

How do academically successful Pasifika students perceive task value?

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Abstract

Pasifika students are a minority group in New Zealand education who are at risk of underachievement. This article examines how five high achieving Pasifika students reported the factors that contribute to the task value of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) Scholarship. It uses expectancy value theory to consider motivation through subjective attainment, utility, and interest values. In-depth data were gathered from five high achieving Pasifika students who attained at least one NZQA Scholarship between 2005 and 2012. It was found that during the year these students sat the NZQA Scholarship examinations, their sources of value changed as they perceived different costs and opportunities associated with the NZQA Scholarship. Limitations, implications, and future directions for supporting high achieving Pasifika students are also discussed.

Introduction

An important component in the education of high achieving students is understanding what motivates these students towards tasks that enable them to demonstrate their academic capability. This qualitative study examines the subjective task values of the New Zealand Qualification Authority (NZQA) Scholarship examinations (optional examination undertaken by secondary school students in their final year of high school) reported by five high achieving Pasifika students. Pasifika people refers to geographically, linguistically, and culturally diverse peoples who have migrated to New Zealand from Pacific nations and territories or who identify with Pasifika through ancestry (Anae, Coxon, Mara, Wendt-Samu, & Finau, 2001; Schuster, 2008). Pasifika students potentially have multiple cultural identities from their families, upbringing, and birthplace and may be monolingual, bilingual, or multilingual (Callister & Didham, 2008; Ministry of Education, 2013; Statistics New Zealand, 2013). Addressing the low achievement of Pasifika in New Zealand schools has been highlighted as a priority by the New Zealand Ministry of Education through

successive Pasifika Education Plans and Pasifika research priorities (Ministry of Education, 2012, 2013).

Review of Literature

Expectancy Value Framework

An expectancy value model of achievement motivation (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002) shows how achievement-related choices are influenced by the relative personal value and perceived costs of any options (Eccles, 2005). Expectancy value theorists use a socio-cultural lens to argue that task choice, persistence, and performance may be explained by the expectancy of successfully completing the task and the extent to which the task is valued by the individual (Eccles, et al., 1983; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000).

Within the expectancy value framework, task values include:

- a. attainment (the importance of doing well on the task to confirm self-perceptions or fulfil achievement and social needs),
- b. utility (the usefulness of the task for meeting a future goal or for an extrinsic gain), and
- c. interest (enjoyment from engaging in the task, based on individuals' perceptions of the field of possible achievement-related options) (Eccles, 2005; Eccles, et al., 1983; Eccles & Wigfield, 1995).

Task value is evaluated against the potential costs for engaging in a task. Costs include effort required, loss of time for other tasks, and the risk of failure (Eccles, et al., 1983). This study investigates successful Pasifika students' achievement-related choices through task value for the NZQA Scholarship because this framework allows for the recognition of the diversity of Pasifika students as a group of individuals who often possess multiple cultural identities (Nakhid, 2003). The subjective construction and maintenance of task value incorporates the influences of individual identities and interactions between socio-cultural contexts on

how tasks are perceived and pursued (Wigfield & Cambria, 2010).

High Academic Achievement in the New Zealand Context

In New Zealand, the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) is the main secondary school qualification used to gain university entrance. In addition to NCEA qualifications, NZQA Scholarships offer an externally assessed set of optional examinations. Through success in these examinations, which are sat in the final year of high school, scholars prove their ability to “demonstrate high-level critical thinking, abstraction and generalisation, and to integrate, synthesise and apply knowledge, skills, understanding and ideas to complex situations” (NZQA, 2015, para 4). Gaining a NZQA Scholarship does not contribute toward university entrance or provide a qualification, but is rewarded with financial payments conditional upon students attending a New Zealand tertiary institution.

Each year, approximately three percent of the national cohort are awarded a NZQA Scholarship, identifying them as having demonstrated high academic ability. The participants in this study were not necessarily identified as gifted and talented or students of high academic ability while they were at school. However, consistent with international literature that identifies the percentage of students who may be considered gifted and talented (Gagné, 2003; Renzulli, 2002), gaining one or more NZQA Scholarships may be considered as evidence of high academic achievement, and therefore arguably places these students within the group labelled gifted and talented.

