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# The Transition From Intermediate School To High School: Insights From Pasifika Families

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## The Transition From Intermediate School To High School: Insights From Pasifika Families

### Cover Page Footnote

We gratefully acknowledge the ten families who were involved in this study, and thank them for their generosity, time and participation.

## **The Transition from Intermediate to High School: Insights from Pasifika Families.**

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### **Abstract**

This qualitative study examined the interplay between home and school environments across the transition from Primary School (Year 8) to High School (Year 9) for 10 high-achieving Pasifika students and their families. Interview data from the students revealed the important role that their parents played in their education. Drawings completed by the adolescents provided a high form of data illustrating the dynamic between home and school, including the influence of both on learning. Findings revealed strong intergenerational expectations for success from the dual perspectives of parent and their children, based on cultural competency and parental high expectations. The study's results build upon existing knowledge bases which focus on parent and student strategies for success across the transition to high school, with regard to cultural competency.

### **Introduction**

Educators and researchers worldwide have been concerned about the impact of transition from primary to secondary school on young adolescents for some time. Educational research highlighted the complexities surrounding transitions in the early 1980s, and emphasized the need for continuity in the schooling context for young people (Deering, 1996). The purpose of this study was to extend our understandings of the experience for students from non-dominant backgrounds by exploring the transition experience from the perspective of Pasifika students and their parents, and investigating the culturally located ways that families support those transitions. Here, we report the findings from a year-long qualitative study which followed the experiences of 10 successful students who self-identified as Pasifika, and their families, as they transitioned from intermediate (Year 7-8, middle school) to high school (Years 9-13).

*Pasifika* is a heterogeneous term that refers to Pacific people who reside in New Zealand; most commonly those from Tonga, Samoa, Cook Islands, Niue, Tuvalu and Tokelau (Samu, 2006). As a group, Pasifika people are both indigenous to their own countries and migrant to New Zealand. The peoples of the Pacific islands are diverse, and within New Zealand this diversity is magnified, since the term incorporates both the Pacific-born and the New Zealand born. The Ministry of Education uses the term Pasifika to refer to “those peoples who have migrated from Pacific

nations and territories. It also refers to the New Zealand-based (and born) population, who identify as Pasifika, via ancestry or descent” (Airini et al., 2010, p. 49).

Students in New Zealand have high levels of academic achievement when compared with many of their international counterparts. Academic results are indicative that the education system works well for the majority of students (Meissel & Rubie-Davies, 2016). However, results in the lower levels of these international benchmarks demonstrate large gaps in achievement in four groups which have historically been underserved by the New Zealand education system. These groups are Pasifika, Māori, students with special needs and students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Alton-Lee, 2008).

The majority of Pasifika students attend mainstream<sup>1</sup> schools, New Zealand's education system is described as “a high quality, low-equity system in which a national discourse of educational equity conceals stark disparities between Māori and Pasifika students and their *Pākehā*<sup>2</sup> counterparts” (Crawford-Garrett, 2018, p. 1055). A system-wide focus on raising Pasifika achievement has been developed (Ministry of Education, 2014) with some progress reported (Ministry of Education, 2015); however, work remains to be done. The more recent Action Plan for Pacific Education 2020–2030 policy highlights that one of the five key objectives is to “partner with families to design education opportunities together with teachers, leaders and educational professionals so that aspirations for learning

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<sup>1</sup> English medium and state funded.

<sup>2</sup> European New Zealander.

and employment can be met” (Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 1). In order to meet this aim, the cultural knowledge of Pasifika families needs to be better understood by schools (Si'ilata, 2014). It is intended that understanding what occurs within Pasifika families as children transition to high school will help to inform teacher practice and improve academic outcomes for Pasifika students (Chu et al., 2013).

From a developmental perspective, middle schooling is a time of emergent adolescent identity (Mac Iver et al., 2015). For students from non-dominant backgrounds, research repeatedly highlights the importance of considering the social, cultural, and economic contexts, as a school's practices may either uphold or clash with local cultures, particularly in multicultural settings (Deering, 2005). Adopting culturally compatible approaches is vital to avoid miscommunication due to linguistic and cultural differences and the inherent school-home power imbalances (Ogbu, 1988).

