

## A letter to research

*By Averill Waters*



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### Abstract

Recent developments have seen a greater valuing of close inter-relationships between research and practice. This article uses a letter format, to tell an auto-ethnographic story of my experiences of a small research project, undertaken within my school community. The purpose of this project was to inform my work as a school guidance counsellor, through seeking the perspectives of parents and students from the small Tongan community that is part of our school. The project was undertaken in the course of both my employment, and my professional education in a Master of Counselling program. The letter acknowledges and witnesses to how research extended the possibilities for who I could be, both as a school guidance counsellor and as a researcher. The participants taught me about their lives; and the research taught me cultural knowledges about others, and myself, in ways that were unique in my professional life.

**Keywords:** school counselling, autoethnography, Tongan students, multi-cultural counseling, Pasifika

Dear research<sup>1</sup>,

As I began to prepare for this research project (Waters, 2008), I read Crocket (2004) who wrote of having a relationship with you. I think for me it has been a love affair. It has been passionate and all-consuming. You have challenged my ideas and opened up new ways of being. My life has been altered irrevocably by my relationship with you.

## Courtship

When we first met I didn't warm to you. You seemed to me to be a forbidding presence. I was not confident I could meet your exacting standard. Reading helped me form a closer relationship, as I began to better understand the issues. As I read, I experienced pain as you reminded me repeatedly about the ways in which dominant cultures have colonised minority cultures and left them disenfranchised (see, for example, Bishop, 2005; Bishop & Glynn, 1999; Jones, 1991; Smith, 1999; Vaioliti, 2006). You reminded me that I am well placed in the dominant culture and am, therefore, an unwitting agent of colonisation. This led me to ask questions about my own identity.

September 3 entry in diary<sup>2</sup>:

*I find it very hard to make the move from ideas I have grown up with – especially around self reliance/responsibility, independence --to the ideas and values inherent in a collective society. I guess that, in most places I go, it is Western ideas that are reinforced and idealised – while other ideas are disparaged. My struggle helps me realise how difficult it must be to inhabit both worlds [the world of a high decile Euro-centric school, and the world of Pasifika home culture].*

I recall times when I have given voice to ideas - about practices of non-dominant cultures - that I now understand to be disparaging. You have led me down difficult paths that have resulted in me having to confront the ideas I have grown up with. I was starting to understand what you were about and to respect you for forcing me to ask the hard questions.

## Making a commitment

I wonder if you remember when I made a commitment to you? I had taken on what I now understand as arrogance which led me to believe I was close to getting a real understanding of what it means to be Tongan and living in Aotearoa (New Zealand). You put me right. You have been relentless in not allowing me to develop a sense of complacency. I had thought – or hadn't thought – setting up the interviews would be straightforward. Once again you showed me that I had made some clear mistakes. As I wrote at the time:

Diary entry August 2

*Vasi<sup>3</sup> has been having difficulty contacting the Tongan parents to make a meeting time. One mother is working at two jobs, so is difficult to contact. Vasi has been unable to contact either of the other two mothers. I am wondering if I have the right to impose myself and my study on their busy lives. How middle class of me to think Vasi and I could make a time to visit together ... and that it would be simple to arrange. I think it is not just 'others' that need to understand how it is for people to experience being marginalised. I need to get out of my books and discover reality.*

Your influence took me out of my books. The difference between the *book* learning and the *face to face* learning has brought the reality of other people's lives to life in a way I have not previously experienced. If I found reading painful, the reality is even more so. Your ways of working bring so much forward. When I embarked on this project, I thought of the process in an academic sense. I didn't realise you were taking me on an emotional and thought-provoking journey. I found myself being drawn into a world I thought I knew a reasonable amount about, but now realise that thought too was touched by arrogance. Research, you made me even more aware not to mis-use you by becoming another agent of colonisation. You reminded me that being part of a school could position me in this way and that I needed to loosen my relationship with the authority the institution of the school offered me.

Learning about the realities of the lives of others sent me on a journey of re-examining my values and beliefs. This was an uncomfortable and humbling experience. The discomfort still sits with me. I thank you for that, because it helps me think more critically about thoughts and beliefs of my culture.