Pasifika Achievement and NZQA Scholarship

Pasifika students are less likely to gain achievement, NCEA qualifications and university entrance, and are underrepresented at the upper end of achievement distributions when compared to non-Pasifika students in New Zealand (Callister & Didham, 2008; Harkness, Murray, Parkin, & Dalgety, 2005; Ministry of Education, 2014a). To date, most research investigating potential contributors to Pasifika achievement patterns has tended to focus on the cultural differences between Pasifika people and schools (see Amituanai-Tolua, McNaughton, Lai, & Airini, 2009; Coxon, Anae, Mara, Wendt-Samu, & Finau, 2002; Ferguson, Gorinski, Wendt Samu, & Mara, 2008; Fletcher, Parkhill, & Taleni, 2008; Kepa & Manu'atu, 2011; Ministry of Education, 2014b). One common theme that has been identified in this research is the influence of expectations and relationships with teachers, parents, and friends on Pasifika students' motivation and academic achievement (Fletcher et al., 2008; Graham,

Meyer, McKenzie, McClure, & Weir, 2010; McClure et al., 2011; Meyer, McClure, Walkey, Weir, & McKenzie, 2009). For example, the assumptions held by teachers and the community, based on their perceptions of Pasifika culture and achievement, appear to influence how students identify with academic tasks and contexts, which may potentially operate to maintain the existing high levels of underachievement among Pasifika students (Nakhid, 2003).

It is noteworthy that Pasifika students and families appear to value skills and knowledge that have cultural, practical, and community significance, which may be different to those valued by the rest of the student population in New Zealand (Frengley-Vaipuna, Kupu-MacIntyre, & Riley, 2011; Miller, 2005). Consequently, there may be a need for different identifiers of giftedness among Pasifika students in New Zealand schools, which may incorporate factors such as the level of adaptability, memory, church affiliation, the seeking of self-improvement, the positive nature relationships, resilience, and lineage (Faaea-Semeatu, 2011).

Research Aims and Question

This study was undertaken in recognition of the paucity of research that investigates successful Pasifika school experiences, especially from the perspective of high achieving Pasifika students. In particular, the study provides an opportunity to make a practical contribution to understanding how interactions between interpersonal and intrapersonal factors may shape the experiences of these high ability Pasifika students.

The research question that guided the study was:

How do academically successful Pasifika students perceive task value?

Method

Multiple Case Study Approach

A multiple case study design was used to gather personal and contextual data about the experiences of each participant. Each case is conceptualised as a bounded system (Stake, 2006) and in this study, each case was a Pasifika student who achieved NZQA Scholarship in at least one academic subject between 2005 and 2012. Multiple sources of data were collected (Yin, 2014):

1. Semi-structured face-to-face or Skype interviews with participants were the primary form of data. Interview questions

were centred on the decision to participate in Scholarship and strategies to manage the experience.

2. Archival records. NZQA records of achievement were used to identify students who had attained a NZQA Scholarship between the years 2005 and 2012.
3. Publicly available school data. Education Review Office (ERO) reports, to gain contextual details about the school environment, priorities, and values, were accessed for each school the participants attended.

NZQA achievement data were used to identify potential participants who self-identified as Pasifika and received a NZQA Scholarship in one or more subject. Specifically, NZQA forwarded invitations to participate in this research to all Pasifika students who received a NZQA Scholarship between 2005 and 2012. In total, 90 Pasifika students received Scholarships during this period.

Five students indicated their willingness to participate. The low response rate may in part be explained by the substantial time delay between receipt of the Scholarship (e.g., in 2005) and the request to participate in 2014. Furthermore, it is reasonable to assume that many students did not receive an invitation due to changes in address since the time of receipt of the Scholarship. Three of the five students were interviewed via Skype, while the remaining two were interviewed face-to-face at a venue of their choice.

Respondents comprised four females and one male; they were New Zealand born and identified as having wholly or partially Samoan, Tokelauan, or Cook Island ancestry. Table 1 provides brief case descriptions of key characteristics of each of the five participants.

