

Polyfest-Polysuccess: Collaborative critical autoethnographic reflections of Pacific cultural festivals and the success of Pacific students in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract

This paper connects the collaborative critical autoethnographic (CCA) reflections of three authors who story and examine their own personal experiences of being part of the organising bodies for secondary school Polyfests across Aotearoa, New Zealand: the ASB Polyfest in Auckland, HuttFest in Lower Hutt and the Canterbury Polyfest in Christchurch. We contend, the Polyfest experience provides a platform for Pacific students to develop and share cultural expertise, exhibit pride in their cultural identities and cultivate leadership skills. As critical spaces and sites of cultural knowledge generation and sharing, communication, and innovation, the three aforementioned polyfests highlight the vibrant nature of Pacific flourishing in Aotearoa New Zealand, which can strengthen educators' and schools' appreciation of what matters and is deemed as success in the eyes and stories of Pacific/Pasifika people themselves. When used by teachers and schools for active education, Polyfest as a critical entity and site can provide a lever that encourages Pacific students to engage positively with school and experience improved academic success.

Keywords:

Polyfest, collaborative critical autoethnography (CCA), cultural transmission, identity consolidation, music, dance, performance, leadership

Why critical autoethnography?

The different understanding of epistemology began with my own Hawaiian people. It came from listening to those grounded in *na mea waiwai* (the depth and richness of our knowledge traditions). It was delivered through song by those who understood the emotion of rains, and why stones were gendered...It came from ‘*ike mo’olelo* (our stories and the consciousness), but it was the practicing of our own ideas found in our own language that instructed my thinking the most. (Manulani Aluli Meyer, 2014, pp. 152–153)

The words by Hawaiian scholar, educator, and researcher Manulani Aluli Meyer are utterances of the vibrancy and life-giving nature of Indigenous Pacific knowledge, culture, language, traditions, and practices. Stories, storytelling, and consciousness are practices that enable the ‘self’ to sense-make meaning (Meyer, 2014). Similarly, the Rethinking Pacific Education Initiative for and by Pacific People (RPEIPP), through the “Tree of Opportunities” metaphor is evidence of how Pacific scholars in the *moana* collectively came together to share their insights and challenges, and to (re)think education and narratives in ways that meaningfully mattered to them at the time (Chu, 2018; Pene et al., 2002; Sanga et al., 2003). Our coming together as Pacific school leaders, educators, and researchers located in Aotearoa New Zealand to write this paper carries a similar spirit, care, and generosity.

Autoethnography is a popular qualitative method of inquiry in the social sciences. It is an interdisciplinary approach to research which centres the ‘self’ as a site of inquiry (Marx et al., 2017). Autoethnographic approaches were “sought to reposition and resituate unheard voices in ways that reveal lived experiences in sociocultural contexts” (Marx et al., 2017, p. 2). Moreover, autoethnography provides a “narrow, but solid, pathways for stories of the socially marginalized to enter the discourse of academi[a]” (Marx et al., 2017, p. 2). Although critical autoethnography (CAE) is a relatively young approach within the field of education, we have opted to utilise it in our paper because of its potential to visibilise our voices as Pasifika/Pacific women leaders who continue to wayfind our joint educational commitments (Iosefo et al., 2021) and “illuminate privilege, power, and marginalization in educational contexts including the areas of teaching, learning, and policy” (Marx et al., 2017, p. 3). Our decision to adopt collaborative critical autoethnography (CCA) as an approach in our paper is primarily because of our long-standing shared connections and commitments in the education of Pasifika/Pacific in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Our CCA unpacks the lived experiences of three Pacific women educational leaders and their engagement across three festivals. The authors share their perspectives on the festival and the ways they played an integral part in the organisation and running of the festivals in their local regions across Auckland, Wellington, and Christchurch. We have chosen critical autoethnography as a method in this paper because it matters to our wayfinding of knowledge and understanding (see Iosefo et al., 2021).

Autoethnography is an approach which seeks to analyse personal experience to make sense of cultural experience (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 273); it is not separate from who we are and how we engage with the world or how we reflect on our lives (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022, p. 206). Through the use of the critical autoethnographic lens (Ellis et al., 2011; Holman Jones et al., 2016; Iosefo et al., 2021), we share our own seen first-hand experiences of how Polyfest has been used to create positive outcomes for student growth, engagement with school and academic achievement, as well as an opportunity for building positive relationships between school and home for Pacific families. Strong home–school partnerships are critical to Pacific student success within the school system. Teachers and schools that are able to build and nurture these relationships will enable much higher levels of educational success (Flavell, 2017, 2021).