Until recently, research has commonly adopted a deficit theorizing approach to examining the educational achievement of children from multicultural and or low-income families (Gorinski & Fraser, 2006). In New Zealand, deficit theorizing by educators is known to impact on the educational experiences and outcomes for these young people (Hunter et al., 2016; Meissel & Rubie-Davies, 2016). Whilst there is growing evidence of Pasifika research conducted from a strength-based perspective (Fa'avae, 2016; Lipene, 2010), a major focus of past research has been sharply focused on why Pasifika students might be underperforming academically in comparison to other groups of learners. There is need to build on Pasifika learners' cultural knowledge with a focus on strengths rather than propagating deficit theories (Porter-Samuels, 2013).

Investigating experiences of transition to high school for Pasifika students provides two opportunities to improve outcomes for these minority students. Firstly, as highlighted, there is more to discover about culturally compatible approaches that schools might employ. Such approaches require evidence about how families support their children across this important transition. Secondly, building on Pasifika learners' cultural knowledge from a strengths-based perspective contributes to dismantling a deficit approach which has been common response to Pasifika achievement in New Zealand (Gorinski & Fraser, 2006;

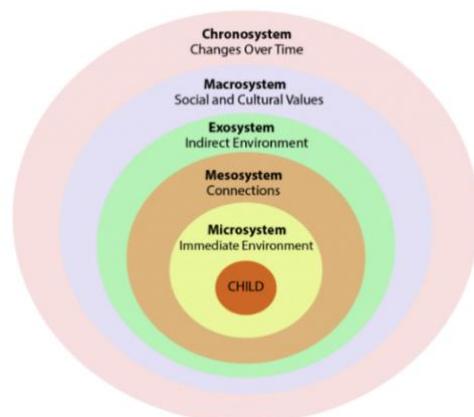
Porter-Samuels, 2013). In the present study, we explicitly employed a strength-based approach. The design of this study promoted a shift from deficit theorising, by drawing on the cultural knowledge and practices within Pasifika families to understand their influence on successful transition experiences of the students involved. In New Zealand, the transition from primary to secondary school takes place at Year 8 (age 12-13) to Year 9 (age 13-14). A premise of the study is that cultural knowledge and practices have an important part to play in academic success across the transition.

Given the importance of enhancing educators' understanding of how Pasifika youth experience the transition from intermediate to high school but the limited amount of existing research in this area (Education Review Office [ERO], 2019), the present study aimed to explore the transition experience of successful intermediate school students as they move into secondary schools. The role of parents and extended family on continued academic achievement was considered through the lens of academic socialisation. Using this lens we investigated the ways in which children and parents experienced the changes, and the ways that parental support changed as the children transitioned to high school.

## Review of the Literature and Theoretical Framework

### Figure 1

#### *Ecological Systems Theory*



*Note:* Figure sourced from ‘What is Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory?’ (<https://www.psychologynoteshq.com/bronfenbrenner-ecological-theory/>)

The lens of ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) provided an explanatory frame with which to examine significant influences known to be relevant to the transition but contextualised in the experiences of our participants. As shown in Figure 1, this theory identifies that human development is influenced by a range of factors from micro- to chrono- levels. From an ecological systems perspective, positive transitions across to high school are likely to be influenced by academic socialisation (Fan & Chen, 2001) which may include parental expectations, involvement in their children's schooling, and the messages parents communicate about the importance of education (Taylor et al., 2004).

Within an ecological systems theory, the family system is crucial to understanding socialisation practices, as parents express their expectations around school and academic achievement, which are internalised by their children (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Parents are influenced by their own experiences as young people and cultural expectations, which in turn infiltrate the ways in which these are transmitted into their own socialisation practices. Educational expectations set by parents are a significant influence on adolescents' educational expectations because parents are the first to model the importance of education to their children (Aceves et al., 2020). Theoretically, patterns of academic socialisation within families are influenced throughout the range of contextually embedded and mutually influential systems:

- Within families (micro-systemically), for example, through expressions of high expectations of children, regular communication, support, and availability.
- Within the relationships between families and school (meso-systemically), for example - through parental involvement in and communication with their children's schools.
- Within wider cultural contexts over time (macro-systemically and chrono-systemically), for example - through the passing on of cultural knowledge within the family and community.

Importantly, while the influences on families are analysable using these systemic foci, in families each of these systems influence and are influenced by each other, providing probabilities of response and change over time. In the present study, the ecological lens

enabled analysis of the interaction between the multiple levels of systemic influence on young people's academic successes.

