

Teachers' perceptions of socio-cultural practices on students' academic achievement in North Pentecost, Vanuatu

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This study investigated teachers' perceptions of sociocultural factors affecting students' academic achievement in Zone Five North Pentecost, Vanuatu. This paper reports on a qualitative study involving 45 participants, identified as 'a culture-sharing group'. The study documented participants' attitudes, perceptions, beliefs and shared approaches to sociocultural and classroom practices concerning students' academic work. Teachers' perceptions from etic and emic perspectives within their cultural and social context and their meanings and processes were investigated. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of learning proposes that learning happens through interaction within the socio-cultural context. All contexts are complex, with intertwining systems of collective behaviours and simultaneous interactions with the environment. Diverse sociocultural factors affecting academic achievement were identified, including kava as a socio-cultural keystone, religious responsibilities of community members, domestic commitments towards families and wider communities and traditional formalities such as bolololi (Traditional pig-killing ceremony), mateana (funerary ceremonies) and lagiana (marriage). These aspects of daily interactions among Zone Five communities influenced the relationship between teaching and learning pedagogies. Despite setbacks to learning, teachers suggested the urgent need for a culturally inclusive curriculum to assist students in acquiring important communal values, understanding their spiritual and cultural phenomena, living sustainably with their environment and maintaining a healthy life while adhering to the virtues of citizenship and governance.

Keywords: Vanuatu, socio-cultural practices, traditional knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

A UNESCO (2006) report noted the changing trends in teachers' perceptions towards socio-cultural practices in schools. The document outlined the need for thorough preparation of teachers so they can develop students to uphold the principles of good human relations and a sense of responsibility within their societies. The report also urges teachers to contribute significantly by teaching and being professional regarding individuals' social, cultural and economic progress. In Vanuatu, socio-cultural practices in traditional societies play a fundamental role in the daily lives of communities and their schools. These practices are daily societal aspects that significantly impact students' academic learning. In the educational context, parents, teachers and stakeholders perceive these societal practices as affecting how students learn in schools. Hongboontri and Keawkhong (2014) state that sociocultural practices are perceived as society's norms, characteristics and social behaviours. These are ways of life

in which a person interacts daily with his/her immediate environment. The cultural context influences teachers' beliefs and actions towards students and learning. Thaman (2008) encouraged research that will enable a better understanding of the socio-cultural practices of Pacific societies to appreciate better relationships among people within a community and how relationships impact student learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teachers' beliefs and perceptions towards students' learning and academic achievement remain hegemonic, which affects learning within schools and local communities. As Taufe'ulungaki (2002) puts it, 'the failure of education in the Pacific can be attributed to a large degree to the imposition of an alien system designed for a western social and cultural context, which is underpinned by quite different values' (p. 15). Therefore, it is essential to enshrine core values in a school's curriculum that are relevant and contextualised (Taufe'ulungaki, 2009). The *Vanuatu Education Sector Strategy* (VESS) anticipated the *Vanuatu National Curriculum Statement* (VNCS), which aims to offer an effective and relevant education for all ni-Vanuatu and guide the national government in achieving quality education standards based on values derived from Vanuatu's unique culture and beliefs. The official VNCS document was the recent platform that influenced how teachers perceived their work and day-to-day interaction with students in their classrooms. The document was the first of its kind in Vanuatu. It was also aimed at harmonising the language and curriculum content of Anglophone and Francophone streams, thus achieving an integrated bilingual school system. Teachers' assessment and evaluation practices in schools have changed because of a more coherent continuum of learning that begins from kindergarten and continues to Year 13/14. The Statement was framed following values relevant to Vanuatu's educational needs (Vanuatu Ministry of Education and Training, 2010).

The values that VNCS targets identify students' civility and expertise as paramount ingredients in forming better citizens. The national statement supports a coherent continuum of learning standards at all levels by recognising diverse cultures and national identity. Several government reports and international recommendations, including *Re-Thinking Vanuatu Education Together Conference 2002* (See review by Watson-Gegeo, 2005), *Education Master Plan 2000-2010* (See Republic of Vanuatu, 1999), the *Austin Report 2004*, and *CRP Summit Resolutions and National Forums 2009 & 2010* (See Asian Development Bank, 2009), have outlined the need to recognise and contextualise social and cultural elements in formal learning.

