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Telesia Kalavite

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## Toungāue cooperative pedagogy for Tongan tertiary students' success

Telesia Kalavite

Otago University  
New Zealand

### Abstract

*Cooperative Pedagogy specific to Tongans can enhance students' academic success in New Zealand's tertiary education. Tongan students' success depends on teachers' recognition and understanding of Tongan students' sociocultural context which involves their pule'anga (bureaucracy), famili/kāinga (family), siasi (church) and fonua (country) relationships. Tongan students should not be treated within the Pacific groupings because 'Pacific' is a term of convenience for peoples who originate from different countries in the Pacific region whose cultures are uniquely different from one another. The term 'Pacific' tends to make these students live in the shadow of being treated as if they have the same needs in the classroom. The culturally specific needs of Pacific students are obscured by the assumption that they are homogenous. Academics and educational authorities in New Zealand need to recognise the importance of Pacific students' culturally specific needs in their educational environments to move towards solving the problems of underachievement. This article explores the use of a culturally specific Tongan Toungāue Cooperative Pedagogy for teaching Tongan students in New Zealand tertiary education. Toungāue Cooperative Pedagogy is rooted in Tongan students' sociocultural context which is at the heart of the Tongan society. More importantly, this proposed Toungāue Cooperative Pedagogy is transferable and could also be beneficial to other Pacific and Indigenous cultures.*

### Keywords

Toungāue cooperative pedagogy; Tonga tertiary students' success; Pacific diversity; Pacific ethnic special needs.

### Introduction

Tongan students' academic success is always driven by community expectations within their sociocultural contexts which should be considered when teaching them not only by the teachers in the classroom but also by all those in their learning environments, such as supporting staff, principals and curriculum designers. The proverb *Mo u ō 'o ako kemou 'aonga ki he fāmili siasi, pule'anga mo e fonua* (Go forth, be educated to be useful to your family, church, bureaucracy and country), is meant to motivate Tongan students to be successful in education for everybody who is related to them (Kalavite,



2010, Vaioleti, 2001). It is a Tongan students' main purpose in life to obtain a good education so that they can fulfil their *fatongia* (obligations) to everyone in Tonga. This strong community outlook is at the heart of the Tongan culture (Gifford, 1985). Tongan students' success in New Zealand tertiary education depends on teachers' recognition and understanding of students' sociocultural context as it influences and moulds their lives. The Tongan students must be understood to inform and comprehend the circularity of the Tongan worldview and epistemology which are rooted in *mo 'ui fakatokolahi* (living together in cooperative lifestyle). Central to this *mo 'ui fakatokolahi* are the core values of *tauhi vā* (keep good relationships), *faka 'apa 'apa* (mutual respect), *lototō* (humility and generosity), *mamahi 'ime 'a, talangofua ke fua fatongia* (loyalty, commitment and obedience to fulfil mutual prescribed obligations) (Ka'ili, 2017). These core values are the four pillars of the Tongan culture. They are manifested by *'ofa* (love) and not wanting to be *fakamā* (shameful) within their sociocultural relationships. Tongan students are expected to live and commit to these core values by making them their main goals to benefit their *fāmili, siasi, pule 'anga, and fonua*. Tongan people's sociocultural contexts are the breath of the Tongan society, in the homes, the churches and schools. When educators in the New Zealand tertiary classrooms recognise these Tongan students' social-cultural contexts, they are in a good position to introduce relevant pedagogies for Tongan students' success.

As a Tongan and Pacific educator in the New Zealand tertiary sector, I am always concerned about Tongan and Pacific students' academic achievement as many of them struggle to pass their courses (Kalavite, 2010). Primarily my role is focused on the retention and successful completion of Pacific students' programmes of study in the setting of a New Zealand university. My daily work includes participation in nationwide discussions about Pacific students' academic achievement at all education levels. I attend conferences and community meetings and set up staff and student forums particularly to discuss Pacific students' achievement and how to improve it. This passion to make a difference in Pacific students' academic achievement motivated me to do a doctoral study on Tongan students' academic achievement in New Zealand tertiary education. At the time it was evident that there was limited discussion in the literature on how educators can recognise cultural specific sociocultural contexts in their teaching practice (Fusitu'a, 1992; Fusitu'a & Coxon, 1998; Manu'atu, 2000a; Vaioleti, 2003). This is where I found out that educators' recognition of Tongan students' socio-cultural context is critical for their success. Since the completion of my PhD (Doctor of Philosophy), I have applied co-operative pedagogies in my teaching practice especially for Tongan students in my classes, and community educational activities that I am involved with.

