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## **Pacific-Asian Education**

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## Guest editorial

They say it takes a village to raise a child – this special issue of *Pacific Asian Education* is testament to a different take on that old adage – it takes a community of scholars to complete a journal issue.

This special issue had its genesis in January 2018 when, with Ralph Brown from Skillset New Zealand, I facilitated a writing retreat for academic staff from the National University of Samoa's Faculty of Education. The workshop was hosted by the faculty's Dean, Tofilau Dr Faguele Suaalii, the Head of School, Fuaialii Dr Tagataese Tupu Tuia and organised by various staff members. Over two days, the staff shared and refined their article ideas based on research they had completed or were intending to complete.

For the rest of the year, the staff held writing support groups to encourage each other to meet the deadline for their first full draft. The drafts were sent to New Zealand where blind peer reviewers provided feedback to the authors. I later returned to Samoa to hold individual writing conferences with each set of article authors so that they could produce a stronger version for the next round where their revisions would be carefully checked. In July 2019, the authors presented their papers at a local conference, where they received further feedback from their peers and teachers and principals from local schools. Finally, the articles were honed to the point where the final acceptances could be announced.

That was not the end, of course. Dr Alexis Siteine, editor of *Pacific Asian Education*, undertook further stylistic and formatting amendments before the articles that appear in this issue were ready to go to print. The articles went from her hands to be laid out in the journal's format and then on to the University of Hawaii where they will be published on line and in hard copy.

The articles highlight the different research interests and projects conducted by the staff at the National University of Samoa. The research the authors discuss arises from authentic challenges they face in their work at the university, in teacher professional development or education policy. How well does the university cater for first year students? How are teachers in the upgrade programme finding their experience? Why are upgrade teachers struggling with mathematics? How can food and textile technology teachers be better supported? Did the policy of extended teaching hours lead to improvements in student achievement? How well prepared are physical education teachers for the reality of the classroom? What are the strengths of a thematic approach to classroom teaching? And, what constraints do women in leadership positions face? While the questions are specific to the Samoan context, the results of the research studies and the discussion of the issues will resonate with many readers around the Pacific and further afield.

I tell the story of the development of this special issue in detail because many of us who sit in well-resourced academic institutions with generous research funding, leave

and publication support can be oblivious to our colleagues in less developed countries where institutions might set similar publication expectations but lack the funding or infrastructure to support staff to achieve those goals. This special issue only came to fruition because we connected with a community of scholars from across the Pacific who each in their own way generously supported the authors through the process to reach publication point.

It is important to note that the choice of journal was also deliberate – not just because it focuses on content of interest to the Pacific (and Asia) but because it has a commitment to giving voice to scholars in nations that are not always noticed on the world stage. Thank you to the many people who were part of this journey. I hope that the authors enjoy their success and that we have provided a model for others to follow. I will end with an appropriate Māori whakataukī (proverb):

*Ehara taku toa i te toa takitahi, engari he toa takitini*

Success is not mine alone but only comes from the support of others.

*Professor Carol Mutch, Guest editor  
The University of Auckland  
December 2019*

## **Women's leadership in Samoa**

**Silia Finau Pa'usisi**

### **Abstract**

Women are under-represented in village councils, the local judiciary of traditional village communities in Samoa. The participation rate of women leaders is relatively low as the total population of these forums is predominantly male. Village councils consist of holders of matai titles only. Of the 240 traditional villages in Samoa, 41 do not allow women to be bestowed with matai titles. Additionally, 34 other traditional villages do not allow resident female matai to participate in village council meetings. Therefore, these restrictions heavily contribute to the under-representation of women in the local judiciary of traditional village communities. This article aims to explore reasons for women's under-representation as well as investigating why village rules have been established to restrict women from holding matai titles, and not recognising their participation in village council meetings. It is possible that tensions may have existed between patriarchal administration and potential women leaders who challenge the status quo.

In this article, I draw on the literature which examines the perspectives through a feminist lens to contextualise the suppression women have encountered while striving for leadership positions and relate this to village councils of traditional communities in Samoa. A mixed method methodology consisting of semi-structured interviews, observations and document analysis gathers information for the study. The findings reveal that cultural, social, and religious obstacles restrain potential women leaders from accessing leadership posts in local government. Other interesting aspects of the findings include the communal and non-hierarchical nature of women in empowering themselves when advocating for their rights to leadership.

### **Keywords**

Representation, Participation, Patriarchal, Administration, Potential, Challenge, Leadership

### **Introduction**

The authority to establish rules and punishments in traditional village communities rests with the village council. This forum ensures that all village citizens conform to ascribed norms and sanctions. Therefore, women leaders, as the minority group, struggle to counter the rules that restrict them from holding matai titles and not recognising their participation in village council meetings.

