

# An Indigenous Approach to Teacher Preparation for American Sāmoa

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In his address to the annual conference of the International Samoan Language Commission held at the American Sāmoa Community College on June 2005, the deputy head of state of Sāmoa (previously called Western Sāmoa), His Excellency Tuiatua Tupua Tamasese Efi, delivered a profound message to the people of American Sāmoa *“Ne’i vale tuulima lou tofi—beware that you do not carelessly lose your birthright or heritage.”* In the context of his message the word *“tofi”* was used to refer to language and culture—a God given gift that emphasizes the responsibility of every Samoan to their Samoan heritage.

This admonition, from an important government and culture leader from Sāmoa, was delivered in the face of increasing pressure on the people of American Sāmoa to become more and more Americanized. Sāmoa, once known

as Western Sāmoa, has been an independent state since 1962. In contrast, American Sāmoa, formerly called Eastern Sāmoa, was ceded to the United States in 1900 and is administered as an unincorporated territory of the United States. His Excellency’s message, however, suggests that there could be a heavy price to pay for the material prosperity that American Sāmoa enjoys as a result of its ties with the US. In addition, his warning reminds Samoans of their duty to preserve the unique heritage of Samoan language and culture.

Material prosperity is largely a result of Samoan participation in the United States cash economy and the life-style changes that many American Samoans have embraced—changes that include western attitudes toward work, leisure time, and vacation. The importance of this

economic value to the region is worth stating. The currency exchange rate between the two Samoas is approximately one U.S. dollar to three Western Sāmoa talas. Extensive inter-country travel confers some of the advantages of the high value of the United States dollar to Western Sāmoa. For example, the Sāmoa News (June 2005) recently reported that the Independent State of Sāmoa's economy plummeted when over 5000 potential travelers from American Samoa did not travel to Apia between April and May 2005. American Samoans did not travel at this time because of additional immigration restrictions set by the American Sāmoa government.

In spite of the changes which 100 years of Americanization have produced, the American Sāmoa people overwhelmingly identify themselves with their culture. They are proud to be Samoan; they are committed to the *fa'a-Sāmoa* or the Samoan way of life; they want to keep their communal land system and their *matai* system (chieftain kinship); they want their children to learn and perpetuate their language and culture; and they want to preserve their "*tofi*" and keep it alive and well for future generations. The desire to balance American ways with the unique values that make up the Samoan sense of identity presents important challenges to the people of American Sāmoa.

In this article, I wish to explore how this problem has permeated the educational system, especially raising important questions about how we should prepare teachers in our community. If one of the vital responsibilities of the public schools of American Sāmoa is to transmit the culture, language, and values of its society, then it is important that the people who teach in the schools are properly prepared to discharge this important task.

Data collected over the years on student academic performance in Sāmoa's schools, and the pressures placed on our indigenous way of life and language, warrant a renewed look at the process by which Samoan teachers are prepared. This is particularly important given the two-fold responsibility with which the American Sāmoa community has charged its schools: to offer all students rigorous academic preparation to access the American way of life locally and abroad; and to perpetuate Samoan language and culture. Over the years, the teacher training programs in American Sāmoa have attempted to provide for bits and pieces of these expectations. Given that the teacher training program had been conducted solely in the context of programs of education offered by U.S.-accredited universities, perhaps it is time for Samoans to rethink the ways that teachers are prepared. If Samoans are serious about preserving and not carelessly throwing away our "*tofi*," perhaps we need to recognize the important role that teachers play in the preservation of our Samoan heritage.

## Brief Background on the Islands and People of Sāmoa

The eastern islands of Sāmoa, commonly called American Sāmoa or Eastern Sāmoa, are an unincorporated and unorganized territory of the United States administered by the United States Department of the Interior. American Sāmoa is the only United States territory in the South Pacific and has been since the late 1800's when the Samoan islands were divided into two political entities—the other larger islands of Savaii and Upolu being allocated to Germany.

The population of American Sāmoa is about 60,800 people, of which 89 percent is of Samoan ancestry. The median age is around twenty-one years and 47.9 percent of the population is under twenty years old. For most residents, Samoan is the native language and English is spoken as the second language. It is estimated that about 61 percent of the territory's residents live at or below the poverty level with 44 percent of households earning less than \$15,000 a year. Virtually all public school students (99.4 percent) are eligible for free/reduced school meals.

