

Valuing education: my story

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I was born on Felemea, a small island in Ha'apai, Tonga. I grew up in a very poor family of four children. I was the youngest, with an elder brother and two elder sisters. Our father was third in a family of seven so he had no entitlement to any of his parents' land. However, he was interested in education from when he was young and was the most educated in the 'Ofanoa family at that time. He was a teacher and then a soldier during World War II, and received military training in New Zealand (NZ). While we were growing up he was an inspector of copra. My mother was the only daughter of a talking chief (chosen by a noble or the royal family to represent them in ceremonies) who used to captain the biggest sailing ships in Ha'apai, even into his old age. Our mother told us that, before he died, our grandfather said that if she had children in the future, he didn't want them to follow in his footsteps because sailing boats was too risky. His dream was for us to be educated in other careers.

We were raised around three fundamental values: always to know God, to study and be educated, and to love our extended families and care for each other. We were encouraged not to miss school or church services. We children started our education at a local government primary school between Felemea and 'Uiha villages. My elder brother was absent because he attended Tonga High School on Tongatapu. This was the best Tongan high school and to attend there was very competitive. My mother made many sacrifices for our education. She sent my brother to live with our uncle, a primary school teacher, who took my brother with him to his teaching posts until he passed the local government exam to Tonga High School. My brother then stayed with relatives on Tongatapu. He won a government scholarship to study medicine in Fiji, so continued to be absent overseas.

Family commitment to education was not easy. It involved interactive talks within the family, consensual agreement, proper planning and wise decisions for successful adaptation to risky situations. Rather than be separated from her other children, my mother made another sacrifice. My parents decided that my sisters and I would move with our mother from Ha'apai to Tongatapu, but our father would stay on Felemea to work. We children attended primary school in Nuku'alofa. We lived in Tongatapu while our father stayed in Felemea for many years. My parents only saw each other once a year, until the marketing of copra from Tonga ceased and our father joined us in Tongatapu. None of us have ever returned since. My elder brother qualified as a doctor in Fiji and returned to Tonga. He started to support our immediate and extended family financially, socially and morally. During this time he was the only one of us working, although he was posted to many different island district hospitals and still absent from us. Our mother died before the rest of us had a permanent job. This was a big loss for us all, but we still remember when she was in the hospital and she said that one day we will all have good jobs: 'God bless you all in your future education endeavours'.

Valuing education is not only an individual effort, it takes a family and a village to raise, educate and nurture a child. Every time students left Felemea to attend schools, there was a special education Sunday when parents and village members attended a service. Student representatives from each school gave a talk on their academic performance in the past year, and their plans to achieve success during the new year. This was always a moving session where tears of happiness, determination and commitments were shared between students and the village. Before students were paddled in a canoe to the

sailing boat waiting to take them to their different destinations, elder women approached them to say goodbye. They gave each student a beautiful garland, a handmade bottle of beautifully smelling oil and a message saying 'Goodbye, please remember to know God, study hard and care for each other until we meet again in December'.

At the end of 1963, I passed the Tonga High School entrance exam and went to secondary school there from 1964 to 1969. My sisters completed their education at Queen Salote College, and both obtained the highest government qualifications. They were sponsored by my brother to study at a technical school in Suva, Fiji, and were later in top leadership and management jobs in Tonga.

After completing high school I did not get a government scholarship, awarded to only a few top students to study overseas. I got a job as assistant technician at the telegraph and telephone department in Tonga. I expected that I would be sent overseas for technical training but after a year, the department no longer discussed any training opportunities. In 1981, I applied and was employed as health education assistant in the Ministry of Health. Now I had opportunities to further my education. That year I was sponsored by the World Health Organization (WHO) to study public health and health education at the Institute of Health Education, University of Papua New Guinea, Port Moresby. I was married in 1975 and now had two children. I was very homesick and had culture shock. This was the first time I engaged with Melanesian people and the way they dressed and prepared their food was totally new and different. I was not at all familiar with people carrying their bows and arrows, knives and sharp axes in the marketplaces and shopping areas. Many times, I was scared to move around, especially at night. However, after a month I realised that they were humble and very kind people who had a traditional welfare system where everything evolved around the tribe or clan members caring for each other.

Next, in 1982, I was offered a WHO/UNFPA scholarship to study for an Advanced Diploma in Public Health at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. When I was not met at the airport in Lagos, I had many adventures getting to Ibadan. I experienced for the first time seeing many check points with soldiers and guns in strategic points. Every time they stopped us and told me to get out, I was really scared, and my thinking went back to the peaceful roads we have in our small country, Tonga.