Polyfests - cultural knowledge generation spaces and sites

New Zealand has a colonial history. In 1840, a founding document Te Tiriti o Waitangi (The Treaty of Waitangi) established a partnership between Māori and Pākehā which specified a bi-cultural approach should be taken to all aspects of life, including education. Unfortunately, this Treaty was never upheld. With the dominant Pākehā view that Māori were a lesser people that needed to be civilised, racism and bias towards Māori has always existed and continues to be evident throughout New Zealand society to this day. The history of colonisation and intergroup conflict amplify deeply entrenched and negative attitudes towards Māori (Blank et al., 2016; Bolton, 2017). In a similar vein, the prevailing attitude of the Pakeha majority to Pacific peoples is one of superiority. The arrival of Pacific peoples to New Zealand was born out of economic necessity in the 1970s when a post-war boom created a labour shortage and workers for unskilled and semi-skilled jobs were sought from the Pacific Islands to fill the shortage. The welcome was short-lived when a downturn in the economy meant that Dawn Raids (early morning home invasions and arrests by Police) were carried out to send any Pacific peoples who had overstayed their visas home (Anae et al., 2015; McDonald, 2021). It is this history of systematic racism and oppression that provides the backdrop for the promotion of Māori and Pacific cultural knowledge and practices in the modern day. Cultural festivals provide a space and site for Māori and Pacific peoples to perform and celebrate their identity, heritage languages and traditional song and dance.

Cultural festivals are enjoyed by a wide range of peoples of varying age groups, social backgrounds and across ethnic lines. When preparing for Polyfest, cultural experts are called upon to tutor and teach the different performance items. These cultural experts are often parents or family members of the student participants and sometimes the students themselves. Polyfests play a “crucial role in cultural transmission, especially through music and dance” (Williams, 2022, p. 157). Pacific dance cannot be separated from cultural practices, traditions, and knowledge and dance is used to pass down important cultural knowledge and traditions from generation to generation in many Pacific and Indigenous cultures (Taeao & Averill. 2021).

In Aotearoa, New Zealand, Polyfests are also a site for the construction of “diasporic identities” and “visible beacons of belonging” (Mackley-Crump; 2012, 2013). Polyfests are sites where new identities and representations are articulated, these are identities that are “cultivated at the intersection of ancestral heritages (links to former homelands, traditional stories and ancestors) and current identities (links to life in Aotearoa, New Zealand and new cultures)” (Wood & Homolja, 2021, p. 389).

Polyfests - organisational events

Polynesian festivals or Polyfests are well established annual events for secondary students throughout Aotearoa, New Zealand. A highly anticipated occasion, each festival is a spectacle of vibrancy and colour. The number of Polyfests throughout the country continues to grow as Pacific Islands populations migrate to new areas of the country. This is to provide Pacific peoples an opportunity to celebrate their identities and to share their culture with the wider community in which they live. The following discourse seeks to look at the value of these festivals to the secondary school participants in terms of enabling student success. The authors of this article believe that Polyfests, when utilised well by teachers and schools, can be a lever for improved student engagement and academic achievement, particularly for students of Māori and Pacific ethnicities.

Polyfests - a lever for student achievement

The idea that Polynesian Cultural Festivals can be utilised as a vehicle for student learning and for skill development is one that has been debated from the outset of these Polyfest events. As with any activity that takes significant time and energy, there are a range of views held by parents, families and caregivers about the value of student participation. Mackley-Crump (2015) documented some of the views of migrant parents who did not believe that Polyfest activities would produce the success that they had come to New Zealand for, and that time should be spent on more important activities. Mackley-Crump (2013) identified that the Auckland Principals’ association also discussed how the disruption Polyfest causes to school programmes could be minimised.

While many parents are staunch advocates for their children joining a Polyfest group, others believe that students’ limited time could be better spent on study. The notion that culture is for home and school is for academia is one that has always been held by some of our Pacific parents and by educators alike. In response to this belief, some schools have decided to only enter groups into Polyfest every two years to limit the time that each student would dedicate to Polyfest experiences over the period of their schooling. To this day, the value and usefulness of Polyfest as an activity for students to invest their time and energy in is debated by families, teachers and school administrations. This stance is comprehensively refuted by research that indicates the importance of Pacific culture as a source of curriculum content and fundamental for developing equity for the achievement of Pacific learners (Hunter et al., 2016; Kana’iaupuni et al., 2017; Mackley-Crump, 2011; Mila-Schaaf & Robinson, 2010;

Nakhid, 2003). All three of the case studies that follow confirm the research to give personal voice to the enactment of this through the mechanism of the Polyfest.