This article highlights the obstacles Samoan women experience while striving for leadership posts in village councils. It also provides a platform for the voices of suppressed women leaders, acknowledging their engagement in enabling activities. Through a *talanoa* research framework, this study generates dialogue about the leadership oppression faced by women in traditional communities in Samoa. The study also advocates for potential women leaders to take up leadership challenges. Employing a *talanoa* research framework provides a frame to educate village women about their rights to leadership; challenge the mind-set of women subordinates; encourage prospective women leaders; and generate dialogue about general gender inequalities in Samoan traditional communities. The article also appeals to village councils to re-examine the rules that hamper women from holding matai titles as this is the gateway to other leadership opportunities.

This article scrutinises the hierarchical leadership structure of traditional villages in Samoa to determine the limitations placed on women leaders. It makes reference to the original leadership authority of the *tama'ita'i Samoa* before foreign contact. Examples of women's suppressions are drawn from other Pacific cultures and from further afield, to depict the constraints faced by women leaders in general. Specific references focus on women leaders in village communities in Samoa. To authenticate women leaders' oppression and the implications of this, the article critiques the patriarchal leadership phenomenon of the *Fa'amatai* system through a feminist theoretical lens.

## Background

Leadership of most Pacific Islands is generally patriarchal, and male leaders ensure that essential values and beliefs of the communities are maintained. One of the integral parts sustained and safeguarded is male leadership territory. In Tonga, most traditional communities desire to keep the monarchical system (Taufe'ulungaki, 2009). In Samoa, the *Fa'amatai* System is dominant and forms all types of administration for social and religious institutions on the local and national levels (Toleafoa, 2007). Teairo (2009) notes that all Pacific cultures have indigenous principles, theories, and images blended into their leadership models. These are executed in ways that achieve the conservation of cultural values and beliefs (Te'o, 2011). These cultural values and beliefs emphasise the importance of patriarchal rule.

The two dominant leadership frameworks in most Pacific countries are the *big man* and *chiefly leadership* cultural models (Bhim, 2006). Bhim notes that the status of big men emerges from demonstrating unique skills such as magic, bravery, and wealth. The ascribed status legitimates these particular chiefs to govern their traditional societies. On the other hand, chiefly titles in Samoa are inherited. However, some chiefly titles are accomplished through political influences. The power of matai in Samoa is mandated and not to be challenged. The matai system in village communities is autocratic (Lewin, Lippit, & White, 1939) especially with decision making. The autocratic authority of patriarchal leaders is adhered to as it is the norm. Hence, those potential women leaders who intentionally challenge the status quo, struggle.

Samoa myths, genealogies, and traditional roles of women demonstrate the leadership power attributed to females as highly regarded people (Le Tagalao, 1996).



However, amendments in traditional leadership framing influenced by colonisation and Christianity have diminished the leadership power of women. As a result, the number of male leaders in many traditional societies continues to increase (Schoeffel, 1979). Patriarchal leadership emerged in the mid-17th century and became very active in all traditional village communities in Samoa. In their efforts to empower more people in the leadership arena, Samoans have generated new titles and allowed numerous titles to be singly or jointly held. The recruitment of new titles predominantly involves males – thus limiting opportunities for prospective females to hold matai titles and participate in the leadership arena of traditional village communities.

### **Feminist theory**

Feminist theory is an outcome of the general movement to empower women worldwide (Malabre, 1978). According to the Malabre, the feminist movement can be broadly defined as a critique of male authority together with efforts to change it. The explanation warrants using feminist theory to scrutinise the obstacles Samoan women encounter in striving for leadership positions in local government. Feminist theory is about social justice, advocating for marginalised women, and attending to injustices (Barton, 2006). The notion of promoting social justice is fitting for this study given the suppression of women leaders in traditional communities in Samoa. According to Tong (1989), feminist theory helps people to honour the feminine and encourages both men and women to be more authentic. Honouring women's capabilities is one of the main foci of this study.

Feminist theory in the Pacific context is about the equality of all people, and social justice (Griffen, 1989). The concept of social justice, according to Griffen (1989), incorporates feminist perspectives of Pacific women from Guam, Tonga, Tuvalu, Kiribati, Cook Islands and Samoa. The same author concludes that Pacific feminists strive for opportunities to participate equally with men in decision-making forums. Similarly, this study aims to provide platforms for Samoan women leaders in village communities to be as equally involved as men in decision making. Most of the theoretical characteristics of feminist theory were evident in the interviews and observations – thus affording the eligibility of these theoretical lenses in validating the information provided by participants of the study.

### **Methods**

This qualitative research involved the participation of 15 women leaders selected through a purposive sampling technique. The selection takes into account the experience and wealth of knowledge women have about the investigated topic (Ryan, Coughlan, & Cronin, 2007). The intention of gaining detailed, rich information (Patton, 2002) was the main reason why the research employed the purposive sampling approach. It was envisaged that the selected women would freely provide confident and thorough responses to the interview questions. Patton (2002) also alludes to the strategic nature of the purposive method in ensuring that substantial information about the explored topic is extracted.

