

# Principal's Sabbatical Report 2018

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## Focus Question:

### Where do they come from?

Virtually all students at St Pius X Catholic School identify as Pasifika. This sabbatical gave me the opportunity to visit both Tonga and Samoa where over 90 percent of our families originated. I visited schools in both towns and villages on the main islands of both countries to experience island life first hand, in order to be able to build more effective relationships and improve parent engagement at our school.

Link to media [Presentation to Board of Trustees and Staff](#) (Holiday Snaps)

## **Executive Summary**

Talofa lava, Malo e lelei.

These simple greetings now mean so much more to me, after having had the opportunity to spend time visiting the Pacific Islands, where so many of our St Pius X families have come from. Having the chance to experience island life, visit towns and villages in the main islands of both countries and to visit many primary and secondary schools, has been thoroughly worthwhile. My goal of improving my knowledge of island life and schooling in the Pacific, has given me a considerably better understanding of the education and life style of most of the parents from my school. I had the chance to visit, or at least drive through, almost all the villages on the islands of Upolu and Savai'i in Samoa and Tongatapu and Vava'u in Tonga. I spent many hours chatting with principals, teachers, students, and parents as well as locals and other visitors, on life and schooling in these two island nations. I have also spoken to many New Zealand resident Pacific educators and parents before and after my sabbatical experience.

I was overjoyed on my first day back at school to enrol a student from Marist Primary in Apia. Neither he nor I knew, at the time a couple of months earlier when I visited his classroom, that we would meet again in Auckland, but the smile on his mother's face when we chatted showed a huge sense of relief. As we talked about the school and life in Samoa and having visited her village, I was able to reassure her we would be able to meet his needs, particularly in relation to his not only being new to the school but also new to the country. I was also able to ensure that his mother felt completely at ease with our school, as I had been able to make the connection to her homeland straight away.

This sabbatical has been extremely beneficial to me in my practice as principal of our predominantly Pasifika school. It had already become the norm that I ask all our families about their places of origin and now I can relate directly as I have recently visited. I have observed parents 'light up' when I can talk about where they come from and their home village or places nearby. This has had an extremely positive impact on the relationships I have been able to have with parents, particularly with those I don't know very well. I plan to foster these outcomes, so we are able to celebrate better communication and parental involvement across the school.

## **The Author**

It has been 40 years since I started Auckland Teachers College in 1978 and in those 40 years I have spent about half my time in primary and the other half in secondary education. All my teaching has been in lower decile schools in West, South, Central and finally Central East Auckland and meeting the needs of children who predominately identify as Pasifika. In my present school, St Pius X, almost all our students were born in New Zealand but almost all their parents were educated in the Pacific Islands. Approximately sixty percent of current families identify as Tongan, thirty percent Samoan, and one percent Maori, with the remainder coming from other Pacific Islands such as Fiji, Rarotonga or Niue.

I have been Principal at St Pius X for the last nine years and the school is a member of the Manaiaakalani Community of Learning. The school has also experienced huge change in recent years as the Government's Tamaki Regeneration Housing Project has had a major impact on the school's roll number. We are a Decile 1b school with a very caring community which has been under increasing stress given the uncertainty of the housing market and the cost of living in Auckland. We have been very fortunate to have been granted a small staffing protection for the last couple of years, to allow for the sudden roll drop, directly related to the state housing redevelopment. It is expected there will be a massive increase in enrolments over the next 5 to 10 years. There are development plans for a staged increase in roll numbers to eventually reach 500 students. The Auckland Catholic Schools' Office is making plans to cater for this dramatic increase in the future, as is the Ministry of Education, for the state schools in the area, which are similarly affected.

My sabbatical was for Term 2, 2018.

## **Acknowledgements**

I am grateful to the Ministry of Education for enabling this project, by awarding me a TeachNZ Principal Sabbatical in Term 2, 2018.

Thank you to the staff of St Pius X for shouldering the extra load, and particularly to Mrs Debbie Williams who very ably stepped into the principal's role while I was away. Special thanks to all the staff who had other responsibilities to ensure the smooth running of the school during this time.

Thank you to the many teachers, school leaders, researchers, students and parents whose stories and experiences which were willingly shared and have guided and enriched this project. I would especially like to acknowledge Marist Brothers' Chris and Siaso who not only shared their home with me while in Apia but also spent many hours discussing the issues and challenges facing Catholic education in Samoa. The dedication of these men is an inspiration to us all and their simple, selfless and caring lifestyle is to be admired. I visited many schools while in Samoa and Tonga, some Catholic, some Government funded, two privately owned, most primary but several secondary schools including a technical college. I am completely humbled by the generosity and hospitality I was shown everywhere I went. In Samoa, I would like to especially single out Fr Nuku from Don Bosco College in Salelologa and Sr Tualili from St Theresa Primary School in the village of Fusi both on the island of Savai'i, who went out of their way to open up their schools and make my visits so valuable. In Tonga, Fr Ofa Vaihu, Acting Principal of 'Api Fo'ou College, which was decimated earlier this year during Cyclone Gita, was inspirational and so positive, all while dealing with half his school being destroyed two and a half weeks after taking on the role at the start of this year. Special

mention also to Monsignor Lutoviko, Bishop's Representative for the Diocese and Principal of St Francis of Assisi School in Nuku'alofa, the only Catholic Primary school in Tonga at present, for so willingly giving his time and sharing his wisdom.

This experience would not have been possible without my St Pius X friends so generously organising their respective families in Samoa and Tonga to look after, feed, transport, organise and make my stay in each of their homelands so enjoyable. Special mention to Mrs Ana Tui, Mrs Kuilei Pulotu, Ms Mafu Falatanoai, Mrs Siueli Vatikani, Fr Felise Lemi, Mr and Mrs Huib and Moa Kuilboer who opened their home in Vava'u for me to stay, as well as all the members of our St Pius X community who spent time telling me their own stories about life and schooling before coming to New Zealand.