This paper discusses my research-informed reflections on how I apply a culturally specific Cooperative Pedagogy called *toungāue* (working together in a group) to enhance Tongan students' success in tertiary education. *Toungāue* Cooperative Pedagogy can be used by any teacher at any level in their teaching of Tongan, Pacific and non-Pacific students. *Toungāue* is parallel to western Cooperative Pedagogy (LaBriola & Walsh, 2020), although there is basic Tongan cultural knowledge that teachers should know when dealing with Tongan students. The Tongan sociocultural knowledge is not hard to understand because it is like any other knowledge that is needed in one's teaching, such as knowing the contents of one's subject/discipline, or maybe knowing a theory to apply in teaching of a particular content or subject area. This paper sets out to evaluate the existing research on Pacific students in New Zealand tertiary education and focus on Tongan students. An explanation of *Toungāue* Cooperative Pedagogy in a Tongan communal context is provided. Lastly, I reflect on my PhD research, explaining how my doctoral research informed my teaching practices, and I present my conclusions.

## Pacific students in New Zealand tertiary education

Pacific students come from the three different racial groups of Polynesia (many islands), Melanesia (black islands) and Micronesia (small islands) in the Pacific Ocean. Polynesia includes the island nations of Cook Islands, Rotuma, Samoa, Tonga, Niue, Tokelau, Tuvalu, Tahiti, Hawaii, Marguesas, and New Zealand Māori. Melanesia includes the islands of Fiji, New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. Micronesia then are the islands of Guam, Republic of Kiribati, Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, Northern Mariana's, Palau, and Marshall Islands (Kalavite, 2010). In New Zealand the terms Pacific, Pasifika, Pasifiki or Pasefika do "not refer to a single ethnicity, nationality or

culture but is a term of convenience to encompass the diverse range of peoples from the Pacific” (Fletcher et al., 2009, p. 25). These different Pacific island nations have their own unique cultures and identities and are not a homogenous group. Despite their differences, most academics and researchers emphasise their similarities and treat them as a homogeneous group so there are familiar concepts in educational conversations, such as Pacific education, Pacific students, Pacific support, Pacific achievement, Pacific strategies, Pacific pedagogies and so on. The term ‘Pacific’ that unifies these people is an illusion which adds more challenges to this conversation in education. A Pacific perspective then is without grounds because a common identity might be established through the recognition of the diversities between and among the different cultures (Manu‘atu, 2000a). The reality of this classification is problematic because these students are from different cultural contexts that are uniquely different from one another (Cowley et al., 2000; Pasikale, 2002; Pasikale et al., 1996). The classification also hinders individual groups from receiving appropriate education strategies to reflect their own distinctive cultural and historical diversities.

Kalavite (2010) also proposes that Pacific students are not familiar with the Western or *Pālangi* (fair skinned foreigners/westerners) culture of the academy or how the institution works, which contributes to their underachievement. Other researchers (Anae et al., 2002; Kalavite & Hoogland, 2005; Taufe‘ulungaki, 2003) suggest that Pacific students also have different learning styles from *Pālangi* which affect their learning, and these should be considered in teaching and learning situations. For example, referring to students from the Pacific as a homogenous group, teachers claimed that Pacific students are often too shy to ask questions because it can be seen as being disrespectful to their elders. Researchers also noted that if Pacific students consistently respond to teachers’ questions in class it can sometimes be interpreted by their peers that they are trying to be smart and show off or are seeking the favour of the teacher (Taufe‘ulungaki, 2002, 2003). It is evident that Pacific students who are from different cultural backgrounds tend to perform differently from *Pālangi* students in the classroom (Tongati‘o, 2010). Pacific scholars like Hau‘ofa (2008), Ka‘ili et al. (2017), Mahina (2008), Georgina (2017), Māhina-Tuai (2017), Va‘a (2017) and others have reinvented, reintroduced and offered Pasifika epistemologies and knowledge which are relevant to how Pacific students learn and do things from their perspective. These approaches are not intended to discredit Western knowledge but to provide alternative ways and methods of alleviating academic underachievement of diverse groups of Pacific students (Kalavite, 2010; Vaioleti, 2011). Tertiary institutions’ use of unfamiliar pedagogies, such as critical analysis, and curriculum content on history and geography of foreign developed countries, sometimes makes Pacific students feel lost and alienated (Kalavite, 2017; Nabobo-Baba, 2006; Seve-William, 2017). Pacific students’ sense of alienation can act as a prompt to miss classes and disengage from studies, leading to high dropout rates and poor achievement (Thompson et al., 2009). Many Pacific students prefer an inclusive teaching and learning style that promotes the formation of integrated groups, feelings of solidarity and cooperation, while many *Pālangi* students use an exclusive style that promotes individualistic and competitive learning styles (Finau, 2008; Graves & Graves, 1985).