All participants were Samoan females whose ages range from 50 to 76 years. They were chiefs, orators, or holders of managerial positions in government ministries, non-government organisations and private entities. The 15 participants' anonymity was protected through a numerical system. In this article, the responses of each individual quoted can be traced since direct quotations from the data are numbered accordingly. Standard ethics of anonymity were observed, and each of the 15 participant interviews was conducted either in English or Samoan, depending on the participant's choice. The English interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, while the Samoan interviews were later translated into English. Participants received a transcribed version and final script of their interview to ensure accuracy. The length of the interviews varied from one hour to one hour and 45 minutes.

Interviews were facilitated by the talanoa research methodology, a Pacific conversational approach where people converse in a language of their choice (Vaiolleti, 2006). Talanoa in the interviews focused on the four research questions listed as follows:

1. What are the challenges that prevent Samoan women from being traditional leaders?
2. What is leadership for women in traditional village communities in Samoa?
3. What are the strategies Samoan women use to serve as leaders?
4. How do Samoan social philosophies, cultural beliefs, and perceptions inform women's leadership?

The main research question was: *“What are the gender inequalities pertaining to Samoan women's leadership, representation, and participation in the local government of village communities?”*

Participants were given a choice of language to use in the interviews. The nine rural participants selected the Samoan language, while the six urban participants selected bilingualism. Manu'atu (2000) claims that the context in which people activate talanoa is both formal and informal. Talanoa at the participants' homes in village communities started off with a formal address in which the sacredness of the land, spirits of ancestors and family gods were all acknowledged. This address is significant regarding asking for permission to allow the researcher on to the people's land. Talanoa upholds practices that elevate people's identity, strengthen contextual cultural elements, and simplify evidence of activities in the Pacific context (Anae, Mila-Schaaf, Coxon, Mara, & Sanga, 2010). Rural participants were overwhelmed and appreciative of the opportunity to participate in the research. They took their time, and happily responded to questions in the tranquillity of their homes. Participants acknowledged their ancestors and family gods who passed over the leadership knowledge and skills. Nabobo-Baba (2005) alludes to a major significant element of talanoa whereby people, protocols, and ethical values shape the direction of the research process. The researcher and participants upheld the value of respect as the talanoa progressed. However, there were spaces for side-tracked conversations and short intervals for parties. The researcher gifted the participants with money and groceries at the end of the talanoa sessions; reciprocally, the hosts prepared meals to share with the researcher. The researcher went back to the participants to validate the transcripts to ensure the recording captured the participants' viewpoints.

Participants were informed that information provided and their identities would be anonymised. Therefore, participants are known as Participant 1 to Participant 15 in the study.

## Results

Results from participant interviews identified cultural, religious, and social barriers as major hurdles that restrain potential women leaders from participating in local government of traditional village communities in Samoa. These major hurdles are continuously enforced by rules and practices and are monitored and controlled by local government. Participant 5 strongly refutes the controlling manner of local government by saying:

*These male leaders control local government in ways to suit them and their egos. They always look for excuses of convenience to defend their gender-biased decisions. This is why they never allow women to participate in meetings of local government because they don't want to be challenged.*

Participant 8 lamented the same sentiment:

*It's disheartening to witness the absence of women in decision making because of the male leaders' roadblock. These leaders should provide equal opportunities for both genders instead of sparing the decision-making arena for themselves only. This is very selfish of them.*

Participant 2 specifically points to a cultural barrier established by male leaders. In her own words she says:

*Male leaders always think it is culturally appropriate for them to lead organisations of any type. Be it the family, village, church, district, even politics. This cultural belief is generally expected, supported and practiced. The worst thing is, it diminishes the chance[s] for prospect[ive] women leaders.*

The opinions of the quoted participants portray their disappointment with male leaders who establish systems that disadvantage prospect women leaders.

There was a strong willingness in participants to advocate for potential women to be bestowed with matai titles, and their participation to be recognised in village council meetings. However, restrictions force them to utilise their leadership skills in women's committees where they are actively involved in running small businesses and income-generating activities (Fairbairn-Dunlop, 1996).

Participant 10 expressed readiness to fight for the rights of women leaders. She says:

*Women need to exercise their rights to leadership. They should hold matai titles of their families and join local government to challenge the status quo. Women leaders must participate in village council meetings. No one should take away this privilege from women.*

This quote sends a strong message to all women who are striving for leadership

positions. It also encourages potential women leaders to be more proactive in challenging male leaders' decisions.

Some of the participants describe how they secretly confront male leaders without upsetting the cultural protocols of local government. Cultural protocols are central to people's everyday life. The sacredness of cultural protocols should not be compromised as this results in punishments. Consequently, women maintain peace while covertly convincing male leaders of the significance of women leaders' participation.