Previous studies have highlighted the experiences of Pasifika students at each of these ecological levels; within families, in relationships with schools, and in relation to cultural contexts over time (Fasavalu, 2015). Parental expectations are known to feature particularly prominently within Pasifika families, and play a part in the high expectations held for their children and their value for academic achievement (Paulsen, 2018; Siope, 2011). Culturally, previous research has indicated that the majority of Pasifika students come from communities where family is important, and education is given high priority (Rubie-Davies et al., 2006). A number of Pacific scholars have signalled that the messages that Pasifika parents pass onto their children about the importance of education are embedded within expectations which develop intergenerationally (Fa'ave, 2016; Si'ilata, 2014). For many Pasifika families, a major purpose for migrating to New Zealand was the desire to give their children access to greater opportunities in education and employment as well as a place that could fulfil the goals and aspirations they held for their children. The migration to New Zealand commonly involved significant sacrifice to transport their families to New Zealand where they uprooted themselves from what was familiar (Leaupepe & Sauni 2014). Despite this, research with Pasifika learners frequently documents inequitable teaching practice, cross-cultural misunderstandings and deficit theorising by educators (Hunter et al., 2016).

### ***The Transition to High School***

Developmental transitions are points at which children's learning is particularly vulnerable (McNaughton et al., 2003). The shift from middle school (intermediate school in New Zealand) to high school is an important developmental transition which involves significant social, academic and environmental changes. Some studies have shown that the likelihood of students staying in school can be heavily dependent on the success of their transition into high school (McGee et al., 2003). In New Zealand, the dip in achievement associated with the transition to high school is larger than other transition points (making it one of the most vulnerable transitions), and is more than double the drop associated with changing from primary school

to middle school (from Year 6 to Year 7). It is likely that the Year 8 to Year 9 patterns reflect processes over and above a simple change in schools (Peters, 2010). Given the nature of this evidence, the desire to better understand successful transitions underpins much of the transition to school research.

Most students approach the transition to high school with a combination of concern and excitement (Akos & Galassi, 2004). This transition is marked by adolescents' growing independence as well as the onset of significant developmental, physiological, social, and academic changes. Socially, young people beginning high school must adjust to new rules and teachers, make new friends and familiarise themselves with a much larger environment (Andermann et al., 1999). Academically, students will encounter a wider variety of subjects, in addition subjects are often compartmentalised which contrasts to the more integrated approach common at primary school (Mac Iver et al., 2015).

Carefully designed transitions can assist adolescents to navigate the change with confidence (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Andrews & Bishop, 2012). Factors that contribute to successful transition include: developing and maintaining friendships (Peters, 2010), schools demonstrating appreciation for students' cultures and values (Fletcher et al., 2009), positive relationships between students and teachers (Fraire et al., 2013), and support from the family (Toumu'a & Laban, 2014).

A growing body of research confirms that families play an important role in learning, and that parental involvement remains important through adolescence (Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018; Mac Iver et al., 2015). As young people transition to high school, parents provide social, cultural and emotional support to assist their child, and they are often the first to notice signs of their child's disengagement with learning (ERO, 2019). Research demonstrates that it is more likely that adolescents will experience positive transitions to high school when schools, parents and stake holders work collaboratively (Fan & Chen, 2001), as the interrelationships between the parents' involvement in connecting the home and the school environment play a role in determining the quality of connections within the mesosystem operating for the young person.

Evidence from successful school-based transition programmes identify two core components. First, they include parents,

teachers and students across primary and high school settings, and second, they take place over the course of the whole school year, with preparation beginning several months before the transition and support continuing well into the new school year (Hanewald, 2013).

### ***Transition Experiences for Pasifika Students***

Pasifika students bring a wealth of cultural knowledge, experience and values into their classrooms in Aotearoa; however, the values of the dominant Pākeha culture tend to not only be significantly different but also to dominate the majority of classrooms (Hunter et al., 2019). Research that explores the experiences of Pasifika students in New Zealand as they transition to high school is limited. What can be gleaned from a number of studies available is the importance of family support and the relationship between teacher and learner (Chu et al., 2013). Focussing on academic success, Lipine (2010) explored the experiences of Samoan high school students their findings indicated that a "passion to achieve" (p. 160), as well as the importance of family played a strong role in students' ideas about the development of academic success.

For Pasifika students, there is evidence that supportive relationships between teachers and a classroom environment that values cultural knowledge are particularly important for educational success in general (Fletcher et al., 2009). Relationship-building between students and teachers is seen as crucial to engage students in learning and raise achievement (Ennis & McCauley 2002). Repeatedly, studies have emphasised the importance Pasifika students place on building positive student-teacher relationships and teachers showing they care (Hawk et al., 2002; Helu-Thaman, 2000), a finding which has implications for how schools might work to build strong relationships through the transition to high school.

