

# Beliefs and Practices of Samoan Teachers: From BEd Cohort Program to Master's Degree

*by William L. Greene, Siamaua Ropeti, Lisa Vaivao Ino,  
Denise Ah-Sue, and Faleula Aoelua Sappa*

Four and a half years have passed since the following teachers from Cohort VI in American Sāmoa graduated from the University of Hawai'i with bachelor of education degrees and with teaching licenses from the state of Hawai'i. This article highlights changes and developments in the beliefs and practices of four teachers from Cohort VI who, in the midst of full time teaching, are now taking graduate courses in pursuit of master's degrees offered by the University of Hawai'i in American Sāmoa. Siamaua Ropeti, Lisa Vaivao Ino, Denise Ah Sue, and Faleula Sappa wrote reflections about their personal development as teachers based on the following prompts: (1) What were your early, pre-cohort, beliefs about teaching and learning? (2) What are your current beliefs or philosophy about teaching and how does that look in your classroom practice? (3) Describe some of the influences that have shaped your current approach to teaching. Their reflections and insights are included below. The article concludes with an analysis of how the voices of these teachers add to the literature on teacher preparation and the development of new teachers.

## Four Teachers Siamaua Ropeti

When I started teaching eight years ago in the private sector, I thought I knew everything there was to know about teaching. I could read, write, and even speak English well. I thought that all it took to teach was to pass information on to students and they would immediately grasp the idea or concept the teacher wanted them to learn. After that first year of teaching, I realized the task was not as easy as it seemed. It frustrated me that my remedial students were still remedial, and many of them did not possess the interest or enthusiasm to learn. I used to blame them for their failure. I told parents that because their children didn't want to learn, they kept failing in my class and therefore needed to repeat the same class the following year. I always had a lot of excuses; none of those excuses had to do with me, the teacher. I didn't see myself as the one responsible for the daily learning that goes on in the classroom. I was the "giver of knowledge," and every student should show me courtesy.

I had a variety of students in my classroom every year. When they left my classroom, the smart ones remained smart and the remedial ones remained remedial. I told them that if they didn't do their work and their parents didn't show interest, they'd very likely remain as they were at the beginning of the year. I never saw myself as the one who

should play a huge role in the classroom. I was always right and the students were always wrong. I thought like this because I was older and I was the teacher. I grew up going to school where teachers were always yelling at students. I was yelled at every day of the week for such small things as breaking a crayon, for not doing my hair correctly, or for going to the bathroom too often. I got so scared sometimes that I wouldn't dare open my mouth to answer the teacher when he or she asked a question. I would rather play dumb than risk being yelled at if I said the wrong thing.

When I became a teacher, I started to do the same things to my students. I decided to join the UH cohort program three years later and my philosophy, ideas, and concepts completely changed. Being a teacher is a gift, and like all gifts, you need to work on it in order to perfect it. Teachers are not "better" than their students. If they were, students would have a hard time connecting and building relationships with teachers. Teachers must always be sensitive to students' needs because they all come from different cultural backgrounds. Every child in the classroom is different, and therefore every teacher must use a variety of instructional techniques to accommodate these fragile and sensitive individuals. Students must feel safe and welcome in the classroom. They should feel as though they belong in an inviting environment established by the teacher because that is where they will stay for the duration of their learning experience. When students are comfortable, they learn well.

Students must always be given the chance to express themselves. Teachers don't know everything; most teachers learn a lot more from their students than they might expect. It is crucial that teachers try to see things from the student point of view. They need to be assertive and show flexibility in the classroom. Teachers must always consider making learning practical by using lots of hands-on activities. Students tend to misbehave when they're bored or left with nothing to do. Teachers should always encourage students to work cooperatively. We live in a world that requires people to work together. It is essential, therefore, that students learn this skill at a young age.