## Some Background on Teacher Education in American Sāmoa

The American Sāmoa Department of Education (ASDOE), or the public school system, is comprised of six high schools, twenty-three elementary schools (K–8), and a pre-school division that serves three- and four-year old children. The ASDOE provides private and parochial schools with the federally subsidized school lunch program and transportation. The local department of education serves approximately eighteen thousand students from pre-school through grade twelve.

About eight hundred local Samoan teachers provide instruction for all of the school age children in American Sāmoa from the early childhood centers to high school. A handful of teachers are hired from other states such as Western Sāmoa and India. These foreign teachers fill the need in particular for science and math teachers. Persistently low achievement scores of students on standardized test has been blamed in part on the lack of qualified teachers in public schools. As Roy Fua (2005) points out,

The achievement gap between American Sāmoa students and their stateside counterparts continue to widen. Ninety-five percent (95%) of local 4<sup>th</sup> graders lack the basic Math skills in 2000. Only marginally better, 93% of local 8<sup>th</sup> graders lack basic Math skills and up to 95% lack basic Science skills.

In response to these years of low academic achievement in the public schools and the ongoing problem of the shortage of qualified and certified teachers, the American Sāmoa Community College has developed a new Teacher Education Department to address ASDOE's need for more teachers.

Directed by an experienced educator, Roy Fua, the American Sāmoa Teacher Education Department received a \$1.2 million federal grant to provide approved course work to develop teachers' skills in teaching methodology and knowledge in the content areas. However, the Teacher Education Department does not require teachers to be skilled and knowledgeable in Samoan language and culture.

Prospective teachers in Sāmoa, who wish to teach in the government schools and private schools, are generally required to complete a two-year liberal arts degree in elementary education through the American Sāmoa Community College. They then complete their third and fourth years in a program offered locally by the College of Education at the University of Hawai'i-Mānoa. Usually, teachers work on their program of studies in their spare time by taking their required courses in the evenings or during the summer months. Teachers who are employees of the American Sāmoa Department of Education receive free tuition to obtain their third and fourth years as University of Hawai'i cohort students. This teacher preparation program is a part of a three-way agreement between the American Sāmoa Department of Education, American Sāmoa Community College, and the College of Education at the University of Hawai'i. This program is known as the Territorial Teacher Training Administration Program or TTTAP and has existed since the mid-1980's.

According to the American Sāmoa Department of Education, less than 30 percent of public school teachers in preschool to grade twelve have teaching certificates. Sixty to sixty-five percent have not earned a baccalaureate degree. Of the 394 Elementary teachers, only 23 percent have baccalaureate degrees while 77 percent have only a two-year degree (Fua, 2005).

Thus, one of the critical problems in American Sāmoa, in addition to the shortage of teachers, is that a large percentage of those teaching have not completed a four-year degree. The shortage of fully trained teachers raises questions about quality in content area knowledge and level of understanding of teaching methods and pedagogy. To compound the problem, the program designed and developed to train local teachers makes no provisions for teaching Samoan culture, language, and values—an omission that is astonishing given the socio-cultural background of the students and the important role that culture plays in Samoan society. Although the TTTAP program is field-based and occurs within the familiar milieu of the school and community, the program focuses predominantly on providing student teachers with practical experience in the classroom. It is not designed to provide knowledge of, and pedagogy in, Samoan culture. Further problems arise because of the high attrition rate—teachers who have completed their 4-year program often seek work outside the teaching profession where they can find jobs with better pay and working conditions.

Essentially, the problem is one of divided aims. Although American Samoan society values the idea of bilingualism and biculturalism, its teachers are bound by an education system that promotes, and is heavily oriented towards, English and western values. Outside of their professional work, Samoan teachers live as Samoans in the community; inside the schools, they employ English and operate within a system that is tied to western values. This over-emphasis on English and western values can be resolved easily by amending local laws to ensure that Samoan language and Samoan culture have equal importance in our government and community. Secondly, ASDOE should revise its English-only policy to embrace bilingualism and biculturalism. This action would have a profound and beneficial effect. It would, of course, require considerable changes to be made to the system and involve reforms in curriculum, professional development, and teacher preparation.

Sāmoa is not alone in experiencing an absence of indigenous culture and values in its education system. Hosia and Penland (2005, p. 5) had this to say about similar education problems in the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI):

Although community members in RMI have clearly articulated a desire for a balanced education...there continues to be a disproportionate emphasis on academic education... We have left behind a vast majority of our children who choose to remain in our communities. We have failed to provide opportunities for them to learn cultural knowledge that is essential for survival in this island community.