The Auckland Secondary Schools Māori & Pacific Islands Cultural Festival - ASB Polyfest

Natalie's reflections

Origins and background

The year 2022 marks 46 years of the festival that has come to be known as the Auckland Secondary Schools ASB Polyfest. This festival began in the school hall at Hillary College in Otara on October 20, 1976, with only three other schools: Aorere College, Seddon College and Mangere College. The festival has been held annually since this time except for in 2019 where the final competition day was cancelled due to the Christchurch terrorist attacks and in 2020 where the Covid-19 pandemic meant a cancellation of the entire festival for that year (Williams, 2022).

The initial objective set by the organisers of Polyfest was to “demonstrate the pride of cultural identity and to bring schools and the different cultures between them together” (ASB Polyfest, 2022(a)). The festival has grown from strength to strength, from small beginnings the festival now takes place over four days and can host over 100,000 visitors. Located at the Manukau Sports Bowl, a large expanse of mainly grass fields, for many years now, the ASB Polyfest is one of the largest cultural festivals in the world. The festival at this point in time has six performance stages for schools and students to choose to compete on Māori, Cook Islands, Niuean, Samoan, Tongan or Diversity stages. While the Māori stage focuses on three divisions of Kapa Haka (New Zealand Māori performing arts) competition, the Pacific stages offer both a speech competition in the specific Pacific languages and a cultural performance competition. The diversity stage offers the opportunity for any culture that is not represented to participate in the festival. The need for the diversity stage became apparent when students from other ethnic groups than the five main Pacific stages sought an opportunity to perform at the festival. The smaller Pacific populations such as Fiji, Tahiti, Tuvalu and Tokelau perform on this stage as well as many other groups representing cultures from all over the world. The diversity stage is a site for cultural fusion and “trans-national solidarity” with many performers from different ethnic groups joining together (Wood & Homolja, 2021).

Each stage has a team of organisers headed by stage coordinators. These stage coordinators become the komiti whakahaere, or overarching organising committee, that work alongside events management to organise and run the festival. Each of the stage coordinators is a cultural expert in their own right and brings a wealth of experience, cultural knowledge and cultural connections to the Polyfest event. The komiti whakahaere and events management team work tirelessly in the months, weeks and days leading up to the event to ensure that all that is needed for the smooth running of Polyfest is put in place. The major festival sponsor is ASB but many other sponsors including universities, polytechnics, government

departments and the business community contribute to the cost of the running of the festival and each individual stage also has a named sponsor.

Personal involvement with Polyfest

My own involvement with the ASB Polyfest began when the school in which I teach volunteered to be the host school for the Polyfest event some 17 years ago. At that time, the festival was structured in a manner that had one host school that would provide personnel to support all the different stages. As a teacher of Cook Islands ethnicity, I was assigned to the Cook Islands stage. This is where I met Mama Tupou Manapori, a stalwart of the Auckland Polyfest who has been involved from the very first event held at Sir Edmund Hillary Collegiate. Mama Tupou Manapori has been the stage coordinator for the Cook Islands stage at the ASB Polyfest for the entire lifespan of the festival. A woman of immense passion for both her Cook Islands language and culture, her years of experience with the festival and knowledge of its history are unmatched. It has been an honour and a privilege to work alongside her and learn from her in this space.

In my school role, I have also been involved in organising cultural groups to enter and perform at Polyfest on a number of stages. This is always an epic undertaking which requires a huge amount of time, energy and significant monetary cost. Practices must be scheduled and supervised, cultural dances composed and choreographed, costumes designed and created. It is both an exhausting and very rewarding activity which comes with both frustration and jubilation. If we were to multiply this effort across every group that enters Polyfest to consider the extent of the volunteer work hours and financial backing that each Polyfest requires, we would find that many, many thousands of hours and dollars are given freely by parents and families, teachers, schools and community. All of these resources are given willingly for the love of culture and the desire to give young people the opportunity to participate in the event. Without teachers and tutors volunteering their time and effort to organise each of the groups that enter, there could be no Polyfest. It is with a grateful heart that I pay tribute to each person that gives of themselves to this work. Each person brings something special to add to Polyfest as a whole and each individual contribution adds up to the sum of the creation of what is a colossal event.