Despite the hindrances, women have explored empowerment avenues to uplift the standard of living in communities. Additionally, 75% of all community women have participated in leadership training and entrepreneurial initiatives (Samoa Women Empowerment Project Report, 2015). Women's participation in these activities proves that their lower status in the hierarchical structure of village communities does not undermine their perception of development and achievements (Le Tagalao, 1996). Women's active participation in developmental activities is evident in the following quotes:

Participant 1:

*I enjoy learning leadership trainings to gain confidence in my role as a leader. I also love to engage in money generating activities to raise the standard of living of my family. I don't worry about male leaders because they don't work hard, but talk hard.*

Participant 3:

*I focus mainly on developing my family because I am happy to witness my own achievements. I claim that I am successful in all these because of my effective leadership skills.*

Participant 11:

*Men cannot do what the women do. Men spend most of their time talking and dreaming. Women have proven themselves very successful because they plan well. Women work extremely hard to ensure that their families are secured financially, socially and spiritually.*

Participant 15:

*As a woman leader, I move forward with the developments all the time. I am happy to provide the social and financial needs of my family. My family takes advice from me because they see how hard-working I am. I am a leader in my own right.*

In summary, women claim that they are eligible to hold leadership positions because they have proven to be successful in the things they do. Unfortunately, they are denied the right to leadership in these contexts, and are assumed to be supporters and advisers to male leaders.

## Cultural challenges

Historically, Samoan society was patriarchal in terms of leadership since the advent of colonisation and Christianity in 1830 (Te’o, 2011). Prior to foreign contact, Queen Salamasina, holder of the four paramount chiefly titles (pāpā) reigned for more than 60 years (Meleisea, 1987). Prior to Queen Salamasina’s administration, the war goddess Nafanua was the initial ruler (Te’o, 2011). Participants during the talanoa sessions made reference to the matriarchal leadership that harmonised the country for many years. According to Participant 4:

*The country lived in peace and harmony during Queen Salamasina’s time in power. People paid her a lot of respect because she was loving, caring and kind. She did not do any dirty politics but made sure her people lived happily. Now, these male leaders do corrupt practices which upset every single institution in the country.*

Women’s strong voices were echoed regarding their appreciation of female leadership. Participant 7, in comparing leadership styles of males and females, said:

*The patriarchal power in village councils is regulatory, governing and controlling. This leadership style contradicts with that of the females who are more accommodating and flexible.*

Participant 9 alluded to the originality of patriarchal leadership. She said:

*Male leadership is a Victorian era concept imposed by London Missionaries in 1830. It’s a pity because this is now seen as a norm. But, if we wind the clock back, we would see the effective leadership styles of Nafanua and Queen Salamasina as recorded in our myths.*

Participant 14 commented on the ingrained mentality of male leadership, saying:

*It’s very hard to change the patriarchal leadership as the idea is accepted generally. Whether women like it or not, it’s there, and the practices say it all. If I concentrate on improving my family, people would see the good leadership skills in me. So, hopefully, the mind-set will change.*

The selection of matai is another influencing factor in women’s leadership. The nomination of matai titles is primarily male, as they are more capable of using Samoan proverbs in traditional speeches than women. Coupled with this is the belief that men are salient and fitting for the leadership task in the eyes of the community. This ingrained mentality makes women’s struggle for leadership very hard. However, women leaders do not dwell on this suppression, but vow to move forward in their development. Participant 6 said:

*We need to educate people to change their mind-set about leadership. However, we shouldn’t push our agenda too far in case we ruin relationships and upset the cultural protocols of village communities.*

Participant 12 thought along the same lines, stating:

*What we should do is ensure that our families live in comfortable houses, eat healthy food, and wear good clothes. If we are able to provide necessities for our families that is the best that counts. Successful leadership is about achieving our goals, whatever they are.*

In Samoa, 41 out of the 240 village councils do not allow women to hold matai titles. A total of 34 other villages do not recognise the participation of women matai in village council meetings (Center for Samoan Studies, 2015). The reasons for the rules include the inappropriateness of relatives in discussing fragile issues and sharing jokes in village meetings. However, this argument is claimed by participants of this study as an excuse of convenience for male leaders. The women further argue that a village council meeting is responsible for officiating rules and sanctions, but not a place for less important business. Participant 13 said:

*The deep-rooted notion of male leadership has to be changed. Otherwise, women leaders continue to suffer the consequences.*

Participant 15 strongly refuted the reason for refusing women in village councils. She said:

*Male leaders never run out of excuses to safeguard and preserve the village council territory for themselves. They enjoy receiving things gifted to them by the villagers for doing nothing. The beauty of the Samoan culture is spoiled by these corrupt practices.*

### **Social challenges**

Assumptions that attach women to child rearing, taking care of old people, and domestic tasks are other restrictions for prospective women leaders. These ascribed roles make women vulnerable because doing otherwise is going against the norms of the society. Respecting male leaders who are physically seen in leadership roles is another contributing factor to rejecting female leaders. Regularity in attendance to village activities secures leadership positions for males. Consequently, the respect for prospective women leaders gradually diminishes as not playing leadership roles contributes to their ineligibility to compete in leadership posts. Participant 8 said:

*We were the most sacred siblings until the missionaries came and said that we should raise children, nurse old people, and take care of the welfare of the family. This is not fair because such ascribed roles diminish the status of the Tama'ita'i Samoa. Now, people expect us to do all [the] domestic chores and treat us like door mats.*

Participant 1 expressed the same sentiments by saying:

*We are hardly seen in leadership positions because we are fully occupied with roles assigned to us by males. This is wrong because it makes us feel small and unworthy. But, if you do a survey of our potentials, you will be surprised to see that we are more capable leaders than males.*

Women leaders partake in empowerment leadership training to refresh, explore, and gain new approaches to leadership (Samoa Women Empowerment Report, 2015). However, they are confined to leading women's committees. Therefore, they are not constituted leaders because of their absence in the decision making of the village. Consequently, these culture-oriented, conservative norms limit women's chances of becoming leaders (Le Tagaloa, 1996). The restrictions put pressure on prospective women leaders and the general population of women. This pressure is relieved through the women's following expressions.