Samoan teachers who have been trained to teach western academics to Samoan students without first becoming proficient in the pedagogy of their indigenous language, culture, and history and who have not been trained to integrate their indigenous way of life into classroom activities only perpetuate Sāmoa's education problems—the achievement gap and the low level of academic scores of students.

Training Samoan teachers in exclusively western academics is likely to miss an important part of the education of Samoan teachers. It also teaches them implicitly if not explicitly, that indigenous ways are unimportant and that such subjects don't matter. This has the further undesirable consequence that teachers are not professionally prepared to help students learn, value, and come to understand their Samoan identity. Thus teachers are not equipped to help students explore the role that Samoans can play in a global world; they are unable to teach important Samoan values such as communalism, reciprocity, and mataihip. This is not to argue that learning western academics is unimportant, but that these goals must be embedded in and responsive to the goals of the Samoan community.

Bartolomé (1994, p. 230) eloquently expresses the danger of technical solutions to the problem of the schooling of

immigrant children—that finding a solution to problems of education is simply a matter of finding the right method.

The solution to the problem of the academic underachievement (of culturally and linguistically diverse students) tends to be constructed in primarily methodological and mechanistic terms dislodged from the socio-cultural realities that shape it.

The same point can be made of Samoan education—solutions to problems tend to be drawn from outside rather than inside, from the American system rather than from practices that embody Samoan ways of knowing.

Juanita Rilometo (2005, p. 14) argues that renewal is a matter of community involvement:

Education...is firmly rooted in the cultures of Pacific societies...The main purpose of education in the Pacific is the survival, transformation and sustainability of the Pacific peoples and societies. Teachers must recognize the importance of using learning outcomes firmly rooted in cultural identity and local knowledge.

In short, our local approach to teacher preparation has continued to replicate methods and systems of teacher education designed more for the residents of Orange County, Tacoma, and even Honolulu than Samoans. Konai Thaman (2005, p. 12) in her poem “Realities” describes the frequent disjunction that many Samoans feel about western education and Samoan culture:

I see my teacher  
Sitting on a sterile rock  
Near the beach  
Selling green coconuts  
What do I do now?  
An old man close-by whispers,  
“Come fishing with me today  
For you have a lot to learn yet.”

American Sāmoa has dutifully followed the example of American education for over a century. As a result, the main thrust of education in Sāmoa has been directed to the Americanization of the islands, the people, and their way of life. Paradoxically, Samoans view being American as liberating, different, and yet disconnected from their day-to-day lived experience. Unfortunately, the local education system has not developed a well-organized and planned Samoan language and cultural curriculum to teach many of the essential skills required to function fully in Samoan society. For example, they do not teach the Samoan oratory skills required to become a talking chief. They do not teach the leadership skills and performance expectations necessary to become a

chief’s wife—someone who will be responsible to lead the village women in carrying out the customs and traditional ceremonies important to the *fa’asāmoa*. These are the realities for Samoans that Konai Thaman alluded to in her poem.

Samoan students have not learned how to read the same stars that our ancestors once used to navigate their voyages in the Pacific. They have not learned how to fish the Samoan way, weave mats, build canoes, or identify the correct leaves for making Samoan medicines. Sadly, many Samoan students are illiterate in their indigenous language and ignorant of many of the important practices and values of their culture. As Juanita Rilometo (2005, p. 14) points out

Traditional Pacific island societies’ ways of teaching and learning are integrated within family and community life. Youngsters learn through listening to words from the mouths of their elders—observing, imitating, and engaging actively. Through active engagement, we learn and internalize...a child having firm cultural connectivity has a good self-concept and the confidence needed to perform well in school and in life, no matter where he or she goes...this is the desired learning outcome of...education.

Dr. Hilda C. Heine (2005, p. 4) reminds us of the importance of providing an indigenous education for Pacific islanders:

The focus on creating ownership and making education an integral part of families and communities cannot be overlooked in Pacific communities. That ownership starts with schools and teachers building on the knowledge learners bring from home, honoring the language they bring to the school, and connecting learning to contexts familiar to them...Across the region, schools are experiencing high student absenteeism and high drop out rates. Students seem to be disconnected from the schooling process. The value of relationships, which has such an important place in the livelihood of Pacific people, is ignored in school.