Government and non-government organisation and educational personnel in New Zealand are working hard to alleviate the problem of Pacific people’s underachievement (Anae et al., 2001; Ministry of Education, 2015). There is growing evidence in Aotearoa New Zealand of the significance of culture, identity and ethnicity in educational responsiveness that can lead to successful learning for Pacific, Māori and Indigenous students (Bishop et al., 2007; Bishop and Berryman, 2006; Southwick et al., 2017). Research shows that Pacific students’ academic problems derive basically from the cultural differences between Pacific cultures and that of the dominant *Pālangi* culture (Bishop, 2007; Jones & Schuster, 2003; Thaman, 1994, 2002).

Prior to the Labour Government of 1999, New Zealand’s education policies and structures disadvantaged Pacific people through the lack of policy for Pacific people in the education sector, and lack of funding and resources to address Pacific education issues effectively (Coxon et al., 1994; Eckermann, 1994; Tofi et al., 1996; Tongati‘o, 1994). In 2000s during the Labour Government there were works done to address under-representation of Pacific people at all levels in the education sector (Adams et al., 2005; Coxon et al., 2002; Peterson et al., 2006). The under-representation of Pacific people means that there are fewer people to advocate for addressing Pacific students’ needs. The majority of initiatives to raise achievement for Pacific people are instigated by Pacific people themselves

(Peterson et al., 2006). Initiatives for the tertiary sector are limited because many Pacific people are not very clear on what their roles are in these initiatives (Manu'atu, 2000b).

Nevertheless, since the Labour-led Government between 1999 and 2008, the strong pressure from Pacific communities to recognise and include their cultural knowledge on all facets of their lives in New Zealand has begun to instigate gradual changes. There are nationwide changes in government directions to include Pacific people's cultural knowledge and aspirations in policies and structures for both government and non-government agencies in education and some other sectors. For example, in the tertiary education sector, all eight New Zealand universities, including the University of Otago, have their own Pacific strategic frameworks and support systems for Pacific students. The practicality of these policies is yet to be evaluated to find out why they do not work for some Pacific students and that the wide gap between them and non-Pacific students' achievements still persist.

Pacific people's participation in tertiary education has increased in New Zealand over the last decade but the achievement is still lower than the general population, and there is a lack of understanding about why the 'gap' persists (Southwick et al., 2017; Thompson et al., 2009). The barriers to Pacific students' academic achievement in New Zealand's tertiary education are cultural, economic, academic and bureaucratic (Kalavite & Hoogland, 2005). The cultural barriers are referred to as 'cultural gaps' "which are the distances between the expectations of the school curriculum and those of the cultures in which students are socialised" (Thaman, 2002, p. 5). Thompson et al. (2009) stated that "appropriate teaching methodologies, and cultural contextualization and customization of teaching enhance Pacific learners' engagement in classroom discussions and curriculum" (p. 1). In this regard, culturally specific research by postgraduate students in this area needs to be recognised and taken seriously because it has much to offer (Kalavite, 2010; Ta'ai, 2015; Vaioleti, 2011). Fa'avae (2018) highlighted that the voices of minority groups, such as both Tongan students and teachers, are not heard, rarely valued and are often ignored.

