

Local Responses To The Needs Of Samoan Students: Implications For Pre-Service Education Programs

Judith Kearney, Maria Dobrenov-Major & Gary Birch

Griffith University

With the spread of globalisation, many Pacific Islanders have realised that opportunities for economic gain and social mobility can be found outside their island countries, and have been eager to access these opportunities. This has resulted in substantial migration to Australia, either directly or via New Zealand. Here in Australia, a large Samoan migrant community has formed in Logan City where more than 160 different cultural backgrounds are currently represented. Logan City has a high level of unemployment and about one-third of those who are employed earn less than \$200 a week (Queensland Government, 2003). Thus, for teachers in some schools in Logan City, global changes have resulted in a local community where cultural and linguistic diversity is often interfaced with poverty. In this paper we report on data obtained from a sample of more than 300 teachers working in primary and secondary schools in Logan City. We determine their levels of concern regarding the educational achievement of Samoan students, and identify the issues that teachers associate with student underachievement. Implications of these data for pre-service education programs are then considered.

Globalisation involves the flow of technology, finances, information, and ideology. It also involves the movement of people (King, 1997). Since the 1960s there has been substantial migration from Samoa to New Zealand for a combination of reasons (Connell, 2003). Primarily, migration has been prompted by economic circumstances. Samoan migrants recognise significant income differentials between Samoa and countries such as New Zealand, Australia and the United States; and are attracted by the prospect of social and economic mobility in the destination country. In addition, they identify opportunities to improve the living standards of family remaining in Samoa by providing remittance transfers to relatives. With a decline in the prestige of agricultural work in Samoa there has also been a pattern of movement away from remote islands and isolated rural areas to urban centres. Thus, the increased pressure on domestic resources in urban centres encourages migration which, in turn, alleviates levels of unemployment. Finally, the opportunity to migrate has been enabled by improved air transport at reduced costs.

Migration to New Zealand was particularly attractive as the country's industry and service sectors developed during the 60s and 70s. However, when New Zealand's economy saw a decline in the early 80s there were high levels of unemployment among unskilled, Pacific Islander migrants. This made Australia a destination target for many Samoan migrants, and those who had migrated at an earlier stage to New Zealand (Hughes, 2003). As the majority of Samoan migrants have low levels of English proficiency and limited capital resources, they have tended to locate as diasporic communities in areas such as Western Sydney and Logan City where public housing and cheaper accommodation is available.

Logan City is the third largest city in Queensland, with a population of 170,000 people. It is a multicultural city comprised of 161 different cultural backgrounds (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003). According to 2001 census data, Logan City has a high level of unemployment and about one-third of those who are employed earn less than \$200 a week. In the central district of Logan, unemployment ranges between 14% and 17%. Retention rates for senior level schooling are generally low and the percentage of people attending university is about 2%. Approximately 30% of the population in the central district of Logan was born overseas with 22% speaking a language other than English. Almost 16% of those with a non-English-speaking background are Samoan. More recently, there has been a significant increase in the number of migrants with refugee status (House of Representatives, Commonwealth of Australia, 2004).

For teachers in Logan City, global population shifts have resulted in local school communities where a rich mix of cultural and linguistic diversity may be interfaced with poverty. One of the major cultural groups represented in local schools is Samoan. Typically, Samoan children come from homes where traditions of family networking are strong and where parents have adopted an authoritarian role.

Communal, cultural and religious activities have been highly valued with resources often pooled to cater for family needs, and to assist relatives who have remained in Samoa (Queensland Government, 2004). The fa'aSamoa (the Samoan way) is a set of cultural understandings that has underpinned these practices. As an ideology, it promotes values of respect, obedience and reciprocity, where the needs of the individual are subordinate to those of the group (Hutakau, 2002). While the church, in particular, has played an important role in sustaining the fa'aSamoa for Samoan migrants in areas such as Logan City (Tiata, 1998, cited by Singh & Dooley, 2001), it is likely that the integrity of this phenomenon has been challenged by competing ideologies that accompany experiences in 'new times in new places'.