I must also thank the St Pius X Board of Trustees for recognising the benefits of this project and supporting me so fully with time away from school as well as contributing financially. I am also very thankful to the New Zealand Catholic Primary Principals' Executive for awarding me a **Furnware Travelling Scholarship** for 2018 which covered most of the airfares for my separate trips to Samoa and Tonga.

Finally I need to thank my wife, Vicky, for listening to me drone on about my experiences over these last months, and for encouraging me to apply for the sabbatical in the first place.

## **Purpose**

Like all schools, we try very hard to make our school as welcoming as possible. We are fortunate to have fluent Tongan and Samoan speaking staff and Board of Trustee members and a Tongan SWiS worker. We are able to offer translation services as required, our student reports have translations on the front cover and parts of our school Charter are translated into our main Pasifika languages. We celebrate the different Language Weeks and have translators available at curriculum and planning meetings. We are doing all we can. Or are we?

I have always felt that something was missing. I was still finding it difficult to connect with some of our parents. They were always polite and respectful but for many I still wasn't getting through. I wondered if this was because I was working from my 'palagi' experience. Several years ago my wife and I had the opportunity to spend a week working with the Principal and teachers at Marist Primary, Mulivai in Apia. We visited classrooms each morning and then ran staff development meetings each afternoon focussing on what we saw. There was a new principal who was keen to lift his teachers' performance away from the traditional methods to a more collaborative approach. We got the impression that several, perhaps of the older teachers, were not so happy with our input but most were keen to try out our suggestions. We both thoroughly enjoyed the experience but regretted we didn't get the chance to visit other schools. We also learned that not all the students attending this school came from the surrounding area and that some came from far off villages with far more traditional lifestyles.

With this in mind, I decided to apply for a sabbatical to get the chance to visit the places where most of our school parents grew up and were educated, but also to get a better understanding of what life was like in the different islands of both Samoa and Tonga. I wanted to experience island life so I could better relate to where our families came from. I wanted to be able to talk about their villages

and village life and strike that closer connection. I wanted to be able to better engage with them back at school on the personal level that had been missing.

I would use visiting schools as the main focus of my visits but just as important for me was to learn about life in these islands and what encouraged our people to come to New Zealand in the first place.

## **Background and Rationale**

All New Zealand State and State Integrated schools are required to develop an individual school curriculum that best meets the needs of the students in their school. This curriculum needs to use the framework of the New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) which has a principal function of setting the direction of student learning and to provide guidance for schools as they design and review their own curriculums. St Pius X, like most schools has invested a huge amount of time and energy over many years developing and reviewing all aspects of our own school curriculum. Unfortunately, there has been a feeling that the wider curriculum has been high-jacked a little in recent years, as the absolute priority to improve National Standards results, became the Minister, the Ministry of Education and Education Review Office's main focus.

An important aspect that my school has been focussing on for many years, is to lift the level of parental engagement to enhance the learning and achievement levels of our students. One of the main tenants for the NZC and our own St Pius X Curriculum, is that there needs to be a partnership between the home and the school to give the students the best chances for success. One of our school's Strategic Goals has been, and continues to be, to lift levels of parent involvement in all aspects of school life but most importantly, the academic performance of students. The NZC (p9) states that the curriculum *has meaning for students when it connects with their wider lives and engages the support of their families, whanau and communities*. It is our job as teachers and school leaders, to facilitate learning through shared activities and conversations with other people, including family members and by this, develop a learning community where these partnerships can flourish.

Hornby, in the *Power of Parental Involvement* (Education Review April 2012) summarised three major reports on Parental Involvement produced by the Ministry of Education (2003), Education Review Office (2008) and New Zealand Council for Education Research NZCER (2008). All these reports concluded that 'effective partnerships between parents and schools result in improved outcomes for children'.

Another important document which has been particularly relevant for St Pius X, is the Pasifika Education Plan (PEP) 2013-2017. The PEP puts Pasifika learners, their families and communities at the centre of the education system. Lesley Longstone, Secretary for Education for the Ministry of Education, stated that 'working with parents, families and communities means better outcomes will be achieved for learners'. The plan aimed to achieve 'optimum learning by promoting closer alignment and capability between learners' educational environment and their home and or cultural environment'.

At St Pius X, where virtually all students identify as Pasifika, this plan has been a key document since its inception. Its main goals drove all planning at our school and have underpinned every aspect of our school life.

Goal 1. Pasifika parents, families and communities support and champion their children's learning and achievements.

Goal 2. Pasifika parents will be better informed, more knowledgeable and demanding consumers of the education system.

One of the targets was to increase Pasifika participation on school Boards of Trustees to be proportionate with the number of Pasifika students at the school. When I started as Principal at St Pius X, we had just over fifty percent Pasifika membership on our school BOT. This is now over eighty percent, with the principal and staff representative the only non-Pasifika members. The seven actions detailed in the plan all talk about parental involvement or actions to enhance this.

Goal 3. That Pasifika Parents and families engage with the schools in supporting their children's learning.

This final goal in relation to primary education clearly states that the intention for parents is to be the instigator of the engagement, rather than just responding to initiatives by the school.

The interpretation of what Parental Involvement means also needs to be investigated. As Principal, I enrol all new students and personally meet all parents and caregivers. During these meetings we discuss what this engagement means and all parents leave the enrolment meeting, agreeing to engage as much as possible throughout their child's time at school. Over the years we have tried many different ways to meet up with parents and continue to look for ways for this to increase. We regularly have discussions at Board level and during Strategic Planning meetings with parents about what may help. We now get virtually all parents attending 3 way conferences at mid-year and historically have had quite good numbers at curriculum evenings. It has also been relatively easy to get parents to come to sports days, Fiafia Nights and concerts or school Masses and Liturgies. Our challenge has been to get greater parental involvement with the actual learning going on in the classrooms. Parents coming to these co-curricular events has been great and certainly builds community and a wonderful feeling through the school, but there always seems to be something missing.

I am very aware that we put pressure on children to get their parents to come to events and this works quite well. I always endeavour to connect with as many parents on a personal level as I am able to, to ensure they feel as welcome as possible. This works on the surface, although there are still some parents we seldom see.