### Tongan students in New Zealand tertiary education

The Tongans view *ako* (education/learn/school), *'ilo* (knowledge) and *poto* (skill) of *tangata kakato* (holistic person) in a circular framework which is in contrast to a Western linearity framework (Vaioleti, 2011). *Tangata kakato* is the totality of *mo'ui fakapotopoto* (sustainable livelihood), *fetokoni'aki* (supportive livelihood) and *fakatoukatea* (compatible in every way) is achieved when *loto* (heart/spirit), *sino* (body) and *'atamai* (mind) are harmonised and coherently cultivated (Kalavite, 2010). Therefore, Tongan students' socio-cultural relationships and their importance to academic success need to be specifically recognised in the classroom by academics and educational authorities. To date this has rarely been occurring because Tongan students are often included in research that addresses the 'Pacific' as a collective entity rather than as a specific cultural group. This deprives Tongan students from getting the specific support that they need to be successful (Kalavite, 2010, 2012; Manu'atu, 2000a). In New Zealand the culturally-specific information about Tongan students' achievement is scarce apart from research done by postgraduate students, for example, Manu'atu (2000a), Kalavite (2010), Vaioleti (2011), Ta'ai (2015) and Fa'avae (2016). Tongan students' voices are not always distinct because the more generalised Pacific voices dominate, so Tongans often deny themselves, their language and their culture in their educational journeys (Manu'atu, 2000a). Furthermore, the understanding of Tongan people's identities and experience derives mostly from collective understandings of Pacific Island histories, values, language and cultural practices (Manu'atu, 2000b). In New Zealand, research to date on the issues of academic achievement and the importance of socio-cultural aspects of Tongan students' in their learning are from the work of Fusitu'a (1992), Fusitu'a and Coxon (1998), Manu'atu (2000a), Wolfgramm-Foliaki (2005, 2006), Kalavite (2010, 2012, 2017), Vaioleti (2003, 2011), Ta'ai (2015), and Fa'avae (2016). But the wider tertiary education community is not always aware of this work, hence the dilemma of the status quo. There is a need to recognise these works and try things differently to alleviate this problem of lack of recognition. This problem stems from putting Pacific peoples into just one homogeneous group rather than treating them differently according to their cultural specific groups (Kalavite, 2010; Manu'atu, 2000a; Ministry of Social Development, 2012).



Part of Tongan students' struggles to be successful in education relates to the lack of understanding amongst educational personnel about students' socio-cultural relationships within their learning environments. Tongan students' low academic achievement cannot be transformed in a learning model that homogenises them with all other non-Tongan students (Manu'atu, 2000a; Otunuku & Brown, 2007). Tongan students' learning is grounded and built on meaningful values of the Tongan culture through their worlds of self, *fāmili/kāinga*, *siasi*, *pule'anga* and *fonua* (Kalavite, 2010; Vaioleti, 2011; Ta'ai, 2015; Fa'avae, 2016). Tongan students need to connect with their own representations and identities of who they are and wish to be. Their representations should be valued within the education institutions and must originate from the students' own constructions and should not be defined by the dominant culture which can have the effect of students' confidence in who they are and what they can achieve (Nakhid, 2003; Kalavite, 2010). Therefore, understanding the socio-cultural factors that impact on Tongan students' academic achievement and designing a specific pedagogical strategy for them is extremely important.

Tongan scholars in education offer relevant pedagogical approaches to help Tongan students by including Tongan epistemologies in teaching and learning. Ka'ili (2008) offers *Tauhi-Va* relational framework; Manu'atu (2000a) offers *Mālie-Māfana* metaphorical framework; Vaioleti (2011) offers *Manulua* pedagogical approach; Ta'ai (2015) offers *Kalia-Langimālie* framework; Fa'avae (2015) offers *Fakakoloa 'o e to'utangata* Tonga cultural capital approach; and Kalavite (2010) offers *Toungāue* cooperative pedagogy. This enables Tongan students to achieve better through improved self-esteem, stemming from an acknowledgement of their Tongan identity and the knowledge that their unique ways of learning are respected in the education system (Thaman, 1995a, 1995b). Tongan scholars argue that Tongan students should be exposed to their own language, moral, social-cultural and spiritual concepts during their education in New Zealand for better achievement. The central proposition is that Tongan students will achieve more meaningful educational outcomes when the acknowledgement of their Tongan representations and identity, knowledge and unique ways of learning are valued and respected in New Zealand's education system. The failure of Tongan learners to reach their educational goals has more to do with the mis-match between their socio-cultural world and that of the education institution, including the different expectations between the Tongan students and the western education system that they study in (Kalavite, 2010; Ta'ai, 2015).

