

# Lost in Translation: Transcending the Boundaries of Critical Literacy in American Sāmoa

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## Introduction

This article describes how four Samoan teachers used critical literacy in their classrooms after they first encountered the idea in a children's literature course that I taught over a five-week period in Sāmoa in 2005. My course description reads

This seminar will focus on reading adolescent and children's literature with a 'critical eye.' Texts encode cultural values, and it's possible for readers to step back, weigh those values on the balance of their own experience and knowledge, and to question, and sometimes reject, the version of the world encoded in that book. Our goal is to gain new understandings about these issues and to teach ourselves to see the political and ideological dimensions of literature.

In a routine typical of the first day of class, students took time to introduce themselves and share their goals for learning. They were all avid readers who looked forward to reading a wide variety of literature and engaging in classroom discussions. A short time after the first reading was assigned, students began to question themselves, their identities, their cultural norms around education, and their positions as teachers in a system that accorded them "residency" but not citizenship in the United States.

Analyses of student reflections and discussion transcripts show the conflicts encountered by American Samoan teachers when the ideological frameworks of the teacher education program and the professor challenge the accepted teaching and learning frameworks of the community and the institutions they work in. Findings strongly suggest that purposeful mediation of these conflicts is crucial to the continued success of these Samoan teachers.

## Historical Background and Problem Statement

For the past three years a growing community of scholars around the country have engaged in research and dialogue about the pedagogical beliefs and classroom practices of pre-service and in-service teachers who have participated in a teacher education program where multicultural pedagogy is embedded in the university pre-service and professional development curriculum. The Multicultural Teacher Education Pedagogy Project (MTEPP) is a pan-geographic, multi-disciplinary dialogue initiated

to develop a network of educators and researchers who will engage in multi-site, longitudinal studies of the outcomes of multicultural teacher education on K–12 classrooms. The MTEPP initiative began as an email dialogue in response to shared concerns expressed by junior faculty of color across the country, and quickly grew to its current pan-geographic, multi-site configuration through grass-roots organization. The project facilitates cost-effective planning and development of multi-site collaborations by using existing educational organizations such as the American Anthropological Society (AAA), National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME), National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and American Educational Research Association (AERA) to bring together potential collaborators.

Since 2003, a total of eleven events have taken place at annual meetings of AAA, NAME, NCTE, and AERA drawing a combined audience of over 400 people. Sessions on research in multicultural education have included scholarly papers and poster presentations on related issues. This "conference within a conference" model has helped to promote cost-effective interdisciplinary networking and dialogue, and has facilitated the development of a pan-geographic meta-dialogue.

MTEPP appeals to a diverse group of scholars, with one common interest: the design and implementation of longitudinal research on the K–12 outcomes of multicultural teacher education. While these scholars maintain their allegiance to other research and professional endeavors, they are bound together by a commitment to discuss matters of common interest in the area of multicultural teacher education. Small and large group conversations have evolved that have stimulated the development of collaborative groups ready to explore a formal multi-site, cross-disciplinary, longitudinal research design. To date, seven multi-site, cross-disciplinary collaborative research teams have formed and, as a result of these dialogues, are in the process of implementing their respective longitudinal research projects.

MTEPP selects one topic each year from among several issues in multicultural teacher education as the subject for an interactive symposium designed to facilitate an interdisciplinary dialogue on multicultural pedagogy involving scholars from many different counties. This article draws on my interest in one of these focus topics—the

emerging issue of professional development programs for in-service teachers: What is the impact of multicultural teacher education pedagogy when professional development is taken “on the road?”

Increasingly the trend is for professional development courses for teachers to be offered in non-traditional settings. This is particularly the case for programs designed to be culturally responsive to specific groups and contexts within the U.S. Such programs are often created to provide constructivist, culturally responsive, and critical curriculums to countries like Mexico, Iran, American Sāmoa, Guam, and the Philippines. Thus, multicultural teacher education has come to encompass teacher education in multicultural, multilingual, multinational settings as well as working with immigrant and minority communities within the U.S. This raises the questions—“How are multicultural pedagogical practices such as constructivist teaching, inquiry groups, study groups, socio-cultural frameworks for teaching and learning, community-based schooling, action research, and critical literacy perceived? And what experience do teachers gain from these courses?”

## Theoretical Framework and Connection to Literature

The increasing diversity in our nation’s schools highlights the importance of educating teachers for cultural awareness and sensitivity (Zeichner, 1999). National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) standards have also motivated many institutions to include some sort of multicultural perspective to teacher preparation to keep in step with the changing demographics of school populations in the U.S. Increasingly, teacher educators are adopting multicultural and social justice stances within their own curriculum. Cochran-Smith (2003) identifies three primary needs related to the future directions of scholarship in multicultural teacher education:

- ❖ the need for studies linking theory and practice in multicultural teacher education;
- ❖ the need for a cost-effective vehicle for multi-site research programs that capitalize on the natural laboratories of variations in courses, programs, and arrangements; and
- ❖ the need for outcomes research in multicultural teacher education—research that examines the links between multicultural teacher preparation and what prospective teachers learn, what they do in their classrooms, and what, how, and how much their pupils learn.

