et al., 2013; Luafutu-Simpson, 2015). This collaboration ensures educational aspirations are shared and supported within the learner’s wider network.

Implementing Targeted Mentoring, Counselling, and Peer Support Systems

Structured mentoring and academic counselling—particularly during key transition points—are linked to improved retention and achievement. Appreciative Inquiry-based mentoring focuses on students’ strengths and leadership potential, creating a positive framework for growth (Chu, 2010; Madjar et al., 2010). Peer mentoring further strengthens support by fostering aiga-like (family-like) connections, enabling learners to draw on shared cultural bonds and collective resilience (Marshall et al., 2008).

Creating Culturally Inclusive and User-Friendly Learning Environments

Pasifika learners thrive in spaces that feel like a “learning village,” where cultural identity and communal learning styles are visible and valued. This includes employing Pasifika staff, creating dedicated cultural spaces such as fono rooms, and embedding Pacific values within curriculum content (Alkema, 2014; Horrocks et al., 2012). Inclusive environments should be intentionally designed from the outset to reflect Pasifika ways of knowing and being, ensuring learners feel seen, respected, and supported (Hargraves, 2018).

Identifying Effective Strategies

To keep pastoral care responsive and meaningful for Pasifika learners, practical strategies are recommended:

Feedback Mechanisms

Regular feedback helps educators understand what is working and what needs improvement. Using tools such as surveys, questionnaires, and focus groups gives learners a voice and ensures their experiences shape future support. Feedback should be gathered in ways that are culturally appropriate and accessible, for example, through talanoa-style discussions that encourage open sharing.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Tracking key indicators like retention rates, academic performance, and wellbeing data are essential for measuring the impact of pastoral care initiatives. This information should be reviewed regularly and used to adjust strategies where needed. Evaluation processes must go beyond numbers and include qualitative insights to capture the lived experiences of Pasifika learners.

Learner Involvement

Pasifika learners should be actively involved in planning and decision-making about pastoral care. Their perspectives ensure that support systems reflect real needs and cultural values. This can include student advisory groups, leadership roles in cultural activities, and opportunities to co-design programmes that strengthen engagement.

Community Collaboration

Strong partnerships with Pacific communities are vital for authenticity and cultural relevance. Working alongside families, churches, and community organisations helps institutions align

their pastoral care with Pasifika values and practices. Collaboration can include community-led workshops, cultural events, and shared decision-making to build trust and mutual understanding.

Conclusion

Pastoral care for Pasifika learners needs to be holistic, culturally grounded, and shaped by the voices of learners themselves. It is not just about academic support—it is about creating environments where Pasifika students feel valued, respected, and connected. By embracing Pacific methodologies such as talanoa and talatalanoa, educators can build trust and foster meaningful relationships that go beyond the classroom. These approaches encourage open dialogue, shared understanding, and collective problem-solving, which are central to Pasifika ways of learning and being.

The findings from Phase 1 of this project highlight the critical role of cultural support, spiritual care, mental health services, and community-building activities in promoting wellbeing and success. These elements work together to create a sense of belonging and safety, which is essential for engagement and achievement. As the research moves into the next phase, these insights will guide the development of practical, evidence-based guidelines for tertiary institutions. The goal is to ensure pastoral care is not only effective but also authentic, reflecting Pasifika values and worldviews while meeting the diverse needs of learners.

Ultimately, investing in culturally responsive pastoral care is an investment in equity and inclusion. It strengthens relationships, enhances learner confidence, and contributes to better educational outcomes for Pasifika students across Aotearoa New Zealand.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that Grammarly and Copilot, AI-assisted writing software's, was used in proofreading and refining the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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Contact emails: anamua.lole@manukau.ac.nz
krishan.mani@manukau.ac.nz