Then there were the interviews with the mothers and students. Do you remember how apprehensive I was when I went with Vasi to meet Anau<sup>4</sup>? I was concerned that the authority of the school might go with me. To show my appreciation for her time and knowledge, I took a bag of mandarins I picked from my tree, a personal and practical offering. You had a surprise for me:

*Diary entry August 10*

*As I left Anau gave me the most beautiful Tongan bag ... It is really beautiful. My bag of mandarins suddenly felt very inadequate. I said to Vasi I felt bad about it. She gave the giving a Tongan name, Mafana, and told me it 'means she has warmed to you.' So, while I feel undeserving, because I went to ask a favour and was given a most beautiful gift that speaks of Tonga and has been crafted with care, skill and love, I also feel privileged to know she has warmed to me. Perhaps I did leave authority at school, or somewhere else, and that is good.*

You have taught me lessons in humility. I was very humbled to receive Anau's gift. I also recall feeling humble as the mothers expressed gratitude for my interest in their daughters. I was surprised by the warmth of the interviews and realised these relationships will not be confined to the research. When I listened to, and then read, the conversations I had with the mothers and with the students, I was excited by the openness of the interviews and the amount of knowledge that was shared. You prompted me to ask questions about how it is that this knowledge had not been made available to the school. At the time this is how I replied to your questions:

*Why when there is a problem do we not go to the people directly affected and find their thoughts on how to get through it? I think it has to do with expert knowledge – and school is a place where this is alive and well. I think it helps to preserve the dominant position and continue the oppression – cages don't get rattled.*

Research, you continued to make sure I retained humility. I was beginning to form a relationship with self-satisfaction because Sela and Anau had been so open in our interviews. Then you reminded me of Vasi's role.

*Diary entry October 4 and 10*

*I find myself wondering whether the conversations I had would have been possible without Vasi's help. I think her presence and support positioned me well in terms of inviting*

*participation and the stories being told. I rode on Vasi's coat-tails, so to speak. It was her support that has given me credibility, so it is not something I have earned. It is so humbling. It was an epiphany for me to realise just how instrumental Vasi has been in helping my work gain acceptance and credibility in the Tongan community. I reviewed Fran Cahill's (2004) work. She talks about a 'broker' – someone with high status in the community who supported her research and introduced it to the participants and hence gave it credibility. I have read this several times – so why did it take so long to fully appreciate Vasi's role in my work? I think this process of research opens up new learning in quite a different way. On one level I know these things but on another it takes the research to really start to understand.*

This new awareness that you gifted me has supported me in making a commitment to you.

### **A marriage: Putting your teachings into practice**

You have taught me to offer respect; to accept difference; to refrain from judgement; and to open myself to listening and learning. Your teachings are in evidence when I meet with students and their families. I want to speak about some of these, but there are limits to my doing so. To protect members of the public, you have these rules and guidelines, particularly when research is conducted on the terms of academic institutions. For reasons of confidentiality and privacy, and the limitations of the ethical approval for this project, I offer now an *imagined* story that draws on my work as a counsellor, influenced by my research learning, to illustrate the small everyday practices that I have learned.

*I met Aroha, a mother, in the context of serious concerns expressed by members of the senior management team about Hana and Mere, her daughters. While I understood the concerns of senior management, I remembered your teachings and resisted the actions they wanted me to take. Senior teachers and I had several meetings with Aroha, all of them at school. At the first meeting, I found it difficult to engage Aroha in conversation. However, at that meeting, I offered and we agreed that I would drive her to and from her home for the meetings at school. As we travelled together, we both took opportunities to get to know each other through small conversations away from the problems that were besetting Hana and Mere and causing the difficulties at school. One day Aroha phoned me to ask some questions. We were, over time, able to establish a relationship in which there was trust and I was invited into her home as I dropped her off one day after a meeting. Through my learning from you I was conscious of the need to de-emphasise the authority the school bestowed on me and to take respect and acceptance when I met with Aroha. I became a conduit between Aroha and the school, as she became an agentic participant in finding ways forward for Hana and Mere. Meetings took on a different tone, and culture. Aroha was not positioned as a parent who alone was responsible for fitting her daughters to the school culture but she was a member of a team, all of whom were concerned to do the best for Hana and Mere. Another professional involved in the discussions acknowledged Aroha's efforts in the face of the concern. While we may not have altogether resolved the problems Aroha, Hana and Mere faced, there is for me a strong sense that, as a school, we have offered Aroha respect and that she has been able to retain her dignity. I am sincerely grateful to Aroha for allowing me to learn from her. I appreciate that I am richer through the friendship and trust we established. It was you, Research, who made this possible, through enabling me to learn something from what members of the Tongan community at our school had to teach me.*