Traditional notions of learning in the Samoan culture have supported a formal system of education that has favoured teacher-centred, talk-and-chalk instruction with students situated as passive recipients of knowledge. This system has been complemented in the home and in the community by an informal system of learning where children learn by observing and imitating (Yorston, 1999). Both formal and informal systems of learning have reinforced a similar set of cultural values and attitudes. While the role of the classroom teacher in Samoan culture was highly respected, formal classroom learning was separate from informal learning outside the classroom. Thus, family participation in children's formal education was not encouraged, nor expected (Onikama, Hammond, & Koki, 1998). Notions of childhood, in the Samoan culture, did not depict the child as "a recipient of care but as a contributor" (Yorston, p.3). Children prepared food and cared for younger siblings, activities that would have been prioritised over homework. These cultural practices would have encouraged a set of learning styles and attitudes that conflict with those in westernised classrooms where co-operative learning, student inquiry, critical thinking, and family involvement have been promoted. This is not to suggest that these cultural practices should be interpreted as a set of general traits to describe an individual. As Gutierrez and Rogoff (2003) noted, overgeneralizations such as this can hinder understanding of effective ways to support individuals, and deny variation and change that occurs for individuals.

Barnard (2003) advised that difficulties will occur when values and beliefs underpinning practice in a school community are not shared and understood by children and their families, and compounded when teachers are not aware of the possible disparity between their own values and those held by families whose cultural and linguistic background may differ. McNaughton (2002) has suggested that effective literacy instruction for children with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds demands a meeting of minds between learners and teachers in classrooms, where the meeting allows continuity between "how things are done at school and how things are done in the child's family and social setting" (p. 20).

This research looks at how teachers believe things 'should be done' at school. It achieves this by:

- determining teacher perceptions of the academic achievement of Samoan students;
- identifying issues that teachers perceive as influencing student underachievement; and,
- investigating the stability of teacher perceptions across primary and secondary years of schooling.

Data collection

Survey data were obtained from 306 teachers working in eleven schools located in the central and south-west districts of Logan City. The schools were comprised of six government primary schools, four government secondary schools, and one Catholic P-12 school. All schools had significant populations of Samoan students. In some, Samoan students comprised 60% of the school population. In total, 32% of the respondents were primary teachers with the balance teaching in secondary schools. Teachers who completed the surveys represented a range of teaching experience. The majority of teachers were monolingual with 16% of respondents describing themselves as bilingual or multilingual.

The survey was comprised of three parts. In the first part, teachers provided demographic particulars. In the second, they responded to a set of seven items using a five-point Likert scale. These items determined teacher levels of cultural awareness and confidence when working with Samoan students. The third part required teachers to provide responses to open questions. The data reported in this paper involve responses to one item from the second part of the survey, "I am happy with the academic achievement of my Samoan students"; and one question from the third part, "What issues are of concern to you regarding the educational achievement of Samoan students?".

Data analysis

SPSS Version 12 software was used to analyse responses to Likert-scale items. The percentage frequency of response categories was determined for all teachers. Responses by primary teachers and secondary

teachers were then compared. QSR NUD*IST Ver 4 software was used to analyse responses to open-ended questions. This allowed an exploration of text to build and refine a series of categories and subcategories. Frequencies for items within categories were determined and reported as a percentage of all items comprising the dataset.

Findings

Figure 1 indicates that fewer than 25% of teachers agreed with the statement that they were happy with the academic achievement of their Samoan students while more than 50% disagreed. About 20% remained undecided.

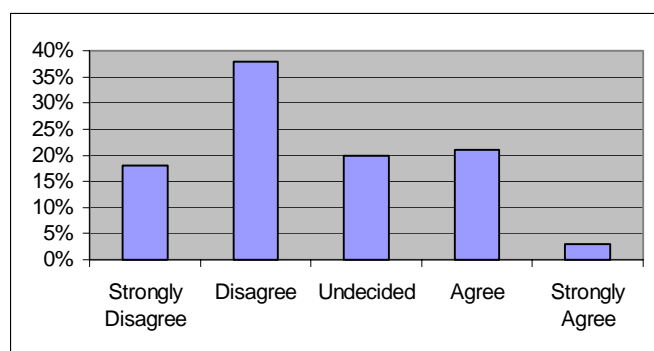


Figure 1.