Cultural Considerations

It is noted that Pasifika researchers emphasise the need to conduct research in a manner that collaborates with participants and builds on community strengths (Airini, Mila-Schaaf, Coxon, Mara, Sanga, 2010; Anae, et al, 2001; Bennett, et al., 2013; Finau, et al., 2011; Fletcher, Parkhill, Fa'afai, & Morton, 2006). Consistent with this need, the interviews provided an opportunity to build rapport with participants, (Fletcher et al., 2006). Furthermore, refreshments were provided by one of the researchers in face-to-face interviews in line with Pasifika research recommendations (Anae et al., 2001; Bennett, et al., 2013).

Data Analysis

After all interview transcripts and ERO reports were entered into NVivo, an iterative process of analysis began by the review of the interview transcripts, interview notes, and the ERO reports. Thereafter, line-by-line coding was undertaken on each interview transcript. Coding was checked across two coders, and where there was disagreement, the coders returned to the transcripts and notes to ensure that a full understanding of participant perspectives was gained. The findings for each case were triangulated prior to the examination of emerging themes.

Member checking was undertaken by forwarding all participants a copy of their interview transcripts with an invitation to comment on the analysis. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to protect his/her identity during the reporting of the study.

Findings

The factors that contribute to the task value of a NZQA Scholarship, for the participants of the study, appear to be divisible into three broad categories: personal beliefs, social influences, and persistence.

Personal Beliefs

Participant decisions to sit the NZQA Scholarship examinations appear to be influenced by their belief that preparation for this examination may improve their overall results in the NCEA, and that the financial reward may assist in supporting them at university:

If you do Scholarship and you can kind of understand it, any work that you do for that will definitely help you with level 3 [NCEA]. (Ruth)

I looked at it like an opportunity to make some extra money for university, which I needed. It was also an opportunity to boost my CV, which was also important. (Luke)

Beliefs about ability

A NZQA Scholarship was also considered an opportunity to confirm self-perceptions of beliefs about ability. Ruth perceived the Scholarship examinations to be a challenge, which she discussed as part of her self-concept:

It didn't necessarily have to be Scholarship they put in front of me, I am always up for a challenge. (Ruth)

Table 1: Case descriptions

	Alexis	Sina	Daisy	Luke	Ruth
Ethnicity	“I am Samoan”	“I am a quarter Samoan, my dad is half, and the other three quarters is NZ European”	“my mum is full Samoan and my dad is NZ European”	“I will always put Cook Island and also NZ European. So I’ll claim a half and half”	“I am Tokelauan”
Cultural identity	“I am second generation, so my parents were here but my grandparents were the ones who came over”	“I always tick NZ European and then if there is an option for Pasifika I will tick that as well”	“I’m very much European and Pacific Islander”	“I’ve had a more NZ European upbringing rather than the Pacific Island”	“I identify as Tokelauan”
Place of birth	New Zealand	New Zealand	New Zealand	New Zealand	New Zealand
Year of Scholarship	2010	2010	2007	2008	2011
School decile	9	10	7	9	7
Scholarship subjects	English, geography, art history, history and classics	Classical studies, geography, and English	English, drama, and media studies	Statistics, physics, and economics	History, statistics, and calculus

Relatedly, Luke and Daisy were willing to engage with extra material, particularly when it was perceived as an opportunity to demonstrate their academic competencies:

I guess I was pretty ambitious at school. I think I am now, but I was probably more ambitious then, you know. This was another chance to shine and do something a little extra, so I just kind of did it. (Luke)

When I knew that in the Scholarship English exam the plan was opened up to include any book you wanted I got really excited because I was like “I can write about the intelligent books I’ve been reading.” (Daisy)

In contrast, Alexis was influenced both by her ability and alignment with family values:

English has always been rated as very important in my family and I was always good at it so I just stuck with that. I enjoyed doing English. (Alexis)

The choice of subjects for the NZQA Scholarship examinations may also have been based on perceived ability. Specifically, participants

appeared to choose subjects in which they felt more competent, because they anticipated a stronger performance:

I think I just took the ones I was taking and that I thought I would be good at. (Sina)

Generally, personal beliefs about the benefits of receiving a NZQA scholarship, and the opportunity to demonstrate knowledge in the task where the students had high competency beliefs, were evident in the data.