Polyfest is always spectacular, vibrant and exciting for performers and spectators alike. The colourful crowds of people, the anticipation in the air, the smell of food stalls and the sounds of drums, singing and chants saturate the venue. However, even the most recent ASB Polyfest in April 2022, which because of Covid-19 settings, was held with no crowds, no stalls and live streamed to audiences from the venue, was still an event that was relished by those that took part. ASB Polyfest director Seiuli Terri Leo Mau'u found the support for Polyfest even through Covid times overwhelming, identifying "our students have demonstrated that Covid can't beat commitment and they have stepped up on stage with pride and passion after navigating their way through disruptions" (*Education Gazette*, 2022, p. 13). The shouts of joy and smiles on the performers' faces showed how much enjoyment was experienced from

their participation in Polyfest where, through the use of technology, they were able to perform to a world-wide audience.

Over the years, both in my role as assistant stage coordinator to Mama Tupou Manapori and as a teacher involved with cultural groups that enter the festival, I have observed the magic of Polyfest. The magic is in the opportunities that the event provides. For students, their parents and families, cultural tutors and the school support teams that commit their time and energy to the event the opportunity is to be part of something unique and special. These opportunities include: the teaching and learning of cultural items, dance, music and song. The process of practising these items until they are competition ready with each performer given the task to learn the words and movements so that they are delivered with precision. Designing and creating cultural costumes and wearing them with pride. Building strong team bonds where each member of the group plays an important role and senior students develop leadership and organisational skills. For some, the element of competition holds much of the excitement of Polyfest and the anticipation and celebration at prize-giving time each year bears witness to this. The opportunity to share culture and to have cultural identity recognised and valued is a vital part of the festival. The performances themselves, as the climax of the Polyfest experience for the cultural groups that have entered, are always a time of immense pride, joy and satisfaction (Mackley-Crump, 2011, 2013; Williams, 2022; Wood & Homolja, 2021). In addition, these opportunities can also be coupled with academic recognition for the various aspects of Polyfest that students are participating in. This can take the form of NCEA (National Certificate of Educational Achievement) credits for a range of different subject areas.

NCEA assessment development for Polyfest

In recent years, the events management team now under the trading company *Black Sei* have put in place a pre-event for Polyfest – the Polyfest leaders conference (ASB Polyfest 2022 (b)). This event is designed to equip student leaders with the tools they need to lead their cultural groups and provides support, encouragement and leadership advice. At this event, there is also a teachers' meeting to share and discuss the different ways that schools are utilising Polyfest for student assessment. This has provided excellent networking opportunities for teachers to share resources, assessment tasks and marking schedules for NCEA dance and music standards (Ministry of Education, 2022).

NCEA is New Zealand's national secondary qualification. Students work towards the different levels of NCEA (Levels 1, 2 and 3) by having their learning assessed against a set of agreed standards by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority. The internally assessed standards that are able to be assessed through the medium of Polyfest can create positive learning for students of Pacific descent (NZQA, 2019; Sanders & Boyte, 2019). The encouragement for teachers to use Polyfest as a context for assessment has been promoted by NZQA and Pacific educators for many years. The concept was shared

on the Pacific news programme *Tagata Pasifika* as early as 2014 where it was reiterated that NCEA is designed to recognise the abilities and talents of our young people through standards-based assessment (*Tagata Pasifika*, March, 2014a).

In my own teaching experience, I have seen Pacific students' achievement boosted by the successes that they experience in the Polyfest arena. In most cases, schools can utilise the NCEA standards for dance and music as well as the Pacific language speech standards and various other cultural standards. However, it is not just in the areas of dance and music and Pacific languages that credits can be attained. There are several cross-curricular opportunities that I have observed teachers utilising Polyfest for – particularly as a platform for social science assessment including Level 3 Geography, for Media Studies projects and for English assessment. As an English teacher myself, I have used Polyfest for speeches, debates, and writing both formal and creative. For example, students in my classes have written opinion pieces on the benefits of Polyfest to learning, debated the issue that time spent on Polyfest is time well spent, written articles and made short films about different groups preparing for Polyfest and conducted research during the festival itself by interviewing attendees. Without doubt, there are a number of other learning areas that with some thought and assessment design could also utilise Polyfest as a platform for assessment.

The practice of utilising Polyfest for learning is becoming more and more widespread. Even schools and other education facilities that do not perform at the festival bring their students to observe and study the phenomena that is the ASB Polyfest. I can only see the potential for further curriculum development in this space moving forward with other subjects such as Art, Maths, and the Social Sciences like Geography, Psychology and Pacific studies being able to develop learning and assessment opportunities using Polyfest as a contextual resource. This understanding that Polyfest can be used to add value to a programme of learning can assist educators throughout the country to engage their Pacific students in connected and culturally sustaining ways.

