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Logan City Schools: Repositories of Desperate Hopes or Planned Strategies to Enhance Literacy Outcomes for Students?

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Throughout the world, global movements of people have meant increasingly diverse student populations in classrooms. For all students to achieve academically it is important that teachers and administrators in schools have high levels of intercultural understanding and feel confident working with students whose cultural and linguistic background may be different from their own. In this paper I report on a study that investigated teachers and principals' perceptions of the achievement of Samoan students in Logan City schools. Data collection involved surveys and interviews. Findings indicated that fewer than 25% of teachers agreed that they were happy with the academic achievement of their Samoan students with most explanations of students' underachievement being framed in deficit terms. Similarly, all principals were concerned about the underachievement of Samoan students. Two key priorities emerged from these data: (1) the need for resources that encourage extended literacy practices in homes and that promote the use of classroom texts which are culturally relevant; and, (2) the implementation of strong well-defined links between schools and the Samoan community which identify teaching/other support strategies that will enable the performance of Samoan students by building on the strengths they bring to classrooms.

Introduction

Since the 1960s, many Pacific Islanders have migrated to Australia, either directly or via New Zealand (Connell, 2003). As a good proportion of Samoan migrants tend to have low levels of English proficiency and limited capital resources, they tend to relocate as diasporic communities in areas where public housing and cheaper accommodation are available. Here in Logan City, a large Samoan migrant community has formed and is the largest of some 161 different cultural groups represented in the city. 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 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003).

Logan City is the third largest city in Queensland, with a population of 170,000 people. According to 2001 census data, the 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% (Queensland Government, 2003). Thus, for many local school communities

in Logan City, there is a rich mix of cultural and linguistic diversity that is often interfaced with poverty.

Trends of academic underachievement in diasporic Samoan communities have been reported in the United States (Janes, 2002) and in New Zealand (McCaffery & Tuafuti, 2003). For example, in New Zealand, 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). In addition, PISA data for New Zealand (Ministry of Education, New Zealand, 2004) showed that the literacy achievement of Samoan and other Pasifika students, on average, was significantly lower than the mean scores of Pakeha, Asian and Maori students, with only 25% of Samoan and other Pasifika students performing above the mean score for all other cohorts represented in the data. Unfortunately, data that describe the literacy performance of Samoan students, in either the State of Queensland or Logan City, are not available because performance data achieved through annual state-wide tests in Queensland are not disaggregated to identify the achievement of particular cultural groups other than Indigenous students. State data are provided for Language Background Other Than English (LBOTE) students, a cohort whose performance on literacy tests has been reported as similar to that of students with an English-speaking background. These data, however, are not disaggregated beyond Indigenous students. I propose that the underachievement of many Samoan students within the LBOTE group is masked by the performance of LBOTE students who have well-developed English literacy. This proposal is supported by Singh's (2001, p. 322) report that, in 1997, when performance data achieved through state-wide testing of Year 6 students in Queensland schools were disaggregated to show the performance of cultural groups, the literacy performance of Samoan students was "extremely below the performance of the whole cohort of students". It is worth noting that these same data were used to legitimise reduced funding to English as a Second Language (ESL) programs, a decision that would have further disadvantaged those LBOTE students who were underachieving.

McNaughton (2002) explained academic underachievement as a consequence of failure to achieve a meeting of minds between students and teachers in classrooms. Typically, Samoan families understand childhood and so socialise their children in very different ways from Anglo-Australian culture that influences school practices. Socialisation within Samoan families has been reported as observing a set of four principles: (1) caregiving is hierarchical and distributed with many tasks achieved collectively rather than individually; (2) socialisation practices are situation-centred rather than child-centred with the child expected to accommodate to social situations; (3) socialisation occurs through repeated demonstration, prompting and action imperatives; (4) emphasis on task completion rather than on individual performance (Duranti & Ochs, 1996). Thus, notions of childhood in Samoan culture do not depict the child as a 'recipient of care but as a contributor' (Yorston, 1999, p. 3), while methods of socialisation encourage a set of discourses that differ from those promoted in Australian regional classrooms where student inquiry, critical thinking and individual achievement are valued. Consequently, many Samoan students find that they operate in different discourses at home and at school.