Social Influences

Students reported multiple social influences that impacted on their success. These included the influence of their teachers, their peers, and their family.

Teachers

Teacher-student relationships appeared to be central in the selection of subjects, while teacher practices appeared to help students to maintain motivation during the year. All five of the participants noted the importance of having a positive relationship with teachers, and the appreciation they had for teachers who invested additional time and energy to support them.

Positive relationships with teachers appeared to be particularly important as this provided participants with assurance that they would be supported in the subjects that these teachers taught.

It is noteworthy that the ERO reports indicated that the participants' former high schools were aware of the importance of consistent teaching practices, and accordingly made investments in teacher professional development (ERO, 2014). Nevertheless, Ruth and Daisy identified that teacher support for NZQA Scholarship examinations did not always equate with school support:

It also helped that I knew the history teacher would offer me support because she had already agreed from the very beginning and even though I knew that the school probably wouldn't offer much support. (Ruth)

I think I remember writing a letter to my English teacher after school and saying "if it wasn't for teachers like you, I probably wouldn't have stayed at the school." (Daisy)

Daisy noted that her relationship with her English teacher was particularly important for her, as she felt that her reputation at the school was not congruent with studies toward an NZQA Scholarship. She explained that it was her teacher's recognition of her potential, and her relationship with her teacher, that encouraged her to take an NZQA Scholarship examination:

My English teacher kind of approached me and said she'd like me to do it and I really respected her. I liked her and I wanted to do well for her. (Daisy)

The additional workshops, assignments, and feedback offered by some teachers generally assisted students to feel that they were making progress, and that their own study efforts were being recognised. As well as increasing their knowledge of the subject, the additional workshops were a forum where teachers could assist participants to understand the assessment:

We would leave feeling like we had done something, so it wasn't just the fact that we had learned stuff or that we kind of refined stuff, it was also the fact that we felt better about being a little bit closer to being where we wanted to be. (Ruth)

Moreover, the subject knowledge of the teachers and their skill in teaching supported student interest in subjects. Ruth discussed how understanding the principles underpinning her mathematical subjects helped her to feel

confident in her knowledge and application of the theory:

I didn't just know rules because someone had written them on the board and I had to learn them, I kind of understood why they existed and how you could apply them. (Ruth)

For some, a teacher's passion for his/her subject boosted their own enthusiasm which contributed to their willingness and enjoyment to engage with extra material which was not required for the NZQA Scholarship or NCEA:

She was really passionate about English, especially the text that she chose for us to study. I loved the text ... she obviously loved the romantic poets so we studied a few of Keats' poems as well. That was really cool because that was not even what we were studying but she taught us about the poems as well. (Sina)

In general, the participants reported a greater affiliation with those teachers who were passionate about their subject, invested effort, and related well to students. These teachers effectively supported student progress in their goals through engaging their interest and imparting deeper knowledge.

Peers

The participants generally reported that they had varied groups of friends, at least some of whom had an academic focus. The involvement and attitudes of friends with respect to the NZQA Scholarship examinations appeared to be influential in the decision making of the participants:

Lots of people were doing it so that's obviously another factor. (Sina)

I have some quite academic friends around me and so there was talk of "yeah, might do some" so it was always a talked about thing. (Daisy)

For Sina, who did not share her friends' focus on school, the high value that her friends placed on NZQA Scholarship assisted her decision to take it:

Everybody wanted to achieve really, really high marks and they just took school really seriously, basically, and I wasn't inclined to do that. (Sina)

Nevertheless, some of the participants had friends with different beliefs and value systems, which meant that their NZQA Scholarship ambitions placed them at odds with their peer group. For example, Daisy perceived that her attitudes differed to that of some of her friends,

which she attributed to an older peer group, many of whom chose to leave school or move away:

I think looking back I probably wouldn't have told any of my friends that I really wanted to get Scholarship in English. (Daisy)

Relatedly, Alexis discussed feeling that others may not understand the potential value of undertaking studies for the NZQA Scholarship:

I just think people weren't that interested in it like I think they were more focused on getting UE [University Entrance] and focused on the actual subjects and that they couldn't be bothered doing the extra work for Scholarship. (Alexis)