In summary, previous studies exploring the experiences of adolescents making the transition to high school (Fletcher et al., 2009; Peters, 2010) highlight that for Pasifika students in Aotearoa New Zealand, successful transition to high schools requires: i) that schools demonstrate an appreciation for students' cultures and values, ii) that positive relationships between students and teachers develop quickly, and iii) students receive support from their family and community. In the present study we used repeated interviews of students and families to document the

changes and challenges they faced across the transition, including the role of family preparation and support, the role of teachers and the processes in schools, including cultural knowledge to supporting this process.

### Methodology

Participating students and families attended two schools within central West of Auckland, New Zealand's largest city, having the largest Pasifika population worldwide. Participants were identified for inclusion for this study initially through identification by their classroom teachers. The criterion for invitation was that the students be Year 8 (12-13 years old), of Pacific descent, and be achieving at a high level academically.

Ten students were identified on recommendation from their teachers; they were spoken about favourably by their teachers in relation to their attitudes towards school and learning. They and their parents were contacted by a Pacific liaison teacher from their school and invited to participate. All 10 parents consented to participate and assented to the participation of their children.

The first author met with the young people, explained to them the purpose of the study, and invited them to ask any questions about what their participation would involve. A brief description of the participants is provided in Table 1 (all names used are pseudonyms).

The study explored the experiences of Pasifika families and therefore it was critical for the methodology to be embedded within Pasifika research principles and to recognise Pasifika values. Pasifika cultural advisors supported the study through each step of the research, beginning with the research design through to protocols related to interviewing. Pasifika researchers highlight the importance of conducting research in ways that invite collaboration and build on community strengths. Relationships are at the heart of research with Pasifika communities (Fletcher et al., 2009), the lead author prioritized building the relationships with the participants through regular contact throughout the study's duration, bringing home baking to share and keeping in regular contact with participants through phone calls and sending cards.

**Table 1**

*Participants' pseudonyms, place of birth and ethnicity.*

Parent participants	Place of birth	Ethnicity	Child
John and Lovai	Both New Zealand	Both Tongan	Toakase
Mihe	Niue	Niuean	Maria
Melino	Tonga	Tongan	Emeni
Salesi (older brother)	Tonga	Tongan	Semisi (younger brother)
Teuila	New Zealand	Samoan	Loto
Sina and Henare	New Zealand (Sina) Samoa (Henare)	Both Samoan	Sione
Eleni	Australia	Samoan	Sefina
Leilani	New Zealand	Samoan	Manaia
Kalasia	Tonga	Tongan	Heneli
Ana	New Zealand	Samoan	Lelei

The interviews with parents and the young people were semi-structured and conversational in nature. A conversation was developed to explore the range influences on patterns of academic socialisation. Questions were structured to align with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), asking about influences across the range of ecological systems, over time. Topics of discussion focussed on experiences from the past and present, including how they planned for and experienced the transition to high school, changes in their experiences at schools

and the influences of socioeconomic and cultural factors over time.

Parents were interviewed three times over one year. During the first two interviews they were asked about their expectations as well as activities that they engaged with at home with their children related to learning (microsystem), their memories of their learning as young people (chronosystem), and the ways they felt their support changed with their children once they started high school (mesosystem). During the third interview



As a non-Pacific, outsider researcher researching within Pasifika families, the processes of member checking were particularly important and had cultural significance. I was aware that I could mistakenly interpret what my participants shared in their stories, as often cultural practices, including the ways that their children's participation is supported, are "invisible" to those who are not members of the same community (Rogoff et al., 2014). Reviewing the participant transcripts together was one way we could address this issue, and in turn co-construct the interview interpretations throughout that process.