Perhaps it is fair to say that the experience of American Sāmoa over one-hundred years of following the traditional pattern of American education, aimed at replicating what is the norm in the United States, has failed to produce the kind of Samoan students that our community so desperately needs today—those who can face the challenges of Sāmoa in the twenty-first century. The education system in Sāmoa has essentially alienated Samoans from their indigenous ways—the values, language, culture, and sense of Samoan identity—by excluding indigenous knowledge from the curriculum and from the preparation of Samoan teachers. For this reason, I believe it is important to restore a more indigenous approach to the preparation of teachers in American Sāmoa—one that builds on Samoan values, language, and perceptions of the world in their relation to western academics and thinking.

Samoan teachers should be proficient in English but they should also be proficient in their indigenous language. They should be familiar with Samoan cultural practices and have an understanding of local needs. Programs of teacher preparation, then, should make a substantial commitment to teach Samoan language and integrate indigenous ways of knowing into the teaching of the arts and sciences. This would be the most straightforward approach to making this important change for local teachers. However, we also need to re-think the content, structures, and requirements of teacher preparation to reflect a sense of Samoan ownership and community and to include Samoan ideas and aspirations.

I believe that it is important that Samoan teachers should spend part of their first year of teacher training learning their language as a language of instruction—especially for those who teach children in preschools and elementary schools. Teachers should also learn how Samoan children are raised and socialized in the Samoan community as part of their coursework in psychology, human development, and theories of learning. Samoan teachers should learn the traditional Samoan arts as well as Samoan views on the environment, politics, and social issues as a foundation on which to build other subjects that are taught in the schools. Values unique to Sāmoa, such as the Samoan ideals of communal living, mataiaship, kinship, and reciprocity, should be taught as part of the coursework of teacher preparation programs. In addition, Samoan role models should be invited to participate in the schools with the aim of developing closer ties between the school and the community.

Ignoring the importance of Samoan culture and language and its contribution to the preparation of our public school teachers is a serious omission. It excludes vital elements that should be a part of our indigenous reforms that are vital in determining their own future—the demand for educational relevance, individual self-worth, community support, and the self-reliance of the Samoan people. Samoans should not be educated in isolation and apart from the rest of the world, nor should they continue to be educated as if they were not Samoan. The failure to integrate Samoan values, traditions, and needs into the education of teachers is completely contrary to the conviction that Samoans, with their unique cultural traditions, are also a part of the global world.

Marilyn Cochran-Smith (2005, p. 6) insists on the need for local solutions and a plurality of approaches in the processes of teacher preparation:

“Teacher preparation” and “teacher education” are neither monolithic nor unitary pursuits. To the contrary, even in the face of tightly specified policies, teacher education is enacted in ways that are highly local—embedded in the multiple and changing context of the local institutions and regions and subject to the interpretation and social interactions of the individuals and groups.

Similarly, Judy Abrams and Julia Ferguson (2005, p. 64) affirm the importance of cultural sensitivity and an understanding of home cultures in the knowledge base of teachers and other educators, particularly those concerned with teaching ESOL students, who comprise the vast majority of our public school students in Sāmoa: “Cultural values are part of every language learners’ profile...when teachers and administrators acknowledge, understand, and value different cultures, they can help ESOL students adjust without losing the home culture.”

If American Sāmoa wants to educate globally-minded, productive, intelligent, and committed Samoans who are prepared to successfully navigate their community through the complex shoals of the twenty-first century while remaining firmly grounded on their “*tofi*,” teacher preparation must adopt elements essential to an appropriate indigenous teacher preparation program. Varghese and Stritikus (2002, p. 84) make the case for “culturally responsive instruction, which focuses on creating conditions in classrooms and schools that integrate students’ needs and culture; and a critical pedagogy, having students raise questions about their own immediate conditions and identify ways to transform these conditions.”

As His Excellency, Tuiatua Tupua Tamasese, stated in his 1976 address at the University of the South Pacific, Fiji

I am convinced that for far too long we have imitated and inherited imported forms of development, life-styles, ethics, dress, thinking...Over the years these have taken a heavy toll of the vitality of our own ways, of our pride in our inheritance and of our self-confidence and self-respect...I am equally convinced that...we must rediscover and reaffirm our faith in our values—the vitality of our past, our culture, so that we may develop our own uniqueness, our own ways of doing things, our own solutions to our problems.

I firmly believe that Samoans want to keep their “*tofi*,” and I also firmly believe that an important step that American Sāmoa can take to preserve this heritage is to prepare teachers to become stewards of our culture.

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