In addition, traditional notions of learning in the Samoan culture appear to support a formal system of education that has favoured teacher-centred, talk-and-chalk instruction with students situated as passive recipients of knowledge. This system was 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 reinforced a similar set of cultural values and attitudes. While the role of the classroom teacher was highly respected, formal classroom learning was separate from informal learning outside the classroom. Thus, family participation in children's formal education was neither encouraged, nor expected (Onikama, Hammond, & Koki, 1998).

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 and administrators are not aware of the possible disparity between their own values and those held by families whose cultural and linguistic background may differ (Barnard, 2003). Thus, this research looks at how teachers and administrators perceive the academic achievement of Samoan students, and how they explain these patterns of achievement.

Data collection

Survey data were obtained from 304 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. Teachers responded to a set of items using a five-point Likert scale. These items determined teachers' levels of intercultural awareness and their confidence in supporting the English-literacy development of Samoan students. Teachers were also invited to respond to open questions that encouraged explanation of patterns of achievement within Samoan cohorts of students.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 principals. In almost half of the interviews, principals invited key stake-holders such as ESL teachers, English co-ordinators, and deputies to participate with them in interviews. The purpose of the interviews was to identify principals' perceptions of Samoan students' levels of achievement and to identify factors that contributed to perceived levels of achievement.

Data analyses

SPSS Version 12 software was used to analyse responses to Likert-scale items. The percentage frequency of response categories was determined for all teachers. QSR NUD*IST Ver 4 software was used to analyse responses to open-ended responses provided by teachers and interview data obtained from principals. This allowed an exploration of text to build and refine a series of categories and subcategories.

Results

Teachers completed surveys, and principals participated in interviews.

Survey findings

Figure 1 indicates that fewer than 25% of teachers agreed or strongly 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.

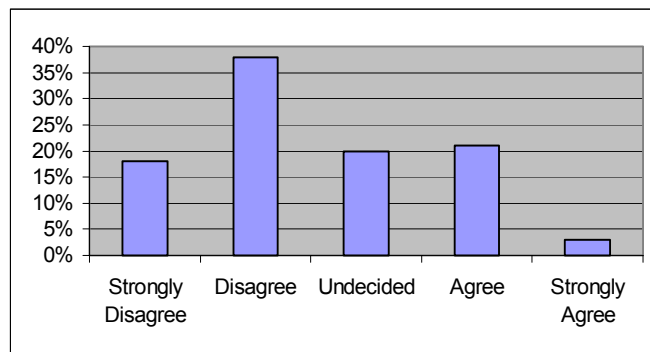


Figure 1.

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

Findings also suggested that

- (a) 38% of teachers agreed that they were confident supporting the literacy needs of Samoan students;
- (b) 26% of teachers agreed that they were aware of traditional communication structures associated with Samoan families;
- (c) 25% of teachers agreed that they knew how the Samoan language was different from English language; and,
- (d) 38% of teachers agreed that they were familiar with social and cultural expectations associated with Samoan culture.

Teachers' explanations of Samoan students' academic underachievement associated with five categories: (a) student beliefs and values, their attitudes and levels of motivation; (b) student behaviour, especially in relation to classroom participation; (c) literacy performance; (d) cultural differences; and (e) lack of human and material resources. Figure 2 provides percentage frequencies for categories.

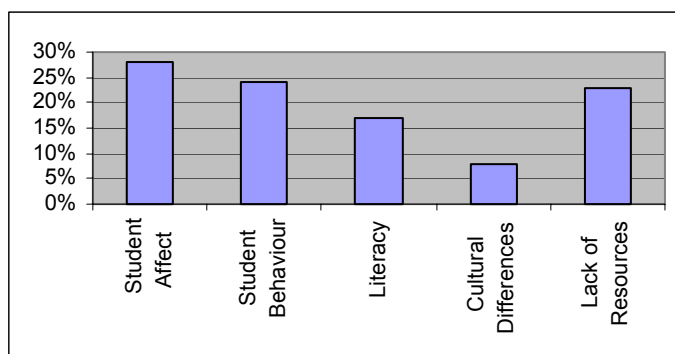


Figure 2. Teachers' response to the question, "What issues are of concern regarding the educational achievement of Samoan students?"