Although some of our families have been in New Zealand for many years, there are many who are more recent immigrants. Many parents have English as a second language and come from countries with traditional schooling systems, in which parent involvement is not emphasised, and therefore have low levels of involvement with their children's schooling. Language difficulties and uncertainty creates a barrier which is hard for them to overcome. They have come from a background where teachers, and even more so Principals, are revered, and never questioned. They trust the school to do the best for their children and have no experience challenging that.



## Methodology

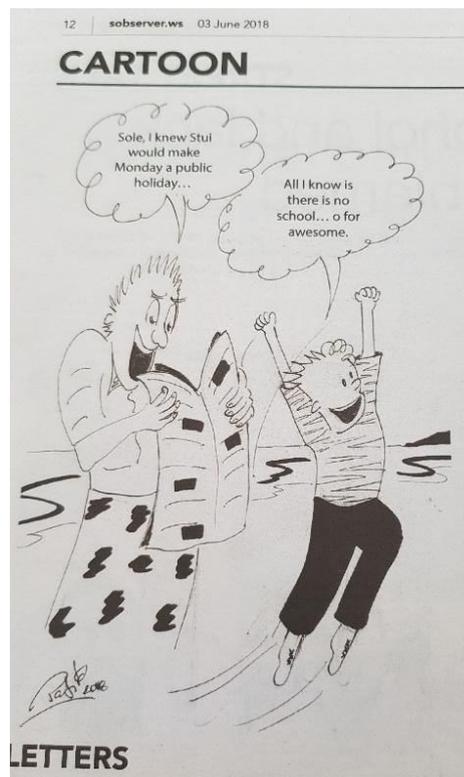
As stated previously, I planned to visit schools in both Samoa and Tonga as well as have the chance to travel extensively around the main islands of both countries and see first-hand what village life was like in the present day. I had plenty of contacts within our school community as well as several Principal colleagues who were able to offer suggestions and make introductions. My plan was to spend about five days on the island of Upolu in Samoa before travelling to Savai'i for another five days. I then planned to have a similar experience in Tonga by first visiting the capital, Nuku'alofa on Tongatapu, before flying to Vava'u to the north for another five days.

I will break this report into four separate parts outlining my thoughts and experiences, and detailing what I found about schooling and lifestyle in both countries.

## Samoa

I arrived in Samoa late on Independence Day in June 2018. I had been warned there would be much 'feasting and marching'. What I found was that most of the feasting and marching had finished for the day but much celebrating continued, starting in the Arrivals Lounge of Faleolo International Airport and continuing through the many villages driving the 32 kilometres to my base on Upolu at the Marist Brothers' Community at Mulivai. Most of the marching had happened early that Friday morning, as was witnessed by the many photos in the following days' morning newspapers. I had planned to spend the weekend acclimatising before starting my school visits on the following Monday. I learned, however, only a week or two before departure that the government decided to grant another public holiday on the Monday extra-long weekend which required my school visit plans. Fortunately all the had planned to visit were very accommodating and said this sort of thing Samoa, so my timetable was easily rescheduled. This did give me the chance to long weekend travelling around Upolu and to beach fale near the beautiful Lolomanu Beach, devastated during the 2009 tsunami. This a special significance for me, as the husband my staff members, and one of the first people when appointed to my position as principal at lost his life there the weekend before I had my welcome. I also had the chance to speak to the locals who had suffered hugely and were rebuilding their lives after losing so much. *Samoa Observer* on 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2018.

I spent my first day in Apia collecting my looking around the main city centre, chatting brothers and finally going to a party at St Joseph's College in Alafua to celebrate the birthday of one of the semi-retired brothers, who had spent most of his life serving the boys of Marist Primary. This was where I experienced my first Samoan Kava Ceremony. I had tasted the kava through our Tongan and Fijian Communities at home and once on a previous visit to Samoa, as part of a tourist



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attraction. I think I liked the actual kava, but thoroughly enjoyed the conversation and banter that happens when men get together. The next morning I went to Mass in the beautiful Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception and had the wonderful privilege of attending the First Holy Communion Ceremony for about forty children. Although the liturgy was in Samoan, I had no problem following the order of the service as I have attended many Samoan Masses over the years. At the end of the lengthy service, the children performed a beautiful liturgical dance which reminded me so much of how we celebrate this Sacrament in our own parishes and schools in Auckland.

So, following Mass and with my Google Maps App at the ready, I set off to explore the real Samoa. I planned to circumnavigate the island staying for a night on the south coast and then visiting as many places as possible as I journeyed back to Apia, to complete my formal school visits later in the week. I felt pretty confident I would not get lost as there are not many roads and my 4G phone would keep me on the right track, although I didn't really use any 'tracks' until later in the week on Savai'i, but I will get to that later. Most of the main roads on Upolu are sealed and although not particularly wide are in reasonable condition. I did still need to be careful though, as I was never quite sure what I might come across around any corner. When travelling in many of the Pacific Islands, but particularly in Samoa and as I found out later, even more so in Tonga, you very quickly understand that the idea of fencing your livestock is uncommon. In New Zealand 'free range' chickens are still fenced in, but in Samoa there are not only free range chickens, but I came across lots of dogs, sheep, goats, cows, horses and of course pigs, thousands of pigs. Most of the pigs had anywhere from three to ten or more piglets in tow. Most of the cows and horses were tethered to fences or trees along the sides of the roads, particularly in the more remote places. Often they had got themselves loose and were sometimes on the roads. On one occasion I came across a tied up horse with his rope stretching across the road to the other verge. Fortunately it was not on a corner. I also discovered that on almost every part of this island there were adults and children walking to or from somewhere, mostly church and as there were no footpaths, they were usually in the middle of the road. With my journey starting on a Sunday there were very few cars and many pedestrians.