My experience in the UH master's program has caused me to rethink what I learned in the undergraduate cohort. This rethinking has a lot to do with keeping in mind the characteristic of quality in teaching. After spending a lot of time learning about strategies and methods of helping students, it is extremely difficult to go back to the old, traditional way of teaching. For example, when I have students

read a piece of literature, I instinctively think of using reading strategies I learned in the cohort program that develop comprehension—ones that are fun, interesting, and make meaningful connections to real life situations. However, there are times that I feel tired, or stressed out. I know that I can always have students read the story and answer questions at the end of the chapter, but knowing what I've been trained and taught to do, my conscience keeps bothering me if I don't do the best I can for them. A small voice seems to say, "So what is the purpose of learning so much from the cohort if you're not implementing it in your classroom?" The masters program functions like that small voice that compels me to rethink what I'm doing and to remember what I learned in the cohort program—to start acting like a professional again.

After taking classes with off-island professors during my cohort experience, I saw that there was something completely different in the way the class was conducted. The instructors were friendly and teaching was delivered in a way that made us understand the content. There were plenty of opportunities for practice and lots of examples. Learning was fun, and best of all, students were encouraged to voice their opinions, and that made me feel very important. I no longer feel ashamed or scared when exchanging opinions in the classroom. I'm confident that I won't be penalized when voicing my views. I credit this to all the teachers that have helped me believe in myself.

I am in my ninth year of teaching this school year. Every new school year brings excitement. I anticipate meeting and getting to know each student in my class. When I come to the end of each school year, I am always filled with sadness because I will be saying good-bye to my students. I have had many chance encounters with former students. They come up to me and say "hi" or thank me for being their teacher. There is no greater feeling in the world than to be appreciated by your students.

In conclusion, I believe that teachers should be professionals in every aspect of their work—including the way they look, act, speak, and conduct lessons. I no longer see myself as the "giver of knowledge." Rather, I see myself as a "facilitator of learning." I try to make learning fun and interesting in my classroom because every one of my students is important. My beliefs as a teacher are always changing because times change and people change. One change I will never make, however, is to go back to my old ways of teaching. I am best remembered by many of my students for my Bible stories and my humor in the classroom. But more importantly, I hope to be remembered by my students as simply being a good teacher.

Lisa Vaivao Ino

Living on a tiny, isolated island with limited opportunities can either leave a person without hope of renewal or lead

them to pursue new goals. Picture yourself attending college with a dream of owning your own business or joining an expedition to some far away place. Think of becoming an astronaut or an oceanographer. Unaccountably, you find yourself on a career path you never thought you would take. A year later, you became a teacher. At the age of twenty-two, I became the thing I had least expected to become. The journey of my career began in early August of 1999. The idea of becoming an educator at that time was something I had never considered because my interests lay in a different direction. However, I became a teacher to make my mother proud, and it was the only job available at the time here in American Samoa.

I recall back in eighth grade when my teacher asked what it was that I wanted to be when I grew up. At that time, being a teacher was the best job there ever was. I had a perfect role model—my mother. She was a sixth grade teacher. I told my eighth grade teacher, straight up, that I wanted to be a teacher when I grew up. He said something that I would never forget. It was harsh and painful. "You'll never be a teacher with that slow, uneducated brain of yours." I felt like all my dreams had been scattered and had flowed down a thousand mile tunnel to a place where I could never reach them again. I went to high school with no goals or dreams. I attended high school because I needed to get a high school diploma. I was unsure what I wanted to be and where I would head to next. My dream had been completely destroyed with my eighth grade teacher's cruel response.

My eighth grade teacher had changed my mind and my goals in an instant. I looked elsewhere for another interest. It was my mother's love and everlasting support that got me into college. She had convinced me that once I got a college degree, life would be easier for me. I got into college still unsure that I might be wasting my parents' money. Because I was born in a foreign land, I was not eligible for financial support. Work-study wasn't an option for me because I was needed at home.