The call for outcomes research in multicultural teacher education has been made in many discussions of the literature (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Grant & Secada, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Sleeter, 2001; Zeichner, 1999). As a

result, it has become a major goal of MTEPP to encourage the development of formal research collaborations for cross-disciplinary, multi-site longitudinal studies of outcomes related to multicultural teacher education pedagogy.

This article explores the impact of multicultural pedagogical methods on teacher professional development and in-service teacher education. It offers documentary accounts of the experiences of four educators from American Sāmoa who implemented critical literacy units developed as part of a five-week professional development course. These educators created their own thematic unit plans with an emphasis on critical literacy. Their units explored the implications of literacy practices in their own classrooms and teaching. Each teacher describes her efforts to change the curriculum to include critical literacy and social justice issues.

## Cultural Identity in a sixth grade classroom

Donna Vaitu’utu’u Achica-Talaeai is a sixth grade teacher at Matafao Elementary School in American Sāmoa. The following narrative describes Donna’s experiences in implementing a critical literacy (Shor, 1999) unit focused on identity.

First and foremost, as one of my culture’s strength is in its salutations, I would like to say a few words in the language of Sāmoa: Tālofa (Hello), Afio Mai (Welcome), and Mālō fai o le faiva (What a blessing that we are all here today).

My unit was implemented in a class of thirty sixth graders. These students are presently living in a Samoan society that is undergoing rapid change, and this is having a direct impact on their lives and surroundings. These students identify themselves as Samoans, yet they are still in the process of developing their sense of identity. Culture involves a specific pattern of societal lifestyles shared by many people, but these Samoan students need to learn the values of being an individual and of belonging to a unique people. The thematic unit that I developed engaged students in the exploration of Samoan and Hawaiian cultures. It looked at how life in both societies has changed over time. I chose these two cultures because of the various similarities that they share and the differences that make them distinct.

Initially, students had difficulty understanding some aspects of Hawaiian culture. Similarities between Sāmoa and Hawai’i interested them, but the differences confused them. At first, they didn’t believe the things they were being introduced to in the unit plan. For example, although both of these cultures use taro as a daily staple, Samoan students couldn’t understand how taro could be eaten as poi. The thought of poi wasn’t appealing at all to them because of the familiarity of how food is prepared in their own culture. On the other hand, the recognition of cultural similarities in clothing led to an understanding of possible connections.

Modern aloha wear seemed very similar to Samoan modern wear. Students began to see how fashions were connected, and they began realize that some of the styles Samoans have acquired are borrowed from Hawai'i.

Students' questions indicated that cultural sameness and difference were important in developing their understanding of Samoan and Hawaiian culture. For example, they asked, "Did Samoans and Hawaiians live together some time in the past?" "Do Samoans look like Hawaiians or do Hawaiians look like Samoans?" "Why is it that many of our customs are similar but our languages are very different?" "How come the Hawaiians are slowly losing their culture, can we help save it since we have similar customs?" In response to the final question, I asked my class how they might help support the survival of Hawaiian culture. This question has opened their minds to the issue of preventing the loss of a culture so similar to theirs and of the threat to Samoan culture.

One of the important lessons Donna learned as she implemented her unit was that the notions of sameness and difference were predicated upon prior knowledge. For example, when asked to draw pictures of Sāmoa and Hawai'i, students generally responded with stereotypical representations of Hawai'i.

One of the most valuable activities that I observed during this unit was a brainstorming activity that involved words and pictures. I would say Sāmoa and then Hawai'i and allow a few minutes for the students to draw pictures that they identified with each of the terms. For Sāmoa, the majority of the students drew pictures of coconut trees and Samoan fale (traditional houses), but for Hawai'i the majority of students drew pictures of pineapples, plumeria leis, and ukuleles.

As a result of this exercise, Donna decided to modify future instruction to include more opportunities for her students to engage in authentic activities to learn about Hawaiian culture. She considered student cultural exchanges, and extended cultural studies.

It is valuable for students to become familiar with the practices of other cultures so that they are able to appreciate their own culture and what makes it different. They also need to interpret relationships between various events in the past and present so they understand the forces that have shaped their identities and so that they can take this into consideration in making decisions about the future. Students need to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of major ideas, people, events, and turning points in their own culture as well as in other places such as Hawai'i.

## Exploring the theme of individuality with first graders

Faleula Sappa teaches first grade at Aua Elementary School. Her students come from a variety of socio-cultural and economic backgrounds. This narrative describes how Faleula used literacy instruction to help build on individual student strengths and support the development of positive self-concept.