In these imagined ways, and in other real and embodied ways, you were not content to stay a 'research project'. You wanted to put ideas into action. Sometimes I wondered whether you wanted our relationship to move faster than I was ready for. You remembered the suggestion, made by the students, that the parents would welcome a newsletter written in Tongan. At the

end of the year, a Tongan student was elected Head Girl for the following year. It seemed to me that this was a good opportunity to follow up the suggestion of a Tongan-language school newsletter. In addition to an article about Malia being elected Head Girl, there was one about Vasi and her work at the school, and another about Heimoana, who had received a significant public award earlier in the year. Each article was accompanied by photographs. Vasi wrote the stories and her aunt, Anatolia Ulakai-Cullen, to whom I owe many thanks, translated them into Tongan. The end product was eye-catching, a newsletter to take pride in.

I had a copy of the newsletter with me after school, when one of the cleaning staff came into the room and asked to see it. When he realised it was written in Tongan, he asked for a copy to keep. The deputy principal asked me to place a copy in reception for visitors to see. Your influence doesn't stop there: this newsletter has inspired talk of a similar newsletter being written in Maori and another in Samoan. A short time after the newsletter was posted home, students told me the reactions of their parents on receiving it. One mother cried when she read the newsletter. Another has plans to frame her copy. Other parents have sent copies to Tonga for family members to read. Your lessons make a real difference to people's lives. Thank you.

Did I tell you I had another meeting with Sela? There was a situation at school of considerable concern. Sela phoned and asked to see me. She was looking for support in negotiating the school system. As she talked, I remembered our interview together. I particularly recalled her saying she had not known who to contact at school. I wondered whether she would have phoned, and come to school, if you had not made the connection between us and taken interest in what she knows. I also wondered whether the scenario may have been different, if there had already been a forum in which Sela had been able to share her knowledge, when her daughter had first started school. Why did we have to wait until there was a concern to negotiate before Sela found an opening to speak?

There was more for me to learn. I had another conversation with Sela on the last day of school. She apologised for not attending the dinner I had organised a few weeks earlier. On the invitation I had asked people to let me know if they were coming, because I wanted some idea of the number to cater for. Sela and her husband did not attend because they had not replied. I experienced distress to think not replying could be interpreted as not being able to attend. This reminded me that the gap is still there and there are things that I do not see or understand in the same way as the families in this study do. The bridge between cultures, between school and home, is in need of further building. I will never be able to walk in Sela's shoes, but my hope is that I can learn more from the opportunities I have to walk alongside her. I hope to respect what she has to teach me by being willing to learn.

Although this particular research project has formally ended, I carry the commitment to respond to its learning. The *kato* (a traditional Tongan term for a woven basket) given to me by Anau companions me on this journey of commitment. Research, thank you for being a part of my life. Your influence will always be with me, and in my meetings with students, and their families.

Best wishes,  
Averill Waters.

## Notes

1. I acknowledge Linda van Durren (2002), who employed the strategy of addressing Research in her Masters thesis on bereavement and loss.

2. The The diary took the form of an on-line research discussion with another MCouns research student, Jane Harkness.
3. Vasi Jones is the Pasifika mentor at our school, who generously agreed to assist me by liaising with the Tongan community for the research project.
4. I have used pseudonyms for the names of students and parents, according to the terms of the ethical approval for this research project. After careful consultation, Vasi and her aunt are named in this paper, in acknowledgement of their contributions that made this research possible.

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