At a very young age, I became a mother to my family. As the eldest of my family, it was my duty to raise my younger brothers and sisters. Because my mother was a teacher and my father worked at an oil company, they were hardly ever at home. Mom stayed at school late to grade papers, plan for the next day, and attend workshops while Dad had to attend business meetings and complete paper work. So, I was the one who nourished and nurtured my younger siblings, took care of them, and made sure their needs were met.

In college I was required to have a major. I believed that most of the successful people in this world were business people who owned their own business and were their own bosses. This, I felt, was something that would result in a more pleasant and a successful life for me. With that in mind, I double majored in business management and accounting. I was confident that I was going to be the best Samoan

businesswoman on the island. I graduated and worked at a family bakery for about a year before I came to realize that things weren't going exactly as I had anticipated. Managing a business was a totally unfamiliar world. I recalled my earlier goals in life. I wanted adventure. Several people, my mother in particular, convinced me that I could have all the adventure I wanted if I became a teacher. The Department of Education had a desperate need for teachers, so I signed on.

My mother and her passion for the profession had prepared me for my first year as a teacher. My whole family, including my younger siblings had joined in with my parents to help me set up my classroom for the very first time. Throughout my first year, I had various downfalls. I tended to over-react at times and placed the focus of attention on me instead of on the students. Management was straight-forward: "You do what I tell you, or else." I wasn't educated on how to control the students. It all seemed very easy to blame them for anything that went wrong. "They're not disciplined." "They never do what I tell them." "They never seem to keep quiet." I employed several excuses to defend myself. I was fortunate however to have someone who could show me how and what I needed to do. The "why" part was left to me. It wasn't until after the first semester of my second year as a teacher that I was accepted into the University of Hawai'i cohort program. It was in this program that I learned to become a professional.

The cohort program taught me to believe in my students, my career, and myself. I learned from my second graders that being a teacher can and will take me along on that adventure I had longed for. I learned to love teaching. I learned to believe that children should be taught in a way that developed their natural desire, curiosity, and hunger for knowledge. Children should learn in classrooms where they are nurtured and loved by their teachers. Teachers and students can thrive together in an environment filled with talk. I learned to believe that the classroom should be an inviting and enriching place where students are motivated with a desire to learn. Now, before each lesson I think about how I can make learning relevant to my students' lives. The physical environment and daily routine should encourage children to actively participate in and take responsibility for their own learning.

I feel that teaching gives me much more than what I put in. I say this because the children are not only learning from me, but I am learning from them as well. I start out each day with smiling, excited little people who show greatness in life and learning. Teaching offers me the opportunity constantly to better myself, and at the same time, enrich the lives of a future generation.

I have learned to plan activities that offer rich literary, math, social studies, and science experiences. I facilitate each child's social, emotional, and physical growth by praising their strength and teaching them to believe in themselves.

I encourage my students to work together and respect each other's differences. I want them to think of learning as a way of sharing ideas, accepting different perspectives, and responding to each other with a positive attitude. How I teach depends heavily on these values. I must take into consideration that every child is unique and their future depends to some extent on decisions that I make and beliefs that I hold.

My focus is not only based on academics, but on values and attributes that each child needs in order to be a successful citizen in the world of tomorrow. I set goals for myself. Such goals involve striving to develop a broad range of teaching skills that can be adjusted to meet the needs of my students. I want to challenge my students and to evaluate them honestly and fairly—to foster students' mastery of material while at the same time helping them to develop practical skills such as effective communication and critical thinking. I try to motivate my students to believe in themselves, to set goals, and never to let anyone tell them that they can't reach their dreams.

What is rewarding to me is that each day is a new adventure. Each child comes with special needs, abilities, and infinite potential. As a teacher, I enjoy the challenge of helping children develop these needs to the highest degree possible. I am confident that every child who enters my classroom will receive the most I can offer. I am also confident that I shall continue to develop as a teacher.

