

# **The NCLB Act and Education in the Pacific: A Dire Need for a Balanced Perspective—What Do We Do Now?**

**Salusalumalo S. Hunkin-Finau, Ed.D.  
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## ***A Balanced Ecosystem***

Communal lifestyle in traditional Samoa dictated land use pattern and the division of land. This traditional way of land use followed a conservationist's pattern wherein people's dwellings were close to the sea and the natural flora and fauna remained close to virgin rainforest on the mountaintops. Each segment of land had its purpose. Each part was dependent on the other. A balanced use of each segment of land was a must for sustainability and survival

One very important segment of land in Samoa requiring a balanced ecosystem for survival is the wetland or *taufusi* (pronounced tah-oo-foo-see). The *taufusi* is a plant community that exists on relatively flat land. It is often waterlogged during part of the year. *Taufusi* are a culturally, biologically and economically important segment of land that supplies food and protective control for pollution.

The demand and pressure for flat land have taken over the beauty and habitat of this traditional food supply. Increased population has required the conversion of the *taufusi* to much needed land for residential areas. The once balanced ecosystem of *taufusi* is fast becoming scarce in Samoa (Whistler, 1994).

Like the fragile ecosystem of the *taufusi*, education in Samoa has become a perplexing and an unbalanced issue for decades. The "demands and pressures" of western ideas and values have impacted the once balanced education of Pacific Island children.

## ***Western Practices in Pacific Education System***

Several issues of western education have pressured the stark imbalance of Pacific Island education. In the writer's opinion, the expediency to comply with western mandates to obtain much needed funding, and the absence of serious local efforts to infuse the indigenous best practices for teaching and learning with western best practices have caused an imbalance in the education systems in our communities. However, when examined, the imbalanced education system calls for an urgent need to review policies which have been bought into without due consideration by well-intended leaders. A Critical review of these policies would reveal a dire need for an immediate integration of the indigenous way of teaching and learning to provide a balanced perspective for Pacific Education.

Although well intended and perhaps, effective for certain student populations in the United States, the implementation of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, and other similar types of federal mandates for the Pacific have attempted to implement policies and practices under certain assumptions. It is the writer's opinion that these assumptions have camouflaged the realities of educating non-English speaking students of the Pacific in an English-only school system. These

assumptions are:

- 1) Pacific Island students enter school equipped with the pre-requisite social and academic English language skills necessary to function at grade level and for all subject areas.
- 2) Pacific Island teachers are near native English speaking models and are well trained in implementing the much needed English development programs with minimal support.
- 3) The society or communities in which western schools operate in the Pacific are western thinking and English speaking communities.

First and most prevalent, is the assumption that Pacific Island students come to school equipped with the prerequisite- the social and academic English language skills necessary to function at grade level and for all subject areas. In reality, reading comprehension scores depict a different story. Samoan students do poorly academically. As Fua (2005) reports, “the achievement gap between American Samoa students and their stateside counterparts continue to widen. Ninety-five percent (95%) of local 4th graders lack the basic math skills in 2000. ”

The imbalance in the development of the indigenous language in contrast to the pressures and demands to have all Pacific Island students quickly transition into English as early and as quickly as possible have taken their toll over decades (Hunkin-Finau, 2006) The English-only approach is a disregard for research which has shown strong evidence on how best to teach literacy from the home to the school(ref.)\*\* It is not surprising that elementary school children score well below the national average in reading comprehension (DOE, year)\*\*

It is apparent that NCLB, and other similar mandates, reflect an unawareness of the realities of the many positive benefits of bilingualism, diversity and multicultural education. Besides this unawareness on the part of the NCLB mandate, it is the writer’s opinion, that perhaps local education systems are equally responsible for the imbalance of Pacific education as well. Perhaps, local education systems may not be informed of the most current research of best practices nor realize the importance of contextualizing these practices which closely align with Pacific Island education needs. In addition, perhaps, local education systems may not have communicated their true educational needs to the funding sources and or may not have had local expertise to provide serious efforts to develop contextualized programs.

For example, for over 3 decades, the American Samoa Department of Education mandated an English-only language policy in the belief that this policy will produce literate bilingual students. Despite the poor scores on national academic assessments in English, Math and Science annually, local education system continued promulgating an English-only system. It has been slow in addressing this critical issue because of the economic and employment pressures for an English-only curriculum from abroad.