Understanding the perceptual processes in practice and research in education is complex. Practitioners, researchers and learners often have problems understanding why a person behaves or learns a certain way. The complexity of understanding human perception makes its definitions and theories interdisciplinary (Zheng, 2015) and speculative. Conversely, belief is a firm conviction or acceptance of something. Belief is the individual truth one holds about physical and social realities. Beliefs are based on trust and confidence in knowing that something exists or is true. Beliefs are the fundamental building blocks in our conceptual structure. One of the overarching explanations for belief in education is one's personal philosophy, opinion or conviction about learning and teaching (Tarman, 2012). Teachers' strong convictions about pedagogies affect how they respond to learners' needs in school (Tarman, 2012).

Beliefs, perceptions, expectations and attitudes guide and direct teachers' and learners' responses toward school and student achievement. Teachers' perceptions and beliefs influence

their pedagogical practices and students' efficacy and success (Ferguson, 2003). Teachers' perceptions and beliefs of social and cultural factors affecting pedagogies vary with context. Equally, students from Pacific cultures have unique knowledge acquisition and epistemology systems that influence their ways of thinking and behaviour and, in turn, their academic achievement (Thaman, 2014). In Pacific settings, teachers and students bring their cultural baggage to school, including things learned and experienced from their societies (Nabobo-Baba, 2006). It is challenging for teachers to deal with diverse attitudes, beliefs and perceptions affecting students' educational responses in schools, including in Pacific Island countries. However, understanding that beliefs strongly impact teachers' actions and students' achievements will guide teachers in schools to re-examine their pedagogies.

Teachers' willingness to adopt new teaching strategies in schools depends on teachers' beliefs and perceptions (Sanz et al., 2015). Teachers must be aware that students' local cultures frame their knowledge and how they arrive at knowing (epistemology). The lack of teachers' cultural understanding in schools often results in assumptions that students are unintelligent or ill-behaved if they do not adhere to the teacher's expected norms. Thaman (2009) argued that teachers do not link students' experiences with their teaching. Teachers in schools should recognise and understand this context to influence their actions and interactions. Understanding students' socio-cultural environments is crucial to meeting their learning needs. Teachers' understanding of sociocultural environments are also critical because of their contribution to students' academic success and positive teacher-student relationships (Thaman, 2009).

Bakalevu (2000) found that Fijian students faced problems with Mathematics because of the mismatch between the school's expectations and students' cultural backgrounds. Mathematics has been conceptualised as neutral and culture-free, which can marginalise students if not embedded in their context. Students' academic success in Pacific schools is achievable if their socio-cultural backgrounds are accounted for and contextualised. In addition, a student's sociocultural background can affect the teacher's expectations and teaching strategies in schools (Bakalevu, 2000). For instance, Gay (2000) reports that some classroom rites and social protocols do not favour students whose cultures are passive. In sum, Burnett (2004) asserts that teachers in the Pacific Islands should be astute observers, reading their school context and being intelligent interpreters of their school community. These skills will create a harmonious atmosphere that should promote academic success for learners.

Socio-cultural factors also influence teacher performance and student achievement in schools. Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory stresses society's significant contributions to individual development. Vygotsky argued that More Knowledgeable Others (MKO), such as parents, teachers, peers and culture, were responsible for developing learners' higher-order functions. Thaman (2012) continually argued the salience of the Pacific student's culture in the teaching and learning space and defines culture as a way of life, thinking and being of a group of people, which include their language, knowledge and value systems. This 'way of life' includes how people remember important skills, knowledge and values, communicated to the young for cultural continuity and survival. The curriculum contains the culture it intends to transmit, and if it is devoid of Pacific cultures and worldviews, it becomes culturally undemocratic (Thaman, 2012).