Kalavite (2012) argued that Tongan students' academic achievement results are affected by the inter-play of *tā* (time) and *vā* (space) and the differential contexts of *fāmili/kāinga* where the socio-political interface can be either a stumbling block or a stepping stone for students operating across the socio-cultural boundaries. Ta'ai (2015) highlighted that many obligations of honouring these *tā-vā* relationships cause confusion, especially for Tongans born in New Zealand. According to Vaioleti (2011), the ideal sense of being for a Tongan is one who has a balanced spiritual social being that is at harmony with the self, family, the environment and his/her God/s. Manu'atu (2000a), Kalavite (2010), Vaioleti (2011), Ta'ai (2015), and Fa'avae (2016) proposed that fostering this ideal cultural state in the classroom should be a central aim in education for Tongans. These perspectives are very important in considering appropriate and effective pedagogies for Tongan students in the classroom. Southwick et al. (2017) strongly stated that "in generalising all Pacific cultures we lose the richness that is provided by the diverse culture of the Pacific" (p. 5). There is a strong need to change tactic in this field to consider culturally specific pedagogies in education. Culturally specific strategies in education offer a way forward to improve diverse Pacific students' academic success in tertiary education.

### ***Toungāue* cooperative pedagogy in Tongan context**

The concept of *toungāue* refers to co-operative work within a *kautaha* (group) in Tongan communities. This is when all members of the *kautaha* work for one member one time/day, then for another person on another time/day, and so on until everyone in the *kautaha* has had their turn to be helped by all members of the *kautaha*. *Toungāue* is a means of *fetokoni'aki* (helping one another) amongst the Tongan people so that they can produce things more easily and quickly in large quantities and of good quality. This is a well-known group work model for women when they are making *fala* (mat) in a *toulālanga* (weaving group), and *ngatu* (tapa cloth) in a *toulanganga* (tapa making group). Women commonly work

together (*toungāue*) in *toulālanga* and *toulanganga* throughout the year. Making *fala* and *ngatu* involves much work and each *fala* or *ngatu* takes a long time (days and months) to complete so they work together to speed up the process. Similar work processes of *toungāue* for Tongan men are when they work in *kautaha lauhoua* (hourly work rotation) in bush farms when tending their crops. This *kautaha toungāue* is an ongoing practice amongst the Tongans throughout the year.

Pedagogy, or *founga ako* in Tongan, is an integrated learning framework (Vaioleti, 2011). In its broadest sense it includes how teachers and students relate together as well as the instructional approaches that are implemented in the classroom. Pedagogies should enable students to relate concepts back to the real world and their own lives, hence the proposed *toungāue* for Tongan students. Every pedagogy is constantly evolving and must help students to focus and develop an understanding of the subject content beyond memorisation and surface knowledge. The introduction of *toungāue* is an appropriate opportunity for Tongan students to do that.