### Data Analysis

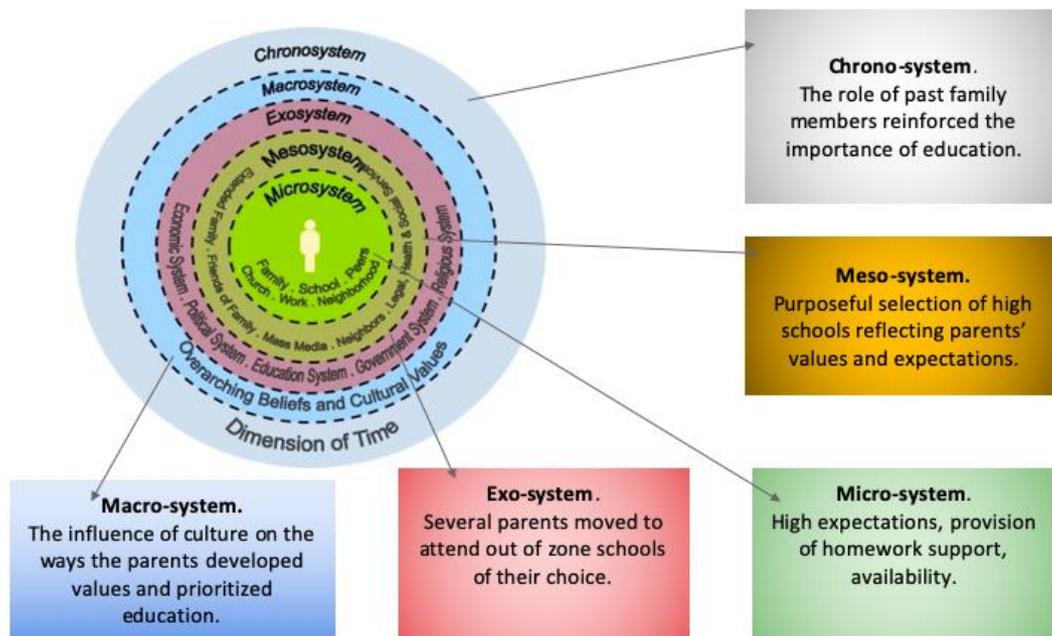
Interview data from both parents and children were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun

& Clarke, 2006). The process focused on developing themes from the perspectives of both parents and their children relating to activities engaged in at home related to learning within the family, expectations for achievement, parents' role in the children's learning, and the changes associated with the transition to high school.

Secondary analysis involved coding the themes against the five levels of ecological systems theory utilising a researcher-developed coding frame. Consistencies across thematic representations were used to develop categories across the cases to demonstrate a complete representation of the data. Themes identified across the data sets of both parents and their children were organised drawing on ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3**

*Themes Developed from Interview Data*



### **Findings: Parents and Young People's Experiences During the Transition**

Five significant themes emerged from the data: i) parents extensively supported learning and education (microsystem); ii) families made considerable preparations for high school (mesosystem); iii) families valued support at the transition to high school (mesosystem); iv) parents' support changed at the transition (microsystem); and v) the

role of past family members remained pivotal (chronosystem and macrosystem). Each theme is elaborated on from the dual perspectives of parents and children.

#### **Finding 1: Parents Extensively Supported Learning and Education**

The young people all expressed a deep appreciation of their families' involvement in their education. Indeed, most of the young people attributed the success that they

experienced at school largely to their parents' support. The young people identified that the forms of support they valued the most from their parents were the encouragement they received, their availability, the priority placed on the importance of school, their parents motivating them to achieve and their high expectations. Most of the youth highlighted that their parents' high expectations served as sources of motivation for them to do well academically. Here Sefina shared on the impact of her parents' support:

*My parents will always be there and knowing that really helps, I work hard at school because I know I'm doing it for them. They're setting my future ahead of me, and I'm making sure I follow that path.*

Maria described her parent's role in her learning as fuel, with their support and encouragement she explained she felt better equipped to take on challenges:

*My parent's job in my learning, they're my fuel that like keeps me going. If a car doesn't have fuel, then it can't run ... they keep on fueling me.*

Semisi expressed the expectations his family had for him and emphasized the importance of living by their shared values. He also highlighted the priority that was made for education by his parents and brother. He understood that his family expected him to do his best, and they also allowed him to make his own decisions regarding the paths he took in his education. Semisi articulated appreciation for the values his family instilled in him:

*They're constantly reminding me about my values: God first, education second and sport third. They tell me that education is important because you always have education to go back to. They're always pushing me to do my best, that's all they ever ask for.*

The types of involvement between parent participants differed between families; however, for most families there was consistency in the extent of their involvement. Six parents in this study spoke about the importance they placed on prioritizing their availability for their children. This included

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<sup>3</sup> In the New Zealand system children who live in the school's area (the zone) are guaranteed a place at their local school. Attending an out-of-zone state school requires the family to either move to the

attending sporting or cultural events, making time to participate in parent/teacher interviews and being available to help with homework. All participating families in this study spoke of the importance of their faith. Of the 10 participating families, nine attested to attending church regularly. For these families, weekends were often spent at church, taking part in church activities or volunteering their time to serve in their communities. Regular family prayers and involvement in church life were highlighted during interviews by both parents and adolescents as a central cultural practice, and key source of strength with which to draw upon.