When we did our fieldwork for that diploma, I learned a valuable lesson. We had to go to the community and conduct a 'community diagnosis' to identify their priority needs. Our group visited our villages and conducted various community consultations. Then we decided that the community priority needs were toilets, because we never saw any toilets in the villages. We forgot that their priority needs were roads, a meeting place, water and electricity. However, we wrote our report and presented to the University. They agreed to allocate some money to build ten community

toilets in the area. We all thought that this was a model project for future students to follow. We arranged a construction company to install ten pit latrines. It took only a week and a half to complete, and we arranged a day with the community to celebrate and officially open the latrines. On that day one of the oldest men in the village called our students together. He acknowledged the completion of the project, but he said to us all 'You know young guys, this project is the worst you have ever made'. He then spins around to point to the bush and says 'God has given us the bush as our latrines. No one will use the pit latrines because our people are afraid of sorcery and magical practices. Our needs were not what you see but what we told you.'

After that I worked in Tonga until 1992 when I received a WHO/UNFPA fellowship to do my undergraduate degree in health education at the University of Canberra, Australia. I took my wife and five children with me. This was a tough decision but since the value of education was our family ethos, we continued to strive forward no matter what challenges encountered us. We struggled financially during the first year because my stipend was not enough to meet our family obligations, and it was hard for my wife to get a casual job. A Tongan church community helped us and showed us how to get extra financial resources by selling flowers on the roadside. Many times, I did my reading and assignments on the roadside under a tree while one of my daughters was selling flowers. My children continued their early education careers in Canberra: two at pre-school, one at primary and two at high school. In 1995 I returned to Tonga with a degree in public health education.

I continued working in health education. In 1998, I was awarded a Commonwealth scholarship to do postgraduate study in health promotion at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. I went alone. I enjoyed every bit of it. I made new friends locally and around European countries. It really opened my eyes to the world of public health, especially health education and promotion. I was introduced to both qualitative and quantitative research. I wished that I was there for three or more years to become fully confident with research methodologies. However, after a year I returned with a postgraduate diploma and Master of Health Promotion Sciences.

When I returned to Tonga I was promoted to the post of Senior Health Promotion Officer at the Ministry of Health. I was still eager to continue my education. In addition, although my wife had a senior job in government and had a Diploma in Accounting and Commerce through correspondence studies from technical schools in NZ and Australia, she was also motivated to study for a higher degree. We decided to migrate to NZ.

We had a family prayer meeting and suggested to our children we apply for residency in NZ to seek better education. We were unsure whether our children fully understood the idea, but they fully endorsed it. We moved to NZ in 1999. Initially our children faced many challenges such as

cultural shock, cold weather, new environment, new schools, palangi foods, traffic congestion and shops being open and people cutting their grass on Sundays.

I joined the University of Auckland as the coordinator of the community health worker training programme, funded by the Ministry of Health. In 2006 I became a Lecturer in Pacific Health, and in 2010 I was awarded my PhD after many years of part-time study. I now have a full-time appointment as Senior Lecturer in Pacific Health. I hope to reach my professorship dream before retiring.

Since we came to NZ our family have achieved our mission for education. My wife has a Bachelor of Education. My elder daughter has a Bachelor and Postgraduate Diploma in Education, and my second daughter bachelor degrees in both pharmacy and nursing. My eldest son has a Certificate in Police Training and Advanced Certificate in Disabled Care and Management, and my second son a Bachelor of Business Studies with double major in accounting and human resources. At the end of 2022, having achieved a Bachelor

of Health Sciences and a Masters in Public Health with honours, my youngest son was awarded a Doctorate in Philosophy.

Valuing education is a circle from conception to death. It never ends. We learnt that whatever successes we achieve are our family and our village, our Island, our church, our people and our communities' successes. We learnt that we stand on the shoulders of big people in the past who motivate and enable us to look forward and backward during our education journey to achieve the best. Furthermore, we learnt that the way to start is 'to quit talking and begin doing' (Martin Luther King). Valuing education involves many learning commitments and actions throughout our lives. My elder brother established the first benchmark for our family. I established the second in 2010, my youngest son the third in 2022, and my wife, and the rest of our family have also started some benchmarks. I can't wait to see our grandchildren establishing new benchmarks in the different fields of education. I hope to see what, where and how they will do so in the future.

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