Tongan '*Toungāue Cooperative Pedagogy*' involves cooperative teaching and learning in a communal environment that includes the principles of "positive interdependence, individual responsibility, appropriate grouping, group maintenance, cooperative skills, and interactive time" (Nolinske & Millis, 1999, p. 31). Cooperative learning promotes students' learning and social relations more effectively than traditional whole-class methods of teaching (Hwang et al., 2008). It is a group-centred and student-centred approach that actively engages the students in the educational process. Each group member in this approach is responsible for their own learning and understanding and also is expected to take responsibility for helping other members in their group so that everyone maximises their own learning. Teaching and learning from this perspective are socially negotiated and constructed through interaction. The goal of *toungāue* cooperative learning is to create an atmosphere of academic achievement and effective learning in classroom environments where the roles of the teachers and students in this environment is defined as both good communicators and learners (Thanh, 2014). When teachers embrace the socio-cultural aspects of students into their teaching then it becomes more meaningful to them. *Toungāue Cooperative Pedagogy* draws specifically on a Tongan sociocultural perspective. This approach is where learning is culturally bound and integrated which can be used by both teachers and students. It is one that employs the Tongan educational concepts of '*ofa*, '*ilo*, *poto*, *fatongia* and *fonua*. *Toungāue Cooperative Pedagogy* is student-centred which is inclusive of many other educational pedagogies, such as appreciative, critical, collective, dialogic, effective, social, culturally responsive, Socratic and so on. Fundamental to *toungāue* is *tauhivā* (good relationships) between individuals (students and teachers) and is driven by '*ofa* and not wanting to be *fakamā*. *Toungāue Cooperative Pedagogy* could guide teaching and learning to prepare Tongan students for a balanced and harmonious life where they can serve fully in their communities. *Toungāue* cooperative and communal learning, with its emphasis on shared goals and activities, is increasingly recommended as a way of facilitating interaction and integration of diverse groups in multicultural classrooms in New Zealand (Baker & Clark, 2017; LaBriola & Walsh, 2020). *Toungāue Cooperative Pedagogy* could work for anyone in a teaching and learning environment as it is based on human values of good relationship, love and not wanting to embarrass families and loved ones.

*Toungāue Cooperative Pedagogy* foregrounds Tongan language and culture as valuable knowledge in the education of Tongan students (Manu'atu, 2000b; Thaman, 1988; Kalavite, 2010; Vaioleti, 2011). Putting the *Toungāue Cooperative Pedagogy* into practice in the classroom means sharing responsibilities between teachers and students, and more specifically the sharing of responsibilities amongst students themselves. For example, in individual project work, students could work together in groups to share knowledge as well as working in a rotational process to share responsibilities so that all members of the group could be helped to complete their own individual projects. Students are given instructions by the teachers on how to conduct their group work in a *toungāue* style explained earlier, just like that of *toulālanga*, *toulanganga* and *kautaha lauhoua*. In this process the Tongan students' understanding of themselves in their sociocultural contexts discussed earlier contribute to meaningful learning in an educational context. The essence of *Toungāue Cooperative Pedagogy* is firstly, students could succeed and, secondly, it reminds all those concerned with academic achievement of Tongan students, that Tongan values and sociocultural knowledge and practices are extremely important for

their learning. When this is realised in the classroom, then Tongan students can be well supported and therefore succeed.

### Research informed *Toungāue* pedagogy

My PhD research was driven by a passion to improve Tongan students' academic achievement in New Zealand tertiary education. Tongan people in New Zealand are classified under a Pacific collective entity and there was not much culturally specific information on Tongan students' academic achievement (Ministry of Education, 2008, 2015; Statistics New Zealand, 2007). When I first started working in the teaching profession in Tonga, the core activity of Tongan students searching for western knowledge was to move from *vale* (ignorance), to *'ilo* (knowledge), to *poto* (skill) in a western academic context and not within a Tongan context (Māhina, 2008). But it was not until I did my doctoral study that I found out the reasons for our struggles in formal education. Our struggles are mainly due to our cultural differences with the western system that we are in for our education. For me this calls for a change of tactics on how to enhance Tongan students' academic achievement in New Zealand and around the world.

In my PhD research I interviewed 25 participants from universities around New Zealand, although other members of the *kāinga* participated during the informal *talanoa* (conversation) (Prescott, 2008). All participants, both male and female, were identified as Tongans, who had tertiary education experiences. There were young and mature undergraduate and graduate students. There were also some tertiary staff and educators who had worked in New Zealand for more than five years. All participants ranged from age 20 to 50 years and some of them had lived in New Zealand for more than 30 years. The tertiary staff were competent in both Tongan and English languages and cultures and have known the New Zealand education system very well.