### **Finding 2: Families Made Considerable Preparations for High School**

At the time of interviewing, most of the participating parents had started preparations for high school. Parents were purposeful and chose schools based on distinct criteria, reporting that a lot of time and research went into investigating potential high schools. Their preparations included online researching, seeking advice from friends, family and church members and engaging in discussions with their children around the changes that would occur at high school. Four separate criteria were identified by parents regarding their choices of high schools:

- Six parents chose out of zone<sup>3</sup> high schools due to the desirability of that schools' academic reputation.
- One family moved to a new district of Auckland so that their child could attend their preferred out of zone school.
- Two parents chose local schools that their other children had attended or they themselves had attended.
- One family allowed their child to board at a school of the child's choice in a different district in Auckland, a significant distance from home.

Ana gave her daughter a choice as to the high school she went to; however, she suggested they look carefully at all of their options. They decided on a large central school in Auckland that had a good reputation for sports and academics:

desired schools' location or enter their details into a ballot to secure a place.

*We applied for all the schools going through their ERO (Education Review Office) reports. I know some of their good friends from church went to [school name] and I think what was swaying their decision was the friends, and I said 'let's take the friends out of the equation let's look at education first.'*

### **Finding 3: Families Valued Support at the Transition to High School**

All of young people remarked that the transition to high school was challenging academically and socially during the first few weeks. They identified four challenges and changes: expectations, shock at the changes, support for success, and cultural mismatch. Most young people reported the dramatic increase in the numbers of students and the size of their high school was difficult to navigate initially. However, most young people reported they adjusted in time. The change in expectations from their teachers and school in terms of behaviour and what was expected of them academically was also challenging. The young people also found it difficult getting to know people and adjusting to being apart from their usual friends from intermediate.

Students all noted that the expectations of school and their teachers were different to those at intermediate school; for example, there was greater competition and different rules to adhere to. Students also mentioned that it took time to gain confidence in learning where their classrooms were located and how to follow a structured timetable. The word *shock* was used by a number of participants in reference to the first few weeks of high school. This was mainly related to the size and busyness of high school, as Maria conveyed:

*It was a shock because you go to intermediate and then you go to high school and it's like wow! High school is really big and I got lost the first day and I didn't know anyone. There's so many people and so much going on.*

Half the youth shared that making friends was difficult at first. It took time to get to know people in their classes and sports teams, and some students were separated from friendship groups established at intermediate. Those who had friends from their intermediate attend the same high school expressed an appreciation for having familiar people alongside them.

Reports were mixed from the young people regarding how well they felt their intermediate had prepared them academically for high school. Those who said they did feel well prepared attributed that to their intermediate teachers who they said had given them more challenging work on the lead up to Year 9. Lelei conveyed that she felt her Year 8 teachers could have spent more time preparing her for the extent of the changes:

*I feel like they missed a bit of stuff that could really help some kids out. Socially, I don't think they told us that much about it, they did tell us that the school is going to be bigger, you're going to be moving classes, you're going to meet new people - but it was a bigger jump than I expected.*

The majority of the young people spoke positively about the support systems their new schools had in place for Pasifika students. These consisted of after school homework clubs, Pasifika liaison teachers who they could meet with if they needed assistance, and Pasifika parent meetings that took place throughout the school year. Sefina spoke highly of the school Pasifika liaison teacher and identified the critical role she played in regards to her support, high expectations and her dedication to the success of Pasifika students:

*She (the liaison teacher) knows every Pasifika kids' name, she changed the perspectives of how other teachers see Pasifika kids. Pasifika kids used to be looked down on, and it was said that they were not the smart ones. But when she came, she lifted them up and made sure they were on top.*

Pasifika youth may experience conflicts between the values from home and those prevalent at school (Hunter et al., 2019). This cultural dissonance was also felt by students in the present study. For example, Maria who started Year 9 at an all-girls' high school commented that her fellow classmates talked a lot about boys. She expressed that being exposed to those types of conversations made her uncomfortable:

*I've really felt the pressure this year, there's so many people at high school and so many girls are boy crazy and stuff - but because of my beliefs I'm not really that kind of girl, you know?*

Most parents felt that their children had

transitioned successfully into Year 9. There were similarities reported in the difficulties their children shared regarding adjusting to high school. Like the students, parents' views encompassed expectations, preparation for change and support for success. Parents conveyed that their children experienced challenges getting to know different teachers, adjusting to meet different expectations, and encountering more challenging classwork. Parents shared that in addition to having high expectations for their children, they also had high expectations for the carefully chosen school. As Eleni described:

*I have high expectations of the teachers, and I want my kids to get a good deal and have the teachers on the same team - empowering my kids.*

These high expectations meant that the parents had to prepare for the transitions. Half of the parents reported they felt that they needed to upskill in order to best support their children academically. Parents discussed wanting to learn more about assessment procedures, requirements for English and Mathematics assignments, how to access the technological tools used in their children's classrooms and information on how to support their children to prepare for exams.