Children attending school each day have their 'virtual school bags' with them. These 'bags' contain experiences, skills and talents learned at home and in the wider world (Thomson, 2002). Students' 'virtual school bags' contain the things they have accumulated over time that derive from various sources. Burnett (2004) points out that location, gender, social class, media and cultural background profoundly influence Pacific values. These variables, experienced through

socialisation and the home environment, affect how children learn, creating an unequal footing across groups (Nawele, 2006).

The concept of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2011) presents another way of looking at the great range of experiences and understandings students acquire from their environment. Pierre Bourdieu's cultural capital is a widely recognised concept underpinning his theory of social reproduction. It has been examined by sociologists of education because of its important potential in the educational process, explaining how students' understandings and experiences are accumulated. Social capital is accrued in a similar way to financial capital. Moreover, Bourdieu (2011) claims that students coming from upper-class families perform better in schools and become more successful than those from lower income groups. This is due to the power of cultural capital that matches the expectations of the school and not the ability or academic competency of the student.

Roundell (2003) argues that society is destroyed when negative perceptions undermine its education system. Students' academic achievements are affected when pedagogical strategies conflict with the socio-cultural aspects of the school. Thaman (2012) argues these systems greatly influence the relationship between teachers, students and learning. In Pacific states, students in schools have diverse perceptions and beliefs about academic achievement and the strategies for achieving higher grades. Schools and universities in Pacific Island states continue to make wrong assumptions about socio-cultural systems and academic achievement (Thaman, 2012). Nabobo-Baba (2006) points out that the 'gap' between school and indigenous knowledge and epistemology can only be bridged if teachers in schools understand children's cultural backgrounds. Research in schools has found mismatches between pedagogy and students' socio-cultural backgrounds. A case study conducted in rural schools of Malekula Island in Vanuatu reported that the Western style education system alienates students from their heritage and local epistemologies (Shipman, 2008). Shipman reported the 'gap' that Western education systems have created in Vanuatu's local communities alienates students from their cultural worldviews. This scenario suggests manipulation and inadvertently makes local people appear to have no agency and disadvantages them. A similar case study was conducted in an urban school in Vanuatu, exploring teacher's beliefs and attitudes towards at-risk pupils. Mwarakurmes (2012) found that teachers lack the pedagogical knowledge to actively engage students to maximise learning in their own ways. Mwarakurmes reported that teachers did not accept students' beliefs and lacked tolerance towards individual learning styles. In addition, the study found weak teacher-student relationships leading to 'at-risk' situations in schools.

During the last decade, an initiative known as 'Rethinking Pacific Education Initiative by Pacific for Pacific' (RPEIPP) was formed to assist Pacific teachers to re-focus their planning by developing culturally inclusive content and pedagogies that emphasise the importance of Pacific values (Thaman, 2009). The need to embed Pacific values and knowledge in the curriculum and activities implies a decolonised system of pedagogies. Thaman points out that RPEIPP's goal is to capitalise on the cultural strengths of Pacific societies to develop learners and help Pacific communities survive. This initiative offers academic space and platforms for scholars to excel academically in national and regional institutions. Such thinking is not confined to the Pacific. Gay (2000, p. 25) points out that teachers need to deliberately create cultural continuity, which demonstrates 'culturally responsive teaching (CRT), which is instructional behaviour that responds to students' cultural needs. Shor (2012) points out that CRT facilitates academic achievement levels and encourages the development of good citizenship in schools. Empowerment through CRT enables students to cultivate personal

integrity and empowers them to be competent, ambitious and confident. An empowering education provides a platform for students to be risk-takers and critical thinkers (Shor, 2012).

Research questions

The primary research question posed in this investigation is:

What are Zone Five teachers' perceptions of socio-cultural practices on students' academic achievements in North Pentecost?

Three (3) sub-questions further guided the study:

1. What are teachers' perceptions regarding the socio-cultural practices affecting students' academic achievements?
2. What do teachers believe are common cultural practices that promote or inhibit students' formal learning in schools?
3. How might certain cultural practices be incorporated to elevate students' academic achievement?