Teachers' response to the question, "I am happy with the academic achievement of my Samoan students".

Issues of concern evolved as five categories: (1) students' beliefs and values, their attitudes and levels of motivation; (2) students' behaviours, especially in relation to classroom participation; (3) literacy performance; (4) cultural differences; and (5) lack of human and material resources. Figure 2 provides percentage frequencies for categories.

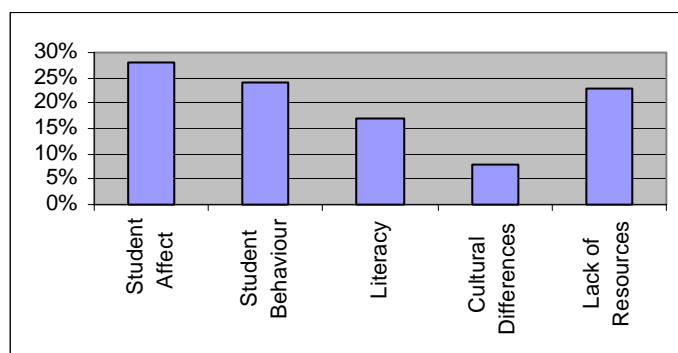


Figure 2.

Teachers' response to the question, "What issues are of concern to you regarding the educational achievement of Samoan students?".

Comments regarding student affect and student behaviour comprised about half of all responses. About one third of the comments relating to student affect focussed on beliefs and values held by students (see Figure 3). There was consistent comment that Samoan students did not value educational achievement. More than half of the comments related to attitudes. The comment, "Lack of commitment and willingness to work hard – if it's too hard it's not worth the effort" (Teacher 20, School 3), was typical. Teachers made consistent comments about students' lack of motivation in class. In terms of behaviour, there were four subcategories (see Figure 4). Teachers listed concerns about absenteeism, time management difficulties in relation to the submission of work, and inappropriate wearing of uniform. At least 40% of comments related to participation in class. Patterns of disruptive behaviour or passive withdrawal were both commonly reported.

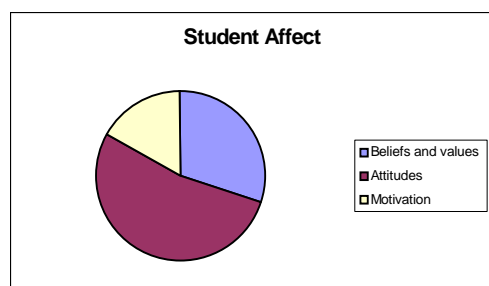


Figure 3.
Proportion of subcategories for student affect.

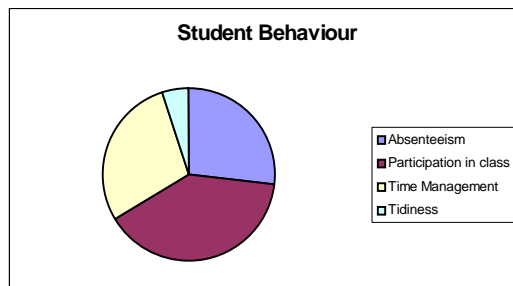


Figure 4.
Proportion of subcategories for student behaviour.

Fewer than 20% of all responses related to literacy performance. Over half of the comments described students' difficulties when reading and writing print texts (see Figure 5). While fewer than 10% of all responses related to cultural differences, the majority of comments suggested disjunction between the ways of school and those of homes (see Figure 6). The following was typical, "Cultural mismatch between traditional anglo-saxon culture and island life" (Teacher 7, School 2). A smaller subcategory of comments suggested that Samoan students self-segregated and needed to integrate with other cultural groups.