Parents also wanted support for their children, both academic and social. Salesi reported that Semisi had made friends at high school, and the friendships played a role in reducing the anxieties associated with starting at a large, competitive boys' school. Salesi wanted his younger brother and son to connect with other Pasifika students who were motivated that could support him. He hoped his younger brother had opportunities to meet Pasifika students with similar goals, earlier than he had at high school:

*There'll probably be more brown kids in their classrooms at high school, and they will run into them at an earlier age than I did. We want to send them to a school where there's more kids with a same kind of goals, you get that support from other Polynesians in the school.*

Parents identified a number of specific forms of support made available for Pasifika students at their children's high schools. These were the provision of homework centres, regular

meetings for parents and school staff, orientation evenings for Pasifika parents, and ensuring at least half the school prefects were Pasifika. Homework centres were facilitated by teachers and prefects<sup>4</sup> and regular meetings for Pasifika parents to attend where they could access education on topics ranging from assessment levels to school policies on achievement. Mihe expressed appreciation for the 12 Pasifika prefects at the school who made themselves available at the homework centre:

*There's 12 Pacific Island prefects in the school and those kids are getting merits and excellence in quite a few subjects. The teachers tell the kids that they have paved the way for your kids and so if you want them to be where they are—they're there helping out.*

Two parents reported that at the start of the year there was a welcome meeting for new Pasifika parents of Year 9 students, where the principal, deputy principals and all the Pasifika teachers introduced themselves to the parents. It was communicated that meetings were held three times a year after the initial introduction.

Teuila appreciated the support from the school; she expressed that the teachers and school leaders were all working hard for Pasifika students and they pushed their Pasifika students for leadership opportunities. Homework support was offered in the library by student tutors who were present in the mornings and after school.

Overall, the parents were positive about support offered by their children's high schools for Pasifika students. They expressed gratitude for the teachers' efforts and spoke highly of the school leaders, encouraging their children to make the most of the opportunities on offer.

#### **Finding 4: Parents' Support Changed at the Transition**

Data from the second interview with parents identified three significant changes reported related to parental support across the transition. They were: 1) managing the increase in homework for their children, 2) feeling less confident helping with the more challenging high school level tasks, and 3) seeking out support from their children's teachers to meet task requirements. For

schools. They hold an important role in their school and wider school community.

<sup>4</sup> Prefects are senior students responsible for upholding the rules and standards in their high

example, Mihe conveyed that the support she gave to her daughter needed to adapt to meet the more challenging classwork. To better meet her daughter's learning needs she shared that she wanted to make contact with her daughter's teachers, and to change her approach when helping with homework:

*The work she has to do is a lot more challenging now, so for me as a parent I need to go over what she's doing so that I can maybe help to bring clarity to things she thinks are too difficult. I need to explain it to her and help her break things down.*

Data from the third interview with parents highlighted that the changes associated with the transition impacted family practices. For example, due to the changed academic and behavioural expectations from high school, parents remarked that their support had to transform to meet the changes from school. To meet the different academic needs of their children, parents' reported the levels of support and encouragement adapted to meet the new demands that starting high school had on their children. For some parents, that also meant seeking out support from their children's schools and teachers so they could assist them more effectively at home.

Half of young people reported that their parents' support changed. For example, the expectations that their parents held regarding homework increased. A number of the youth identified that they needed more help from their families as they were encountering more challenging class work at Year 9.

### **Finding 5: The Role of Past Family Members Remained Pivotal**

A key theme throughout the conversations with parent and child participants was the continued presence and impact of previous generations in the lives of the young people. All of the young people expressed value for the stories that were told to them by family members about the purpose for their migration to New Zealand. The stories included details regarding the challenges that were faced by their parents and grandparents. Through the family stories they learnt about sacrifices that were made and the difficulties their parents experienced during their own experiences of high school. Embedded in the stories was the consistent message that education was important, for many it had served as a key driver in their families' migration to New Zealand.