My unit also focused on individuality. I feel each student is unique and has different strengths and faces different challenges. Over the years, I noticed that many students were unable to be successful in school because of their preoccupation with personal issues. Often, challenging experiences outside of school led to students' development of a poor self-image. I believe that it is my duty as a teacher to use literacy instruction to help students build on their strengths and bring out their good qualities.

My unit also focused on individual identity through reading, writing, language arts, and social studies with first graders. I chose the topic of divorce and single parenting because this was an experience that many students shared. Two stories from our local library at Utulei were used: "Arthur and the 1,001 Dads" (Brown, 2003) and "Mama and Daddy Bear's Divorce" (Parkinson, 1998). The class spent one week reading each story, and responding through literature discussion. Then, each student created a family album by drawing pictures and writing about them. On the final day of the unit, students shared their albums.

Through reading aloud and reading the text, the students were able to make personal connections with the stories and share their personal experiences in their journals, drawings, and paintings. Sometimes they created a diorama or poster; sometimes they engaged in role-playing. Because the majority of my students are Samoan first language speakers, I use a lot of visual cues, like pictures, models, and role-playing to help my students better understand directions and assignments. I often have to translate parts of the lesson into their native tongue. The students were able to relate these stories to other stories they had read in the past through classroom discussions and through sharing with a partner or in a small group. They connected the stories to events around the world by bringing in newspaper clippings and adding this to their timelines or presenting them in front of the whole class. They loved hearing their own voices as they read into a tape recorder or shared books they brought from home or from the library.

Parents and administrators were very supportive of the learning activities in our classroom. They visited when they could, spending hours reading aloud to my students, and helping them with their assignments. On one evening, the parents came and sat in the classroom as if they were

students while I taught. They enjoyed the lesson and gave me favorable comments.

Connecting with the stories and sharing their feelings made my students feel important. The highpoint arrived when they were given the opportunity to perform their ideas in front of the school—sometimes in front of other classes or in front of their parents. I put their writings up around the classroom for all to see. It made them feel proud of who they are. It also made them appreciate where they come from and gain an understanding of where they might wish to go in the future.

By incorporating reading, writing, and talking about personal experiences into the discussion of literature, Faleula provided students with the opportunity to connect their lived stories to the stories in books. Connecting with characters who have positive identities in books allowed students to see themselves and their circumstances in a positive light. By including parents and other community members in the unit activities, she provided opportunities to extend the discussion beyond the classroom. She allowed students to develop stronger and more lasting impressions as unique and valued individuals within the classroom, family, and community. At the same time, by engaging in discussions about social issues with her students, Faleula was forced to examine her own identity and self-image.

There are things in my life that I am not proud of, but I have come a long way. I have learned from my errors, and it has made me a better individual, a better teacher, a better parent, a better wife, a better daughter, a better sister, a better aunt, a better friend, and a better student. Likewise, every one of my students is unique. Regardless of their personal characteristics or circumstances, they are special. Connecting to personal experiences through critical literacy allows them to learn, to accept who they are, and to become successful in school as well as in life.

## A Lesson in Racism

Liza Sauni teaches third grade at Coleman Elementary School. After reading a book about Jackie Robinson, students became concerned about the poor treatment that he had received as the first African-American to have the opportunity to participate in the major leagues when he played for the Brooklyn Dodgers. The following narrative describes how Liza introduced the topic of racism -- a term that is not used in Samoan culture.

My unit plan focused on having students understand the concept of racism through their reading of literature and storybooks. This issue captivated the students when they read "Teammates," a book about Jackie Robinson (Golenbock & Bacon, 1990). Students asked, "Why are people so mean?

Who gave them the right to treat others cruelly?"

I taught the unit to twenty-six third graders in Coleman Elementary School, engaging them in writing and reading reflections, group discussions, community book clubs, think/pair/share activities, and many other activities that connected them with problems related to the issue of racism. Technology was also used so that the students could do research and find information about the topic discussed. I designed an integrated unit so that in addition to reading and writing, social studies, art, science, health, and Samoan studies curriculums were also covered. By looking at the issues of slavery and racism within the context of US history, students were able to make connections with Sāmoa's history and tie these ideas to recent developments and with what is happening in the Pacific today. The goal was to provide students with the opportunity to make meaningful connections to self, text, and world.

The overall objective of Liza's unit was for students to understand the concept of racism. By exploring events in Samoan and world history, and comparing them to the events characterized as racism in the book about Jackie Robinson, students were able to develop empathy for injustice in Samoan society even though it was not characterized as "racism." The challenge for students was to critically examine their own culture and acknowledge the inequities that may exist.