As I drove I could not help but notice how tidy most of the villages were. Often the road ran through the middle of the village rather than along the coast like in many New Zealand towns. There were also very few fences between the numerous fales. The grass was always very well groomed and often there would be painted rocks or piles of coconuts with signage naming the village. Many fales had graves placed in front and often I saw children playing on these or people sitting on them. Sometimes the washing was placed on them in the sun to dry. Most villages had a school which was also well presented and often of similar government design in the different villages. Each village also seemed to have one or more impressive churches and often a European style house nearby, which I was told was usually for the pastor. There were very few large shops, but many roadside huts selling small goods such as chips, coke, beer, phone cards, and vegetables amongst other items. I also came across people selling fresh fish or taro etc on their own road frontage. It seems most families do not have fridges so food beyond a day or two won't keep fresh. Just enough is collected for the day's needs.

I learned later that the government has competitions between villages to keep them tidy and that there are fines for villages which don't. On several occasions later in my travels I came across gangs of young men using line trimmers working their way down the road edges some distance from the villages ensuring the first sight of their village was pleasing. As I drove slowly around the island, I could not help but notice how friendly all the children I passed were. They always waved and smiled.

I found it a little unnerving that so many youngsters and many older, young men carried machetes with them as they walked. This tool plays a most important part of everyday life, although it took me a little while to get used to it.

As stated previously, the aim of this sabbatical was to get a better understanding about where our families came from and what their village life was like as they grew up. On this brief journey I wanted to visit as many places as possible that I would be able to talk about when I returned. I particularly enjoyed swimming in the Sua Ocean Trench, which features as one of Samoa's most famous tourist attractions. I enjoyed just as much, though, staying in a very basic beach fale overnight and spending time chatting with the staff and other guests. I found the \$T70 Tala for dinner, accommodation and breakfast very reasonable although the facilities were pretty tired, the hospitality was first rate. Unfortunately I missed the special cultural fiafia performance that happens each Saturday evening. I also found it fascinating that the staff were out early the next morning sweeping the beach and clearing any leaves or coconuts that dared to fall overnight and collecting seaweed that had washed ashore.

As I continued the next day, I took the opportunity to visit some of the numerous beach resorts all along this coast. Many had been damaged in the tsunami but most had been completely rebuilt and now served the thousands of tourists who visit each year. Some of these were very upmarket and were considerably more than the T70 per night I had just spent, but all serve as significant employment opportunities to the many locals who live in the nearby villages.

My journey back to Apia took in some very remote roads, especially as I had to cross the Sa'anapu Conservation Area which climbed high above sea level before winding back down to the coast. There was very little traffic as this was still a public holiday and I was surprised to be stopped at two different police checkpoints with officers on the latest patrol bikes checking driver's licenses.

Later in the week, I caught the ferry to Samoa's other main island of Savai'i. Many people had commented that this was the more beautiful island and far less developed. I had the chance to drive right around, which was reasonably easy to manage in a day. I had arrived at my accommodation near Salelologa Wharf early after catching the 6.00am ferry. This gave me plenty of time. It was a beautiful Wednesday morning and like on Upolo, I suspected I would have no trouble navigating the main road around the island. There were many contrasts on this part of trip. I drove through many well-presented villages mostly on the coast, although there were several higher up as the road occasionally veered inland. These interior villages often seemed to have less defined boundaries and were interspersed with more fields of coconuts and taro or other crops. I was amazed that for a large part of this coast the villages had been built on top of relatively new lava fields. The ground was very stony and severe and the planting must prove incredibly difficult. I witnessed many fields of scoria with shoots of plants growing up in the cracks. The interior of the island seemed to be mostly bush clad but there always seemed to be a small, very simple dwelling nearby consisting mostly of the traditional exterior poles and a rusty corrugated iron roof. I came across more and larger wandering stock on Savai'i and just as many wandering people who were walking to or from their family plantations, usually carrying woven flax baskets and the obligatory machete.

On one occasion, I stopped to ask directions to a tourist attraction, of an older woman sitting on the side of the road. Her English was about as good as my Samoan but I got the message she wanted a ride to the next village. I said "OK" and then a huge man appeared carrying a very large flax basket full of taro and came up to the car. I wasn't sure if he was coming with us or not as his English was

similar to the lady, who turned out to be his mother. He lifted the basket into the back of my car, smiled and left us, disappearing back into the bush. We had a difficult but pleasant conversation as we drove down the winding hill road for the next twenty minutes or so until we came to a small roadside store where we were met by about half a dozen of her younger children, who all tried to lift the basket out of the car together. I was more than happy to give her the lift but it was obvious she expected to get a ride from whoever came along. She clearly felt safe getting into a car with a stranger. I had a similar experience on the other side of the island the next morning when I went to visit the Alofaaga Blow Holes. I stopped to pay as there is a charge for most sights in Samoa. I was just off the main road but some distance away from the coast, when a lady just got in the back of my car and pointed off down the track. I wasn't going to get lost but she just wanted a ride to meet up with other family at the site. It is lovely that there is still that trust in this island paradise.

My journey around Savai'i was on a Wednesday, so I was surprised to drive around a corner and find what seemed like hundreds of people of all ages involved in a large game of Samoan Cricket or kilikiti. People were all over the village green but also on the road and even over the road and fielding on the beach and even in the water. Many others were sitting around cheering and still others were carrying loads of food getting ready for the feast after the game. I learned later it was probably a traditional village versus village match still celebrating Independence Day or some other equally important event. On the Western Coast I found probably the most beautiful beach in the world at Falealupo. This was off the main road and I had to follow a very primitive track which made me worry more than once, whether I should have risked my hired vehicle on such dodgy roads. I was so glad I did and will certainly find a way to return in the future. The children in these more remote places did seem interested in the strange palagi driving by, but were also more wary and stuck closer together.

As I travelled around both islands I was struck by the fact that they were never crowded, but that there were always people around. Nobody ever seemed in a hurry but everybody seemed to know what they were doing. They always smiled and waved and always made me feel welcome. Whenever I stopped at a shop, there were hardly ever any other customers but there was always someone, a young girl usually, ready to serve me with prepared 'fresh' hot food, which I usually resisted. I could not help but wonder how all these small businesses could survive with so few customers. I realised, particularly in the villages, that most families grow the majority of their own food and that they usually just buy enough for that day. There did seem to be more customers later in the day, though. I also learned that almost all these small, local stores were also agents for Western Union Currency Exchange or some other money transfer company. Apparently many families get credit for their spending and then when funds are sent back from overseas by family members living in places like New Zealand, the accounts are settled.