The young people shared that the expectations had been passed down to them from their grandparents, and that aspirations were held for them that were influenced by significant members of their own communities such as church elders as well as their parents. For example, Semisi expressed that the stories told to him by his family motivated him to make the best of the opportunities available to him:

*My parents and my family constantly remind me about what we did to actually get here from Tonga. They tell me these stories to motivate me and to tell me how hard everyone has worked to get here ... it makes me feel that I don't want their work to go to waste.*

For most of the young people, the stories told to them related to the challenges associated with their families' migration were described as empowering, and played a role in motivating them to do well at school.

### **Discussion**

This study placed Pasifika student success at the center through its strength-based approach. Applying the framework of ecological systems theory to the findings highlighted that the whole family planned for and learned to navigate a successful transition to high school. Key themes within the parent and student interview data established connections between both sets of lived experience; contributing to an understanding of factors for successful transition experiences for Pasifika students.

The findings showed that the adolescents were knowledgeable and perceptive about the role of others in their success. They understood that their parents played a strong role in their academic achievement and were aware of the lengths that community and school members went to offer support. As in previous research, the Pasifika families in this study expressed their expectations predominantly through the messages that they gave their children about the importance of education as well as their support (Mac Iver et al., 2015). Our students' awareness of and appreciation for the care and support offered to them by their teachers and Pasifika liaison staff reinforce the value Pasifika students place on positive relationships between themselves and their teachers (Helu-Thaman, 2000). These qualities remained steady across the transition to high school.

The families in our study were similar to families worldwide in many of the ways that they sought to socialize their children in the high expectation they held for them. As in studies internationally (Aceves et al., 2020), parents expressed those high expectations through their actions, routines and direct engagement with their children's learning. They spent intensive amounts of time on these activities, and this investment of time did not change as their children transitioned to high school. Their careful preparations made for high school were made in collaboration with their children, well in advance of finishing intermediate school. At the transition, the parents' opportunities to give direct support changed, and parents responded to this, sometimes by intensifying their own efforts. These efforts were valued by the young people, supporting what others have identified about the critical role of the family as a source of motivation (Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018; Toumu'a & Laban, 2014). Such descriptions of authentic experiences of Pasifika families as their children transition to high school, are intended to support teachers and policy makers to meet students' needs academically and socially (Turner et al., 2015), building awareness of the long-term investment of family support and time in their children's academic success.

Unlike previous studies, the present study has also identified culturally specific influences on the families' socialisation practices. Cultural, social and community resources included spiritual and social values and knowledge, as well as community support from other Pasifika community members at church, in extended families or at school. Many of these less tangible resources called on virtues or values, or ways of being a community or family member, role modelled by elders or family members, since passed on. Within families, intergenerational expectations contributed to the adolescents' motivation to succeed academically. Examples of resilience, for example, were modelled to the young people through the sacrifices made by past family members, which were captured within family stories and conveyed in the messages that parents expressed to their children. The findings highlighted how family stories served to embed high expectations across generations and add meaning to the day-to-day practices employed by families to support their children's education.

### Limitations

The present study is a small scale, qualitative investigation over a year's time span. As such,

a number of limitations of the present study which might be considered in interpreting this study, or in designing future research. The study is limited firstly by the number of participants and the specific context. Generalisability of the findings to the Pasifika population in New Zealand on the whole cannot be assumed. A second limitation is the potential for cross-cultural misinterpretation. A Pasifika researcher may have been able to learn more from the participants than the first author, a non-Pacific researcher. While the research was designed to minimise misinterpretation, for example by asking the most relevant questions and faithfully recreating parents' stories with them, the possibility remains that responses may have been different if the interviewer was of a Pasifika ethnicity. A third limitation is the fact that it was mainly mothers who participated, only three fathers were involved in the interviews. If this study were to be repeated, including more fathers would provide a wider perspective.

### Conclusion

Findings from this study indicate that the participating Pasifika parents' value for education was shaped by past generations of parents, grandparents and great-grandparents' actions, messages and family practices. As schools interact with their Pasifika parent communities, applying this knowledge could be a useful way to find out about and then validate the cultural knowledge that their children bring with them into the classroom. Additionally, acknowledging the contributions that Pasifika parents make through their involvement helps to create authentic, mesosystemic connections between two primary agents of socialisation within young people's worlds – schools and families (Cunningham, 2019). The study highlights the importance of developing a shared focus about the positive activities and cultural practices that occur within Pasifika families for the benefit of successive generations of young people. We argue that, rather than perpetuating disempowering perspectives, a strength-based approach is required for cultivating the effective relationships between schools, parents, teachers and students, upon which successful education thrives.

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