## Reading the Word and the World

When Aua Elementary School second grade teacher Denise J. Ah Sue incorporated critical literature discussions into her classroom, she was frustrated to find that students resisted the invitation to respond openly to questions and pose opinions of their own. The cultural expectation that children strictly obey the teacher and never disagree made it difficult for students to openly share their opinions and feelings, especially when there was the possibility of differing points of view. Using the frameworks developed by McDaniel (2004) and McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004), Denise developed a unit to build comprehension skills using specific critical literacy strategies.

My critical literacy unit was divided into three sections. The first section focused on building background knowledge by introducing four critical literacy strategies—alternative texts, character perspectives, setting switching, and gender switching. The second section focused on deepening students' understanding by having them use the critical literacy strategy of problem posing. This strategy helps students deepen their understanding by taking a critical stance towards issues of equity present in the children's literature. The third and last section focused on applying what was learned, by having students create their own class version of the story, *The Three Little Pigs*. The class-constructed

story aimed to highlight the lessons they had learned from the critical literacy strategies.

The main challenge that was faced during the implementation of the unit concerned the students' abilities and willingness to question, which plays a big role in taking a critical stance in critical literacy. The reason behind this difficulty is twofold—culture and lack of confidence due to low self-esteem. Children in the Samoan culture are usually expected to be “seen and not heard.” It is the belief of our culture, that this is one of the critical learning stages of a child where he or she is to observe and take-in what is to be learned. Serving the elders without question is considered a form of respect. This aspect of the culture, I believe, plays a big part in hindering students' ability to ask questions. Lack of confidence due to low self-esteem also contributes greatly to the students' ability to question and take a critical stance.

### Critical literacy versus critical consciousness

Critical literacy, as a multicultural pedagogy, holds much promise for enhancing the literacy skills of American Samoan students. At the same time, as American Samoan teachers begin to embrace new pedagogical practices, deep reflection about the impact of these new practices on the “culture of the classroom” becomes necessary. As Donna Achica's case illustrates, the development of multiple perspectives requires the development of multiple knowledge sets in order to accurately identify similarities and differences. At the same time, engaging in discussions about social issues with students forced Faleula Sappa to examine her own identity and self-image. As she expresses it in her own words

I was not expecting to think, write, and talk about these topics in a teacher education course, but now I realize how important it is to do my own reflection before I can help my students to reflect on the difficult issues in their lives.

The challenge for Liza Sauni's students was in critically examining their own culture and acknowledging the inequities that may exist within it. As one teacher education student in American Sāmoa wrote, “The word ‘discrimination’ is not used here, but discrimination is everywhere. It's hard to introduce a topic like racism into the curriculum when we don't have that concept in our culture.” For these teachers in American Sāmoa, successful curricular reform, as reflected in their students' increased participation and motivation to learn, was tempered by the ongoing challenges of discontinuity between the expected cultural behaviors children brought to the classroom and the new ways of interacting that the critical literacy units engaged.

Denise Ah Sue's experience highlights the challenges encountered when teaching strategies developed for one culture are introduced into the classroom settings of another

culture. Transcending the cultural boundaries embedded in traditional classroom expectations became the central component to the successful use of critical literacy strategies in her American Samoan classroom.

Critical literacy practices embody not only the inclusion of multiple perspectives toward the text, but also increased transaction between the teacher, the reader, and the text (Rosenblatt, 1978) in the co-construction of new knowledge. Each of the teachers profiled in this article embarked on the critical literacy units to expand their students' world perspectives and critical understanding of texts. However, as our study of critical literacy in the classroom proceeded, each teacher encountered conflicts and discontinuities in their own consciousness. As critical literacy students, they began to challenge their own culture, and question conceptions of authenticity as they became more and more adept at “reading against the grain” and resisting the culturally engrained impulse to accept all “teacher knowledge” as primary. They experienced the same challenges that led their students to open up issues of cultural authenticity. As they engaged in reflection and dialogue, they began to recognize the necessity of transforming their own perspectives as classroom teachers, and mediating their own cross-cultural conflicts before they could successfully integrate critical literacy into their classrooms.

### Conclusions and implications

Teaching and learning is context-driven. The literature on this point is well established. As teacher educators seek to encourage the use of critical pedagogical practices in classrooms, it also becomes necessary to provide time and space for teacher self-reflection, self-examination, and the process of reconstruction of identity as self and teacher. These processes are the key to successful integration of the new pedagogy into the K–12 classroom. Classroom teachers need to understand the underlying knowledge required to engage in critical dialogue. They also need to learn that the development of these knowledge sets needs to precede the implementation of some critical literacy strategies. However, as teacher education becomes more and more global, it becomes critical to re-examine fundamental issues such as language as a hegemonic practice in schooling, the conflict between state and traditional policy, perceptions and beliefs about teaching and multicultural pedagogical practices, and the underlying value of social justice.

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