METHODOLOGY

The Zone Five area is located in North Pentecost in Vanuatu. It is one of the seven zones within Penama province that the Vanuatu government recently established to provide educational and financial support to schools. The zone has a mixture of Francophone and Anglophone schools administered by school heads. The zone covers approximately seven square kilometres with over 5,000 residents, making it the most heavily populated zone of the province. Over the years, the zone, like other zones within the province, has been overseen by different Zone Curriculum Advisors (ZCA). The ZCAs, appointed by the Teaching Service Commission (TSC), provide advisory services to their schools. The zone is currently coordinated by a School Improvement Officer (SIO) in collaboration with the Provincial Education Officer. The zone has 23 schools altogether and comprises 74 teachers in total. Each year, Zone Five teachers convene at a selected school to discuss important issues that affect them because they are relatively close to each other. A Zone Annual Plan provided by the Ministry of Education, together with a designed Zone Five academic policy, guides the overall running of the schools.

This study used a qualitative method to capture teachers' perceptions from etic and emic perspectives within their cultural and social context, their meanings and processes (Reeves et al., 2008). This design was employed because of its flexibility at the fieldwork stage and its ability to provide rich, in-depth responses from participants. Zone Five is considered a 'culture-sharing group' Creswell (2007, p. 241). A culture-sharing group has shared sets of beliefs, behaviour and language (Creswell, 2007), which provides collective perceptions of socio-cultural elements that are anticipated to pave future directions for current teachers within Vanuatu schools. A *Talanoa* method (Nabobo-Baba, 2003; Vaiioleti, 2006) was used in the study as a research tool for data collection, with baked food and *malogu* (kava) presented to the gatekeepers as tokens of appreciation after each *talanoa* (*vevhuriana*) session. The gatekeepers for the *talanoa* sessions were treated with *binihimarahi* (respect) and *gogonaiana* (reverence). The lead researcher listened attentively and spoke with humility to participants. Obtrusive manners were avoided, and disruptions were minimal to allow participants to fully express themselves.

The lead author is from North Pentecost and has taught at Lini Memorial College, a school within Zone Five, for eight consecutive years from 2005 to 2012. Being *Ata Raga* (North Pentecost native) to the subject area and its people made the researcher mindful of his own subjectivity. As an insider, the extensive experience with the Zone Five community persuaded the lead author to focus this study on the zone and reveal the factors affecting learning. The lead researcher interacted with participants using the local language spoken by North Pentecost people, the *hano* dialect. This cultivated willingness and openness from participants, who seemed comfortable providing reliable information to the researchers. The lead author's role as an insider blended well with social functions like funerals, traditional weddings, religious functions, and fundraising during the fieldwork.

Forty-five teachers participated in the study. They were from Francophone and Anglophone schools, with 34 participants female and 11 males. More than half of the teachers in the sample have more than ten years of teaching experience, and only one had less than five years of teaching experience. From the sample of participants, six were school Principals, four Deputy Academic Principals, seven Heads of Departments (HOD), 19 secondary school teachers, eight primary class teachers and one Early Childhood and Care Education (ECCE) facilitator. All 45 practitioners had more than one role as key players in their school's academic success. Though 22% of participants were administrators, all teachers had dual roles in teaching and administration.

FINDINGS

Making sense of vernacular and symbols

Many teachers perceived that using their first language in school, at home, and within their cultural boundaries enhanced students' academic achievement. Observations concluded that the *Hano* dialect is the first language all participants use at home and in the workplace. The local Raga language is somewhat complex and varies in symbols and style. It was the primary means of conveying important information like facts and emotions between teachers and students. As teachers noted:

An excellent understanding of 'Hano' language definitely assists student's intellectual development in schools. It also helps students to construct learning in English and French as foreign subjects taught in the classroom. (TE015)

Hano dialect is a useful tool to be used in classrooms to enhance learning. I believe it to be beneficial because important facts and information in subjects such as mathematics and science can be understood better. (TE029)

I usually introduce new topics using local symbols and Hano dialect. During revisions, students are encouraged to ask questions using Hano because they feel confident with it. I am happy with that because they are learning after all. (TE007)

[C]ultural symbols and traditional activities like performing 'bua', 'singsingi', 'savogoro' and 'iboi' learnt from elders in our 'gamali' enhance students learning because students incorporate them within their assessments like prepare talks and speeches." (TE020).