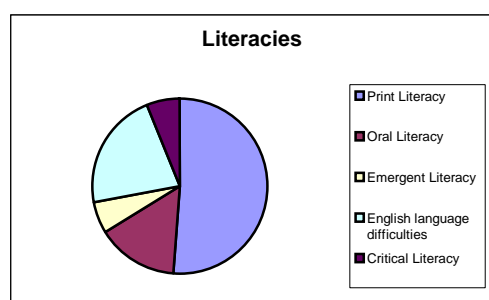


Figure 5.
Proportion of subcategories for literacies.

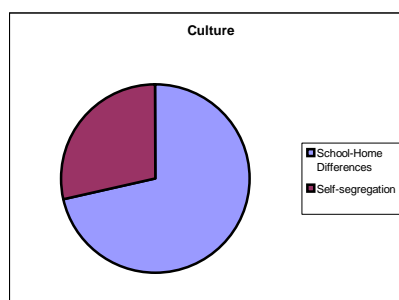


Figure 6.
Proportion of subcategories for culture.

Almost 24% of all responses related to lack of resources. Most comments described the absence of parental support as an explanation of students' educational underachievement (See Figure 7). Lack of teacher understanding and preparedness for meeting the needs of students with cultural and linguistic backgrounds different from their own were noted. Other concerns were the lack of culturally relevant materials to use in classrooms, and the lack of teaching support.

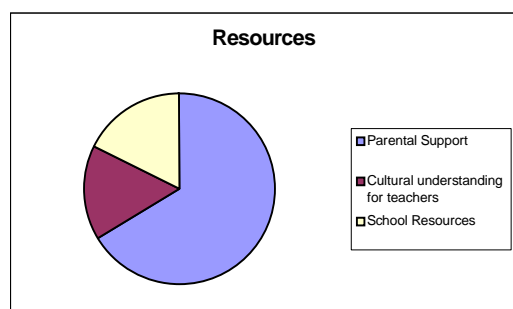


Figure 7
Proportion of subcategories for resources.

As Figure 8 indicates, except for a shared concern about cultural difference, primary teachers and secondary teachers emphasised different concerns. Categories of student affect and student behaviour were prominent in the responses of secondary teachers whereas students' literacy and resource needs were prioritised by primary teachers.

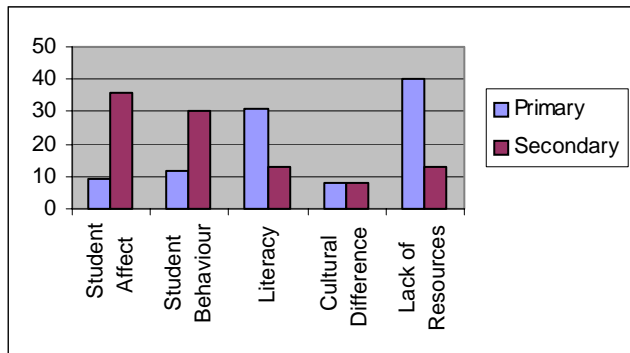


Figure 8

Comparison of primary teachers and secondary teachers' responses to the question, "What issues are of concern to you regarding the educational achievement of Samoan students?".

Discussion

Teacher perceptions of the academic achievement of Samoan students

Reports of Samoan students' educational underachievement by Logan teachers are consistent with trends in other diasporic Samoan communities in the United States (Janes, 2002) and in New Zealand (McCaffery & Tuafuti, 2003). For example, Samoan children in low-decile schools have been found to make significantly lower than expected progress in the development of word recognition, writing vocabulary and reading comprehension (McNaughton, Phillips, & MacDonald, 2003). Underachievement was also noted by Singh (2001) who reported that data provided by the Queensland School Curriculum Council showed that the literacy and numeracy performance of Samoan students during state-wide testing in 1997 was "extremely below the performance of the whole cohort of students" (p. 322). The problem, however, was that the performance of Samoan students was masked by the performance of other students who spoke a language other than English but who had high levels of English literacy. In fact, data for NESB students indicated results above the performance of the whole student cohort and were used to legitimise reduced funding to English as a Second Language (ESL) programs, a decision that would further disadvantage the Samoan students who were underachieving.