HuttFest - Hutt Valley Schools Poly Festival

Sinapi's reflections

Celebrating 10 years of HuttFest

HuttFest, formerly known as PolyFest, has become a staple event on Te Awakairangi Hutt Valley region's calendar, and is celebrating its 10th year anniversary in 2022. This festival began in 2012, when co-founder Barbara Hay was the principal of Koraunui School and was approached by her Samoan colleague, co-founder Luana Leulua'i to set up a cultural festival for local schools. Leulua'i's vision was to "create a rich childhood experience for the kids so they can remember for the rest of their lives" (*Tagata Pasifika*, July, 2017). What started with seven local primary schools performing a one-night concert in the Taita College hall has grown to include over 50 schools from primary, intermediate, and

secondary schools, spanning over five nights at the Walter Nash Centre in Taita. HuttFest's exponential growth over the years is attributed to the festival's kaupapa of not being a competition, but rather a platform where students could come together to celebrate and be proud of who they are, and where they come from.

HuttFest is not limited to Polynesian cultural song and dance performances. There is a daytime oratory section where children could give a speech in their families' mother tongues. In 2018, the festival teamed up with Te Awakairangi Health Network to offer 'PolyOdyssey' – a look at healthy lifestyles from a traditional Polynesian perspective, including island "villages" run by the elders from the community. A daytime mini-festival programme for the early childhood centres was also introduced for the little ones to participate in performances and hands-on cultural activities including storytelling, drumming, traditional dress-ups, tapa cloth making, traditional arts and crafts. HuttFest also hosts the primary, intermediate and secondary schools regional Kapa Haka competitions for Te Awakairangi ki Wairarapa rohe.

Unfortunately, Luana passed away after a sudden illness in May 2018 and this, along with Barbara's retirement from Koraunui School, prompted the name change and establishment of the Hutt Valley Schools HuttFest Trust in 2019. The board members felt HuttFest was an appropriate name to acknowledge the diverse cultures in the community, particularly the contribution of refugee and migrant families as well as Polynesian groups.

The cancellation of HuttFest 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic had seen a significant increase in secondary schools participating the following year. While most schools expressed their excitement in HuttFest 2021 going ahead, participation from the primary and intermediate schools was considerably lower than previous years as some of them were understandably still risk-averse, or had struggled to secure tutors for their groups. Local cultural groups that were not school-based were invited to fill in these spaces.

From 2021, funding from the Creative NZ Pasifika Festivals Initiative (PFI) in response to Covid-19 allowed for the employment of four skilled Pacific people in the community to assist with the organisation of HuttFest 2021. So, 2022 was the start of a new beginning, with a whole new HuttFest events management team employed to take over the organisational roles from the original core team of former Koraunui School staff and community members. The intent for this new team was to come in with fresh ideas and new initiatives to grow HuttFest and become self-sustaining, while keeping Luana's vision alive and remain true to its original purpose.

Invitation to be a part of the HuttFest vision

Before I joined the HuttFest team as the colleges coordinator in 2015, I was the Poly group teacher in charge at Sacred Heart College, and part of my role was to organise the Fiafia (celebration) night for our local colleges as a festival in the Hutt Valley did not exist. Poly group is a space for students to do cultural songs and dances from the Pacific nations. It is an opportunity for students to affirm their cultural identities, while learning the Pacific languages and values.

Schools outside of the Wellington City region had to apply for two limited spaces in order to perform at the only Wellington colleges Poly festival, called Tu Tangata. When Luana asked me to bring the colleges over to be a part of her vision, I did not hesitate and jumped at the opportunity. It helped that I had personal relationships with Luana and Barbara already established from a long time ago. I grew up with Luana as our families attended Petone Congregational Christian Church of Samoa and Barbara was my ex-principal at my old primary school Koraunui School (formerly known as Stokes Valley Primary School). We had six Secondary schools participate in that first year, and this year it is double that amount. For many years, the college night was the tualuga (finale) for the week-long celebrations of HuttFest.

As the HuttFest colleges coordinator, I was the main contact for all the colleges. My responsibilities included: organising and reviewing the college registrations; facilitating meetings with the teachers in charge, tutors, and leaders of the groups; ensuring all communications were accurate and timely; organising the rehearsal and performance schedules; visiting the schools prior to HuttFest week to ensure performance timings were adhered to; and, on the performance night I took on the role of stage manager/floor coordinator.