I know from my experience in our own community of Glen Innes, many families do answer the call from home to send money. This puts tremendous pressure on our families who are often struggling to make ends meet anyway. This also happens if there is a funeral or other celebration happening. It is particularly difficult to get ahead with this pressure from home. The obligation also goes beyond money as families also regularly send containers or crates back containing all manner of essentials such as line trimmers, clothing, food, tools, furniture, cars and building materials. This was also common for our Tongan families.

## Schools in Samoa

My wife Vicky and I had visited Apia four years previously at the request of the Marist Brothers here in Auckland, to mentor the new principal at Marist Primary. The Principal, however, had 'not got the memo' detailing why we were coming and had arranged class visits each morning and closed the school each afternoon at lunchtime to allow for P.D. sessions for us to deliver. We stayed on site with the Brothers and thoroughly enjoyed the hospitality we were offered and marvelled at the selfless lives of these wonderful men. We found the teachers at the school very mixed in their enthusiasm for this professional development. Most of the younger teachers embraced the chance to get direct feedback from what we saw in their classrooms and were more than happy to share ideas about lifting the student agency away from the often very teacher directed, chalk and talk, copy this information type of lessons. Others who were perhaps, more traditional in their ways seemed reluctant to engage and gave the impression they preferred we were not there. I was very keen to get back and see if any of our suggestions had been taken up.

Marist Primary is a large primary school for boys at Mulivai close to the centre of Apia with more than 700 students. It boasts a particularly long and proud history with Prime Ministers and Heads of State counted as old boys. I had the chance to visit most classrooms again and talk to the teachers but did not attend any formal staff meetings. I had lengthy discussions with the new principal and a couple of other semi-retired brothers who still work in the school. On our previous visit we had seen many parents 'hanging around' the school, often sleeping or playing cards or just chatting while waiting to give their children lunch or to go home at the end of the day. Many children came from villages some distance away and transport was difficult. I suggested they be employed as volunteer Teachers Aids making resources or helping in classrooms. On this visit I was particularly pleased to see one specific initiative involving parents helping with a reading programme each morning. One of the Brothers now organises a group of these adults to work with students on their reading mileage and oral language. This is very similar to what we run in my own school using mostly retired volunteers. They generally love the chance to work with the children and the children get some one on one time at no cost to the school. This was the only time I saw this parental involvement in any schools I visited in either Samoa or Tonga. Apart from supporting cultural or sporting events parents seemed to stay away.

When asked about Parent Involvement, most of the principals I spoke to said that in-class involvement was very rare. Most would support events for co-curricular activities but that was about it. One did say that most do ensure homework is completed and some are very keen to complain if there are errors in teacher provided documents. All Government and Mission schools in Samoa are required to offer instruction in English. As virtually all local teachers are second language speakers, there are still varying amounts of instruction in both languages.

One private school I visited in Apia, however taught all their lessons in Samoan and taught English as a subject. This school, Samoa Primary had about 400 students and was co-owned by three women principals. They had seen a need in the market and had responded, and very successfully as far as I could tell. The three had trained in New Zealand and moved to Samoa reasonably soon after that. They opened the school on the present site in 2004 and as it is private, parents are required to pay fees of approximately \$T600 per term. The school does receive a grant from the government to run the school but teachers' wages are not covered by the state.

Another private school I visited, was Vaiala Beach School which was owned by a New Zealand trained teacher in 1984 and started with one student, working out of Aggie Grey's Flats at Vaiala Beach. It steadily grew until being devastated by Cyclone Ofa in 1990. It then moved inland to Vailima and now has about 250 mostly international students. As a private school, parents pay fees of \$T1500 per term if international and \$T1000 per term for local residents. These high fees mean that the locals are usually the children of government workers or other professionals. Many of the teachers are hired from New Zealand and stay for two year placements although some stay longer. This school was quite well resourced, although the site did seem quite small. One of the senior classes I visited did have access to the internet and has already visited my own school senior class site and commented on some of our student blogs. I hope we are able to continue with this connection in the future.

On Savai'i, I visited Don Bosco High School and Vocational College which serves students from Year 9. This school was started by the Salatian Order and relied on funding from overseas to survive. Once again, teachers' salaries are not covered by the government and so fees are charged to parents. Although the students were on exams when I visited, a special assembly was prepared including a wonderful student speech of welcome and a whole school cultural performance. Don Bosco was seen as the 'top' school on Savai'i and enrolls students from villages around the island. I was able to have lengthy discussions with several teachers and the Principal. The school had a computer laboratory with about fifty computers but no internet. Data use is very expensive and teachers also only have very limited access, which is very erratic. However young people are very resourceful. When I arrived at the school a little early, I met a parent in the reception area who had been called in to meet the Principal after his son had been suspended the previous day for cell phone use. Apparently another student had taken a photo of his son on his cell phone on the bus and posted this onto Facebook. This was a major crime, although I couldn't work out why the student who did the posting was not also in trouble. When I quizzed the principal about this, he gave me the impression it was really just about sending a message and there would not be any further consequences. It seems schools and students are similar everywhere. I did notice that every tiny roadside store in virtually every village, advertised data cards along with their money transfer services and beer.

Another school I visited on Savai'i was in the village of Fusi and had just celebrated their 170<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. This school was administered by the Mercy Sisters and had previously been supported by a Catholic School in Auckland. I was shown around by the Deputy Principal as the Principal had had to go to Apia to collect the Government Grant. She had to take physical evidence about how many students she had in the school before the money would be released. Once again this school struggled to pay the teachers' salaries and found it hard to staff the classrooms. These village schools had traditionally been started by religious orders and survived on the goodwill of the local people. A problem all the Catholic schools I visited in Samoa had was finding and keeping good teachers. As the Government schools' teachers' salaries were paid by the state they could pay more. Many good Catholic teachers had been tempted to higher paying positions in the government service.

