

The Family So'otaga: connection between home and school

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Year 1 students at Holy Family School excited about the annual So'otaga Careers Expo.

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This think piece discusses a unique initiative that has been introduced at Holy Family School in Cannons Creek, Porirua. The initiative is funded by The McGuinness Foundation Trust. The funding started at the beginning of 2016, with support from the McGuinness Institute. The ideas in the initiative align with research the Institute has conducted, notably the *TalentNZ* and *TacklingPovertyNZ* workshops.

INTRODUCTION

When faced with the question, 'what is the best way to help people in your local area?' Holy Family School principal Chris Theobald and deputy principal Gina Lefaoeseu knew any new initiative had to hold the community at its core. They decided a programme to empower parents and whānau to make the most of the New Zealand education system was a good place to start.

The decile one Catholic school in Cannons Creek, Porirua is a very diverse environment. Students have varied cultural backgrounds, including: Pasifika heritages (72%), Tangata Whenua Māori (22%) and Burmese (6%). This has two significant impacts, as explained by Theobald:

'Many parents have not had a positive experience in the New Zealand education system - often because of the conflict between their home culture or cultures and the Eurocentric school. The education system in its current form is not set up to enable minority cultures to experience success. While The Family So'otaga focuses on the former, aiming to empower and inform whānau to best navigate school, the programme has obvious benefits to educators within Holy Family School. This means that teachers not only need to be able to speak the common language of their students, but also appreciate and work within the cultural frameworks that have already been established at home.'

New Zealand's Eurocentric education system is currently in a period of change and is placing increasing importance on providing a teaching-style that reflects the cultural background of

the students – a system known as culturally responsive pedagogy. Despite this, Theobald and Lefaoeseu knew that for immediate results, action had to happen outside the classroom.

The Family So'otaga is a joint initiative between Holy Family School and Mark and Wendy McGuinness – with investment from The McGuinness Foundation Trust. The initiative aims to educate and empower parents and families to find their role in their children's education.

The term So'otaga, a Samoan word for 'connection', was specifically chosen to highlight the programme's main goals. The initiative's focus is to create three connections: a deep connection between students' homes and school that breaks down traditional barriers; an informed connection between home and the students' specific next learning steps; and an aspirational connection between students and their future educational pathways and subsequent career options.

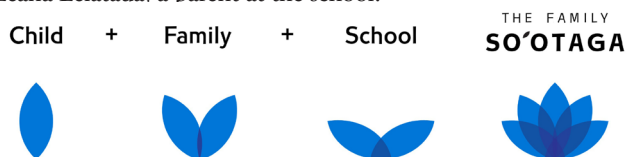
Lefaoeseu is now not only the deputy principal, but also the So'otaga manager. Her work is supported by Metua Tengarua, a former teacher aide at the school who has worked as the programme facilitator since it launched in trial-form at the beginning of 2016. As an existing staff member and part of the community, she already understood the community and its very specific needs.

So'otaga has developed into a programme worth more than the sum of its parts, but seven features can be identified as the core components of the initiative:

1. So'otaga website and logo (early 2016)
2. 'Aiga Education Plans (early 2016)
3. Designated So'otaga meeting room and whānau meetings (mid 2016)
4. Resources and workshops for teachers and parents (mid 2016)
5. Additional layer of support (mid 2016)
6. So'otaga Careers Expo and careers trips (early 2017)
7. The Phenomenal monsters (mid 2017)

1. So'otaga website and logo

Christian Silver developed The Family So'otaga website as a place to collate the programme's messages and resources. The website uses a minimalist design that is tactile and enjoyable to use. The website incorporates the So'otaga logo which was designed by Leana Leiatua, a parent at the school.



2. 'Aiga Education Plans

'Aiga Education Plans or AEPs ('aiga is Samoan for family) were initially the crux of the initiative, but it soon became clear to So'otaga organisers that the process is more important than the product. The plans are drawn up by Tengaru during her meetings with families to help parents and whānau identify long-term goals for their children. The plans typically focus on a favoured career choice and create a pathway for the child to achieve their goals.

In the two years since the initiative's launch, nearly 320 AEPs have been drawn up for the school's 225 students (including updated plans in the second year). The students' goals take into account the important role of emotional stability and success for children as a solid foundation for any academic growth that will follow.

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3. Designated So'otaga meeting room and whānau meetings

During the development stage, Lefaoseu converted her office into the So'otaga meeting room. She consciously designed the room to be open and welcoming. She wanted the room to invite deeper connections and reflect So'otaga's reciprocal relationships with parents.



Inside the So'otaga meeting room.

The Family So'otaga is central to the curriculum, unlike parent-teacher interviews, which remain separate. The programme is the heart of the school and it is used to develop connections with whānau that better replicate mutually beneficial relationships.

Tengaru or Lefaoseu invest approximately three hours of face-to-face time with each family. The meetings establish relationships, set goals for students and track progress. By devoting considerable time to each whānau, the school is letting parents know the school values them as an important part of the learning relationship. This is a key step in addressing the power imbalance that impacts on minority populations and their interactions with mainstream education in New Zealand.

