Pasifika culture: 
A foundation on which to build educational achievement

Keynote presentation: Dr. Apo Aporosa, The University of Waikato

Abstract
This presentation is the story of two very different positions; school drop-out to post-doctoral research fellow and some of the factors that led to these polar positions. This story demonstrates that all of us have the ability to achieve academically when learning is initiated and framed on reference points that are familiar to us. For Pasifikans, that starting point is often our culture and its associated practices and expressions, a unique position that has the potential to create empowered high achievers.

PLEASE NOTE: The following was used by Aporosa to guide his presentation at the Pasifika Post-Primary Teachers’ Annual Conference on Monday the 18th of July 2016 and is not the presentation in its entirety. Additionally, the following has not been edited for grammar, polished for publication or restructuring to reflect exactly what Apo stated in his presentation. Therefore, quoting from this document without reflecting this caveat would be misleading.

Cavuti
Ni tiko Saka na marama bale na Peresitedi ni Post-Primary Qasenivuli, kemuni qasenivuli, kei na turaga kei marama. Vinaka vakalevu sara na nomuni veivureti nikua. (I wish to acknowledge the President of the Post-Primary Teachers Association and delegates present. Thank you for your invitation.)

Na yacaqu o Aporosa. Au sucu mai Niusiladi, vasu ni koro o Naduri. Macuata, Vaua Levu Fiji. (My name is Aporosa. I was born in New Zealand and I am maternally related to the village of Naduri in Northern Fiji.)

Preamble
Much of the next 40 minutes is about my journey from school drop out to post-doctoral researcher, some lessons along the way, and how one factor in particular, culture, contributed to this. It is not a story about achievement based solely on 'self' but comes
about primarily as a result of the great number of extremely patient people who coached and mentored me, people who saw something in me that I didn’t. Some of those coaches and mentors included people like a bunch of 13 and 14 year old Fijians who I will talk about shortly. I stand here today only because many more who are unseen stand around me, people who have guided and pushed me forward when I was full of doubt. While some could view my story as a kind of 'tragedy to blessing' tale, something that only happens to others and never to you, I would disagree and argue that any of us can achieve what I have when you are taught using strategies that make sense to you. As teachers, you already know many of these strategies and therefore hold the keys to your students future.

**Introduction**

Until 2005, I was under the misguided impression I knew quite a bit about Pasifika education and about how we Pasifikans learn and our likely success in the classroom. As a Aotearoa New Zealand (ANZ) born Pasifikan of Fijian ancestry, I had negotiated and failed within the New Zealand education system during the 1970s, leaving without any qualifications. If I had not refused to return to school when I did, I would have returned as a third year fifth, having to repeat my year 11 for a 3rd time. I was not unique in this. A number of my Pasifika relatives and friends, both here in New Zealand and Fiji, together with many of my Māori schoolmates, also faced similar circumstances. In one sense I understood the struggle of those family and friends; education just didn’t seem to make sense to us. The stuff we were taught was like a foreign language, spoken at us as though we knew what was being said, but in reality were words with no meaning, and lacking points of reference that were familiar to us. Added to this confusion was that the *palangi* kids seemed to know exactly what was being said and taught. So we'd pretend we understood so we didn't look as dumb as we felt. And then when we were finally exposed as the learning frauds that we were, the teacher would affirm what we knew deep down, that we had been destined to fail from the beginning. So when I realised I had failed, I don’t recall feeling surprised.

So out of school at 16, mucking around and heading for big trouble when dad lost the plot and said, "you are going to apply for the army and by God boy, you had better get in". Back then the entry test for the Army was fairly basic. However for me it was like wrestling a giant beast in the form of multi-choice questions and mathematical equations that wore the
face of my unpredictable violent father. In my fourth year in the Army I had an accident and left and was accepted into the New Zealand Police. This was something I was told at the time had only been possible because I had achieved highly from a practical sense while in the Army, and that this had compensated for my academic lack.

I enjoyed those jobs, the Army and Police, greatly assisted by the practical and physical nature of the work I did, something that seemed to make sense to me unlike school. I also enjoyed being with the large Māori crew and the increasing numbers of Pasifikan’s I worked with, a collectivist environment that reflected my growing up in a collectivist community. I also noted that most of the Pasifikans and Māori I worked with also seemed to do well in that practical physical setting, and that when we were required to write or do math related to that work, it wasn’t a major struggle as it seemed to make sense because it had meaning and application.