There are presently moves within parliament to include the Mission and Catholic schools into the paying of teachers' salaries, and to develop something like the Integration Agreements many schools have in New Zealand. This will be the saviour of these schools as there are far fewer religious vocations in modern times.

Village life though, is still very traditional. I was fortunate to meet and chat with two Peace Core teachers from America. They were on two year placements in Samoa and were assigned to separate village schools to help in classrooms. One stayed with a village elder whose own children were working overseas. Although already in her thirties, she was still seen as a child and had to take food from her family to the pastor on Sundays, as was the oldest child's responsibility. She had to memorise the appropriate words to be repeated each week. These two had also been warned by the Peace Core Administrators to stay away from the Salelologa Markets as there had been a recent major incident as some of the young men from two neighbouring villages had a huge fight resulting in serious injury and extensive damage to the markets. I had read about this in the Samoan Observer while in Apia the previous week and had seen the damage first hand when I visited the market that morning. After an initial standoff with the police, the village council met, handed over the culprits and then reported that this would 'not happen again'. The village councils have all-encompassing powers and although I did not get the opportunity to sit in on any meetings, I have had numerous discussions with my Samoan staff members and colleagues at home about this. As I drove around each island I did see many instances when meetings were in progress. The large central meeting fales had, generally, older men sitting cross legged against their own separate pole, as serious discussions were taking place. Often there were other younger men and women sitting a little further away waiting to assist as and when required. Life in the rest of the village seemed to carry on as normal.

### **Tongan Schools**

With over sixty-five percent of our St Pius X families identifying as Tongan, as well as several staff members and other professional colleagues, I had no shortage of contacts to help in the next stage of my sabbatical experience. I planned to follow a similar format to what I had completed in Samoa. I would spend about five days staying in Nuku'alofa on Tongatapu before flying to Vava'u in the northern group of Tongan islands. During each five day stay I would visit schools and have the opportunity to travel around each of these islands to experience what life was like both in the towns and villages. I planned to speak to as many teachers, students, parents and other locals as possible.

I will break this part of my report into two sections. Firstly, I will comment on the schools I visited and then finish by sharing my experiences with the local people.

In February 2018, Cyclone Gita blasted its way across the Pacific and caused severe damage to the Southern Islands of Tonga. The first school I visited in Nuku'alofa was 'Api Fo'ou College which was where one of my present teachers went as a student. It is the third oldest secondary school in Tonga after being established by the Marist Fathers in 1886. It boasts many famous past pupils including a recent All Black. Fr 'Ofa, the Acting Principal and the uncle of one of my own students, was very happy to spend time with me discussing their situation and how the school deals with all the obstacles and barriers that every school faces. He had been in the position since the start of this year and had to deal with the cyclone utterly devastating the school, two weeks into the job. Altogether they lost eleven classrooms, the hall and chapel as well as other significant damage. They were so fortunate the cyclone hit at night when the children were not there. The evidence of the damage is all around Nuku'alofa but from what I saw this school was hit particularly severely.

The day I visited, the mid-year exams were starting. There was a large group of parents queuing in the small office trying to pay the exam fees before their child would be allowed to sit their exams.

Large marque tents had been erected on two fields to house the students with the loss of the hall. It was remarkable how all the students and staff seemed unfazed and just seemed to be carrying on. During our tour around the school, we came across two separate groups of students just sitting down around a corner out of sight. It turned out their parents had not come up with the money so they could not sit their exams. They would however, get a chance to catch up at the start of the new term. Fortunately that week, confirmation that a government grant had been approved and the major redevelopment would get underway to rebuild the school shortly. Fr 'Ofa was aware though, that in Tonga, things move slowly.

I had the opportunity to speak to several students who were all impeccably well-mannered and friendly. They enjoyed school and didn't think too much about the cyclone now. They were proud of their school's traditions and saw 'Api Fo'ou as a top school particularly in sports. The boys generally play rugby and the girls play netball, at least at the moment. I was interested to see quite an impressive fitness trail that had been provided by an Australian Government Grant where barbed wire was used on the cargo net apparatus to climb under. They 'breed 'em tough' in Tonga.

Like all Catholic schools in the Pacific Islands, only a part of the teachers' salaries are paid by the state. They can only offer less than what is paid in government schools so it is always a struggle to recruit and retain quality teachers. When asked about technology available in the school, I was told they had a large computer laboratory catering for about seventy students at a time with one device between two students. There was a grant to introduce a Teachers' Laptop Scheme some time ago under a previous principal. Wifi was put in place but not much training. It worked ok for a while until a new principal came who didn't understand the technology. Some teachers were found to be using social media during school time, so the project was dropped.

After lunch Fr Ofa took me to my next visit at St Francis of Assisi School in the centre of Nuku'alofa which is the only Catholic Primary School in Tonga. There were many more Catholic schools previously but in the early nineteen eighties they were closed as it became too financially difficult to continue to pay the teachers, as the religious orders who had historically founded and taught in them, fell in numbers.

The principal, Monsignor Lutoviko, who also knew several of my own teachers, was very pleased to show me around his overcrowded school. He had just arranged to receive two new classrooms through an Australia Grant Scheme. He also hoped to take over the classrooms of a neighbouring technical college when they moved to combine with another technical college further away. Many of his students were the children of government workers who came into town from outlying villages. Most had reasonable jobs so could afford the fees. The school was set next to, and under, the beautiful Basilica of St Anthony of Padua.

Monsignor Lutoviko was very proud of his students' academic results which saw many able to get into the top high schools in Tonga. There were about 300 children which meant classes of about 40 children each. Only about fifty percent were Catholic with the rest being a range of different religions but mostly Methodist. Some of the non-Catholic parents had chosen this school for the values expressed but more often the locality of their work, particularly if they were from a village outside the city centre. Monsignor did smile when he told me some of the Methodist Ministers were reporting the Methodist children were wanting recite Catholic prayers at their Sunday services. After visiting the classrooms Monsignor then took me a tour of his parish which extended to some of the outer villages surrounding Nuku'alofa.