Data analysis revealed that using the local vernacular and symbols in classroom pedagogy enhanced student learning and contributed to their academic acceleration. The link between the *Hano* language and learning in Zone Five schools is inseparable as students learn and interact

confidently. For teachers, utilising the students' first language enhances learning, making meaning clearer during lesson delivery.

Appreciating religion and culture

Culture and religion play a significant role in academic achievement but also can be impediments:

Involving in religious activities develops a sets of values and behaviour that directly influences what students and teachers do, say and think. The school and church are both training grounds for children here. (TE033)

I often encourage my siblings to be faithful to religious obligations to develop their spiritual understanding of things around them. Church leaders are teachers here who nurture our children through sermons. It surely helps them to be successful in class. (TE008)

Zone Five schools honor a lot of holy calendar days observed and celebrated by churches. These celebrations help students to learn and experience life-skills. However, they disturb classes which disadvantaged the slow learners". Also, syllabus are not thoroughly covered which affects examination classes. (TE025)

According to the participants, appreciating religion and culture equips learners to be leaders in all aspects of life. The religious and cultural principles of respect, unity, reciprocity and democracy provide Zone Five students with a staircase for meaningful and abundant living. Adhering to Zone Five cultural and religious environments encourages a spirit of harmony and equitable interaction among the people.

Teachers of Zone Five unanimously agreed that religious obligations have both beneficial and adverse effects on students' academic achievement. The ongoing church-related events within the school premises and the surrounding communities made it difficult for teachers to complete their annual syllabus. Similarly, students devoted more time to religious duties than schoolwork. The overall commitment to religious matters in Zone Five communities portrays churches as teaching institutions that positively affect students' behaviour toward their schoolwork.

Kava as a socio-cultural keystone

North Pentecost produces a lot of kava (*piper methysticum*) for traditional ceremonies, domestic use and commercial purposes. Kava is abundant and a significant crop for North Pentecost culture. Participants reported the crop as both beneficial and an obstacle to students' academic learning in Zone Five:

All cultural obligations in North Pentecost are associated with kava and this steals parent's time and money and not providing enough academic support for their children. (TE033)

[S]tudents are not entitled to quality care at home because their parents are always away from home during the evenings. (TE037)

I am a usual visitor at a nearby kava bar during the evening. I see many parents there whose children attend my school. They chat and drink kava every night. Some of them stay up very late. On several occasions, I observe students that are sent on errands to buy kava, tobacco and cigarette for their parents and elder siblings. (TE037)

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It was observed that students were involved in kava preparation during communal gatherings such as *lagiana*, *mateana* and *bolololi*. This social responsibility often makes students sit until very late at night. However,, important cultural values, appropriate skills and attitudes are acquired during such gatherings; young people are taught during food and kava preparation at the *nakamal*. Some of the teachers commented that:

During morning work, boys in particular are sleepy and feel lazy to do exercises because they stayed up late at the *nakamal*. They often feel tired and not concentrating in class. (TE009)

The good solar lights for home use are used at the *nakamal* for kava sessions. This deprive students of good lighting for private study at home. However, several students sell kava and purchase their own. (TE045)

I must say that most parents do not help students with homework because they spend most time at the *nakamal* for drinking kava and storytelling. Children are not supported but neglected to work alone. (TE018)

Participants said excessive kava involvement and drinking used up students' quality time during the evenings. Parents involved in drinking kava are not supportive towards their children's studies. On the other hand, the return on investment on kava helps schools build new classrooms, purchase new textbooks and provide for students.