Occasionally I would catch up with some of my Pasifika and Māori schoolmates when at home on leave, often watching them struggle with employment opportunities or being restricted to lowly skilled jobs. And throughout those years, the rhetoric regarding both Pasifika and Māori academic failure didn’t seem to alter much either. Whether from the wider community, the New Zealand Ministry of Education (MoE) or the media, the general message I tended to hear echoed what my teachers had told me; that we Pasifikans and Māori were always going to struggle academically and for me, my landing a good job was nothing more than a lucky break, a stroke of good luck.

In the late 1990s, after leaving the Police, I began a 10-year period as a development worker at an isolated rural secondary school in Fiji. During that time, I was increasingly asked to add to the teaching curriculum of the Year 9 and 10 students. This was most often in the area of geography as ANZ is the country of study for most Fijian geography students although a place very few Fijian geography teachers had ever visited. As my teaching opportunities increased, I would often muse that I, a failure at school, without a single School Certificate subject, was now teaching. More surprisingly though, I realised that I was doing a fairly reasonable job at it, and that the success of this was due more to simply
discussing ANZ geography themes with fellow Pasifikans as opposed to at them, which included using local language and references to create links in order to teach a theme.

An example of this type of teaching was to take sachets of dehydrated coconut cream from ANZ. I had the students mix this without seeing the packaging and then had them guess what it was. This was then used as a spring-board into discussion on export to consider dehydration as aiding weight reduction to facilitate freight volumes although we also discussed disadvantages, issues such as taste when considered against locally grated and squeezed coconut cream. By discussing disadvantages, this ensured our local systems were validated as opposed to being seen as inferior against so-called ‘modern processes’.

In another example, I took yams from ANZ to the school. As most of you know, the yams here in ANZ are extremely small – the size of an adult male’s thumb – when compared with our Pasifika yams, uvi, ufi – often as large as a rugby ball. After cooking these and guessing what they were, this opened up discussion on specie variety and climate as a factor in produce size, with ANZ being vastly colder than the Islands. Fijian culture, through joking and veiled suggestion, links the size of yams with the size of the farmers’, usually males, genitalia. Due to the size of yams from ANZ, this naturally led to veiled jokes by the students about the appendage size of ANZ men, which we all got a good laugh out of. However, it also provided a link into discussion on culturally framed joking and explanations on how this type of rhetoric tends to be ethnicity situated and understood as opposed to having universal understanding.

Essentially I would look at the curriculum theme, and even though it was about ANZ geography, I would search for local references to create application and links to assist student learning which I presented in discussion format as opposed to a lecture. In the cold light of today this all sounds nicely structured and planned out. The reality is though, back then it was a lot of guess-work and imagination, a two-way street in which I was a student as much as those I was teaching; a hit and miss experiment that resulted in learning for both myself as much as the students, and exam passes for those students which suggested something was working. What it also did was sew the first seeds in me in which I began to consider how people learn, contrasting that with my own schooling experience in ANZ which
included me contemplating whether things may have been different had my teachers framed my learning around my world views and ways of understanding, in turn providing references that were familiar to me such as my culture, and allowing me to build on from there into more complex issues as opposed to the one-size-fits-all Eurocentric teaching approach my teachers used.

This pondering moved to a new level when I was asked to advise on aspects of education development in Fiji which included the relevance of Fijian values, culture and identity to the education system. While I have a reasonably good understanding of my Fijian culture, and regardless that I was using culture to aid learning, the ability to advise or engage these types of themes to assist education advancement was beyond me. It was a discussion with my wife about this, and her subsequent encouragement, that prompted me to enrol as a distance learning student at Massey University here in ANZ.

Eleven years later I graduated with a doctorate in Development Studies with my thesis having included the theme of culture as an input to education delivery and achievement. While the leap from school dropout to improvising as a geography teacher to doctoral graduate sounds simple, it was the greatest challenge of my life. Again, this would have been impossible without the support of so many people including Massey University’s Pasifika@Massey student support service who were very patient with me. Being Pasifikans, they too used many of the same practices I used with my students, providing points of reference that were familiar to me from which I could orientate and build knowledge from.

It was during the first few years of my university studies that I was introduced to the idea that culture and identity play a role in learning and academic success. That introduction and initial learning influenced my Master’s and later Doctoral studies. What I’m going to do now is take a bit of time and explain that research and in doing so, it will set the scene for what I will end the presentation with, that being the importance of our culture and identity and the use of this in supporting your students to succeed.