The story doesn't end here. My aim is to continue my learning. I am now at work on my master's degree in elementary education. Putting into practice the ideas and concepts that I learned from the cohort program has led to greater awareness of my abilities as a classroom teacher. For example, the cohort program taught me to be more positive in commenting on my students' work. I saw this issue two ways at the time. It feels good to know that if we say something encouraging to the kids, they will be more willing to complete their task. But I felt unsure of myself in saying these things.

Now that I'm taking UH graduate courses, this issue has come up again. This time, I understand that positive reinforcement isn't the cure for all management problems. I view myself as a classroom facilitator—as someone guiding the students in the right direction and preparing them for the real world. Saying "good job" isn't necessarily preparing them for the real world. It may be regarded as insincere, especially when it is overused, and it could be divisive. "Wow, what a terrific job you did on that piece!" may send the message that the teacher values the work of one student over another.

In conclusion, learning to teach is a never-ending project. I still try to think about which teaching ideas work best. Even so, questions are left unanswered and facts about so many things are hidden. Nevertheless, I believe that I will improve with each day if I continue to search for new

knowledge and develop skills that will help me to become successful. I will always be a learner, and I will continue to look for answers in courses, workshops, and through interaction with my students.

### Denise Ah Sue

My journey as a teacher started in August of 2000, five months before I entered Cohort IV as a BEd student with the University of Hawai'i. I still remember the very first day at school as I stood in front of my first group of pupils. Forty-six pairs of eyes were gazing expectantly at me, anxiously waiting for me to say something. I felt the sensation of sweat trickling down my back. My nerves held me in an unmerciful grip. It's a feeling I will never forget. All I had ever read about teaching had not prepared me for the reality of the classroom. Fortunately, I was assigned a teaching partner during the first semester. She played a major role in my decision to stick it out as a teacher. She instilled in me the passion for teaching. I believe, above all else, that a teacher should possess the passion to teach. I had the passion to teach, but I fell far short in the area of pedagogic skill.

In January 2001 I began a new phase of enlightenment regarding my career as a teacher. I had applied and had been accepted into the University of Hawai'i cohort program. The program offered courses that would fulfill the requirements for the bachelor's of education degree in either elementary education, early childhood education, or dual certification in elementary and special education. It is through the cohort program that my understanding of pedagogy started to develop. I began to learn some of the current teaching strategies and methodologies in different content areas. I developed an understanding of new teaching ideas such as inquiry learning, constructivism, and integrated curriculum. These ideas made their way into my classroom. I also came into contact with students, administrators, and fellow teachers who made an impact on my teaching.

I graduated with a BEd in elementary and special education. I am now pursuing a master's of education degree in curriculum studies with an emphasis on elementary education and specializing in literacy and educational technology. It has been a fulfilling learning experience thus far. It is said that those who dare to teach must never cease to learn. I do not intend to cease learning from everyone and everything I come in contact with.

Robert Maynard Hutchins once said, "The objective of education is to prepare the young to educate themselves throughout their lives." This quote best describes my philosophy of education. Students should be encouraged to become lifelong learners. The teacher's role in this endeavor is to be a facilitator and not a dictator. I believe a student-centered classroom that is inclusive of all learning abilities offers the ideal classroom setting to support this educational philosophy.

It has been five years since my journey as a teacher began. I feel that I have really grown professionally. The strategies and methodologies that I have learned throughout the years in my academic courses as well as from my colleagues has equipped me with ways to meet the needs of the different types of learners in my classroom. So the journey continues with new ideas to explore, new thoughts to process, and more students to reach out to and help.

### Faleula Sappa

Becoming a member of the UH cohort made me feel like I was part of a team. We started the two years together, and we finished as one. The members of my cohort and I all had full-time jobs. Many of us have children and spouses. But being together and recognizing each other's struggles to stay the course gave me courage to keep going. It was a struggle because there were many new teaching strategies that were foreign to us. We had to try them out for ourselves to see if they personally worked for us or not. Some strategies worked for me better than others. For example, I used to write the kids names on the board if they misbehaved. I learned that if I focused on misbehavior instead of good behavior, misbehavior is what I would get from my students. I started giving praise more often and rewarding those who listened. This went a long way in changing the behavior of my students. It takes a lot more patience to teach this way, but it works.