The belief that an English-only and western curriculum would be most beneficial for Samoan children to function in a global world is a misconception. Several decades of implementing a predominance of an English-only, western curriculum has proven ineffective. It has been a frustrating attempt to say the least. Aside from the evidence that American Samoa student’s school grossly below grade level, too few have become truly proficient in neither English language nor the Samoan language upon graduating from high school and junior college in the Territory. The percentage of local students passing the ASVAB, TOFEL, SAT and other college

bound indicators have been discouraging to students, their parents and the community. Most unfortunate, and as a result of the poor status of the Samoan Language program in the local school curriculum, the level of Samoan language proficiency of Samoan born students, have grossly declined each passing year. Students in our school system are not proficient in English and, most sadly, they are not proficient in their own native language.

Secondly, the assumption that Pacific Island teachers are near native English speaking models and enter the school system well trained to implement a western curriculum with minimal training has been a continual problem over the decades. More often than not, teachers themselves are English language learners. Of the 90% of Samoan teachers in the school system, only about 40% have completed their undergraduate or graduate degrees through the unbalanced education system discussed in this paper. Too few teachers are qualified and certified to really make a significant impact on student learning. Too many teachers require remedial English courses in reading and writing. Too many teachers have difficulty reading, writing, and teaching in our native language.

The teacher training programs offered for ELL teachers, who ultimately teach ELL students, have not addressed the critical issue of language of instruction and the need to contextualize western practices. The local teacher-training program does not capitalize on the traditional and indigenous strengths of the students and their community. In addition, the teacher training programs have not and do not address the need for teachers to learn how to contextualize western practices for classroom use.

Instead, the local teacher training curriculum advocates English-only teaching and learning and western research-based practices without regard for local language, values and culture. Like the ELL students, Samoan teachers struggle to make sense of what they have learned and then try to transmit what they think they know to students in a meaningful way.

Thirdly, the assumption that the home environment from which the Pacific Island students come from are similar to and reflect the same conditions, values and practices of middle class homes in the US are contrary to the reality. There are vast differences between the middle class home environment of students in the US, in contrast to homes of Pacific Island students. The home life of Samoan students is centered around the extended family, the village and the church. The indigenous language, traditional practices and social expectations revolve around these three institutions. English is rarely spoken at home, nor in the church and most certainly not in the village. Traditional roles, ranks and responsibilities handed down from generation are still practiced daily in Samoa. The home environment of students in Samoa is completely separate and divorced from the schools. When compared to the home environment of middle class English speaking students in the western world, the home-school connection on US mainland communities is very much a part of the larger community. For most, the school and the community speak the same language and therefore practice the same values and ideals. Therefore, is the epicenter of the education of middle class American students and are intertwined with the community.

In light of the assumptions I have attempted to describe, and the fact that Pacific Island education systems have bought into NCLB and NCLB like mandates without due consideration for

contextualizing educational practices, and compounded by the stark realities of education in the Pacific, what should local education systems and communities do now to turn the tide in their favor? How can they re-establish a balanced education system to make education more meaningful, beneficial and harmonious for our students?

### *What do we do now?*

In a recent presentation at the 2007 Pacific Education Conference by Ali Glasglow of Victoria University, Wellington, New Zealand, Glasglow reiterated Smith's (1999) belief that,

In drawing upon indigenous theoretical framework, it would seem ...that educational policy development needs to occur within a climate that is conducive to indigenous knowledge and "ways of being" to reframe an education system that has for centuries been driven by Western paradigm.

In other words, educational policies need to be developed and designed in an atmosphere which capitalizes, acknowledges and recognizes the importance of indigenous culture; that a balanced education system can be attained if the western policies were redeveloped yielding from a one-sided western perspective to a perspective which reflects an integration of the indigenous 'ways of being.'

Cass (2008), a specialist in the PRIDE project in the Pacific under the auspices of the University of the South Pacific, stated that projects designed to integrate local cultures with global ideas seem to be very effective. She says,

The design of the project emphasizes the need...to build its educational plans on a strong foundation of local cultures and languages...the notion of synchronizing the best of the local with the best ideas and approaches of the global world is embedded at the heart of the project." This is about designing projects with a strong foundation of local cultures.

