

Literacy Development and the Samoan Context - A Commentary Paper

Rasela Tufue-Dolgoy, National University of Samoa

Abstract

A common view concerning literacy is that 'it is one's passport in life' thus implying the notion of success. However, this begs the question - can every child read? What of the so called less able learner in the classroom. Would poor literacy skills be a contributing factor to their lack of success? This commentary paper focuses on the three aspects of literacy as highlighted in the literature with specific reference to the child with literacy concerns in the classroom. First the 'service delivery models in connection to meaningful learning, second is the significance of support and assisted learning, and finally 'parents as support agents.' In evaluating the literature a critique is provided from the Samoan context.

Introduction

This commentary deals with the following aspects of literacy development; service delivery models – making learning meaningful, assisted or supported learning as well as parents as support agents. Each topic emphasizes aspects of research on literacy development. Some of these studies are relevant to the situation in Samoa, my own local area some however, are not. Not surprisingly, culture, social structure, and the dual resistance and ambivalence regarding innovation are part and parcel of a somewhat complex and changing system of meaning, stratification and control where Samoan life and education are concerned. In this context, recent discussions on the role of special education has become in large part my responsibility to introduce to the teaching culture of this society, which lags far behind that of the West.

As an individual who is involved with teaching inclusive education amongst other education courses at the university level, getting involved in the debates I am presently discovering that the literature is still new to me. This is due to the fact that the concept of inclusive education was just introduced to the teacher education program a little more than a decade ago. To have something that is local to introduce to the debates is therefore still somewhat preliminary, although attempts will be made in this paper to do so. In Samoa, we do have an overall issue which is mostly with one another, to develop, promote and make the teaching population and the department of education aware of options developed on the outside that might be applied here. The issue is also in part one of cultural transformation. The above claims, based on my experience, will be read into the findings of these papers.

Literacy and the Cultural Context

Samoa has had a long standing relationship with literacy. The axiom, "knowledge is power" is also found in Samoan traditional discourse. Introduced in the biblical context by missionaries, literacy implied the mastery of western knowledge and the entrance into new areas of power

for Samoans (Dunlop 1993). Less than ten years after contact with the London Missionary Society in 1832, school attendance was widespread (Keesing 1934). With the consistent desire for literacy found throughout Samoa's history (Gilson 1970; Keesing 1934; Davidson 1967) there has been an equally consistent problem in sustaining functional literacy as standardized by both Samoan and Western evaluators. This problem has been based on a number of factors. In dealing with the following literature I shall suggest what these factors are and have been in Samoa as they relate to the literature being reviewed.

Service Delivery Models – Making Learning Meaningful.

The four articles reviewed in this section provide a starting point for the introduction of the issue of meaningfulness into the Samoan remedial educational culture. As a reminder this culture is integrally attached to the overarching culture of Samoa. Issues are raised in these articles that are applicable to the Samoan situation and can form the grounds for retesting Western findings within our indigenous population. For example, the utility of the approaches presented by Reetz and Hoover (1992) could be tested in the Samoan situation. However, as we shall see with other literature these authors' work implicitly raise issues of a cultural nature that may have to be dealt with in Samoa. Perhaps the most critical situation that can be read into the Samoan culture from the Reetz and Hoover article is the notion of social acceptability of remedial initiatives (1992: 14). Social acceptability applies to all aspects of intersubjectivity in Samoa. To be socially unacceptable can easily lead to ostracism, stigma, shame and its associated emotions of anger or depression.

Disabilities that are related to social acceptability, shame, anger and impression management would find correlates in Samoa. Any disability or social phenomenon outside the norm is viewed with suspicion here and would be considered a sign of deficiency. Deficiency is not viewed just as essential to the individual but to the individual's family as well. i.e., "next door lives the family of the stupid one." Physical and mental disabilities are often viewed as curses or as part of the motif of a family or individual being cursed. For example, the fa'afafine, the effeminate men of Samoa are called *mala*. The word *mala* derives from the word *malaia*, which means curse. Given the issues of identity remedial reading will be a delicate matter in Samoa in the beginning. It will require an analysis on the part of teachers, the faculty of education and ministry of education of the vulnerability of being different in this society.

