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NURTURING PASIFIKA LEARNERS THROUGH EFFECTIVE PEDAGOGY:
A STUDY OF A PROGRAMME AT UNITEC

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INTRODUCTION

There exists a longstanding disparity in the academic success of Pasifika students within tertiary education institutions across New Zealand. Addressing this issue is crucial for the wellbeing of Pasifika communities living in New Zealand and fostering the academic success of Pasifika students enrolled in tertiary institutions. The Pasifika community comprises more than eight percent of New Zealand's population, primarily consisting of people whose ethnicities hail from Pacific Islands such as Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, the Cook Islands, Niue, Tokelau, and Tuvalu. These communities face unique challenges in navigating the complexities of higher education, including socio-economic disparities, and the gap in equity continues to widen. To tackle these challenges, educational institutions have increasingly emphasised the implementation of various pedagogical methods targeted at Pasifika learners. In this context, the New Zealand Certificate of Health and Wellbeing Level 4 programme, taught at Unitec, serves as an exemplar of achieving educational success for Pasifika students by utilising culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) and holistic support services.

Background

The New Zealand Certificate of Health and Wellbeing Level 4 programme at Unitec is tailored to individuals interested in or already engaged in careers within the mental health and addiction sector, including peer support, in the health and social services fields. Rooted in principles of holistic wellbeing and cultural responsiveness, the programme aims to cultivate a comprehensive understanding of mental health and addiction issues, along with essential skills for engaging with individuals, whānau groups, and communities, including Pasifika populations.

With a curriculum that integrates theoretical knowledge with hands-on experience, the programme prioritises kindness, care, and compassion, while respecting the unique identities and experiences of individuals when working with vulnerable communities in society. Through a blend of classroom instruction and practical learning opportunities, the programme emphasises the significance of cultural competence, relational teaching, and community engagement in advancing positive health outcomes and social equity.

As such, the programme serves as a testament to Unitec's dedication to nurturing inclusive educational practices that acknowledge and honour the cultural identities, languages, and lived experiences of Pasifika learners.

Significance of the study

This research aims to evaluate the pedagogical approaches, community partnerships, and support services employed in the New Zealand Certificate of Health and Wellbeing Level 4 programme at Unitec to enhance the success of Pasifika learners. By examining a case study of this programme, we seek to analyse the strategies and practices that have contributed to Pasifika learners' educational experiences and outcomes at Unitec.

Moreover, this study contributes to a broader understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy, community engagement, and support services that can aid in improving the educational success of Pasifika learners. Ultimately, this research endeavours to contribute to achieving equity and social justice for Pasifika communities in New Zealand.

Research questions

This study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. What pedagogical approaches are employed in the New Zealand Certificate of Health and Wellbeing Level 4 programme at Unitec to enhance Pasifika learners' academic achievement?
2. How do the community partnership strategies employed by the programme support Pasifika learners in improving their outcomes?
3. What support services are available to Pasifika learners at Unitec, specifically within the programme, and how do these services contribute to their academic achievement?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Challenges faced by Pasifika learners in tertiary education

Pasifika learners, comprising mainly seven ethnicities in New Zealand, face numerous challenges in tertiary education, resulting in widening gaps in educational outcomes compared to national averages. Previous research has identified socio-economic factors, cultural differences, language barriers, and lack of representation as major hurdles for Pasifika communities. Socio-economic disparities often lead to financial difficulties, including limited access to resources and support services (Scull & Cuthill, 2010).

Moreover, there is a cultural disconnect between Pasifika learners and Western learning models, which can result in feelings of alienation and disengagement (Brighouse, 2020). The use of English as the language of instruction further exacerbates these challenges, hindering effective communication and comprehension in academic contexts for learners whose first language is not English, such as Pasifika learners (Fletcher et al., 2009). Additionally, the underrepresentation of Pasifika perspectives and lived experiences in curricula and among teaching staff intensifies feelings of marginalisation for Pasifika learners (Fisi'iahi, 2023).

Culturally responsive pedagogy

Culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) emerges as a teaching style that acknowledges that all students learn differently. To address the learning style of Pasifika learners, CRP connects students' cultures, languages, and life experiences with their tertiary studies. CRP emphasises the importance of centering students' cultural references and lived experiences in all aspects of learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995a).

Central to CRP is the concept of 'relational teaching,' which prioritises the creation of a positive and engaging learning environment. This environment is built upon meaningful connections between educators and students, based on mutual respect and understanding (Vaiotei & Morrison, 2014). CRP also emphasises the incorporation of culturally relevant teaching practices and content that relate to Pasifika learners' cultural frames of reference (Bishop & Berryman, 2006). By acknowledging and validating Pasifika cultural knowledge, CRP creates a sense of belonging and empowerment for Pasifika learners, helping them to engage and achieve (Caingcoy, 2023).