Comments regarding student affect and student behaviour comprised about half of all responses. About one third of the comments relating to student affect and 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.

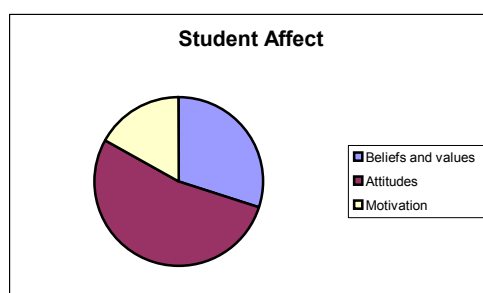


Figure 3. Proportion of subcategories for student behaviour.

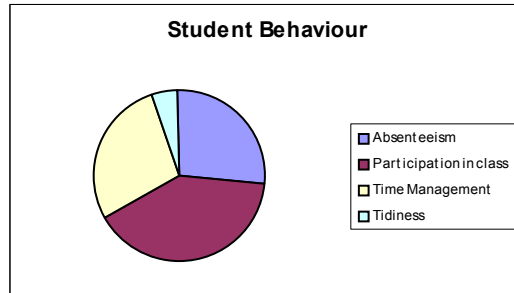


Figure 4.
Proportion of subcategories for student affect.

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.

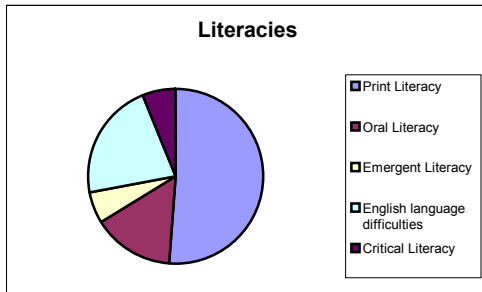


Figure 5.
Proportion of subcategories for literacies.

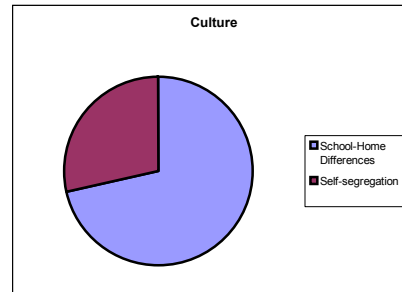


Figure 6.
Proportion of subcategories for culture.

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.

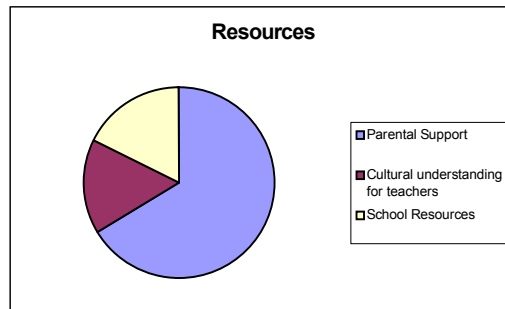


Figure 7.
Proportion of subcategories for resources.

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 development and resource needs were prioritised by primary teachers. Deficit theorising was evident for both groups.

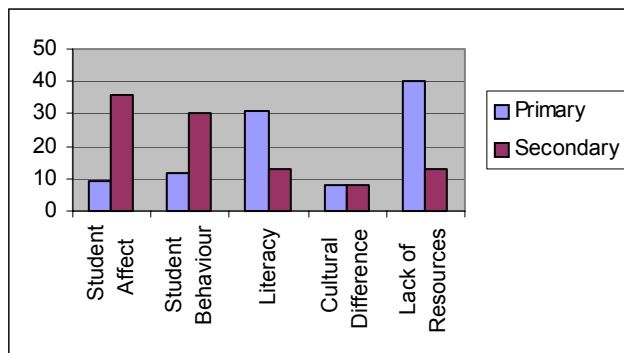


Figure 8.
Teacher perceptions of the academic achievement of Samoan students.