Like most developing countries, Fiji is utilising education as part of their national development strategy; the idea that better education leads to better jobs, more
productivity, greater wealth and economic growth etc. Fiji is hoping to achieve this education / national development strategy by uniting this with their traditional cultural practices and value systems. They have termed this “education with a local bias” (Scarr, 1983:340) and was the result of a push by a number of Fijian chiefs who were concerned that an education system dominated by Eurocentric white-streamed teaching approaches would create a “discontented schooled class who would lose its culture and traditional respect” (Tavola, 1991:21).

Critical to the traditional systems of Fiji is kava, the relaxant soporific drink used across most of Pasifika. Kava is considered Fiji's "cultural keystone species" and indisputably linked with cultural practice and identity formation (Aporosa, 2015). In many schools, just as in the village, kava is part of daily life. Visitors coming into many schools present kava to acknowledge hierarchies and to seek permission to discuss matters. The kava is then often drunk to seal agreements and facilitate talanoa. Kava is also presented by students – even though they do not drink it – to open school events that can include sports days and fundraisers. At rural schools, especially where teachers live on campus or in close proximity, kava is consumed at the end of most school days within the school compound (Aporosa, 2014).

Even though kava has been a part of school culture for many years, it was during my early years at the school in Fiji that sectors within the Fijian MoE began questioning whether kava was negatively impacting productivity and teaching ability, an inquiry they equally appeared to struggle with due to kava's cultural significance. For instance, in their 2000 education review, the Ministry stated, “[Kava] drinking is important in ceremonial Fijian culture and social gatherings but excessive consumption of [kava] is becoming a problem... [as] it substantially inhibits performance of duties in non-traditional professional environments, including... teaching” (MoE, 2000:69). This comment raised a great deal of interest, especially when considered alongside UNESCO’s comment that, “the loss of culture is at the heart of our educational and social problems” (Teasdale & Teasdale, 1992:1).

The Fijian MoE faced a problem, one that became a hot topic at teacher kava talanoa sessions in the early 2000s. On the one hand kava plays a critical role in culture, identity
and practice while the loss of culture and identity had the potential to cause “educational and social problems”. On the other hand there were concerns that kava may be inhibiting productivity the morning after drinking which was seen as impacting teacher performance and student learning, with this then limiting educational achievement and in turn preventing economic advancement (Aporosa, 2014). This ‘tension’ sat for almost 5 years as the MoE were not quite sure what to do with it. This led me to investigate this tension firstly in my Masters (Aporosa, 2008). That study then expand into a PhD after the MoE raised a number of questions from the Masters and invited me to address these (Aporosa, 2014:88).

To tackle this ‘tension’ and the MoEs concerns, I came up with three research questions:

1. What are the kava consumption habits of Fijian teachers, and what role does culture play in this?
2. Does kava impact teacher cognition, sickness and absenteeism and if so, what effect does this have on education delivery?
3. Does kava play other positive roles in the school environment and if so, what action should be taken regarding teacher kava use, considering that kava is central to culture?

In order to answer these questions I spent several months surveying, cognitively assessing – that’s doing reaction and alertness tests on kava drinking teachers as they entered the classroom in the morning – and interviewing a large group of participants, many of whom were teachers from one of the 18 schools I visited across Fiji. I underpinned the research with vakaturaga, the Fijian cultural ethos of respect to ensure high ethical standards (Ravuvu, 1987). Vakaturaga is similar to anga fakaTonga, fa’aSamoa, tau tua fata’amali, kauraro Rarotonga, etc. Additionally, my ancestral links and understanding of indigenous Fijian culture, together with the lengthy periods I had lived and worked in Fiji, opened up schools and villages to me while also providing a number of contrasts between my growing up and schooling in ANZ and education in Fiji.

The results of the study survey found that on average, my teacher participants were drinking kava for approximately 6 hours on nights prior to entering the classroom to teach
the following morning. Some of those teachers reported this produced a hangover type-effect that manifested as feelings of lethargy – laziness – coupled with some minor memory disruption, although this was described as less impacting than alcohol hangover. Results of the psychometric tests suggested a 16.5% difference in processing speed between those who consumed kava and those who didn't (Aporosa & Tomlinson, 2014). While these effects were much less than that experienced with alcohol hangover, it was suggested there was nevertheless some negative effect on teaching ability therefore creating a flow-on effect which interfered with academic achievement and national development. Although these negatives were revealed, kava drinkers – including many non-kava consumers – stated that due to the critical role kava plays in cultural practices, the respect-based values system and identity formation – factors that also pertain to the students themselves – this prevented simplistic solutions such as prohibiting kava from the school campus or situational bans on teacher kava consumption (Aporosa, 2014:144-5).