Participant 15 said:

*The community is blind-folded by the stupid mentality of associating women to domestic tasks. This strengthens the belief that women are only capable of leading the women's committee, a smaller organisation that equips women with skills to do domestic tasks.*

Participant 12 contributed to the discussion by saying:

*Women always look out for empowerment avenues to boost their morale and lift their profile. But, the community's expectation of women tarnishes their efforts. We are like animals in a cage and we are striving for ways to get out.*

Participant 3 commented similarly:

*It is surprising to see that the mentality of not accepting women leaders is deeply rooted in the mind-set of village community people who are supposed to be living in a world of changes. These people refuse to acknowledge the leadership capabilities of women.*

Unfortunately, male leaders remain in power for most, if not all, traditional village communities, while women leaders endure as the minority.

Another barrier is government representatives (male and female) receiving unequal remuneration packages for the same job descriptions. The work of government representatives include the recording of births and deaths, promoting harmony in the village, enforcing law and order, preparing matai certificates, and encouraging health and sanitation activities (Internal Affairs Act 1995). However, the salary of the male representative is \$100 more than the female. Consequently, the male representative appears superior to the woman. Participant 10, who is a government representative, said:

*The Internal Affairs' Division should raise women's salary to be equivalent with men because they perform the same roles. Therefore, I cannot see the logic in not having the same salary.*

Another government representative, Participant 13, said:

*The issue of salaries has been raised in our meetings many times, but falls on [deaf] ears. Our supervisor, the manager of the Internal Affairs usually says that our concern is noted. However, there is no action done, which is very sad.*

The unequal treatment of women in the national government level strengthens the practices of 41 village councils that restrict women from holding matai titles. Women strongly disagree with this practice as it implies that men hold higher leadership positions than women.

### **Religious challenges**

Patriarchal leadership, a concept prevalent in the Victorian era was introduced to the Samoan society when the missionaries from the London Missionary Society arrived in 1830. The notion was well supported by the introduction of Biblical values and beliefs. Participant 6 explained her experience:

*These imposed ethics resulted in diminishing the status of the Tama'ita'i Samoa who was the most elite to being a commoner. She is now playing the advisory role, but not the sole decision maker. She is just like the wife of a pastor who advises the congregation on what to do. Sadly enough, the tama'ita'i's advice is not considered most of the time.*

Participant 3 contributed to the discussion by saying:

*Many alterations have been made since the introduction of male leadership. For example, the missionaries' wives prepared young Samoan women to cook for their husbands when they are married. In the past, it was the brother who prepared the sister's meals. This practice is a real disgrace that weakens the brother's respect for his sister [feagaiga].*

In the meantime, the adopted role now becomes a Samoan society norm. It is evident that young women cook for men in the household, strengthening the leadership position of men, and weakening the leadership status of women.

Religious teachings also enforce male leadership, emphasising the rationale that as God, a man, is the head of the congregation, therefore the man is the analogical equivalent head of the household. Participant 9 expressed her disagreement to such analogy by saying:

*Some people take it to the extreme that when walking, the wife does not walk alongside with the husband. She walks behind to illustrate the hierarchical level difference between the leader and the subordinate. Women who behave in such manner respect and honour the godly belief. I personally feel that this is an injustice.*

Participant 1 contributed to the discussion:

*Women should hold equal status, equal rights and equal everything to men. Men should not be superior. The problem is, some women encourage this wrong practice of respecting males as the supreme ruler and leader. This practice should be stopped.*



Participant 3 sympathised with the former participants, she said:

*I pity the women who think that their husbands hold a higher status than them. This typical thinking is wrong and should not be encouraged. Equal leadership rights should be enforced and practised all the time.*

The majority of participants of this study expressed their disappointment with such practices and claimed them to be discriminatory. The three mainline denominations of the Congregational Christian Church, Catholic, and Methodist, neither train nor ordain women priests. However, the Congregational Christian Church is progressive in other countries like New Zealand, Australia, and Great Britain, as they now ordain women ministers. The Samoan branch is still conservative. Because of the absence of women on church podiums, they are considered unworthy of preaching the Bible and performing religious tasks. Therefore, women do not constitute capable leaders. Women are given the opportunity only to organise supporting activities and women's organisations in churches. The embedded value of women's inappropriateness for leadership positions in churches adds more pressure to the women's struggle for leadership. Participant 4 put blame on the church by saying:

*Church ministers are so territorial that they don't want women to share their space. We count on them being religious, but they are hypocrites. They are perfect in manipulating the system to suit their needs. Therefore, they don't want women to interfere with their business.*

Participant 11, in her analysis of the situation, said:

*The structure of the three mainline churches in Samoa is so rigid. The leaders cannot accept changes happening in other countries, especially with ordaining women ministers. They do not want women to [equal] them in leadership roles. They are very selfish and territorial.*

Participant 6 strongly opposed the church's restriction on women by saying:

*I condemn these discriminatory practices of the church. Not allowing women to be ordained ministers [is] unreligious. Church leaders need to think twice because women are ... strong supporters of church developments. Churches never move forward without women, and men cannot function on their own. They always need women.*

Participant 5 contributed to the discussion by saying:

*The church should be a modernised institution. We are now living in the 21st century, and yet, leaders still live in the ancient world. These leaders should open up their minds and eyes and be able to visualise good changes for the betterment of the church. One of the good changes is providing leadership opportunities for women.*

Women encounter the restrictions established by church ministers and male leaders while striving to lobby for leadership opportunities in religious institutions.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

Participants in this study have advocated for the rights of disregarded women through their responses to the interview questions. They have also been observed striving for social justice in village and church developments. Their efforts to counter injustice is well documented in reports and surveys of empowerment training (Samoa Women Empowerment Project Report, 2015). The women's full participation in local and national activities, village and church developments, and administering women's organisations aligns with the aims of the feminist theory (Barton, 2006). The notion of empowerment, central to feminist theory (Malabre, 1978), has been effectively executed by women through their participation in enabling and leadership training. Planning, implementing, and monitoring developmental activities to benefit families, villages, churches, local and national governments supports what Griffen (1989) refers to as ensuring equality for all people. Participants have promoted the idea of honouring femininity (Tong, 1989) by motivating male leaders to acknowledge women's right to leadership.

Interviews were facilitated by the talanoa research framework. The exchange of information was both formal and informal, elements of talanoa that Manu'atu (2000) notes. It was noticed that talanoa lifted participants' morale, created comfort, and encouraged willingness to give information. These are the characteristics of talanoa suggested by Anae et al. (2010). The research was guided by the cultural values of respect and love, components of the talanoa that Nabobo-Baba (2005) refers to. Talanoa proved a practical choice with rural participants who conversed with the researcher in the Samoan language. The discussions flowed well and were complemented with laughter and fun. The participants' responses were strong, touching and challenging, delivered through bravery and straightforward expressions. A feminist theoretical lens synthesised the participants' responses, observations and document analysis.

Cultural beliefs, social assumptions and religious obstacles diminish women's leadership status. In addition, these challenges weaken women's struggles for leadership posts in local and national governments. The national government of Samoa started to allow 10% women occupancy of parliamentary seats when the parliament convened in March 2017 (Samoa Bureau of Statistics, 2011). However, there is no government law to claim superiority over 41 local government bodies that restrain women from holding matai titles. Consequently, potential women parliamentary representatives from these villages do not have the chance to run in general elections. Thus, the Samoan parliament continues to be dominated by males.

Advocating for an increased number of female leaders is a real struggle in Samoa because of the cultural, social and religious implications of this change. While potential women leaders believe in their right to leadership, the communities think otherwise. In countering this mind-set, women seek empowerment in leadership training and income-generating activities. Irrespective of their success, women advocates remain leaders of women's organisations, and subordinates for male leaders.

Patriarchy suggests a top-down, male-dominated approach to decision making as portrayed by the Biblical reference to Jacob's ladder. The image in this structure shows a competitive, hierarchal scheme for decision making and power. In contrast, feminism

is represented by Sarah's circle, an approach to problem solving depicting a circular web of shared experiences and relationships. In this image, the decision making is a result of being communal and collaborative. These contrasting images of a hierarchy convey different ways of structuring relationships. Moreover, these images are associated with different views of morality and self. These distinct visions reflect the illogical truths of human experience we encounter as we interact with others.

Non-government organisations such as the Office for Women (UNESCO Branch) in Apia, Ala Mai, Samoa Umbrella for Non-Government Organisation (SUNGO) and other collaborative groups promote awareness programmes to increase the number of women leaders in local and national governments. These training programmes also encourage prospective women leaders to run for parliament. At the moment, five women (10%) occupy seats in one parliamentary sitting for the first time. The leadership spheres in local and national governments are continuously dominated by males. Therefore, this article aims to generate discussion on gender equality in managerial and leadership positions in Samoa. The main problem – gender equality in terms of participation and representation – is a long way off due to the cultural, social, and religious restrictions against current and potential women leaders.