Interview findings

Data supplied by local principals confirmed that Samoan students comprised 10% to 60% of student populations in their schools. Interviews with principals supported teacher concerns that Samoan students were underachieving academically. They noted that limited numbers were participating in post-compulsory education programs. For example:

If I look at our Samoan community particularly which is quite a large group in the school there are very few of them at the senior level going for an OP (Secondary Principal 1).

Principals felt that many Samoan students were not having their language needs met in schools, nor having them well supported at home. It was suggested that lack of confidence using language was a reason for parents to avoid communication with the school. The following statements are illustrative:

We have so many students who come through New Zealand after 2 – 3 years and they get no funding but they cannot communicate in any way – orally or written – in English. And because they come through an English speaking country they're not funded. I think it's immoral and unethical ... our ESL teachers are only available depending on the number of the students who come from an NESB country, and we would have as many again who come from New Zealand ...we are far under-resourced (Primary Principal 2).

There are very few books around in the home ... and I understand parents who are brought up in Samoa – Grade 1, 2 & 3 is in Samoan. In Grade 4 & 5 English is introduced, and above that is taught in English. So their first language isn't developed. If their first language isn't developed to the hypothetical reasoning level, then the second language isn't developed either and I think that's one of the greatest problems. The parents don't like to come in because they feel the language barrier (Primary Principal 1).

Principals were concerned that many Samoan students failed to appreciate the relationship between career aspirations and the level of attainment required to achieve them. An "all or nothing" attitude was prevalent among Samoan students. In an interview in one secondary school, a delegate for a principal suggested:

There's a lot of 'I want to be a lawyer, doctor' but no understanding of the amount of work to get to that point and no commitment to do it so ... parents really value the education but don't understand what it is the child's got to do to be successful. There's verbal support but not the actual actions to move things along.... Students just don't have role models. They don't have people to look to. They don't have someone to drive them on and say this is an example of how you have to work – particularly good Samoan role models. That's what we need more of than anything. We've got a few Rugby League players that are around and that's really it.

Principals described their Samoan students as being caught between cultures. Several examples demonstrate their views.

And these students are mostly first generation Australian so they're having a lot of difficulty coping with the Samoan culture at home and – they were born in Australia so they have a foot in both camps. These students have a lot more problems than just the language problem. ... We find Monday tends to be bit of a problem day because they go to church all Sunday and they're tired (Primary Principal 1).

You'll find that older students aren't attending school. If you talk to them and get down to the reason you'll find that they are actually home looking after the children. Females may be kept at home to look after the babies (Primary Principal 2).

Our western education system is very logical/sequential/objective type learning experience, and for many different Pacific Islander children, they grow up in a very subjective/relational culture, which is non-timebased (Principal P-12 School).

Discussion

Reports of Samoan students' educational underachievement by Logan teachers and principals are consistent with trends reported in other diasporic Samoan communities. Strong parallels emerge between findings in this paper and those reported in *The Progress at School Project* commissioned by the Ministry of Education, New Zealand, which monitored the educational attainments of 5400 students from Year 9 to their completion of secondary school. As Nash (2000) indicated, three key findings of this report related to the situation of Samoan students. First, they underachieved in the educational system in relation to non-Samoan and other Pacific Island students. Second, they failed to understand relationships between career aspirations and levels of effort and attainment to achieve these, with professional aspirations being replaced by unskilled work without consideration of intermediate skilled occupations. Third, they were disproportionately under-represented in tertiary institutions. While all three findings are consistent with principals' comments in this study, the third of these findings, that is, 'poor representation in tertiary institutions' particularly concerns me in my role as a tertiary educator working with pre-service teachers.