These meetings do not replace the traditional parent-teacher relationship; rather it provides another layer of connection and communication with the school for each whānau.

The relationships that develop with whānau during the meetings

with Tengaru have become the key to understanding the barriers (both tangible and intangible) that preclude students from getting the most out of their years at school in New Zealand.

As well as working with families already represented at the school, Tengaru incorporates So'otaga into the orientation process. All parents receive a So'otaga bag during the initial planning session that Tengaru individualises with learning activities and resources to suit a family's needs. The aim is to encourage parents to find their role in their child's learning.

By introducing So'otaga as a priority to new students and their families, the school hopes to accelerate the process of parents feeling comfortable at the school. It is a process that previously could take years. Entering school grounds can sometimes be an invisible barrier for many parents who do not feel comfortable entering the school environment.

Through this series of meetings the school is able to discover the best ways to communicate and interact with its parent population. They also help the school alter its day-to-day running to best meet the specific needs of its students.

4. Resources and workshops for teachers and parents

Parents are invited to workshops designed to instil confidence in matters surrounding their children's learning. The workshops focus on areas identified as needing clearer explanations, such as 'how to ask teachers the hard questions', 'how to use school diaries' and 'how to interpret school reports'. All resources and messaging are consistently reinforced throughout workshops, parent evenings and So'otaga meetings.

Strong parent-school partnerships have given Theobald and Lefaoseu the ability to react and respond to these identified needs. If the Family So'otaga was seen as a programme additional to the curriculum and running of the school, its ability to evolve to suit changing needs would be restricted, if not impossible.

In addition, the school worked with teachers to create their own personal development module to amplify the aims of So'otaga, as part of their continuing education.

5. Additional layer of support

Much of the work Tengaru does, both in the meetings and in the follow-up correspondence, falls outside the scope of traditional 'education'. The fundamental understanding of So'otaga is the knowledge that educators cannot start to teach until they know the students are ready to learn.

As such, Tengaru, Theobald and Lefaoseu have extended the scope of So'otaga. Tengaru has attended parent-teacher meetings for college-age older siblings having trouble academically, to assist the family with support and advocacy; Theobald has sourced emergency funds for families with no power or food, (and Tengaru followed up with budgeting referrals); Lefaoseu has created 'asking the hard questions' resources for parents unsure of the best questions to ask teachers; and she has arranged transport to and from school for students struggling with attendance.

The additional support through the So'otaga programme is not social work. The facilitators are more like coaches on a team than first aid workers. This additional work and holistic approach is an acknowledgement of how the emotional and physical wellbeing of a child, alongside their academic achievements, contributes to their success. This adaptive nature of So'otaga is the initiative's biggest success and what makes it difficult to define and quantify.

6. So'otaga Careers Expo and career trips

When identifying learning barriers, it became clear that some students had limited diversity in their employment role models.



The Phenomenal monster 'Optimum' meets Holy Family students at a So'otaga assembly.

To teach the children about the possibilities available to them, Lefaoseu launched the first annual So'otaga Careers Expo featuring career displays from more than 40 parents and current or former members of the community. Professions represented ranged from builders and fire fighters to architects and surgeons and 80% of the role models had Māori or Pasifika heritages.

Teaching the children about this diverse range of future careers boosts their excitement, energy and motivation. Following the expo, Lefaoseu and Theobald now take students on careers trips every fortnight.

7. The Phenomenals

Lefaoseu and Theobald identified the need to focus on building character traits such as grit, striving for excellence and self-belief. The Family So'otaga created a series of Mr Men-style 'monsters', each bearing a key characteristic of a growth mindset.

A student drew the series of monsters that were animated by a graphic artist, and two have subsequently been made into life size mascots. The monsters

(collectively called The Phenomenals each has a name and a particular trait. Current monsters are Grit, ICAN, Optimum and Mafana (a Samoan word for warmth and care).



Holy Family School placed a focus on the phrase 'Believe; Achieve' as part of So'otaga during 2017, to encourage students to believe they will achieve.

Teachers have incorporated the language of 'The Phenomenals' into their teaching and students are starting to use the traits in their own imaginative play and creative projects. So'otaga has placed an emphasis on children mastering these skills at a young age, in the hope they can utilise them now and throughout their lives.

OUTCOMES

Much of So'otaga's success is not readily quantifiable. While there have certainly been academic upturns from the initiative, the social and personal strides have made the biggest positive impact on the school.

Theobald and Lefaoseu remain realistic about the reach of the programme at their school. Children are exposed to So'otaga and the growth mindset at school for just six hours a day, 40 weeks a year. Children face a huge number of other influences that can make progress difficult to sustain.

The repetitiveness of So'otaga is key to ensuring the success of the children, which is why Lefaoseu and Theobald believe So'otaga would be most effective if children were exposed to it at the start of their schooling career and had it continued right through to the end of college.