The cohort structure of the program provided much-needed support in a number of ways. For instance, all of us had our own ideas about the portfolios that we were required to write each semester. Looking at my peers' ideas helped me improve mine as well. The cohort students were a creative group of people. They were organized and were very good at recording ideas. When I saw something good, I usually learned from it. Another example was that each of our professors had their own style of lesson plans they wanted from us. If there was a task I did not understand, it was easy for me to go to one of the members of my cohort for help.

Sometimes members of our cohort dropped out. However, we encouraged each other to keep going and for those who did not make it, we pleaded with them to come back and complete their education. Discipline had a great impact on me while in the cohort. Our coordinator was very firm with her words. Because of the standard set by this new coordinator, a few of my classmates and I did not graduate with our cohort. When she said she would not accept any assignments after the class had begun, she meant it. We begged her, but she wouldn't budge. It was painful, but we learned the hard way that when the doctor speaks, her words are law in the classroom. I signed a contract with her, and she would remind me whenever I started to slack. She was there at my side when

---

I graduated. We cried together and hugged each other. She knew that I knew that nothing comes easy. Hard work pays off.

After having taken many university courses in elementary education, I now know that teaching is not a chore but a blessing. To see the kids eyes light up when they understand how to do a math problem or figure out where water droplets come from on the outside of cold containers or compete to create the tallest building out of straws or compose songs and poems or make up a dance is a great reward. To me, all my students are winners. I have no doubt in their abilities. I have high expectations of them all. I know they need my assistance to grow intellectually, and I want to help them be the best they can be. If I see that one teaching strategy is not working with them, I will look for another avenue so they can continue to move forward. Children are young and innocent, and they need our guidance. I want my students to feel they are all competent. I try to build their self-esteem by praising them when they do what's right. I want them to know there is nothing they cannot do. Some of my pupils may have weaknesses or shy away from participation, but I try to focus on their positive attributes. They are all important to me, and they all have something to contribute to our society.

I would like to continue learning and complete my master's and doctorate degrees and maybe even become a professor in curriculum studies to improve myself in the teaching profession. It's not just the students I want to help; I want to offer my services to other teachers and administrators as well. I want to help others become better individuals.

## Discussion and Implications for Teacher Preparation

Graduate level study of pedagogy and practice has raised some important questions for these four educators about what it means to be a teacher. Enrollment in MEd degree coursework offered them the opportunity to revisit some of the assumptions and beliefs about teaching that they acquired in their initial teacher preparation program. Their continuing education challenges them to grapple with some of the important issues that arise as they progress from novice to expert teacher. Rather than simply appropriate new instructional practices, as might befit a new or novice teacher, these teachers are questioning the nature of their work in a more critical and fundamental way. In effect, they are engaged in the process of evaluating pedagogical principles based on the interaction of theory and personal experience drawn from their teaching practice. At the same time, they have adopted broader conceptions of themselves as teachers and learners, and in the process, sculpted teaching identities more firmly grounded in conscious decision-making.

## Modeling and Interaction in Teacher Preparation Programs

All four teachers referred to transformed ways of being in the classroom as a result of observing and interacting with other teachers and professors in the UH cohort program. Possibilities previously not imagined or experienced were introduced through modeled practice. Barth's (1990, p. 174) statement that "humans learn through reflection, pleasure, and interaction with colleagues" resonates in the developmental narratives of these four teachers. For instance, Faleula talks about finding meaning in the portfolio examples of her peers. Denise mentions the role of her colleagues in helping her understand the needs of her diverse learners. Lisa feels her cohort experience taught her to be a professional, and Siamaua refers to the "small voice that triggers me to rethink what I'm doing and what I learned in the cohort program and to start acting like a professional again." Darling-Hammond (1997) suggests that, like their students, teachers learn by studying, doing, and reflecting; "by collaborating with other teachers; by looking closely at students and their work; and by sharing what they see" (p. 319).