The Kame'enui and Simmons (1999) study challenges the current situation in Samoa regarding the eventual development of an integrated and effective special education regimen. For example in the early 2000, there has been an attempt by the government to extreme special needs students into one school with some initial resistance. In the late 2000, I conducted a research on stakeholders' perceptions of the inclusive education policy that is introduced in Samoa. The findings indicated that in aiming to be inclusive the children seem more excluded within the regular classroom.

These initiatives for promoting inclusive education notwithstanding, one is not aware of any program in Samoa that supports a school-wide intervention model for beginning reading

children or those with reading disabilities. In addition, there is no in situ programme of remedial reading or what we refer to as reading recovery of any kind in Samoa. However, the Kame'enui and Simmons article provides clues to other issues that can be anticipated in Samoan once these initiatives are begun. Kame'enui and Simmons argue that "school district support of the intervention..." (1999: 105) is necessary for remedial reading to be successful. In Samoa there are school districts but they are constructed for administrative and inspection purposes only. Other initiatives are centrally organized by the national Ministry of Education. More authority may have to be given to the school districts in future.

Another issue is the priority of languages. Kame'enui and Simmons suggest that teachers "... are not prepared to address the learning and curricular needs ...for those whom English is a second language" (1999: 106). In Samoa we have a rather ambivalent situation that has yet to be worked out where education and reading are concerned. For almost all Samoans English is a second language. Samoan is given priority in the early primary school years but increasingly English takes over as a language of instruction. Samoan is the language of daily conversation throughout the country. It is the language of customary practices, parliament and in the home. Thus we may have two problems to be remedied in Samoa. The first is remedial reading in Samoan. The second is remedial reading in English.

Based on my own observation and experience there are a number of teachers who do not use a standard English as was the case with Brehaut's (1994) elderly subject. It has also been noticed from observations, that many teachers are reluctant to institute curricular changes. In my experience there has been a tendency for some curricular initiatives to be avoided or ignored by teachers. Perhaps as the authors attribute to Smylie (1988), if teachers were more certain of their English skills they would be more likely to adopt curricular changes.

Finally as the authors argue, "... if you don't read, your vocabulary knowledge doesn't increase and you fall further and further" ...behind (1999: 108). A number of Samoan children rarely bring books home from school, nor do many parents purchase books for children. The Pikulski (1994) article presents some material that would help in offsetting the situation in Samoa once a reading program is underway. They review five programs to improve reading deficiencies that may be valuable in programs to incorporate reading program strategies in future.

Assisted or Supported Learning

The assigned literature in this topic area assists the researcher to understand how the Samoan culture and system of education is situated in current debates. (Talty 1995: 6) presents a number of points that our educational and national cultures must deal with. For example political aspects of classroom activity have relevance for the Samoan classroom and Samoa in general. In Samoan classrooms "pseudo-questioning" is the norm, a practice that reflects a number of other aspects of Samoan intersubjective politics. The authority of Samoan teachers is unquestioned. This is a reflection of "ageism" and "role hierarchies" in Samoa that come out of

the traditional system. Democratic processes between those of perceived differential status are not often tolerated. Teachers set agendas, define situations just as they would in the traditional cultural system.

With respect to other interpersonal politics, the Samoan cultural system is extremely competitive. Village and inter-family rivalry, sometimes fierce, is the norm. I have perceived a very Samoan system of competition in a number of classrooms. It has at times taken the form of outright insults by children of other children who have not done well, or have gotten the wrong answers in classroom quizzes. It is not unusual to “rub it in” to the losing side. On the other hand there is also a traditional Samoan motif of minding relationships and forgiving and restoring harmony. Thus “... the political nature of classroom interaction...” (1995: 6) is one reflection of a multifarious Samoan motif of politics that requires recognition within our educational system if “interaction” and “conversationalism” are to be well understood, and if the latter is to be introduced.

There are aspects of Samoan culture that support conversationalism that the educational system could take into consideration in program development. Samoa is still a strongly defined oral tradition. The culture, its history, the histories of families, and much traditionally legal discourse is passed on orally and stored in the memories of the Samoan people. Some individuals are known as the custodians of the traditional oral knowledge of the family. Samoan children learn traditions through listening and observing. Observations include everything from family and national traditions to the traditional technology of Samoa which includes farming and plantation work, fishing, boat building, and some hunting practices.