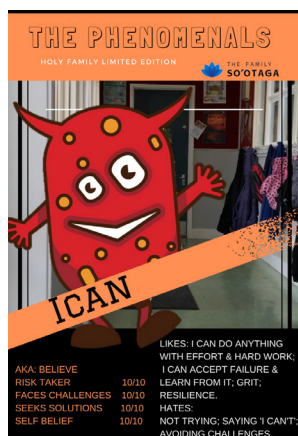
So'otaga is not a one-size-fits-all initiative, and scaling to other schools would need to reflect this nature, not just at an individual level but also for the differing needs of schools and their communities.

The initiative works because it has the support of the principal, the teachers and the parents. In order for it to work in other schools, the schools would have to embrace it as a community initiative ingrained in the ethos of the school.

Finding the right person for the programme facilitator job would be the most crucial element of scaling the initiative to reach other schools. Tengaru was formerly a teacher aide, yet the work of the facilitator is far outside the scope of a teacher aide's usual job description.

From a management point-of-view, Theobald and Lefaoseu knew they had to employ a person who would work best within the community – and that meant choosing someone who was already part of the community. The problems for future So'otaga-style programmes in other schools arise in the difficulty of regulating this system – when the best-suited facilitator is not likely to be an expert.

It is likely individual school communities would be able to identify the right person for the job, whether they are a teacher aide, a parent or a friend of the school.



The Phenomenal monster posters are placed throughout the school to remind students of their attributes.

NEXT STEPS

A complete review of the initiative, its effectiveness and what will happen next will be published in 2019.

Four lessons learnt

Lefaoeseu summarises the key insights of the programme to date:

1. Don't be prescriptive.

'We soon learnt that our approach to So'otaga needed to be less scripted. There is no set format for meetings and we tailor everything to the needs of the family in front of us. AEPs enabled an introduction to a discussion, but should not be the goal. The objective is to improve wellbeing, and that requires heart.'

2. Don't rush the process.

'It takes time to establish reciprocal relationships. Many of the parents have now become integral support-people themselves, helping the school and the wider community. The team had to learn to be flexible in time and resources to meet the specific needs.'

3. Don't try and be a social worker, be a connector.

'The development of an additional layer of care, concern, communication and connection between home and school is what goes on to enhance child/teacher relationships. The goal is to develop a trusted relationship for the benefit of the child.'

4. Be open for change.

'We learnt not to focus on the academic side alone, but also the emotional and social wellbeing of each child and family. Alongside the AEPs, the conversations we were having were equally important. Confidence is critical; when parents become confident in understanding how the education system works, we see phenomenal changes in families and the lives of their children.'



So'otaga starts before school. Fiona Leatuavao already had a relationship with student Inoke Levanatabua before he entered her class.

For complete references and to find out more, visit our website: www.mcguinnessinstitute.org

TESTIMONIALS

Parents of one child - Kiribatian

'[So'otaga has] helped us with everything and it helps support my child with her study. It is from the heart and everyone is welcoming.'

'We feel comfortable to come and talk [to the school] and I would love to be a volunteer [at the school] or teach dancing. My daughter has [achieved] higher in her reading and writing and really likes that we are part of the So'otaga. I have learnt the best way to support her learning is by being patient, listening and talking to her.'

Mother of two children - Samoan

'So'otaga has impacted our family because it has made us work together to make sure our son achieves what he wants to at school. It has hugely impacted the way we interact with each other and the way we speak to our son so he understands more in his learning. The resources have helped a lot and I thought they were perfectly suited to his learning.'

'One of the things that stood out for me as a result of So'otaga is that his father and I have become very active in his learning. Before it might have just been one parent, but with So'otaga both of us could interact with him.'

Parents of four children - Māori

'So'otaga has been really good for my family, especially having all the resources there. My child likes so many different things so to keep him focused on one thing is hard at times. With So'otaga, having a main goal to focus on and work towards was really good for him.'

'So'otaga has encouraged and empowered him to want to do more and it has helped him to be more confident, especially with speaking in front of his class. Overall, So'otaga is such a great initiative that I hope continues because not only does it benefit the children, but the families as well.'

Parents of four children - Māori

'So'otaga is such a positive thing, it's all about working together and everyone is so friendly and welcoming. Our family has really benefited from it. We found the resources particularly helpful for our five-year-old who just started school this year. They have helped him with basic words and reading.'

'a bit of a hard time with our eldest son adjusting to his first year of intermediate. We believe the help of the So'otaga meetings, discussions and goal setting have really helped to improve his attitude and change his mindset in regards to learning. This resulted in him having a great year last year, both academically and in sports.'

'We've found So'otaga has given us the confidence to be able to speak to teachers openly and freely.'



The Phenomenal monsters: ICAN, Grit, Mafana and Optimum.



The McGuinness Institute is a non-partisan think tank working towards a sustainable future, contributing strategic foresight through evidence-based research and policy analysis.
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