Traditional formalities

North Pentecost people associate themselves with *alengan vanua* (ways of the land). These 'ways of place' are traditional ceremonies involving both moieties, *Bule* and *Tabi*. A teacher commented:

Tradition of North Pentecost is very influential that conditions young people to conform to cultural protocols and *alengan vanua*. (TE027)

I must say that in North Pentecost, most parents respect communal obligations. They are attentive to their duties and responsibilities towards *alengan vanua*. This commitment is not healthy for their children because it is time-consuming and a waste of resources. In fact, parents should be concentrating to school activities. (TE002)

During the last five years, Zone Five schools produced a lot of underachievers because social functions such as *bolololi* have taken precedence in many homes. Most parents do not see the value of education because they do not appreciate it. This affected students learning both at primary and secondary level. (TE023)

North Pentecost people are inundated with traditional responsibilities, thus placing much importance on communal duties, especially mutual obligations and practices.

Bolololi, mateana and lagiana ceremonies

Teachers revealed that many resources are spent during *bolololi*, *mateana* and *lagiana* ceremonies. Participants stated that much money is invested in purchasing tusked pigs, *bwana* (valued red mats) and food rather than students' academic needs. One teacher commented that these traditional practices are democratic, so most parents willingly exercise their traditional rights to acquire status and wealth and establish relationships within their resource limits. When participants were asked about their views on traditional ceremonies, almost all talked about its influence, as exemplified in the following quotes:

The current condition of communities within Zone Five is not conducive for good learning. The cultural cycle of events here especially funeral periods demands a lot of resources from the people and low priority on education. Parents coming from surrounding communities are struggling to pay their children's school fees on time. It disturbs them mentally. (TE026)

Traditional obligations such as deaths, marriages and pig-killing ceremonies really disturbs students. Because students are part of the community, they are obliged to show respect by attending. If they are missing classes, they are affected! (TE008)

The Raga traditional way of life promotes togetherness because it is communally oriented. This feeling of "being home" makes students comfortable and are reluctant to attend school every day. Teachers are often blamed for student's failures which is wrong. It is our cultural way of doing things that lead to student's academic downfall. (TE010)

Because these traditional rituals typically take place over long periods, they impact students' academic work. The participants agreed that significant involvement in these cultural obligations inhibits students from achieving better academic results. However, participants agreed that these practices hindering learning could be resolved through meaningful dialogue to reach a 'negotiated space' among homes, communities and schools. The 'negotiated space' model should empower students to realign their focus towards learning.

Understanding spiritual and cultural phenomenon

Developing a cultural and spiritual understanding was a theme that surfaced during data analysis. Participants perceived a strong connection with the cultural and spiritual realm boosts Pentecost children's academic performance. During *talanoa* and interviews, almost all participants commented positively on culture and religion, as exemplified by these responses:

Zone Five students should be encouraged to execute activities like sketching family trees playing traditional games and plays such as 'gai', 'visvisi' and 'gorogorovwengo'. Our culture teaches allegiance to superior being. This traditional knowledge of relationship fosters indigenous philosophies whereby students and teachers relate their own spiritual domains with their learning environment. (TE040)

Traditional rituals of performing birth, marriage and death ceremonies should be taught in school. The traditional songs and dances are important for us because they link our social world with the supernatural. Acquiring and interacting using traditional rituals identifies who you are anywhere. (TE035)

North Pentecost is an intact society where life revolves around unwritten regulations. People's daily lives are guided by the invisible web of totems, norms, spirits and principles relating to clans, family structure and church. Participants felt that if culture and religion blend well into the formal curriculum, students will be more independent and respond well to social responsibilities.

DISCUSSION

In Zone Five, chiefs and elders at the *nakamal* can scaffold and create learning spaces that cultivate personal independence. This study suggested that students' involvement in socio-cultural activities, such as *lagiana*, *mateana* and *bolololi*, promote planning skills, which assists students in accomplishing life-long goals. The accumulation of experiences and understanding of one's surroundings develop skills that apply to their everyday tasks. These are skills that, if exploited by teachers in schools, will likely empower students and encourage them to strive for academic achievements. This is consistent with Koya's (2009) advice. He outlined ways of