It was also recognised that prohibitions and bans on kava would impact the State/Community Partnership which dominates Fijian education. This State/Community Partnership is an agreement between the Government and local communities who partner with the schools to provide voluntary labour to build classrooms etc; run fundraising events; plant, tend and harvest vegetables from the school gardens, especially at boarding schools; plant, tend and harvest school kava farms; assist with school resources, and so on (MoE, 2000:6; also see Bray, 2003).

More importantly, this State/Community Partnership is critically informed, facilitated and motivated, by kava. For instance, an absence of kava removes culturally appropriate forms of appreciation expression. This is necessary to supporting and encouraging parental and alumni participation in schools. Kava is also used as a means of school fee payment with parents often giving more kava than the fee value adding to school coffers. Kava is also important to encouraging attendance and facilitating talanoa at Board and parental meetings, whereas the presentation and mixing of kava is also important to teaching culture to students (even though they do not drink it). Kava consumption environments are seen as valuable in promoting staff unity and inter-racial harmony, especially in the period following
the 2000 coup where some indigenous Fijian and Indo-Fijian harmony was strained, and critical to school fundraising initiatives and activities (Aporosa, 2014:147-152).

I summed up the study by saying that until the Fiji Government is in a position to financially dispense with the 'community' aspect of the State/Community partnership by funding labour to build classrooms and school dormitories, provide honorarium payments to Board members, pay for all school resources etc., most schools in Fiji could not survive without kava. Therefore, the importance of kava to school survivability and financial viability is a complex and sensitive issue for the MoE. This is made even more complex when you consider the importance of kava to culture, a plant and practice I have argued elsewhere (Aporosa, 2015) is one of the most potent icons of Pasifika identity.

It was this type of learning that piqued my interested in the role culture plays in education. Culture, especially the kava culture, plays a critical role in Fijian education delivery, but the effects of late night kava drinking has been criticised for negatively impacting that education delivery. This is an issue the Fijian MoE are still wrestling, a circular problem we will leave them with as we move on to consider culture and identity generally and how this impacts the students in a more direct way.

The role culture plays in educational achievement is a theme that academics have shown an interest in for some time. For instance, in the introduction to their edited text on education and democracy, Carlson & Dimitriadis (2003) make an interesting comment. They say, “Education is not... about the transmission of knowledge so much as the formation of identity” (p.17). They go on to explain that as part of learning, students are positioned within spheres of empowerment or disempowerment dependent upon whether the teaching is perceived to affirm or invalidate their worldviews and identity makeup. Additionally, for those who identify with “historically marginalised” groups, they are more likely to have their position represented negatively and therefore have lower levels of empowerment (p.17).

Paulo Freire (1993) understood this; it was a central theme in his well know book, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. This text is widely used in university disciplines that study
empowerment, race and gender, and social justice issues. Freire argued that for education to be effective, it must be delivered using “dialogical learning” (p.78). Essentially “dialogical learning” is where education becomes “problem-posing” (p.85) and students and teachers collaborate in the creation of knowledge through meaningful dialogue – *talanoa* –, an approach that recognises the legitimacy of student knowledge which in turn promotes empowerment. Freire stated that “dialogical learning” encourages disempowered groups – disempowered through poverty, race, social marginalisation etc. – to learn about how they, their lives and identities have been shaped for them by dominant social institutions and hegemonic power systems. Friere says that through “dialogical learning” and an understanding of this hegemony, empowerment can be regained (p.77-105).

Then you have academics like Shaffer & Kipp (2010) who studied Afro-American students and noted that quality performance in education is closely linked with empowerment through cultural identity and the affirmation of that identity (p.407-8). Then two Fridays ago Māori TV had an article describing a new study about *Unconscious Bias in Education* (Online News, 2016). The study’s author found that Māori experiences in education reflected that of Afro-American’s, with low educational expectation of Māori and Afro-Americans by teachers being linked to the race and culture of these ethnicities resulting in them lagging behind their peers.

When you combine Shaffer & Kipp’s work with Carlson & Dimitriadis, Freire and the new *Unconscious Bias in Education* study into a summary-type statement, this suggests that when a student’s culture and identity is affirmed, this has a profound effect on their sense of worth. This in turn is a determinant on how well they do in the classroom.