The next morning he introduced me to Mr Tulikava Sete, the ex-principal of Nuku'alofa Primary School who had retired a couple of years before but now, at the insistence of Monsignor, volunteered at St Francis of Assisi. When Tulikava was principal, Nuku'alofa Primary was the largest GPS in Tonga with over a thousand students. He drove me the short distance to the school and introduced me to the principal. I learned that many of the present students were from surrounding villages and the children of government employees who worked in the centre of Nuku'alofa. As they had reasonable jobs money was not really a problem but after school care was. The children were often just left at school after the final bell until their parents finished work at 5.p.m. The school has had to roster teachers each day to supervise the children after school. Obviously the teachers are not so keen on this but as it is a large school it works out at only about one afternoon each month, so they cope.

Nuku'alofa Primary was reasonably lucky to escape major damage during the cyclone although they did lose some doors and a few windows. Many of the families though, had their homes destroyed which obviously impacted on the children. I was amused to see that as we were talking in her office, Tulikava spent the time looking around his old office and in filing cabinets for resources he could take back to St Francis'. It is always important for the 'rich' government schools to share with their poor Catholic colleagues. As always, the teachers I met were very happy to share their experiences and the children were delightful.

### **Vava'u Schools**

I flew the one hour flight to Vava'u in a small 8 seater Real Tonga Airlines plane. I had met the pilot's wife the previous day and spent time chatting about old times. She had attended College in Auckland at the same time I did, and although I did not remember her from then we knew many of the same people. Because of this, and after having a talk with the pilot before we left, he gave us the scenic tour of the island. He announced to the other passengers that unfortunately there was another plane on the runway so we would have to do several low level circuits around the Vava'u Group of islands. It was a beautiful day and this unscheduled sightseeing was a highlight for all those on board. I am pretty sure it was for my benefit but nobody on board complained. All the 'Island Paradise' brochures the tourist companies put out, are correct. It was stunning!

The father of one of my students met me at the serviceable, but pretty basic airport and drove me to his Bed and Breakfast Accommodation in the largest town, Neiafu. We overlooked the harbour and were only a short walk to the wharf where he ran his whale swimming and diving business. The accommodation at the 'Flying Annie Moa' was excellent and the staff could not have been more friendly and helpful. They were very interested to hear how 'their' little Fonzie was getting on at St Pius X as he had grown up with them on Vava'u before coming to Auckland for school.

I was collected early the next morning by the recently retired parents-in-law of one of my teachers. Ane, had been a teacher and knew many of the principals in the surrounding villages. She had set up visits to two village GPS's and two colleges. Pila was just happy to be our personal 'uber' driver. I was particularly impressed with these two smallish village schools. The first in the Village of Toula had about 55 children from Years one to six and had three classrooms. The teaching principal was very happy to talk to me, as was one of the other teachers who was on release at the time of my visit. They both appeared satisfied in their work and had both trained in Tonga. The school didn't have much in the way of resources but was quite well presented. Teachers' planning was pinned to walls and had been 'ticked off' by the principal. There was clear evidence of group work, presumably

because of the multiple levels in each room. The grounds were well presented and clean. They get quite good support from parents although this is usually in relation to working on the grounds or attending school events.

In Vava'u, Classes 1 – 3 are taught in Tongan, oral English is introduced in Class 4 and then in Classes 5 and 6, English is taught as a subject. I was interested to hear from a teacher, Soane, that he believed Tonga needed more policemen as there was an increasing crime rate, particularly home invasions. There has been some evidence of drugs in the community as well.

Probably my favourite school to visit was Government Primary School Pangaimotu in the village of the same name. There were 110 children in about six classrooms. The principal was in class when I visited. The rooms were very bright with newish linoleum on the floors. All the children's jandals were lined up perfectly outside, the rooms were well ordered, children's learning displayed on the walls, teacher made resources were also beautifully presented. There was clear evidence of maths and literacy games being used to support learning and several classrooms were listening and responding to 'radio for schools' broadcasts. Topic planning and inquiry processes were also displayed so children knew what they were doing and why. They could easily tell me in their own limited English what they were learning. This school was obviously well lead, the children and staff were happy and the classrooms and grounds were very well presented. They also had a community bus for bringing children from further away to school each day. It is a good idea that all the schools have the same uniform which helps if children need to change schools.

Both Secondary schools I visited on Vava'u were on Exams so no classes were being taught, as such. I did get the chance to speak to both principals and several teachers. St Peter Chanel College in Neiafu is the only Catholic school on Vava'u and is the school of choice for most of the Catholic children, although there are still only about fifty percent of the students who are Catholic. The mission of the school is that they teach anybody who enrolls. It is situated overlooking the harbour and has large playing fields. The school classrooms were in a pretty poor state of maintenance, as are many Pacific Island schools. The classrooms also were basic with very little in the way of displays. This school does struggle to recruit teachers as they can earn more in the government schools. The students were very friendly and quite curious about who I was.

Vava'u High School on the other hand had received some maintenance recently. The principal told me that achievement levels were going very well up until about seven or eight years ago but the Ministry then promoted him and three other senior staff to be principals in other schools around Tonga. Almost immediately this school started to go backwards. Expectations were lower and the buildings fell into disrepair. He was asked to come back and was now rebuilding all those things that had made it good in the past. He set high achievement targets and the school was well on the way to returning to where it was. Every hour he would go on a walk around the classes. He joked it was to keep fit but really it was about having a presence in the school.

As in all the high schools I visited, classroom presentation was not high on teacher priorities. In the library, although there were some books there was no furniture apart for a teacher's desk and chair. There was one sewing machine in the home economics room and one stove. The science labs had minimal equipment although the learning displayed on the board from a previous class, looked sophisticated and at a very high level. The students were friendly although many classes were on study because of the exams, so I didn't witness any actual teaching or very much student engagement.