devising lessons that consider students' needs and backgrounds; as students become more engaged in learning, their academic credentials increase, so they become successful later in life. Bourdieu's (2011) cultural capital explains that students coming from upper-class contexts become successful because of their cultural capital. This is consistent with teacher's perceptions in this study, where students become better managers and planners if they blend well with diverse socio-cultural practices to acquire cultural capital within their own social boundaries. The North Pentecost culture emphasises obligations toward the *gamali*, which is perceived to be the focal point of learning and teaching at the local level. This instils values of cooperation, acceptable behaviour and respect, which are crucial for learning. It is in the traditional space, which Bourdieu termed 'habitus', where knowledge, skills and spiritual powers are regulated. North Pentecost culture is male-dominant; thus, the *gamali* may influence mainly male students to take responsible actions for their learning journey. The way North Pentecost culture exerts influence on students affects the *habitus* of learners. Students' dispositions for navigating the education system reflect how they have acquired cultural capital over time. The interconnectedness of communal life and pedagogy is a system that influences learning.

The findings from the study suggest that culture and religion play a significant role in elevating students' academic attainment. They are perceived to provide a stairway for progress and change among students. In North Pentecost, religion and culture are perceived to be common strong grounds that learners in school embrace and capitalise on for success. This is consistent with findings from Loury's (2004) study, which found the same relationship in her research among a sample of youths in the United States, where active teenagers in churches obtained higher qualifications than those who were inactive. The findings in North Pentecost correspond with Regnerus et al.'s (2003) theory that 'religious service attendance constitutes a form of social integration that has the consequence of reinforcing values conducive to educational attainment and goal setting' (p. 645). These values are underpinnings of addressing different socio-cultural practices that affect learning in Zone Five schools. The study posits that culture and religion positively affect academic learning, mainly through fostering beliefs that influence individual traits, such as a work ethic. A 'negotiated space' for students provides a way to choose the 'best of both' worlds to promote balanced learning.

The findings indicate that using local vernacular and symbols within student's boundaries enhances academic achievement. Using *Hano* as a tool for instruction and cultural symbols in schools by teachers provides an insight that understanding complex concepts is achievable if the medium of instruction is familiar and straightforward. This finding is vital because teachers and students across the Pacific Islands often face setbacks relating to foreign language use. For instance, Willans et al. (2015) found that in the rural primary schools of Vanuatu, teachers are competent when using vernacular to teach, and this builds confidence among students to do the same during discussions, narratives and group activities.

Another finding from the current study suggested that kava planting, its preparation and drinking negatively impact students' academic learning. Teachers perceive that quality time and resources for students are reduced by the different kava processes, and parents do not support children's academic work. This finding suggests that traditional communities do not recognise the importance of formal learning but appreciate how society revolves around kava use. This is consistent with the findings of Nawele's (2006) work with 45 Fijian students who stated that excessive *yagona* (kava) drinking negatively impacts student's academic work. Unsupportive parents at home mean students are not monitored, and this habit paralyses students because homework will be left undone. Children are much freer when left unattended and may roam around the village involved in stealing, smoking or drinking kava.

However, kava ceremonies in Pentecost play a significant role within village settings. This study found that the traditional plant encourages identity maintenance, community support and financial backing for families. Teachers noted that parents establish agreements with schoolteachers and negotiate school fees during kava drinking sessions at the *nakamal*. This demonstrates the complexity of balancing family commitments with kava drinking. Teachers are parents, and if they are involved in frequent kava drinking, their roles, competencies, professionalism and attendance will be undermined, eventually hampering student learning. Because learning is dynamic and participatory, teachers, learners, parents and communities must collaborate and negotiate a learning space for students at school and home to promote quality learning. The time spent by parents and teachers at night for kava drinking eventually jeopardises academic goals and economic growth. However, the cultural embeddedness of kava within North Pentecost is crucial because it helps the survival of many Zone Five schools. Data revealed that most rural schools survive on the revenue earned from kava, and school infrastructures are financed by kava production. This is positive for student learning because most parents are subsistence farmers. The dilemma of being obligated towards kava as a socio-cultural keystone reasserts the complexity of the traditional/educational tension. Kava's position in this traditional/contemporary society remains the central theme of a complex web that challenges modern education. In fact, these challenges could be addressed at the home and school levels so that learning is enhanced and teachers complete their syllabi.