Principals noted a lack of role models and advocates for Samoan students in schools as a consequence of having very few bilingual teachers, proficient in both English and Samoan languages. This situation will continue as there is significant under-representation of Samoan students in Education programs at Griffith University, Logan Campus, relative to the population of Samoan students in local schools. While student populations in Logan classrooms have diversified in terms of cultural and linguistic background, student populations in pre-service teacher programs do not show similar diversity. This trend has been reported globally (see Causey, Thomas, & Armento, 2000). Populations of pre-service teachers are characteristically white, middle-class, and monolingual; populations within schools, as noted above, are culturally, socially, and linguistically diverse. Consequently, pre-service teachers are likely to become teachers of children whose cultural background and life experiences are very different from their own. This situation provides a challenge for teachers, and for teacher educators who support their pre-service preparation. National educational goals (Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs, 1999, pp. 3-4) add to that challenge with the expectation that "all students in schools understand and acknowledge the value of cultural diversity and possess the knowledge, skills, and understanding to contribute to and benefit from such diversity". At a State level, the challenge is reinforced by a set of professional standards for teachers (Education Queensland, 2003, p. 3) that emphasises the need for teachers to be able "to structure learning experiences that are inclusive, participatory and socially critical". Samoan students in local Logan schools need to identify bilingual, bicultural teachers as members of their school community. If not, they will construct teachers as outsiders to their own cultural identity and consequently, exclude teaching as a career choice.

Deficit explanations of the underachievement of Samoan students 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. These types of explanations will only perpetuate the disengagement of

Samoan students, particularly in secondary schools. Comber (1999, p. 23) 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". Alternative forms of explanation were uncommon. Explanations of cultural discontinuity (Erickson, 1993) were reported by fewer than 10% of teachers with the majority making reference to cultural deficits rather than 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 indiscriminate funding cuts to ESL programs for all groups of LBOTE students in Queensland schools is indicative of how systems allow underachieving groups to stay that way. The status quo is maintained; the inequalities are conserved, if not heightened.

It is also important to compare the explanations provided by primary teachers and secondary teachers, and to consider why such variance exists. 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 problem behaviours and poor attitudes. The different emphasis could be interpreted in two ways. First, that problem behaviours and poor attitudes provide cause underachievement. Alternatively, they could be resultant, suggesting student resistance to schooling. The first interpretation is curious as values such as respect and obedience are considered central to the *fa'aSamoa*, that is, the Samoan way of being. The second reading is more credible than the first, especially when there is no response to concerns voiced by primary teachers about the need for resources and the need to develop students' literacy skills. In fact, this second reading provides a warning of how to avoid unwanted outcomes. It re-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.

In addition to the concerns that have been discussed, findings suggest urgency in meeting two key priorities: (1) encouragement of strong, well-defined links between schools and the Samoan community in order to identify teaching/other support strategies that will enable the performance of Samoan students by building on the resources they bring to classrooms; and, (2) provision of resources that encourage extended literacy practices in homes, and that allow the use of classroom texts which are culturally relevant. In response to the first priority, a two-phase project is recommended. The first phase will involve an ethnographic study of literacy events involving Samoan students as they interact inside their classroom, and outside with their families and community with the purpose of describing and analysing their literacy practices from an emic, or insider's perspective. Using these data, literacy practices can be described, and used to assist in a reconceptualisation of what might constitute literacy and literacy teaching practice in the classroom. To achieve whole-school outcomes, a professional development action plan will need to be instigated to re-align existing perceptions and practices that accommodate a more culturally appropriate and inclusive approach to

teaching literacy. In order to monitor outcomes and gather evidence of improved literacy learning outcomes for students, effects on teacher practices, and literacy outcomes for students need to be monitored. This process will facilitate a theorised understanding of ways school communities can better support all students learning outcomes. In response to the second priority, a project that draws on the cultural resources of the Samoan community to develop bilingual texts is recommended.

Conclusion

Historically, explanations for the underachievement of language-minority groups have involved students and their families, their languages and cultures (McCaffery et al., 2003). These deficit explanations are to be challenged. As Nash (2000, p. 83) suggested, 'The school can too readily become, in communities that have no historical experience of its functions a repository of desperate hopes rather than planned strategies'. Thus, it is easy, but not useful to frame explanations using deficit explanations. While these explanations encourage blame, they do not readily suggest an effective response. It is important that strategic responses that build on the resources which students bring to their classroom are identified, valued and utilised. This will facilitate what McNaughton (2002, p. 20) described as a meeting of minds between students and teachers in classrooms; a process that allows continuity between 'how things are done at school and how things are done in the child's family and social setting'.

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