There is also a Samoan motif of turn taking. Ideally it is meant to maintain harmonious relations between individuals and groups. This is usually observed in two important areas. The first is in the sharing of family traditional titles intergenerationally. The second is the quasi-democratic tradition of allowing each person to speak in turn when family and village meetings are being held. What one says is of course based on one’s status. It is not usually the case that one chooses to vote or speak against the prevailing authorities, but there is turn taking, nevertheless. At meetings, those who have not spoken are usually encouraged to do so at some point during the meetings. It is a signifier of inclusion and the individual’s competence in aspects of oratory.

Small talk is also prevalent in Samoa and takes its own form. It usually is characterized by an avoidance of most knowledge claims and often takes the form of bantering, humour and satire. Thus parents as tutors (Kemp 1992) might be effective given the aforementioned traditions, and turn taking a possible technical development that might be effective in Samoa where initiatives in reading are concerned. In addition a key attitude to develop in adults would be that time spent on at risk children would be worth it to the family corporation; that lack of initial competence is not a curse, nor firmly established or based on factors essential to the individual.

In spite of a hierarchical system there is also a Samoan motif of sharing between friends or within one’s traditional social grouping where one’s ascribed status is often played out. Thus sharing of reading experiences (Senechal and Cornell 1993) would be a technique to be explored

in Samoan schools. In addition, the viability of both techniques used by Senechal and Cornell (1993) suggests that perhaps other strategies, including those incorporating Samoan forms developed locally may be suitable for testing in future initiatives in Samoa. (Kemp 1992: 202) anticipates another problem that Samoa faces in his notion that "... we need to know the social contexts within which helping-to-read takes place". Once again I turn to aspects of the culture that require analysis and understanding. The impatience with the slow learner or slow reader may illicit impatience on the part of parents for a number of reasons common to Samoans. There is a tacit non-clarification rule in Samoa. That is Samoans in authority expect individuals after a certain age not to ask for clarification of commands or instructions.

It is not unusual for parents to lose patience with children as a result of a request for clarification. Such requests could result in verbal chastising. Children with learning disabilities could be discounted early in their lives, a child could be withdrawn from school and directed into manual or plantation labour. Poorly educated or at risk children may leave the family, move to another family within the extended corporation. Very large families may tend to only educate those who progress "normally" and immediately give up on those who don't. I have heard it said that it is not worth the time and money to stay with them until they eventually develop. I would hypothesize that this motif is a source of a great deal of psychological malaise in Samoa, in particular as higher education has become increasingly valued and rewarded. The education of children may not necessarily be provided to the child for its intrinsic value or for the future use of the individual. Children are educated in large part for the benefit of the family and the aggrandizement of its status and material resources. This is a reality in Samoa based on the traditional system based on indigenous exchange values. Thus negative prejudice discouraging to a child's development may be established early in the child's development due to some of these cultural motifs. Techniques like "scaffolding", and undoubtedly others require an educated, well-informed parental group, willing to abandon entrenched ideas about the value of educating at risk children.

Parents as Support Agents

The Furniss (1993) paper reviews literature up to the early 1990s. Family literacy consists of parents taking part in the education of children to varying degrees (Furniss 1993: 137-138). Her review suggests a rather complex interdependence between a set of factors where family literacy is concerned. These include resources of school and home, the issue of the possible social reproduction of reading and writing difficulties and the availability of funding for resources and re-education. While she ends her paper with a warning from Nickse (1991) regarding claims made for the effectiveness of family literacy (in Furniss, 1993:145) the literature reviewed is generally positive about the relationship between parents and their children's literacy.

While a valuable piece, I believe that Furniss is uncritical of the social context in which the literature she reviews is situated. She tends to reify the concepts of "home" and "school" without providing due analysis of the cultural context in which they are situated. In Samoa,

home and school implies relationships of power, jurisdiction and exclusivity. There is little about this relationship that implies that a process of mutual cooperation could exist between the two spheres of influence in pursuit of the common goal of reading intervention.