This study revealed that students invest much time toward religious obligations. Church-related events attract students to socialise with others during free time, which may hamper academic learning. Students often exhaust themselves over the weekend, which harms learning. The relationship that students have with spirituality denotes that there is a strong link between the natural and the supernatural in Zone Five. In Zone Five, students' commitments toward religious obligations indicate that certain aspects of *alengan vanua* taught at the *gamali* correspond with Christian principles. This reflects the perception that both the church and *alengan vanua* echo the same teachings of moral and ethical principles.

Moreover, traditional formalities within Zone Five communities, such as *lagiana*, *bolololi* and *mateana*, hinder students' academic attainment. The *alengan vanua* demands a lot of time and resources from parents and students alike, including adhering to lengthy days of rituals. The results from the study reveal that the communal structure of North Pentecost insists on a strong sense of loyalty to the *alengan vanua* ethos. This contradicts teachers' negative and stereotypical assumptions that traditional formalities affect students' academic achievement. Within Zone Five, the total submission to the *alengan vanua* denotes loyalty and devotion to the *welen vanua* – the key concept to action and thought in Pentecost Island. Being of service to others and giving respect to cultural obligations within students' traditional villages is an indication that the same is practised in Zone Five schools.

Though teachers perceive students' submission to societal obligations as harming learning, compliance to various social commitments may serve as a platform for student's conformity to school policies and regulations. Furthermore, teachers' generalisation of cultural practices negatively impacting learning in North Pentecost schools is a 'mismatch' between students' cultural norms and teachers' expectations because it can affect how teachers deliver learning in classrooms. For students, maintaining communal solidarity is a norm that precedes school activities, which is an issue for teachers. This is a complex scenario that can affect pedagogy. Through dialogue among students, school administration and parents, consensus can be reached to accommodate traditional formalities in the zone.

Furthermore, North Pentecost's traditional practices of initiation ceremonies, dances, pig-killing rituals and sand drawing have supernatural links. These are cultural practices that foster allegiance to the spiritual world. This means that the transmission of traditional and secret knowledge to younger generations is through the spirits from the cosmic world and not via formal teaching. This implies that students obtain knowledge through cultural intuition, which contradicts modern knowledge acquisition processes. Therefore, there is a gap between Western scientific knowledge and cultural context. This scenario can create learning gaps for students unless traditional knowledge keepers and teachers fully recognise it. Bakalevu (2009) states that a contextualised curriculum should bridge the gap between curriculum and home cultures. The current curriculum is a culture that leads a scholar to attain a degree or certification. This means teachers in Pacific Island schools have to stretch themselves by embracing the complex modern-traditional form of curriculum. Teachers should also know the values embedded in traditional activities; otherwise, the traditions may harm learning. Working non-linearly to cultivate ethics among students is a teacher's role towards a community of learners. However, if Zone Five head teachers recognise the culture gap and devise workable frameworks for addressing it, it can be used effectively as a springboard to elevate learning in schools

CONCLUSION

Teachers identified practices impacting students' formal school learning, including excessive kava drinking, student involvement in religious obligations, domestic commitments towards families and the wider community and the cyclic traditional formalities within communities. These aspects of day-to-day interactions among the communities influence pedagogies. Traditional formalities such as *lagiana*, *bolololi* and *mateana* in North Pentecost demand time and resources. Most teachers felt that this *alengan vanua* ethos disturbs students' learning. However, a 'negotiated space' can be reached via dialogue between home and school to address these concerns. Establishing bonds and entering into relationships creates room for the balanced academic well-being of learners. Currently, the home environment and communities in North Pentecost are not conducive to students' academic learning, which calls for teachers to devise practical steps to help address student academic achievement. Teachers felt that vital communal values should be integrated into the current curriculum. Similarly, teachers revealed that students should be taught to understand spiritual and cultural phenomena that affect their social and academic lives. Nourishing students' understanding of their cultural and spiritual world in the curriculum develops a sense of responsibility towards academic work and life.

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