The Tongan research theoretical framework that I utilised in this research was: *Tā* (Time)-*Vā* (Space) Theory of Reality. The research methodologies were drawn from a Tongan emerging body of knowledge from works of Tongan academics such as Thaman's (2002) model of *Kakala* (garland); Ka'ili's (2008) and Māhina's (2008, 2017) model of *Tauhi Vā* (keeping good relationships); Manu'atu's (2000a) model of *Mālie-Māfana* (aesthetically pleasing state and the emotional feeling of warmth); Vaiioleti's (2006) and Prescott's (2008) model of *Talanoa* (to talk, tell stories or relate experiences); and Kalavite's (2010) model of *Toungāue* (Cooperative Work). The Tongan research method used was formal and informal *talanoa*, which literally means to talk or to tell stories or relate experiences (Churchward, 1959). The Tongan theoretical framework, research methods and methodology used were consistent with the conveyance of Tongan knowledge, stories, views, values and feelings; both in personal and communal, as well as formal and informal sense of the Tongan culture (Kalavite, 2010).

One key finding from my PhD research (Kalavite, 2010) that is pivotal to the idea of *Toungāue* Cooperative Pedagogy came from one of the participants who was a finalist university student, awaiting graduation at the time of the interview. Here is what he said:

My final semester was very tough and I could not have made it without the help of my family. Something had gone very wrong during the semester and I realised that I had less than two months [45 days to be exact] to complete eight assignments, for the four courses that I took. I told my family that I had a major problem so all of them decided to help. As soon as I had permission from my lecturers to hand in my assignments late, tasks were quickly allocated amongst all the members of my family: My brother who was also a university student helped looking [sic] for information both in the library and the internet. My dad did all the household chores while my mother helped in discussing my assignments, giving me ideas of what I should write about. My wife typed my assignments and she helped my mother in proofreading. What I did was reading, thinking, and putting my thinking down on paper. I realised that this part of my study was like a race against time. I knew what I should put down on paper but I did not have the time to do it so the help of my family got me to beat the time. Time was everything in this situation. I needed time to look for information, time to read and write my



thoughts, time for personal tasks, time to rest when I was mentally tired, and all that. However, this team work not only saved a lot of time but enabled me to hand in all my assignments, passed my courses and graduated [sic]. I owe this to them and I cannot thank them enough for what they did. I will never forget this, ever! (Kalavite, 2010, p. 171)

For this student his success was through a group effort or *toungāue* with his family. This is an excellent example of the Tongan concept of *toungāue* which could be translated into the teaching and learning environment where work could be shared amongst students in the same class or even between levels, provided that they help each other to achieve educational goals. The shared work should be a mutual understanding amongst the students on what they should do for one particular person during the rotational process so that everyone is being helped during the process.

The key findings from my PhD research were that Tongan students perceived that they were academically successful when all parties involved in their learning had a deep and mutual understanding of, respect for, and practice in, both Tongan and New Zealand social and academic cultures. In particular, the Tongan students and their Tongan supporters need a deep and mutual understanding of, respect for, and practice in, their own Tongan as well as New Zealand social and academic relationships. New Zealanders who are involved with Tongan students' education need a deep and mutual understanding of, respect for, and practice in, Tongan social and academic relationships (Kalavite, 2010). This is very important because it's worthwhile for students and teachers to walk in both worlds where they could be able to understand each other. This is where *Toungāue* Cooperative Pedagogy could be very effective in the classroom for all teachers and students regardless of ethnicity. I strongly argue in this paper that a specific pedagogy, such as *toungāue* for Tongan students, is extremely important for academic achievement. Better still, this pedagogy could also work for any other ethnic group of Pacific and non-Pacific students' academic achievement.

## Reflective teaching practice

Prior to my PhD research, my pedagogical practices in primary, secondary and tertiary classrooms in Tonga, Fiji and New Zealand were western oriented. After my PhD I made the critical shift from western to Tongan, Pacific and Indigenous pedagogical practices. This critical shift in my teaching is a systematic reviewing process for me as a teacher to allow links from one experience to the next to make sure that my students have maximum progress in their studies. This change after four decades of teaching was huge, important, appropriate and relevant in my teaching practice. I enjoy my teaching and enacted my PhD research findings with two different groups: a community group called *Fakahalafononga Pōako* (Fakahalafononga Night Class) and university groups at the universities of Waikato and Otago.