Among students who did work towards the NZQA Scholarship with their friends, friends were generally considered to be a source of support that motivated effort even when they themselves started to lose enthusiasm. For example, Ruth described how having friends who were also sitting the NZQA examinations made attending the history workshops more manageable:

I had a couple of friends involved in it, and that definitely helped because we would all drag our feet to Wednesday history sessions. We'd be like "Oh did you write this essay?" and then be like "no". It was good to have people to bounce ideas off and it kind of made it a bit more fun. (Ruth)

When asked what stood out as a helpful component of the workshops, Alexis reflected:

I think it was probably meeting other students that were doing the same things and that you could discuss [with them]. (Alexis)

Generally, having friends who were interested in the NZQA Scholarship or who were already committed to it appeared to be a positive influence on the decisions of participants to pursue NZQA Scholarships.

Family

Apart from teachers and peers, the participants reported that family members encouraged them to take the NZQA Scholarship examinations. For two students, Ruth and Daisy, having fathers who were teachers brought the NZQA Scholarship to their attention:

Because my dad's a school teacher I pretty much knew about it pretty much middle of Year 12. (Ruth)

In particular, the parents of the participants appeared to emphasise the financial incentive as

a reason for undertaking studies toward the NZQA Scholarships:

My mum was quite supportive of it because she thought why not try your hardest to get it because you get money. (Sina)

... when he explained to me what it was I was like "oh yeah, I'm always down to put my name in to get some money"... (Ruth)

However, the financial reward did not ultimately determine the participants' decision to pursue the NZQA Scholarships or maintain engagement during the year. For example, Ruth described how the benefit of the experience was of greater value to her and her parents than the opportunity to receive income:

I guess in terms of goals, we had decided from the outset that it wasn't about getting the money, just like before it wasn't about the end result, it was about going through the exercise. (Ruth)

It was apparent that the parents of the participants were viewed as sources of support during the NZQA Scholarship year:

I used to talk to my mum about it all the time, just expressing my feelings towards it, just talking to her about how hard it was. (Sina)

Generally, the participants appeared to credit their families for raising awareness of the NZQA Scholarships, and the associated financial rewards. Furthermore, they perceived that their families provided emotional and practical support once NZQA Scholarship studies were underway.

Persistence

Finally, the participants noted that the time spent preparing for, and physically attending, the NZQA Scholarship examinations was greater than they had anticipated at the start of the year. A major motivational barrier was the prioritisation of work, especially as the NZQA Scholarship examinations were not compulsory.

Costs

At the start of the NZQA Scholarship year, many participants reported feeling relaxed about the upcoming year:

I think in the beginning I just put it to the back of my mind because it was three terms away and then as it got closer and closer I started freaking out. (Ruth)

Nevertheless, once classes had started, they were able to recognise the level of commitment

that was necessary. This included attendance of workshops, study time, and the time to sit the examinations which were often on Saturdays:

The three Scholarship exams were Saturdays and I was like “you’re joking me!” I am volunteering my Saturdays off to do extra work! (Ruth)

Tenacity

In addition to the costs associated with pursuing the NZQA Scholarships, some participants discussed the difficulty in giving priority to the NZQA Scholarship examinations, as it was optional:

It was an optional thing, for me it was an added extra thing on the side which I had chosen to do and then regretted it. (Sina)

Nevertheless, multiple personal and social reasons existed for them to continue their efforts:

You’ve done all this work, and all these people like all your teachers have helped you out and gotten you extra stuff, the least you can do is to keep going. (Alexis)

There was no point pulling out because then I definitely won’t get it, if I sit the exam there is a chance I could get it. (Sina)

Generally, the participants appeared to value NZQA Scholarships for reasons related to their beliefs and the influences of social agents. Multiple forms of value were salient in choosing to take the NZQA Scholarship examinations, and maintaining effort during the year.

Discussion

The findings revealed that the participants of the study valued multiple aspects of the NZQA Scholarships which were influenced by both personal and social factors.

This section will discuss these findings using expectancy value theory, together with the literature on high academic ability and Pasifika students. Firstly, the attainment, utility, and interest value of the NZQA Scholarship for these students will be examined. Thereafter, the nature of the changes to the value of the NZQA Scholarship will be discussed.

