

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

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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 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 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 my 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 ways 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 (U.S), the implementation of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB), and other similar types of federal mandates for the Pacific, has resulted in the installation of policies and practices that are designed for a context other than that of American Samoa. 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 prerequisite 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 in western academics. 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” (p. 6).

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 (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004; Short, & Fitzsimmons, 2007; Snow, Met & Genesse, 1989; Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages [TESOL], 2006). It is not surprising that elementary school children score well below the national average in reading comprehension (ASDOE, 2007).

NCLB and other similar mandates reflect an unawareness of

the many positive benefits of bilingualism, diversity, and multicultural education. Prior to the NCLB legislation in 2002, the United States Department of Education (U.S. ED) provided supportive bilingualism under Title VII of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965* (ESEA). The reauthorization of the *Bilingual Education Act of 1968* to NCLB removed the focus of supportive bilingualism to mandating a focus on learning (in) English. In my opinion, the removal of supportive bilingualism from federal mandates has driven the efforts of previous education reforms backward from recognizing and utilizing the child’s primary language in his education process. In addition to the NCLB mandate, perhaps local education systems are equally responsible for the imbalance of Pacific education. Perhaps local education systems may not be informed of the most current research on best education 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 or may not have had local expertise to provide serious efforts to develop contextualized programs.

For example, for over three decades, the American Samoa Department of Education (ASDOE) mandated an English-only language policy in the belief that this policy would produce literate bilingual students. Despite the poor scores on annual national achievement assessments in English, math, and science, the local education system has continued to promulgate an English-only system. It has been slow in addressing this critical issue because of the perceived economic and employment benefits from an English-only curriculum both locally and 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 predominantly English-only western curriculum has proven ineffective. It has been a frustrating attempt, to say the least. Aside from the evidence that American Samoa students score grossly below grade level, too few have become truly proficient in either the English language or the Samoan language, upon graduating from high school and junior college in the Territory. The low percentage of local students passing the ASVAB, TOFEL, SAT, or other college bound indicators has 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 in our school system are not proficient in English and, more 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 need for additional 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 English language learner (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 programs do 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, or culture. Like the ELL students, Samoan teachers struggle to make sense of what they have learned and then try to teach 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 is similar to and reflects the same conditions, values, and practices of middle class homes in the U.S. is contrary to reality. 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 or in church, and most certainly not in the village. Traditional roles, ranks, and responsibilities handed down through the generations are still practiced daily in Samoa. The home environment of students in Samoa is completely separate from the schools. When compared to the home environment of middle class English speaking students in the western world, the home-school connection in the continental U.S. 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 assumed that NCLB and similar education mandates are universally good for all children and are a good fit or are aligned with local Pacific teaching and learning contexts, what should local education systems and communities do now to turn the tide in their favor? How can they reestablish a balanced education system to make education more meaningful, beneficial, and harmonious for our students?

### **What Do We Do Now?**

In a 2007 presentation at a conference in the Pacific by Ali Glasgow of Victory University, Wellington, New Zealand, Glasgow 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 that capitalizes, acknowledges, and recognizes the importance of indigenous culture, and that a balanced education system can be attained if the western

policies were redeveloped yielding from a one-sided western perspective to a perspective that reflects an integration of the indigenous “ways of being.”

Cass (2008), a specialist in the Pacific Regional Initiatives for the Delivery of basic Education (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 emphasis 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 about designing projects with a strong foundation of local cultures. (p.22)

Following the belief that education in the Pacific for Pacific children must be based 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 my 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 had, the native language has

been almost totally neglected because of the demands of the 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). The 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 predominance is irreversible because of economic and employment pressures—the local attitude towards valuing our local language and the culture it embeds, 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, p.4) 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 will also be the spear that 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. Teaching should follow a conservationist perspective and be aligned closely with indigenous learning, allowing 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, p.20), 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 or 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. Group work, hands-on modeling, and working with elders are some examples of contextualized strategies, or using local practices in teaching.

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 that 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 activities that lend themselves to communal activities by students in their homes. The group activities provide opportunities for social and academic interaction, which develops language skills and

extends knowledge of the topics of the classroom lesson. Group activities allow for nonthreatening learning, very much like traditional learning done in groups in the village. The teacher also learns in his or her 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. The TLC must include traditional people of the village as resources—the schools should be more village-based and open for sharing within and outside the walls of the classroom.