The *Fakahalafononga Pōako* was a Tongan community group that I set up in Hamilton, New Zealand from 2011 to 2015. There were 12 families in the group with a total annual roll between 30 and 50 during its four-year life. This programme ran for two hours (6–8pm) once a week throughout the school year. The two main objectives of the group were to ensure that the students do their homework, and also teach these children Tongan language and culture. This group was conducted on the *Toungāue* model discussed earlier, where parents and children came on every *pōako* (night class) to work together helping their children's education. The normal *pōako* programme started off with a prayer at 6pm, then we moved on to children doing their homework with the help of their parents and adults for one hour. Following their homework was a half hour teaching of the Tongan language and culture before an evening meal and a closing prayer. We made contact with the different schools of our children to follow up on their performance once every term, and we found that most of our students made huge improvements in their studies and attendance. With our primary and secondary school students, homework was done, literacy and numeracy were hugely improved and some of our secondary school students were highly involved in intercollege speech competitions where two of our students were in the finals. One of our primary school students who started with us as a year two primary school student turned out to be the dux of one primary school on his final year. His parents dedicated his achievement

to the work of our homework group. Details of other achievements with *Fakahalafononga Pōako* would be a focus for another discussion.

Based on my PhD research and with increasing confidence I found windows of opportunity to practice *Toungāue* Cooperative Pedagogy in my teaching of Pacific courses at universities. Throughout my teaching I encourage students to work together in projects and assignments so that they can complete their work on time. I also encourage students to discuss their assessments with their families and friends, allowing them to help make contributions to their assignments. This affirmed Tongati'o's (2006) and Koloto's (2003) claim that education is a shared responsibility and we can create successful students in this way (Pasikale & Tupuola, 1999; Pasikale et al., 1998). Using *Toungāue* Cooperative Pedagogy, I am now more confident in my own Tongan perspective on how to help Tongan and non-Tongan students in my classes to achieve. I informed my students about how I learn which is different from Western norms but it could work for them too. What came through very strongly when using *Toungāue* Cooperative Pedagogy in my teaching is that most students in my classes and myself were very confident, respectful and comfortable to share our knowledge and experiences regardless of cultural differences (Taumoefolau, 2013). Meaningful learning was evident as we related course contents to real life situations based on students' sociocultural contexts that enhanced their academic achievement (Teaiwa, 2011, 2017). This is where students gained knowledge through meaningful learning and applied it to new learning situations in order to retain and transfer information. I argue that appropriate teaching methods such as *Toungāue* Cooperative Pedagogy are an effective way to alleviate problems of Tongan students' underachievement in tertiary education. Teachers should develop their own pedagogy to benefit their students; hence the development of *Toungāue* Cooperative Pedagogy based on Tongan communal lifestyle to help Tongan students to succeed.

## Conclusion

Many Tongan students in New Zealand tertiary education strive to obtain a good education so that they can be *'aonga* (useful or of practical value) in conducting their *fatongia* (cultural prescribed obligations) to their *fāмили/kāinga*, *siasi*, *pule'anga*, and *fonua* competently. Therefore, Tongan students' academic success is driven by a strong community outlook and expectations which should be considered when teaching them in the classroom. Tongan students' success depends on teachers' recognition and understanding of Tongan students' sociocultural context. When teachers recognise Tongan students' sociocultural contexts, they are in a good position to apply the appropriate cooperative pedagogies relevant to foster students' success. This paper introduced a Tongan cooperative and communal pedagogy that has proven to be an effective approach to enhance Tongan and non-Tongan students' success in New Zealand tertiary education.

The findings presented in this paper demonstrated the importance of ethnic specific pedagogies when teaching Tongan students in the classroom. *Toungāue* Cooperative Pedagogy takes into account Tongan students' social-cultural contexts which positively impacted on their academic performance in tertiary education. Alternatively, *Toungāue* Cooperative Pedagogy could be adopted and adapted to support significant understanding of the culturally specific needs of students from other Pacific nations. I believe that if teachers start to recognise students' culturally specific needs in their teaching and design of appropriate teaching pedagogies then they are moving towards solving the problems of underachievement for students from any cultural background. I argue in this paper that tertiary educators should introduce *Toungāue* Cooperative Pedagogy in their teaching to recognise the importance of students' sociocultural context to improve students' academic success. This Tongan *Toungāue* Cooperative Pedagogy has been proven to work in my practice and could also be beneficial to other Pacific and Indigenous cultures.

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