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## **Teacher perceptions of extending teaching hours in Samoan schools**

**Epenesa Esera, Su'eala Kolone-Collins**

### **Abstract**

This research was conducted at the request of the Samoan Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture in relation to teachers' perceptions regarding the mandate for extending school hours. For primary schools, teaching hours were extended by an hour and a half, opening from 8 am to 2.30 pm. Secondary schools hours were extended by two hours, starting at 9 am until 4 pm. In 2012 the change was implemented and, in 2016, research was conducted to gauge teachers' perceptions on the subject. The research used the mixed methods approach; however, for this paper the qualitative component is the focus. A total of 15 teachers from four primary schools and three colleges in Savaii and Upolu were interviewed. The majority of the teachers interviewed predominantly favoured the old system and pointed to no clear guidelines or programmes to support the increase in teaching hours. They also reported that students lacked interest and motivation levels were low during the afternoon sessions. It was difficult for the majority of students to concentrate, resulting in increased levels of apathy. Teachers also mentioned their own levels of motivation were impacted by student's lethargic and listless behaviour which, more often than not, would contribute to more behavioural problems than usual.

### **Introduction**

To satisfy the purpose of the study, questions were targeted on how extending school hours has contributed to students' overall performance in school, teachers' performance, students' learning support, the classroom and school programme, and schools' and parents' discernment. It probed teachers' understanding of the rationale for extending teaching hours, the philosophical underpinnings, and the implementation and application that would contribute to efficacious practice.

Debate amongst researchers on extending school hours is rampant. The literature provides evidence about the effect of school inputs in the education production function and, more recently, studies and reviews have been conducted on the effects of time in school on student outcomes. There is also evidence showing that interventions such as increasing the length of the school day will improve learning outcomes but more research is needed to corroborate earlier findings.

### **The context**

Samoa's education system went through a major change with the implementation of extending teaching hours in school. In 2012, the Ministry of Education, Sports and

Culture (MESC) mandated school teaching hours to start at 9am and end at 4pm. Prior to that, the schools taught from 8am to 12.30pm for infant classes, 8am to 1pm for primary classes (Years 4–8) and secondary schools and colleges (Years 9–13) from 8am to 2.30pm. The change caught teachers unaware, although those at the MESC and principals *were* in the loop. The implementation of extending teaching hours has been controversial. After four years of implementation, the MESC commissioned research to find out whether the change had made a difference to the school programmes and, specifically, to students' and teachers' performance.

Since the establishment of formal education in Samoa and after independence from New Zealand, schools have opened at 8am in the morning and finished at 12 noon for children at the primary level. Those at the upper primary and secondary levels were at school until 1pm or 2.30pm when afternoon classes were held. At some schools, students at the Year 8 level would have a lunch break, then resume classes in the afternoon specifically to assist the students with the Year 8 National Examinations which were held every year.

Over the years, primary examination results, together with the Samoa Primary Literacy Level (SPELL) tests in English, Mathematics and Samoan indicated gaps in students' literacy and numeracy competencies. Parents, politicians and interested stakeholders believed the dismal results indicated teachers were not doing a good job of teaching students (pers. comm.). Notably, the examination results provided entry into two government colleges: Samoa College and Avelo College apart from the mission colleges St Joseph's, St Mary's, Chanel, Wesley and the Church College of Samoa that students choose.

Parents viewed education as a door of opportunity for their sons and daughters to get first-rate results in order to qualify for a place in college. Expectations of excellent schooling meant a scholarship in the future and a job to assist the family, village and community. The government sought answers to the predicament of students failing in the system and how to address what is perceived as a perennial problem facing the education system in the country. As a result, the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture held consultations with government officials, ministry personnel, principals and teachers in Upolu and Savaii to extend school hours. The rationale was that extending teaching hours would provide more time for teachers to assist students in the classroom.

### **Literature review**

The world has experienced tremendous changes in the last decades with the knowledge explosion and technological advancements in all areas of human development. Schools have responded to these changes by adding more subjects into the curriculum, introducing innovative practices to teachers' repertoire of teaching skills and the influx of materials such as audio-visual equipment, computers and software to assist teaching and students learning (Avidov-Ungar & Eshet-Alkabay, 2011; Halverson & Smith, 2009). Additionally, various education systems have responded to these global changes by extending teaching hours (Namibia, Queensland England, Indonesia, Italy, Germany and the USA). The literature, however, points to different viewpoints on the phenomenon.

Many countries' education systems have responded differently to the issue of extending teaching hours in schools or having a longer school year. Children in some countries spend 208 days in school compared to children in the US with 180 days (Lee & Barro, 2001, cited in Parinduri, 2014). According to Parinduri, the schools in Indonesia have 240 days, Korea 220 days, South Africa 195–200 days, Britain 190 days, and Singapore, 187 days. Samoa has 200–250 days so comparatively, Samoan children spend a lot of time in school. The education system in Samoa faces problems with teacher shortages, a high attrition rate, and a scarcity of educational materials, books and facilities. This has implications for teaching and meeting the country's aspirations for quality teachers and quality teaching.

In Indonesia, Parinduri (2014) found the effects of a longer school year decreased the possibility of repeating a grade and increasing educational achievement. Studies carried out earlier (Eide & Showalter, 1998; Grogger; 1996; Lee & Barro, 2001) do not show a correlation between extending school years and better student performance. However, Fitzpatrick, Grissmer, and Hastedt (2011) and Hansen (2001) found that extending school days did improve student performance. Parinduri concluded that the longer school year improves educational achievement and reduces grade repetition.