Community engagement in education

Community engagement plays an important role in Pasifika learners' educational success by establishing partnerships with parents, whānau, hapū, and iwi to garner their support and ensure effective collaboration between educational institutions, Pasifika communities, and other stakeholders. Pasifika communities are rich in culture, providing networks that can effectively complement formal education systems (Reynolds, 2017).

Collaborative partnerships enable educational institutions and community organisations to provide tailored services to meet the needs of Pasifika learners (Kolbe et al., 2015). Moreover, involving the community in educational decision-making fosters complementary roles in children's education characterised by reciprocity, trust, and respect (Gorinski & Fraser, 2006). By bridging the gap between formal education and community contexts, community engagement initiatives contribute to Pasifika learners' sense of cultural continuity and identity affirmation, thereby enhancing their educational experiences and outcomes.

Support services

The success of Pasifika learners in tertiary education depends on effective support services that scaffold their educational journey. These support services encompass a range of interventions, including academic mentoring, cultural workshops, language support, and financial assistance. To ensure the achievement of Pasifika learners, it is crucial to value their cultural heritage (Fowler, 2023).

By deploying these services and aiming to support Pasifika learners, educational institutions can mitigate barriers to their educational success. Tertiary institutions need to understand Pasifika learning pedagogy to help Pasifika learners to succeed in tertiary institutions (Leenen-Young, 2020). Moreover, it is essential to employ culturally competent support staff who understand Pasifika learners' strengths and challenges. This understanding helps in building trust and rapport while providing support services, thereby enhancing their retention rates (Fowler, 2023).

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study utilises a qualitative research design to investigate the effectiveness of a specific programme based on the pedagogical practices employed by Unitec to support Pasifika learners. The research aims to document evidence of the initiatives, objectives, pedagogical approaches, and models of learning employed within the programme, fostering a deeper understanding of its efficacy in nurturing Pasifika learners.

Document analysis

Document analysis is a methodological approach gaining prominence in empirical research for evaluating various documents to extract meaningful insights. The study analysed the following documents:

Curriculum materials: Examination of curriculum documents to identify objectives and pedagogical approaches supporting culturally diverse learners.

Teaching guides: Review of teaching guides and lesson plans to understand instructional methods used by educators.

Learning resources: Analysis of learning resources such as texts, worksheets, and teaching materials to identify models of learning embedded within the programme.

Student feedback: Student feedback was reviewed from sources such as student course surveys and graduate destination surveys.

Data analysis

Qualitative content analysis is employed to distil raw data into themes that reflect the initiatives, objectives, pedagogical approaches, and learning models utilised in the programme. This approach ensures a robust understanding through valid inference and interpretation. Additionally, quantitative techniques are used to analyse the frequency and distribution of occurrences within the documents, providing further insights into the implementation and impact of pedagogical practices (Mayring, 2000).

Ethical considerations

The findings of the research were used in a respectful and responsible manner to ensure they were not used to harm or stigmatise participants or groups. Confidentiality of the programme documents was maintained throughout the research process.

Ethical considerations were of paramount importance throughout this study to protect the rights and privacy of all involved parties. The analysis was exclusively focused on curriculum materials and aggregated learner feedback, which included graduate destination surveys. The study ensured that all feedback and examples cited were anonymised to uphold participant confidentiality. Consequently, the study did not require ethics approval as per the guidelines of Unitec Human Research Ethics. This approach was in alignment with established ethical guidelines to prevent any potential harm or stigma to participants or groups.

Limitations

Availability of programme documents may be limited, which could affect the analysis of the data. The analysis of programme documents is not free from interpretation bias, as there could be a tendency to seek, interpret, and favour data based on the researcher's beliefs, assumptions, or hypotheses, in coding and categorisation of data (Sloman, 1996).

FINDINGS

The findings of this study indicate that the integration of culturally responsive pedagogy within the Level 4 New Zealand Certificate of Health and Wellbeing programme at Unitec has had a positive impact on student learning experiences and outcomes.

Culturally responsive pedagogy

The adoption of culturally responsive pedagogy within the programme has fostered an inclusive learning environment, where students from diverse cultural backgrounds, including Pasifika students, feel included and accepted. By acknowledging and incorporating students' cultural identities, backgrounds, and perspectives into programme delivery, the programme has demonstrated that cultural inclusivity is embedded within its framework.