This summary can be applied to the Fijian kava in schools situation to provide a little application. What it suggests is that while kava use in schools may be criticised for impacting some teacher productivity, to remove it not only takes away an item critical to school function and parental and community support, it would also remove one of the most potent icons of culture and identity. That removal would then send the message to students that their culture is bad and of no importance, which in turn perpetuates notions of disempowerment which adds to under-achievement.
As Pasifika teachers we play a critical role in empowering our students through the affirmation of our culture. As Pasifikans we also understand our culture and therefore know the reference points we can use to orientate our students and provide points of reference from which they can build knowledge from. Know your students, know where they come from and how they think and be creative and use the coconut, the *uvi* and *ufi*, use our measuring systems (such as using our finger and arms) and our weight systems (for instance bundles of similar sizes) as points of reference to then move into centimetres and kilograms teaching (also see my *Post-development education framework* in Aporosa, 2014:51-53).

**Refuse to be colonised by the system that teaches you to teach.**

Instead, use our practices and reference points as part of "dialogical teaching" to create links from our cultural base to the *palangi* world and this will demonstrate that we may look and learn different to other students, but that makes us unique and not inferior or less likely to achieve. I know first-hand the value of this as this was the model my coaches and mentors used on this fala whose best qualification until 12 years ago was a degree in 'School Dropout'. And tell your students not to be afraid to work harder than the European kids and show them that hard work and excellence is part of our *vakaturaga*, our *anga fakaTonga*, *fa’aSamoa* and *kauraro Rarotonga* values.

Two final points; in his interestingly titled book, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, Rancière (1991) stated that equality in education is the start point rather than the end goal. He elaborates by saying that no one culture or education system has the right to suggest their method of education prescription is the most potent, or that they are the ultimate qualification standard authority (pp.45-9). My point is that once the dominant education providers recognise this, legitimise, acknowledge and promote alternative ways of learning such as our Pasifika ways or *kaupapa Māori* for instance, it will only be then that intellectual emancipation and widespread academic achievement will be possible for all. This *Talanoa for Pasifika Success Conference* provides a vehicle to make this statement to those who believe they are the sole qualification standard authority and have the monopoly on being the education delivery model authorities.
To finish, a brief story that I concluded my doctoral thesis with. On the last page I described a conversation one night in which a group of us Fijians in Hamilton were drinking kava and having *talanoa*. That *talanoa* included concerns about our kids, how teaching needed to start from what they understand, a point of reference which they could build on to add understanding and new learning as many were struggling with some of the teaching they were receiving. That *talanoa* included the complexity of culture which is often seen to opposed to economic growth whereas European styles of education are argued to aid and create economic growth and development. We discussed the need to develop economically but how this was often done at the expense of culture which destabilises our identity and leads to disempowerment.

That kicked off more debate that included my academic achievement together with suggests that maybe we need to focus on economic betterment first and then come back to our culture at a later time, while others said culture first and economics second. Then my friend made the following comment that caused everyone in the room to just sit quietly and contemplate for a while. It was like he had yelled out the worst expletive you can image as that was the depth of silence in the room as we all just sat and thought on what was said. In saying this he revealed, in my opinion, what was most at stake here.

He said, “*ni sa yali ga na noda itovo, sa oti sara ga o keda*”: “once we lose our culture we are finished (we are no more, we account for nothing)”.

*Koe taimi ‘e mole ai ‘ae ‘ulungaanga fakafonu ‘o ha tangata, ‘e mole ai foki moe tangata ko ia* (Tongan).

*Afai ole a leiiloa ma galo atu lau tu ma lau aganuu, ole a leai so tatou faasinomaga mautu e taialaina lou sa* (Samoa).

*Taem yu lusum kastom, yu lusum rod* (Vanuatuan Bislama).

*Me e ngaro poina koe i taau peu, ka puapinga kore koe* (Rarotongan).

*Mena ka ngaro to tātou ahure, katahi ka ngaro tātou te tangata* (Māori).

*Pau ka nohona ‘ōiwi, pau kākou* (Hawaiian).

*Vinaka vakalevu sara, malo 'aupito, mei taaki, fa'afetai lava.*
References:


I expand on many of the concepts discussed in this presentation in an upcoming paper entitled Māori academic success: Why the deficit perspectives? to be published in Volume 23 (2016) of the Micronesian Educator: A Journal of Research & Practice on Education which will be out shortly.

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