## **Tongan Life**

My visits to Nuku'alofa and later Vava'u gave me a good understanding of both town and village life in Tonga. I found Nuku'alofa and much of the surrounding areas on Tongatapu to be varied. There were a number of new shops and buildings in Nuku'alofa including the impressive new Taufā'ahau Tupou IV Domestic Wharf at Ma'ufanga, funded by Japan. There are very few shops in any of the smaller villages apart from the road side small stores selling everyday needs which can be found throughout both Samoa and Tonga. There are also several modern restaurants as well as a number of resorts catering mostly for tourists. The housing in town was also varied with the damage from the cyclone still evident although I felt that the condition of the housing may not have only been attributable to the cyclone. Almost every property had the remains of old cars, broken machinery or rusting metal of some description. Many of the houses still had rusty corrugated iron covering windows or propping up fences. There seemed little opportunity for the removal of large broken items so they were left on the front of the section rusting away. I did learn of the Clean Green Tonga Initiative, a campaign aimed at keeping Tonga clean and beautiful that was launched in 2015. Its aim was to work with community groups, schools and businesses to develop action plans on how to make a difference in their communities. On one occasion I did see a couple of fluoro-vested young men walking down the main Vuna Road carrying sacks picking up discarded rubbish.

There were not as many roaming pigs in town, as I believe there are bylaws against this, which admittedly are very hard to police. Throughout the rest of Tonga pigs reign. They wander freely, although I was told on numerous occasions they all know their own home and return at night. There are also regular cases of pigs finding their way into other peoples' 'Umus, which does cause issues at times. There were just as many roaming dogs as I had witnessed in Samoa but in Tonga they seemed larger and more aggressive. All the Samoan dogs looked similar and were quite skittish, but in Tonga there seemed to be a greater variety of breeds and on one or two occasions I even saw them being taken for a walk on a lead. Many of the properties in Tonga are also fenced so they can sometimes seem more aggressive, when barking at you, as you walk past.

My hosts on both Tongatapu and Vava'u each offered their staff to take me on trips around both islands to experience the major tourist attractions. I visited 'several' Royal Palaces, a couple of resorts where my guides knew some of the staff, Abel Tasman's landing site, the Mapu'a 'a Vaea Blow Holes, Captain Cook's landing place, saw some fishing pigs, Ha'amonga 'a Maui Trilithon and the Anahulu Caves on Tongatapu. We were able to drive completely around the island in an afternoon.

On Vava'u, I had a very similar experience although on this smaller island there were less identified tourist attractions, we did visit villages that were very remote where the lifestyle was very traditional. I was surprised to find a small brick building in a tiny village that had a sign for 'Computer Service' on the front door although it was closed and looked as if it didn't open very often.

While on Vava'u, I had the chance to go out with my host on one of his boats with the hope of whale swimming. Unfortunately we were a couple of weeks early so spent the day fishing and snorkelling in such famous places as Swallows' Cave and Mariners Cave. It was a magical day with stunning weather, warm water, no wind and a bucket load of fish when we returned.

In Tonga, Sunday is a day of rest. Shops are closed and very little else is open. It is traditionally a family day starting with church followed by a special lunch. Ane and Pila picked me up to take me to Mass at St Joseph's Cathedral in Neiafu, which was quite close to where I was staying. It was lovely that although the mass was said in Tongan, the priest spoke a few words of welcome in English for the small group of tourists who were visiting. After Mass we returned to Ane and Pila's house for a traditional Tongan Sunday lunch. The older son had prepared the 'Umu or underground oven, earlier that morning. He would go to Mass in the evening with the youth of the parish. When we arrived there was a huge amount of smoke coming from the backyard close to where their large pig was penned. This type of cooking is physically demanding and is usually the men's responsibility.

When lunch was ready, Pila said the blessing. The dining room table was covered with a range of salads, taro, crayfish and other seafood as well as a whole baby pig cooked to perfection. I was offered the chance to begin, but politely declined to allow someone else to carve the pig. After lunch many extended family and neighbours arrived for a practice for the children's church performance happening in a few weeks' time. This was a special lunch with me as the guest of honour, but I am assured that this is a typical Tongan Sunday event.

Later in the afternoon we went on a drive around the other side of Vava'u. The roads were not busy but the cars and utes we did see, were almost always overloaded, particularly with many, usually younger family members, hanging off the back. When I first arrived in Tonga and put my seatbelt on for the drive into Nuku'alofa, I received the comment that I must be from New Zealand, as islanders don't wear seatbelts very often. I could not help but cringe whenever I saw a baby or very young child standing up in the front of cars or sitting on a parent's knee while they were driving. Most cars are in need of repair. Most have dents, broken or cracked windows and almost all the utes have crude wooden planks to act as a seat in the back. I didn't see any police cars on Vava'u.

I very much enjoyed my stay on Vava'u, which was helped by the wonderful hospitality I received from so many of the family members through my St Pius X Community. They were so friendly and generous with their time and went out of their way to make sure I experienced the real Tonga.

## **Conclusions**

I believe this sabbatical experience has had a huge impact on my understanding and knowledge of what it means to be a Pacific Islander attending school and bringing up children in New Zealand. My goal was to be able to make better connections with our parent community, by learning about life and schooling in Samoa and Tonga. Even with this small, but very real taste of island life, I have achieved what I set out to do. I have now personally visited most of the towns and villages where our people come from and, with this first-hand experience, have already been able to have dialogues with families that would not have been possible previously. The genuine excitement when I have been able to talk about particular villages and surrounding sites, has generated far deeper conversations with a warmth I have not experienced before.

Most of our families came to New Zealand for better education chances for their children. This does not mean the previous experience was bad, it just means it was different. I met many, very happy children in many different schools, who were all learning in their own context. The parents I met, all respected the schools and valued the education their children were receiving but wanted to give their children opportunities, that they may not have had themselves.

The challenges we face, are that although the basic philosophy of improving the life chances for our children through education is similar, the differences in delivery in New Zealand can cause some anxiety or even fear. The families are not only having to deal with a new schooling system, but a new life as well. I am now able to acknowledge the island education systems personally and show our new parents what we expect, in a friendly and gentle way. I am able to encourage and demonstrate how much we value parental involvement in their children's learning and growth. These conversations are very much enhanced, once a personal connection has been made.

I thoroughly enjoyed my experiences during this sabbatical, which I believe will enhance my performance as Principal of St Pius X Catholic School. I am very thankful for this opportunity.

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