The use of inclusive pedagogical approaches that acknowledge and celebrate Pasifika cultural diversity is evident in the programme's teaching materials. Teachers incorporate culturally relevant examples and perspectives into their lessons, increasing student engagement by making the programme content more relevant and relatable to students' lived experiences. The case studies used in the programme are drawn from students' lived experiences, leading to greater interest and participation in learning.

The use of CRP has also resulted in improved learning outcomes for students. By educators incorporating culturally-relevant teaching methods and materials, students have demonstrated a deeper understanding of

programme content and have been able to apply their learning effectively using real-life examples. This is evidenced by the increase in successful outcomes for Pasifika students over time.

The programme utilises activities to facilitate the development of cultural competency among students. Guest speakers, who are cultural experts, are invited to address the students, providing diverse perspectives. Through engagement with these perspectives and exposure to cultural experts, students develop a greater understanding and appreciation of different cultural practices, beliefs, and worldviews. Assessments are designed to be culturally sensitive, allowing Pasifika learners to utilise their knowledge and skills effectively.

Overall, student feedback indicates high levels of satisfaction with the programme due to the implementation of CRP. Many students report feeling more connected to the programme and their peers as a result of the inclusive learning environment.

Community Engagement Initiatives

The findings of this study demonstrate a significant impact of Community Engagement Initiatives within the Level 4 New Zealand Certificate of Health and Wellbeing programme at Unitec. Pasifika students enrolled in the programme benefit from participating in Community Engagement Initiatives, supporting their professional development. The programme has established partnerships with local Pasifika community organisations to provide placement opportunities and resources for Pasifika learners. These organisations offer mentoring, tutoring, and cultural enrichment activities. Community Engagement Initiatives provide students with valuable opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world settings, primarily through the 200-hour placement requirement of the programme. Placements are organised in organisations that are culturally responsive to students' needs, allowing them to develop practical skills essential for their future careers in the health and wellbeing sector.

These initiatives play a crucial role in enhancing students' learning experiences and outcomes by providing opportunities for the real-world application of knowledge and skills. The programme encourages and extends opportunities for family and community involvement in the learning process. Events such as Pasifika cultural days and family workshops are organised to engage families in their children's education.

Engagement with community initiatives, such as placements, increases students' awareness of social issues and inequalities facing Pasifika and minority communities. By working directly in these organisations during placements, students gain a deeper understanding of the social determinants of health and how to address these issues to improve health outcomes for communities.

Community Engagement Initiatives, along with the programme content, help students develop strong communication and interpersonal skills. Therefore, during practicum placements, students learn to effectively communicate with diverse populations and develop empathy and cultural sensitivity.

Feedback from students indicates that their involvement in community initiatives through work placements has helped them build valuable connections, enhancing their employability in the sector. This was possible because they gained opportunities for networking, mentorship, and skill development through work placements in the community.

Feedback received from students, including from sources such as graduate destination surveys, also suggests that Community Engagement Initiatives have a positive impact on students' learning experiences and outcomes. Moving forward, it is recommended that these initiatives continue to be integrated and expanded within the programme curriculum to further enhance students' practical skills, social awareness, and professional development.

Support services impact

There is documented evidence showing that student support services (including academic, personal, and culturally responsive support) play a significant role in supporting students throughout their academic journey, ensuring that their learning experiences contribute to their academic success.

Academic support services

The role of the student academic support service is to support Pasifika learners, contributing significantly to their academic success and overall wellbeing. Academic support services, encompassing tutoring, study groups, and academic workshops, have been pivotal in scaffolding students, particularly in challenging subjects. These services are tailored to address specific academic needs, ensuring that students receive targeted assistance where they need it most.

Personal support services

Alongside academic support, personal support services such as counseling, mentoring, and wellbeing services play a complementary role in helping students manage stress, overcome personal challenges, and maintain their overall wellbeing. This dual approach ensures that students are not only academically supported but also emotionally and mentally equipped to thrive in their studies.

Financial challenges often pose significant obstacles to student success. Recognising this, Unitec offers a range of financial support services, including scholarships, grants, and financial counseling, to alleviate financial burdens and enable students to focus on their studies without distraction. This proactive support not only addresses immediate financial needs but also contributes to higher retention rates and improved academic outcomes among students who utilise these services.

Culturally responsive support services

Unitec's Pacific Centre exemplifies the institution's commitment to providing culturally responsive support. Here, Pasifika students receive comprehensive assistance ranging from academic support and career guidance to financial advice and personal mentoring. This holistic approach acknowledges and respects cultural diversity, thereby fostering a supportive environment where students feel valued and empowered to succeed.

Overall, the availability of tailored support services at Unitec has demonstrably enhanced student success and retention within the Pasifika student community. By addressing both academic and personal needs, these services play a pivotal role in fostering an inclusive learning environment where all students can achieve their full potential.