Schön (1983) described one characteristic of reflective teaching as the willingness to articulate tacit beliefs about one's practice and to subject them to critique. This is similar to what happens when a teacher identifies a persistent teaching problem or question and decides to initiate a conversation about it. This kind of inquiry requires a community of learners with whom one can converse. The teachers in this study appear to understand that one of the benefits, or value-added aspects, of collegial interaction is the introduction of others' voices into their reflective moments—voices that seemed to reappear in self-talk. Interaction with colleagues played a part in choosing strategies to guide their thinking through challenging situations. In this way, teachers become conscious of earlier resolutions and agreements—an awareness of prior experience that can help convert feelings and emotions of the moment into strategies, goals, and, ultimately, understanding.

## Sculpting Teaching Identities

Teachers need opportunities to redefine themselves in their professional roles and to construct their professional identities. Reflective practice and dialogue are essential parts of the evolution of constructing a teaching identity: the process of casting off, discovering, proclaiming, and changing one's ideas and values. The experiences gained in the cohort program, and, later, the network of associations within UH graduate courses, offered the participants a social context in which to become aware of who they are as teachers. As Danielewicz (2001) describes it, "creating identities is not an individual undertaking, but involves others, especially groups or collectives connected to social

institutions as well as the discourses associated with them" (p. 35). We see ourselves in terms of sameness and of difference to others, and those comparisons and contrasts can lead us to question who we are and who we want to become. We sculpt this identity of ourselves "through activity and practices like classification (she is a teacher), association (I am like her), and identification (I want to be like her)" (Danielewicz, 2001, p. 35). The iterative nature of identity sculpting is, at least in part, what allows us to grow, to recreate and transform our fundamental beliefs and enactments as teachers.

All of this raises questions about the effectiveness of support systems for beginning teachers and challenges us to consider the important role that collegial mentoring has for teacher preparation and the professional development of teachers during their careers. Teachers find few opportunities to compare and validate their reflections with trusted colleagues. While feelings of doubt about teaching effectiveness are normal for many beginning teachers, opportunities to interact with colleagues and consult with supportive mentors can help build confidence and validate teaching strengths. Without such support, uncertainty and self-doubt may produce a diminished sense of self-efficacy in teaching effectiveness. For example, new teachers who collaborate regularly with colleagues reported greater confidence in their teaching abilities than those who did not (Chester & Beaudin, 1996). The perceived margin of safety in a school or department can shrink considerably if teachers feel that others are questioning the value and effectiveness of their work and when opportunities for professional growth and conversation are not readily accessible.

The personal stories shared by the Samoan teachers in this article offer valuable insights into understanding the professional development of new teachers. Support, feedback, and encouragement are essential to professional growth. Long term and personal relationships with cohort peers and faculty from teacher education programs do not tend to be the norm among newly licensed graduates; yet the teachers here offer testimony that there is a significant value in such relationships. As Danielewicz (2001) argues, "we ought to try making the model of sustained contact standard rather than anomalous" (p. 5). Similarly, Palmer (1998) reminds us, "If we want to grow as teachers...we must talk to each other about our inner lives" (p. 12). As teacher preparation programs and faculty induction models inevitably evolve, it becomes essential to remind ourselves of the malleability of teaching identities and of the ways these identities take shape in the social context of our school communities.

## REFERENCES

- Barth, R. (1990). *Improving schools from within: Teachers, parents, and principals can make the difference*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Chester, M. D., & Beaudin, B. Q. (1996). Efficacy beliefs of newly hired teachers in urban schools. *American Educational Research Journal*, 33, 233–257.
- Danielewicz, J. (2001). *Teaching selves: Identity, pedagogy, and teacher education*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (1997). *The right to learn: A blueprint for creating schools that work*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Palmer, P. (1998). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Schön, D. (1983). *The reflective practitioner*. New York: Basic Books.