In the colleges' second year of HuttFest, we introduced the tuakana/teina (Māori concept referring to the relationship between an older person and younger person) daytime concert for our participating primary and intermediate schools to watch the college rehearsals on stage. The mafana (warmth) and excitement from the younger ones helped ease the nerves of the older kids, which prepared them well for the evening concert.

Mafutaga Kolisi a Hutt Valley Leadership programme

The Mafutaga Kolisi a Hutt Valley (Hutt Valley Colleges combined) leadership programme started in 2017. I took the Sacred Heart College Poly group leaders to the Auckland ASB Polyfest to experience one of the biggest Pacific festivals in the world first hand, to feel inspired and motivated, and take that learning back to the group. The following year, the next group of Poly group leaders attended the festival.

I took up the whānau head position at Naenae College in 2019 and established the Hutt Valley Schools leadership programme for all college students participating in HuttFest. The programme consisted of two leadership workshops for the Poly group leaders, including a trip to the 2019 Auckland ASB Polyfest, and two dance workshops spread throughout terms 1 and 2. The purpose of these workshops was to build the capability, knowledge, and self-confidence of our Poly group leaders, and to nurture effective networks and relationships amongst the schools within the region. It also provided students with opportunities to learn Pacific dance techniques from professional dance tutors in our community.

For the 2021 leadership workshop, I invited a panel of ex-Poly leaders to talanoa about their leadership journeys in the Poly space and they gave some useful advice for the leaders. The workshops provided a safe space for the leaders to talanoa about their issues and experiences, as well as share best leadership practices. We were fortunate to have dance tutors from the Wellington-based Samoan Men's dance group Tofi o Tamatane Movement, and Whitireia Performing Arts group to share their expertise with the students. They taught two dances that were performed by the Mafutaga Kolisi a Hutt Valley (Hutt Valley combined schools) at HuttFest 2021. Representatives from our local colleges of Sacred Heart, Taita, Naenae, Hutt Valley High, Upper Hutt, as well as Makoura College in the Wairarapa took part in this special item.

The Hutt Valley Schools Poly teachers cluster was first established from the inaugural leadership workshop in 2019. This was a space for teachers to support one another, share best practice for dance, and give cultural advice to the many non-Pacific teachers in charge of poly groups in our local schools. The cluster met regularly to design the dance tasks and moderate the seniors for NCEA Levels 1, 2, and 3 dance. Senior students can achieve up to 10 dance credits through their HuttFest performances. This has made a significant difference for our senior students' achievement across all schools, and for most of our Year 13 students, dance was another pathway to university as their third UE-approved subject. Taking the leaders to the Auckland ASB Polyfest over the last three years has had a positive impact on the standard of the performances at HuttFest as they went from strength to strength every year.

I would have liked to develop the leadership programme further as it proved to be beneficial for our college students. Some ideas included organising an end of year leadership camp for the next Poly leaders, and taking the Mafutaga Kolisi a Hutt Valley group to perform on the diversity stage at the 2022 Auckland ASB Polyfest. However, these plans did not go ahead as the ASB Polyfest was live streamed under the orange settings, and I had stepped down from the role of HuttFest college coordinator in 2022 to focus solely on governance as a HuttFest Trust board member. I still offer my support and advice to the new HuttFest colleges and young peoples' coordinators, as well as supporting the Poly teachers in the Hutt Valley region.

I am grateful to my uso (sister) Luana for allowing me to be a part of her vision, and I endeavour to honour her memory and keep her legacy alive in my capacity as a HuttFest Trust Board member, and I will continue to serve my beloved Hutt Valley community, guided by Luana's favourite Samoan 'alagaupu (proverb) - "So'o o le fau i le fau" – In Unity lies Strength.

Canterbury School's Secondary Polyfest

Maria's reflections

When people think of Pasifika in Aotearoa New Zealand, Christchurch City is not the first city that comes to the forefront of one's mind. Otautahi is known as Quake City and where the tragedy of the Mosque shooting happened. Pacific Underground, Tusiata Avia, Scribe, Ladi 6 are just some of the Pasifika Artists/Organisations who have called Otautahi home – amazing Pasifika artists who have shared their vibrant and cultural talents with the world.

The Christchurch Pasifika festival started off as a small gathering of schools in the early 90s. The schools involved were schools that had a significant number of Pasifika students. The gathering was geared towards showcasing the 'Beauty and the Pride' of the Pacific by bringing our small Pasifika Christchurch community together.