Following the belief that education in the Pacific for Pacific children must be planned on a strong foundation of indigenous culture and language, I recommend the following for more effective education systems in our Pacific communities:

#### ***1. Dual Language Instruction Policy***

To reverse this fragile and imbalanced education situation in our territory, it is the writer's belief that perhaps the first and most critical move to make is to address the long standing and crucial issue of the imbalanced language of instruction policy. The current language of instruction policy weighs heavily on the teaching of English, therefore funding, instructional materials, and manpower are made available for English language teaching. On the other hand, the native language has been almost totally neglected because of the demands on English-only language mandate. Samoan language teaching by ill prepared staff, scarcity of materials, the lack of funding, and a second rate status to the other curriculum content areas must change immediately. The importance of Samoan language literacy must be a community commitment if literacy in both languages is the aim of the Territory. To bring about a balanced education system, a dual

language of instruction policy must be instituted immediately.

Although historically Samoans themselves have had a peripheral involvement in pressuring English as the language of instruction, I believe, Samoans have come of age in reversing the 'white man's burden' to make their community a more 'cultured' and civilized 'race' by the English-only policy (Baldauf, 1990). Samoan education system and the general education community in the Pacific must step up to the plate-they must be involved and engaged in planning, designing, implementing and sustaining a truly dual language of instruction policy..

Despite the current predominance of English, and some language experts have said that this is irreversible, because of economic and employment pressures, local attitude and willingness must change now. The community must make every effort to ensure that the indigenous language be taught in the school system. It is a must. If Samoans are to be truly educated, the Samoan community must be literate in their native language and culture first. Heine (2005) said,

The focus on creating ownership and making education an integral part of families and communities cannot be over looked in Pacific communities. That ownership starts with...building on the knowledge learners bring from home, honoring languages they bring to the school, and connecting learning to contexts familiar to them.

Failure to change the language of instruction policy now, will not only heighten the current erosion of the native language, but this failure will be the spear which will deliver the death blow to the values, traditions, culture and identity of the unique community of the Samoan people on this planet.

For teaching to be meaningful to students who do not speak English as a native language, local education system must take into consideration the patterns of learning and teaching which are harmonious with indigenous ways. It should follow conservationists perspective-aligned closely with the indigenous learning which allows for natural growth and development of the child from an internal direction towards external demands or from the extended family unit to the village.

## ***2. Contextualized Learning Strategies***

The fact that over 90% of the student population speaks Samoan as a first language dictates that teaching strategies must be contextualized. What does it mean to contextualize teaching strategies? How do you contextualize teaching strategies? Where do we start?

Emery Wenty (2008), the Director of Education in Palau, had this to say:

How do you begin to improve literacy and numeracy...? Start with what you know... We take the best out of America, Australia and New Zealand models and integrate them into our own unique situations and produce our own models, taking into account the very unique needs of our people and our societies?

Contextualize means to integrate, to infuse and to localize strategies so that they are based on

indigenous culture, traditions, practices which have worked for the Pacific communities. Contextualized strategies are teaching strategies that have been localized so that teaching is relevant for Pacific children. Contextualized strategies such as group work, hands-on modeling, and working with elders are some examples of using local practices in teaching.

The following are a few examples of how Samoan children are traditionally taught within the confines of their extended family, and village and how these traditional teaching and learning practices can be utilized in the classroom.

- *Teaching-Learning Communities(TLC)*

Samoan society is a communal society by nature. Cultural activities are teaching and learning activities which focus on the extended family, maintaining kinship and working together as groups. This traditional concept of working in groups in the Samoan culture can be used in the classroom. The teacher should use more cooperative group and interactive task activities which lend themselves to communal activities of the student's in their home life. The group activities provide opportunities for social and academic interaction developing language skills and extending knowledge of the topics of the lesson. Group activities allow for non-threatening learning, very much like traditional learning done in groups in the village. The teacher also learns in her/his TLC with colleagues in the same grade level, building or content area. The sharing, like communal living, strengthens knowledge, skills and teaching in the classroom.

In addition, group activities can extend to the community wherein the teachers must 'scan' the community for timely community activities, events and celebrations which can be used to teach parallel ideas and concepts scheduled by the curriculum. The TLC must include traditional people of the village as resources—the schools should be more villages based, and opened for a sharing within and without the walls of the classroom.

- *Observe-Demonstrate Learning Model*

Educating the young in the Samoan culture begins at a tender age. The parents, grandparents or the caregiver, who is usually a younger sister or cousin, models everything for the child to imitate. As children grow up in the family and in the Village, the teaching-learning modeling is intensified to transmit knowledge and skills for fishing, weaving, healing and birthing to name a few. Essentially, the learner is expected to **observe** while the artist or teacher demonstrates or models how something is made or done. Then the observer or student is asked to **demonstrate** what he understands or knows from the first observation. As the modeling-observing-demonstration process continuous, conversation and questioning develops between the teacher and learner until the knowledge and skills have been successfully learned.