The Samoan context, however, supports some of her findings. The literature on Samoa has indicated that the latter is a highly stratified and authoritarian society (Macpherson and Macpherson 1987). I have found its authoritarian nature prevents comfortable relationships between home and school. Teachers are considered to be in authority and parents are seldom invited to input into curriculum or tutoring. I have noticed that there are differences in Samoan family literacy activity based on status and class. For example, anecdotal evidence indicates that those students whose parents are well educated or are part of a subculture of obtaining higher education tend to do better than other children where literacy is concerned. This is due to the fact that literacy practices and English speaking begin early for these children.

There are major issues between centre and periphery in Samoa. Generally speaking schools outside the one urban area of Apia have few library resources and a learning context that is thought to be less conducive to literacy than in the urban area. There are a myriad of schools in the urban area, few of which are private and well funded by parents who are able to pay. Thus it may be safe to say that there are status and class issues in Samoa based on wealth. There are no programs in place in the government schools, which constitute the overwhelming majority of schools that encourage home- school literacy activity. For over three generations many rural adults have sent their children to Apia for education rather than keep them in the village setting. There is a general belief that the home is not a place to promote literacy and that it is the school that should find the resources to do so.

The Coots (1998) paper deals with parent participation in schooling in the context of children with delayed development. Coots found a number of factors that influenced parent participation. These included the family's socio-economic status, the status of the child, and the attitudes of and beliefs of parents about school. While an interesting preliminary outcome, with some statistically significant results being claimed, these results are not generalizable due to a small sample (n=35 families; n=103 children) which was not randomly selected. They may, however, fall into the category of a pretest, whose hypotheses can be subject to more scientifically rigid methodology in future.

In contemplating applying Coots' methodology the variable categories utilized would have to be modified and operationalized for the local context. For example, family resources should include the number of adults at home. A large number of adults at home is not uncommon in Samoa, in addition to parents.

The cultural factors noted above notwithstanding, if well educated they can provide a valuable resource for the teaching of children. It is hypothesized that informational resources would show an extremely skewed distribution due to the few people in Samoa who possess educational resources at home and the few libraries that are accessible to children. In spite of growing disparities due to class, socio-economic status may not necessarily correlate with educational level and wealth, due to the peculiarities of the Samoan system of reciprocity and exchange, and

the system of choosing chiefs of families who are the prime organizers of these social forms. This system can lead to the constant depletion and replenishing of resources due to the traditional Samoan system of exchange. What would be a possibly equally valuable indicator would be the district one lives in and the amount of the pooled resources of all adults, the status of one's title, or if one's father is a pastor. Each category would have to be examined, perhaps by informed Samoans or with a pretest as to how and if they should be operationalized. It is more likely that a preliminary study using qualitative methodologies, participant observation, and a variation on content analysis of the resources themselves would lead to the discovery of categories that would be more culturally relevant sources of variation of parent schooling measurement that could be used in future studies.

A basic assumption of McCarthy's review of the literature on literacy activities in the home environment is that "virtually all children in a literate society have numerous experiences with print before beginning school because literacy practices are embedded within the social fabric of family life" (McCarthy 2000: 145). In the context from which I and other Samoans have derived our literacy, this claim is defensible but again in a decidedly local context.

One can argue that the most widely read book in Samoa is the Judeo-Christian bible in its Samoan translation. There can be little doubt that most children have been exposed on a daily basis to adults reading the bible. This example supports the author's claim. I have found very few Samoans who employ literacy for other than religious purposes. A few read Western novels, and those involved in school work will on occasion borrow books from an extremely impoverished library system.

McCarthy's argument of differences between home and school perceptions of literacy, discursive styles and perception of the roles of teachers and parents has been independently debated in Samoa over a number of years. Conservative Samoan educators have argued for a "Samoan only" set of discourses and pedagogical techniques conducted exclusively in the Samoan language (personal observation; Aiono Fanaafi, unpublished communication). This argument falls on the side of domestic priority, which is partly supportive of McCarthy's argument. On the other hand this raises the issue of the Samoan context, i.e. the home, as an impediment to literacy and learning based on the argument of the primacy of the Samoan language and adult needs. Samoan custom where adult-child relations are concerned may have to be modified in certain contexts for functional literacy to become firmly entrenched in Samoa based on adult participation. This viewpoint is opposite to the argument proposed by McCarthy.