The Canterbury Secondary Schools Polyfest Festival has been and continues to be one of the key events for the Pasifika community in Christchurch (*Tagata Pasifika*, 2014b). Due to Covid-19 restrictions, we did not proceed with the Canterbury Secondary Schools Polyfest for 2022. The year 2022 would have been my 19th year in the space of the Canterbury Polyfest stage. I started as a novice stage hand with duties that included managing cues of spectators, making cups of tea for our elders, staying behind till 1.30am picking up rubbish and also opening and closing stage curtains.

Specifically Pacific

I was part of an organisation called 'Specifically Pacific'. An incorporated society, this organisation was and is still currently made up of Pasifika community leaders, members of the Canterbury Pasifika Teachers Association, a Pasifika representative from the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Pacific Peoples, Ministry of Social Development and Pasifika Liaisons from local various tertiary providers. The Specifically Pacific Group not only supported the Canterbury Secondary School's Festival but also a series of events that also supported cultural confidence, cultural engagement, cultural leadership and cultural heritage.

In the early 2000s, the series of these key events were delivered in a week. Now, the events are spread throughout the year. The events included a church service for all Pasifika secondary students for the beginning of the series. Various Students from different schools would participate in roles such as

Prayers (in their Pasifika Language), Offering bearers, *Bible* reading (in their Pasifika language) and reflection pieces. Students, aiga, teachers and principals would be in attendance. The Church service is a magnificent event where students will attend in their number one school uniforms, whether it be the school ie faitaga (traditional Samoan attire for males), the school Puletasi (traditional island attire for females), a fresh flower lei (flower garland), a fresh flower ula (flower necklace) or a traditional fine mat donned around the waist. This is always a great space to acknowledge the Pasifika student community, in a place of faith with the arm of their school family in attendance. Other events included the Pasifika Student Language Speech Competition, a Pasifika student careers expo, a Pasifika student leaders breakfast, a Pasifika and of course the secondary schools' Polyfest festival.

Each of the significant events have been named after Christchurch Pacific pioneers who have passed but are remembered for their significant contribution in that space of Pasifika leadership, Pasifika language and Pasifika excellence.

The late Amosa Fa'afai (Tokelau) university lecturer at the University of Canterbury (Education). Amosa is a well-known leader in the Tokelau realms. The Emerging Leaders breakfast was named after him. His children have also demonstrated leadership in the political and media realms, Kris Fa'afai and Jason Fa'afai.

The late Aneriueta Teta Pa o Sopoaga (Samoan) secondary school teacher. Aneriueta was a well-known Te Reo Māori, Gagana Samoa and an English Teacher. The speech competition is named after her love of languages. She led the Church choir and was renowned for her beautiful singing voice and her children have followed in her steps, one of whom is Bella Kalolo.

The late Memea Eleitino Ma'aelopa JP NZofMerit dedicated his life to the Pacific in the Canterbury community. He was instrumental in the piecing of the different education based events, alongside the sPacificaly Pacific group, MOE and the Pacific Community. It was important for Pasifika in Canterbury to see a series of Pasifika events that were underpinned by education (Northcott, 2017).

All these events work in alignment with each other by providing a Pasifika platform for Pasifika student success. My role within the group grew to a space where I then became donned as the 'Polyfest Lady'. Indeed, this was a great honour but also a privilege to serve the community in this space.

To ensure that the kaupapa around Pasifika dance was respected, I would visit all the performing schools. I would sit for approximately an hour at each school and view their practices. During these practices, I would also speak about the alignment of culture, language, identity and success. I would praise the students for their efforts and also praise the tutors/teachers and parents who were also present.

I would meet regularly with teachers in charge of the Pasifika Group. The significant difference for Canterbury, in comparison to others around the motu, is that the teachers who were in charge of the Pasifika Group were not always of Pacific heritage. Together with a team, we would assist them through how to best meet the needs of our Pasifika students and also their families. I've viewed it as 19 years of 'Culturally Responsive PD' for schools. The benefits of the Polyfest festival have been immense and more so with the introduction of the dance credits. The quality of the performances changed significantly with the introduction of dance credits into the fold. The enthusiasm for Polyfest had indeed grown over the years, as there was a standard, not only the NCEA standards but standards set by the festival team. To date, the Canterbury Secondary Schools Polyfest remains a non-competitive event. The kaupapa behind this is to ensure and grow the celebration but a celebration of Pasifika excellence as a community.

Our numbers are significantly smaller than our North Island brothers and sisters, but we match the heart and the intensity, 10-fold. The build-up towards the festival plays out a myriad of feelings and emotions – all of which have benefited the students in their feelings of belonging to and connecting to their cultural heritage.

As a stage facilitator, I've had the pleasure of witnessing and mobilising up to 27 schools. Numbers that can range from a solo performer to a huge number of 97 students in one group. The cultural courage that has been exhibited from emerging from the post-earthquake space and the post-Mosque shooting has been phenomenal.