STUDENT PERSPECTIVES

Findings from the student perspective indicate a positive reception of the Level 4 New Zealand Certificate of Health and Wellbeing programme at Unitec. Student survey results showed a high level of engagement with the programme content, particularly its relevance to their personal and professional lives. Many students expressed that the programme provided them with valuable insights into health and wellbeing practices that they could apply both in their future careers and personal lives.

Pasifika learners in particular value the inclusive and supportive learning environment created by the programme. They appreciate the opportunity to learn in a culturally responsive setting that celebrates their identity and heritage. They were satisfied with the opportunity to engage with their peers and learn from their experiences. The interactive nature of the programme, including group activities and practical exercises, was highly rated.

While students appreciated the programme design and its interactive elements, they also suggested areas for improvement to further enhance engagement and relevance to their personal and professional lives. These suggestions included providing additional one-to-one learning support, increasing the number of interactive workshops, inviting guest lectures from industry professionals, and providing additional online resources.

Overall, the findings from the student perspective highlight the effectiveness of the programme in providing students with relevant knowledge and skills in the field of health and wellbeing.

DISCUSSION

Implications of culturally responsive pedagogy

The findings of this research emphasise how culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) has contributed to the academic success of Pasifika learners within the programme at Unitec. By valuing Pasifika learners' cultural identities, languages, and lived experiences, CRP fosters a sense of belonging and empowerment, which are essential foundations for meaningful engagement and learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995b). Pasifika learners have been empowered by incorporating culturally relevant content, teaching strategies, and assessment methods into their curriculum and teaching (Bishop & Berryman, 2010). Moreover, CRP has also helped in building positive teacher-student relationships based on mutual respect and understanding, creating supportive learning environments where Pasifika learners feel valued, respected, and motivated (Vaioleti & Morrison, 2014). The implications of CRP in institutional practices have not only addressed inequities within the institution but have also helped to advance educational equity for Pasifika learners.

Community engagement

The study's findings underscore the role of community engagement as a pivotal element in fostering the educational success of Pasifika learners within the programme. Insights gleaned from the study further highlight the significant impact of community engagement on the educational experiences and outcomes of Pasifika students. Successful partnerships have been established with Pasifika community leaders, local organisations, and cultural experts, all of whom offer invaluable insights and support to both educators and students (Brighouse, 2020).

Inclusive community services, such as academic tutoring, mentorship programmes, and cultural counseling, have been tailored to assist students in navigating both academic and personal challenges (Reynolds, 2017). Community engagement has afforded Pasifika students with practical learning opportunities that involve families and communities (Vaioleti & Morrison, 2014).

The findings of this study emphasise the importance of community engagement as a key component of effective pedagogy for Pasifika learners. They offer valuable insights that can contribute to enhancing equity and social justice within the programme.

Importance of support services

The study demonstrates that the comprehensive support services offered within the New Zealand Certificate of Health and Wellbeing programme at Unitec were instrumental in the academic and personal success of Pasifika learners. These services, grounded in cultural competence and a holistic approach, cater to the diverse needs of Pasifika students, thereby creating an inclusive and supportive educational environment.

As corroborated by other studies, culturally appropriate services, including academic mentoring, workshops, language support, and financial assistance, play a significant role in overcoming barriers to educational success.

Comprehensive support services that prioritise cultural responsiveness and holistic wellbeing contribute to learners' academic success, cultural pride, and overall sense of belonging. This makes them more resilient in navigating tertiary studies (Mafile'o et al., 2019; Reynolds, 2017).

The study further underscores the importance of these support services in enhancing the educational experiences and outcomes of Pasifika students. It offers valuable insights for other educational institutions aiming to promote equity and success among Pasifika learners.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

While this research provided valuable insights into the effectiveness of pedagogical practices for Pasifika learners within the Unitec programme, several limitations and avenues for future research merit consideration.

Firstly, it is important to note that the findings are specific to the context of the Unitec programme and may not be readily generalisable to other educational settings or Pasifika communities. Secondly, the reliance on qualitative data in this study may have constrained the depth and breadth of analysis. Future research could benefit from employing quantitative and mixed-method approaches to triangulate findings and offer a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing Pasifika learners' experiences in educational settings.

Furthermore, future studies should delve into specific pedagogical practices, support services, and community engagement initiatives to explore their impact on Pasifika learners' academic achievement, retention rates, and overall wellbeing. Additionally, there is a need for research that examines the role of Pasifika learners in shaping educational policies, practices, and curriculum development within tertiary education settings. Such investigations can contribute to promoting educational equity and social justice.

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