Attainment, Utility, and Interest Value of the NZQA Scholarship

The NZQA Scholarship appeared to have attainment value for Pasifika students as it may serve to confirm their beliefs about their own competencies. Indeed, the subject choices of the

study participants appeared to be based on their competency beliefs, and their interpretations of their previous academic performances. Additionally, the NZQA Scholarship appeared to allow Pasifika students to fulfil a need for relatedness with academically oriented friends, as many of the study participants reported that they were positively influenced in the decision to pursue the NZQA Scholarship by friends who had academic aspirations.

Simultaneously, NZQA Scholarship appeared to have utility value due to the opportunity for financial gain. Usually, the parents of Pasifika students highlighted the benefits of the possible monetary rewards associated with the successful completion of the NZQA Scholarship examinations. It is noteworthy that this finding contradicts other studies that have suggested the general reluctance of Pasifika students to discuss schooling matters with their parents (Siope, 2011).

Along with attainment and utility value, the NZQA Scholarship appeared to have interest value for Pasifika students, as the study participants reported that they enjoyed NZQA Scholarship subjects. This was particularly the case when strong teacher-student relationships were developed, teachers valued the efforts of the students, and teachers were knowledgeable and enthusiastic themselves. The combination of teacher competencies and interpersonal skills was favoured by high achieving students in other studies (Horsley, 2012; Vialle & Tschler, 2005), and may be particularly pertinent in Pasifika culture which values reciprocal relationships (Bennett et al., 2013).

Changes to Value of the NZQA Scholarship

For some of the participants, preparing for the NZQA Scholarship examinations required more effort than they had anticipated at the start of the year. The investment of effort into challenging tasks, such as the NZQA Scholarship, may be considered to be a risk because if it is not achieved, it may be attributed to a lack of ability (Eccles, 2005). Interestingly, Pasifika students appear more likely to attribute school success to ability than to effort (McClure, et al., 2011; Rubie-Davies et al., 2013).

As the NZQA Scholarship examinations approached, the study participants had: (a) changing perspectives on the value of the NZQA Scholarship, and (b) different characteristics of the NZQA Scholarship held value at different points in time. Specifically, while financial gain appeared to be important initially, later on, there was a shift to valuing the development of the knowledge and skills to needed to gain entry into university. Effectively, the utility value associated with monetary gain decreased over

time, while the attainment and utility values associated with achieving the goal of university entry increased. It is noteworthy that during this time, which saw a simultaneous increase in the costs of time and effort, strong teacher-student relationships and effective teacher practices may have contributed to the maintenance of the task values of the NZQA Scholarship.

Limitations

This study has some limitations. Firstly, by being open to the participants' representations of themselves with no explicit attention to cultural issues, the study does not comment on the interaction between Pasifika culture and the New Zealand school system. While this aligns with the purpose of the study to deepen the understanding of the motivation of Pasifika students, it may nevertheless limit the generalisability of the study to other Pasifika students. Secondly, greater methodological rigour may have been possible if data collection went beyond participant interviews, archival data, and ERO reports, to also include data from interviews with family members, peers, and teachers.

Conclusion

Expectancy value theorists argue that task

choice, persistence, and performance may be explained by the expectancies of successful completion of tasks, and the extent to which the tasks may be valued by individuals (Eccles et al., 1983; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). This study used student perceptions and perspectives to gain an understanding of how expectations of successful task completion and task value shaped the experiences of high ability Pasifika students. In particular, the identification of specific task values provided much needed insights into the factors that motivate gifted Pasifika students to pursue studies toward the NZQA Scholarship examinations. Importantly, the study found that family, teachers and peers may be very influential.

Significant implications for researchers, teachers, and professionals who work with gifted Pasifika students were identified. In terms of research, it may be useful to investigate the interactions between all relevant parties and task value, and changes to task value, for a significant academic task, from an expectancy value perspective. In terms of practice, it may be useful to provide gifted Pasifika students with material they find both stimulating and meaningful. Moreover, there may be value in placing an emphasis on the utility of significant academic tasks for students to commit time and effort to study.

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