Our Canterbury community has had the privilege of being in the Town Hall, the Horncastle Arena, a Church space, school auditoriums, and outside park venues. We have done it all. We would always ensure that the venue was accessible to all our community. We would charge \$5 at the most and at the very least, a gold coin donation. We wanted our Pasifika festival to be accessible to all our friends, whānau and community. The resilience and the pride through Pasifika leadership in a time where Otautahi has been rocked by natural disasters and tragedy.

Some 19 years ago, the items were delivered with a CD/cassette tape being played in the background. The uniforms were dowdy and ill-fitting. The students looked young with a different sense of innocence. A series of plastic leis, smudged lipstick across shiny faces and the all too familiar scent of Johnson and Johnson Baby Oil. This was all in a space of no mobile phones and no social media.

Fast forward 19 years and our students have a different sense of being. The Polyfest stage is now a space of excellence and unspoken competition. We have immaculate high buns, with not a hair out of place. Cans and cans of hairspray utilised to ensure a uniform look. We have couture uniforms, athletic bodies likened to Black Ferns and NRL players. We are wowed by performances in sync that can

resemble the best synchronised swimming team and, out of 23 schools, only one or two schools will have music aid. Nothing but voice. Nothing but drums. Nothing but the invocation of the Indigenous ancestors. In this space now, we have Tongan, Samoan, Fijian, Cook Island offerings in this space of secondary school performances.

Schools have confirmed the sense of pride that students have stepped into and also the mirroring of this pride in their other subjects. What was born out of this time of Pasifika excellence is the spring-board of utilising credits for White Sunday Productions. Because of Polyfest, we were able to activate the space of NCEA credits for White Sunday Plays. Again, Polyfest was a platform to acknowledge the generational Pasifika gems, which is known as White Sunday. Students felt that their hard work was recognised at school but also in the place that many called their second home (Breakfast, 2020).

In the past 19 years, I've attended many schools' 'fa'aliga' where grandparents, parents, friends and family have exclaimed their pride in seeing their children connect to their cultural heritage, proud that their child is singing songs from back in the day. The feeling of inclusion in a Pacific space, this time, came from school and not home. For them, this was seen as a preservation of their cultural heritage.

Future opportunity for utilising Polyfests as a lever for success

As all authors have recognised the growth of Polyfests as an event has been exponential throughout the country and, as a result, the opportunity to use Polyfest in constructive ways for learning is also increased. The recent NCEA change programme (New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA), 2019) a programme of work to review and improve the national qualification as well as the New Zealand Curriculum refresh (an overhaul of the current curriculum to ensure it fits the needs of today's world) are enabling more culturally responsive teaching and learning within schools and classrooms. This is in response to the acknowledgement that the Treaty of Waitangi, when applied to education, realises that the enactment of the principles of the Treaty would establish equitable partnerships that educators are both legally and ethically obligated to uphold (Riwai-Couch, 2021). Te Ao Haka, a new Māori performing arts subject is a new assessment area for NCEA; this is a step towards Māori knowledge parity (*Education Gazette*, 2021) and builds on research such as that by Whitinui (2010), which concludes that the use of Kapa Haka for Māori in learning with the inclusion of language, culture and customs improves levels of student participation (interest, attendance, engagement, association and success). Fairburn-Dunlop (2014) and Wood and Homolja (2021) also came to similar conclusions for Pacific students who participated in Polyfest groups and the connections to improved learning that this afforded them.

Concluding remarks: Polyfest-Polysuccess

Collaborative critical autoethnography has afforded us a way to story our reflections of why Polynesian festivals are meaningful to the educational success of Pacific students across Aotearoa New Zealand. By looking to Polyfest as an opportunity for culturally responsive learning and assessment, teachers and schools are enabling “exposure to culturally distinctive social spaces” that enables Pacific cultural capital to be recognised and which could result in improved education outcomes (Mila-Schaaf & Robinson, 2010, p. 1). Polyfest can be more fully developed as a platform for schools and teachers to acknowledge students’ cultural capital, affirm their Pacific identities and create stronger links between home and school. The positive impact of these actions on Pacific student achievement has long been recognised (Alton-Lee, 2003; Hunter et al., 2016; Tuafuti & McCaffery 2005). It is hoped that educators will continue to look to Polyfest as an opportunity to build curriculum and more fully incorporate polyfests into culturally responsive learning experiences. It is entirely possible for Polyfest to enable Polysuccess.

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