Samoans learn best using the Observe-Demonstrate learning model. It is non-threatening. Reliance on the printed word to learn will be balanced with the opportunity to demonstrate what has been learned. Modeling on the part of the teacher will be extremely important while observing and demonstrating on the part of the student will be equally important.

- *Visuals*

The Samoan culture is an oral culture. Printed Samoan words connect symbols to mental images already developed from experiences or have direct application to local surroundings. When printed English words are read, it is difficult for Samoan students to make the connection between the printed word and a mental image when students lack the experience or knowledge of the English word. For example, the English or French word ‘escargot’—the Samoan student cannot conjure up mental image of ‘escargot’ because of the lack of experience and knowledge of ‘escargot’. With a picture or a sampling of ‘escargot’, learning connections can be made between the printed word and the image or the real thing.

The use of a variety of visuals would be a positive asset in the classroom in Samoa. The teacher must make it a point to use visuals, graphic organizers, charts, tables, and other imageries to make greater connection between the printed word and mental images and thereby increase comprehension and learning. Visuals in this case should not be limited to what the teacher gathers but equally important are the visuals the students themselves create to illustrate their perceptions of the concepts and ideas. Student drawings and other art work displayed in the classroom are important learning tools.

- *School/Community-based Projects*

In traditional Samoa, one’s worth is measured by the utility of his/her finished product. The finished product reflects years of knowledge, skills and experience. The skill of a fine mat weaver is measured by the beauty, the luster and the size of the fine mats produced. A house builder’s reputation would precede his presence because villagers would share stories of the strength and beauty of his fine work. The finished product would be useful to the family and the community as a whole in cultural ceremonies and in daily living.

Varghese and Stritikus(2002) stated that “culturally responsive instruction...creating conditions in the classrooms and schools that integrate students’ needs and culture; and critical pedagogy, having students raise questions about their own immediate conditions and identify ways to transform these conditions.”

In today’s classrooms, students should be able to ‘show and produce’ projects which focus on school and community issues such as environment, infrastructure, and other current issues in their schools and communities... Although research or book learning must be a part of school-community based project, it should also have a component where students would have to connect, work and learn from community leaders, parents and resource people. Not only will students have an end product that would address issues in the school and in the community but student learning would be relevant and extended beyond the classroom.

## SUMMARY

Like the fragile ecosystem of the *taufusi*, education in Samoa has become a perplexing and an

unbalanced issue for decades. The “demands and pressures” of western ideas and values have impacted the once balanced education of Pacific Island children. Although well intended and perhaps, effective for certain student populations in the United States, the implementation of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, and other similar types of federal mandates for the Pacific have attempted to implement policies and practices under certain assumptions. It is the writer’s opinion that these assumptions have camouflaged the realities of educating non-English speaking students of the Pacific in an English-only school system. These assumptions follow.

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For teaching to be meaningful to students who do not speak English as a native language, local education systems must take into consideration teaching and learning patterns which are harmonious with indigenous ways. It should follow conservationist's perspective-aligned closely with the indigenous learning which allows for natural growth and development of the child from an internal direction towards external demands or from the extended family unit to the village. To bring about a balanced education system, a dual language of instruction policy must be instituted immediately. The fact that over 90% of the student population speaks Samoan as a first language dictates that teaching strategies must be contextualized. To contextualize means to integrate, to infuse, and to localize strategies so that they are based on indigenous culture, traditions, and practices that have worked for the Pacific communities. Contextualized strategies are teaching strategies that have been localized so that teaching is relevant for Pacific children.

The percentage of local students passing the ASVAB, TOFEL, SAT and other college bound indicators have been discouraging to students, their parents, and the community. Most unfortunate, and as a result of the poor status of the Samoan Language program in the local school curriculum, the level of Samoan language proficiency of Samoan born students, has grossly declined each passing year. Students graduate from our school system and they are not proficient in English, but more shockingly, they are not proficient in their own native language. Failure to change the language of instruction policy now, will not only heighten the current erosion of the native language, but this failure will be the spear which will not only deliver the death blow to the values, traditions, culture and identity of the unique community of the Samoan people, but of all indigenous peoples on this planet.

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