Callahan et al. (1998) studied the effect of the participation of parents in the homework activities of children who were "at risk" in the study of mathematics. The result showed that the intervention of parents led to overall performance that "... increased significantly during intervention (Callahan et al. 1998: 135). In addition to issues with the study such as sample size and lack of a control group, issues that I also felt were problematic, the design seems over-controlled by team leaders, pretests and validity checks, to the extent that one wonders if a "Hawthorne Effect" might have in fact resulted from this design. These issues notwithstanding, I

was driven by the desire to carry out a similar study in the Samoan context and to see whether this study can be replicated in Samoa. In late 2000, I carried out a small scale study on parental participation in children's education in Samoa (Tufue 2016). The design was more explorative in nature for I was interested in participants' views on parents' involvement in children's education. The finding supported Callahan et al. (1998) study.

Conclusion

The above commentary on the literature reviewed has set it in the context of Samoan custom. A number of questions are begged from this review that should provide a rich basis for future research in inclusive education and reading recovery in particular that I will be able to direct teacher students towards. As I and my colleagues become more familiar with the debates in the literature I believe we will be able to make valuable additions to them.

References

- Brehaut, L., (1994). Starting from scratch: Teaching an elderly man to read. *Good Practice in Australia Adult Literacy and Basic Education*, 25, 11-13, 15.
- Callahan, K., Rademacher, J. A., & Hildreth, b. I. (1998). The effect of parent participation in strategies to improve the homework performance of students who are at risk. *Remedial and Special Education*, 19(3), 131-141.
- Coots, J. J. (1998). Family resources and parent participation in schooling activities for their children with developmental delays. *The Journal of Special Education*, 31(4), 498-520.
- Davidson, J. W. (1967). *Samoa mo Samoa: The Emergence of the Independent State of Western Samoa*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- Dunlop, P. (1993). "Samoan Writing: Search for the Written Fagogo" *Readings in Pacific Literature*, ed Paul Sharrad. Wollongong., New South Wales: New Literatures Research Centre, University of Wollongong.
- Furniss, E. (1993). Family Literacy: Another Fad or a new insight: *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 16(2), 136-148.
- Gilson, R. P. (1970). *Samoa 1830 to 1900: The politics of a Multi-Cultural Community*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Homan, S. P. Celsius, J. ., & Hite, C. (1993). Effects of repeated readings and no repetitive strategies on students; fluency and comprehension. *Journal of Educational Research*, 87(2), 94-99.
- Kame'enui, E. J., & Simmons, D. C. (1999). Beyond effective practices to schools as host environments: Building and sustaining a school – wide intervention model in beginning reading for all children. *Australasian Journal of Special Education*, 23 (203), 100-127.
- Keesing, F. M. (1934). *Modern Samoa*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Kemp, M. (1992). There's more to listening than meets the ear: Interaction between oral readers and their parent as tutors. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 30(3), 197-223.
- Mc Carthey, S. J. (2000). Home-school connections: review of the literature, 93(3), 145-153.
- Mcpherson, C., & Mcpherson, L. (1987). "Towards and Explanation of recent trends in Suicide in Western Samoa". *Man*. 22(2), 305-310.

- Nickse, R. (1991). *A typology of family and intergenerational literacy programs: implications for evaluation*. Paper presented to the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, Illinois.
- Pikulski, J. J. (1994). Preventing reading failure: A review of five effective programs. *The Reading Teacher*, 48(1), 30-39.
- Reetz, L. J., & Hoover, J. H. (1992). The acceptability and utility of five reading approaches as judged by middle school learning disabled students. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, 7, 11-15
- Senechal, M., & Cornell, E. H. (1993). Vocabulary acquisition through shared reading experience. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 28 (4), 361-373.
- Smylie, M. (1988). The enhancement function of staff development: Organisational and psychological antecedents to individual teacher change. *American Educational Research Journal*, 25, 1-30.
- Talty, F. (1995). Small talk around big books: Interaction or conversationalisation? *The Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 18(1), 5-18.
- Tufue, R. (2016) *Parental participation in children's education: A Samoan case*. Germany Omni Scriptum. LAP LAMBERT Academic Publishing.