Perceptions of issues influencing student achievement

Comber (1999) has warned that in areas where there is high poverty and low employment, teachers must guard against deficit discourses that "construct poor children as lacking, effectively blaming their parents not only for their poverty but also for their poor behaviour, language and literacy" (p. 23). 'Deficit' explanations in relation to the Samoan students' underachievement were common, with most teachers explaining underachievement in terms of behaviour problems, negative attitudes, lack of parent support, poor literacy skills, and socio-economic disadvantage. Explanations of 'cultural discontinuity' (Erickson, 1993) were less common with fewer than 10% of teachers noting cultural mismatches between practices at home and those at school. Explanations of 'structural inequality' (Au, 1993) were uncommon. Such explanations focus on issues of social- and economic-power differentials that allow inequalities among groups to persist. Singh's (2001) example of government funding cuts to ESL programs for all groups in Queensland schools when some groups underachieve demonstrates how systems allow underachieving groups to stay that way. The status quo is maintained; the inequalities are conserved.

It is important to compare the explanations provided by primary teachers and secondary teachers. Primary teachers emphasised concerns about the literacy achievement of students, and the lack of human and material resources to meet students' learning needs. In contrast, the secondary teachers emphasised problematic behaviours and attitudes. Their emphasis could be interpreted in two ways: (1) that problematic behaviours and attitudes are the cause of underachievement, or (2) that they are the result,

suggesting student resistance to schooling. The first reading is of interest as values of respect and obedience have been central to the fa'aSamoa. The second reading is credible if concerns voiced by primary teachers about the need for resources and the need to develop students' literacy skills are unheard. The second reading provides a warning of unwanted outcomes. It directs our focus to the inadequacy of systemic resources, and to the role of teacher education institutions in equipping pre-service teachers to respond effectively to students' literacy needs.

Implications for pre-service education

Many classroom teachers lack professional knowledge about "teaching, assessing, and organising programs for students with a non-English-speaking background" and "learn how to cope with NESB students through trial and error" (Haworth, 2003, p. 138). This does not provide an efficient response to students' needs especially when global migrations continue to result in classroom populations with a diverse range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. It is important that universities review current programs for pre-service teachers to see that there are opportunities to develop initiatives that encourage intercultural sensitivity, cultural awareness, linguistic awareness, and responsive pedagogies. The solution does not lie with one course but a series of courses throughout the pre-service program where participants are provided with opportunities to reflect on their own cultural beliefs and practices. Superficial, static and stereotypical views of cultures need to be challenged.

Causey, Thomas and Armento (2000) predicted a global trend where populations of preservice teachers will become more homogenous while student populations in schools will continue to diversify. Similar trends are evident locally. For example, student populations in Logan classrooms have diversified in terms of student cultural and linguistic backgrounds, whereas student populations in pre-service teacher programs at Logan Campus do not show similar diversity. For example, at Griffith University's Logan Campus there is significant under-representation of Samoan students in Education programs when the population of Samoan students in primary and secondary schools is considered. Investigation of this situation is needed as this trend has implications for students in Logan schools. There will continue to be a lack of role models and advocates for Samoan school students in schools, and so Samoan students will continue to construct teachers as outsiders to their own cultural identity and will exclude a career in teaching. This will perpetuate the under-representation of all Pacific Islander groups in Education programs at Griffith University.

Conclusion

Historically, explanations for the underachievement of language-minority groups have involved students and their families, their languages and cultures (McCaffery et al., 2003). Thus, it is easy, but not useful to frame explanations using deficit explanations. While they encourage blame, they do not readily suggest an effective response. We have suggested additional explanations and recommend that all be interrogated carefully to determine a course of action that includes a role for: teachers and administrators in schools; students and their families; executives in state and federal education systems who decide on policy and resource allocation; and university personnel who shape the knowledge and practices of the teaching workforce.

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