- *Observe-Demonstrate Learning Model (ODL)*

Educating the young in the Samoan culture begins at a tender age. The parents; grandparents; or 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, such as fishing, weaving, healing, and birthing. 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 or she understands or knows from the first observation. As the modeling-observing-demonstrating process continuous, conversation and questioning develops between the teacher and learner, until the knowledge and skills have been successfully transferred.

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

- *Visual Literacy*

The Samoan culture is an oral culture. Knowledge and skills were transmitted from generation to generation by word of mouth. Included in the oral transmission of knowledge and skills was the transmission of the skill of visually “reading” ones environment. In traditional Samoa, many teaching and learning situations transpired through visual reading of the environment and the local surroundings. For example, skilled fishermen taught novices how to visually recognize and read the ocean, the weather, and/or the particular stages of plants as indications of the best time to fish for particular schools of fish. Skilled navigators learned and taught how to visually read the stars, the currents, and the Earth’s rotation to navigate from Samoa to other Pacific islands. Even children were taught to visually read the important characteristics of certain leaves, plants, and fruits for medicinal use.

Today, printed Samoan connects symbols to mental images already developed from experiences within the 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, since students lack the experience or knowledge

of the English word. For example, the English or French word *escargot*—the Samoan student cannot conjure up a 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 visual literacy in the classroom in Samoa would most certainly extend knowledge, especially for children not yet able to read. The teacher must make it a point to use images, graphic organizers, charts, tables, and other visuals to help students make connections between the printed word and mental images, and thereby increase comprehension and learning. Visual literacy support should not be limited to what the teacher gathers; 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 and communication tools.

- *School/Community-Based Projects*

In traditional Samoa, one’s worth is measured by the utility of his or her finished product. The finished product reflects knowledge, skill, and years of 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 him 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 life.

Varghese and Stritikus (2002, p.74) 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 that focus on school and community issues, such as the environment, infrastructure, and other current issues in their schools and communities. In addition to research or book learning, school-community-based projects should also include students having to connect with, work with, and learn from community leaders, parents, and resource people. Not only would students have an end product that would address issues in the school or in the community, but student learning would be relevant and extend beyond the classroom.

## **SUMMARY**

Education in Samoa, like the easily broken taufusi, continues to exist in this perplexing and unbalanced situation. The demands and pressures of western ideas and values have impacted the once balanced education of Pacific island children. The assumptions under which NCLB initiatives have been implemented are not valid for our context. Our education system, guided by such initiatives, is failing our children and

their communities.

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 that are harmonious with local or indigenous ways. Teaching should follow a conservationist perspective and be aligned closely with indigenous learning, allowing for natural growth and development of the child from the extended family unit to the village.

Finally, to bring about a balanced education system, a dual language of instruction policy must be instituted immediately. Failure to change the language of instruction policy now will not only heighten the current erosion of the native language, but will also be the spear that will deliver the death blow to the values, traditions, culture, and identity of not only the unique community of the Samoan people, but also of all indigenous peoples on this planet.

## **About the author**

As PREL’s Specialist for English Language Proficiency (ELP) Assessment in American Samoa, my work focuses on providing assistance to the ASDOE in its effort to plan, develop, and review valid and appropriate English language assessments, which will be used to assess English language proficiency levels of students grades K–12. This gives me an opportunity to put my beliefs into practice. Although in English, test items are contextualized in ways that make them relevant and meaningful to the Samoan students who respond to them. In my 30+ years working in the education system of American Samoa from the classroom up provide me my background in and experience with dual language

environments. In addition, I have extensive training and experience in the area of culturally responsive practices in curriculum and instruction.

While employed by the ASDOE, I was the Program Director for the Language and Literacy Unit in the Office of Curriculum, Instruction and Accountability. In concert with the English and Samoan language coordinators and specialist, we developed the Samoan Language Standards for grades K–12, including teacher resource books of stories, legends, songs, and poems.

I graduated in 1986 with a doctoral degree in education from the University of Hawaii–Manoa and have since worked in American Samoa.

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