Battistin and Meroni (2016) looked at interventions that provided more instructional time for selected classes of low achievers in Southern Italy. School participation was not compulsory but lower-achieving students were mandated to spend extra hours at school. The findings showed that more time at school assisted their performance in mathematics, English and science. It was concluded that the least-advantaged students showed positive results from taking extra hours. However, a study by Meyer and Van Klaveren (2013) on Dutch elementary schools found no significant difference on mathematics and language achievement. Similarly, a study conducted by Huebener, Kuger, and Marcus (2017) using PISA scores of students in a German education reform found students were taught new content in the additional time and therefore improved their performance. On the other hand, the effects are minimal and differ across the student population showing high-performing students benefitting and low-performing students showing no benefit at all. However, in a study conducted in Munich on class size and its effect on student evaluation of economics classes, Mandel and Sussmuth (2011) indicated a negative impact of class size on student evaluation of instructor effectiveness.

In Denmark, Jensen (2013) examined the effects of annual 9th grade classroom hours on student performance in literacy and math. Findings indicated there was no significant effect on literacy but there was for mathematics. One probable reason provided for the difference was in relation to literacy development as part of the home environment – more so than mathematics. Rivkin and Schiman (2014) attest to recent research that favours extending teaching hours as improving achievement – although they have difficulty with some of the evidence. They believe that any “causal link between achievement and instruction time depends upon the quality of instruction, the classroom environment and the rate at which students translate classroom time into added knowledge” (p. 2). The results indicated that extending teaching hours seem to differ with the quality of the classroom environment; that there is minimal or no benefit

for students in low-quality classroom environments. As such, lengthening classroom time does not make up for the quality of the classroom. However, strong support between policies, classroom environment and extended instruction demonstrated improvement. Additionally, the studies showed a weak relationship between a longer time and the quality of instruction which would indicate a need for further research.

Furthermore, Huebener et al. (2017) attest to few studies that looked at policy-induced extension in teaching hours. An evaluation conducted in Chile by Bellei (2009) on increased teaching hours required large funding into the school infrastructure and major institutional changes. This was also the case in Israel (Lavy, 2012) where an increase in instructional hours and allocated funding improved student performance.

Extending teaching hours can make effective use of time and resources not usually available during the school day (Fashola, 1998). For example, students will have more individual and face-to-face time with the teacher. They can easily access computers as student needs are better identified in areas where they would require the most relevant support. Moreover, parents, volunteers and peer support groups from the academic, cultural, or sports activities would be free to assist after school hours. Some after-school activities may be time consuming and costly but it is possible for schools to identify effective strategies to assist failing and at-risk students.

Evidently some studies have indicated the positive aspect of extending teaching hours and student achievement (Fitzpatrick et al., 2011; Huebener et al., 2017; Parinduri, 2014). There were also findings that showed either no relationship or a significant one (Eide & Showalter, 1998; Grogger, 1996; Lee & Barro, 2001). An intervention involving more teaching time was found to assist disadvantaged students in mathematics, English and science (Battistin & Meroni, 2016); while there was no significant difference on mathematics and language achievement for Dutch elementary schools (Meyer & Klaveren, 2013). On the other hand, Huebener et al. (2014) reviewed policy on extending teaching hours and pointed to one study conducted by Bellei (2009) in Chile and another by Lavy (2012) in Israel to prove that an increase in teaching hours would require additional funding for improved student performance. This is confirmed by Rivkin and Schiman (2014) who found that extending teaching hours varied with the quality of the classroom environment.

### **Research questions**

The purpose of this study was to investigate teachers' perceptions on extending teaching hours in Samoan schools. Understanding teachers' views on the pros and cons of the change could provide useful guidelines for the MESC policy regarding the change.

Although this was a mixed method study involving interviews and questionnaires, for the purpose of this article only the qualitative component has been used. Focusing on the qualitative dimension has the advantage of soliciting rich, thick and in-depth descriptions from the participants' interviews on the phenomenon investigated.

The research interview schedule had semi-structured questions which guided the interview. Participants were prompted and invited to expand more on some of the issues raised. The overarching interview question was an attempt to find out how the participants felt about extending teaching hours. In relation to that, participants were



asked whether there has been a change in students' academic performance as a result of extending the teaching hours. Interview questions also targeted the *need* for a change; the *benefits* of the change; students' and parents' responses, problems and concerns; the effect on the classroom and school programme; and whether the teachers preferred extended teaching hours.

### **Theoretical framework**

The phenomenological theoretical framework deals with how people consciously make sense of their life experiences. It also helps the reader determine the perspective of the authors and the theoretical tools used to make sense of the data.

The study was influenced by the philosophical perspective that was grounded in concepts which are deemed to be transferable and not generalisable (Glaser & Strauss, 1965, 1967). It pointed to the natural setting or context in which the phenomenon takes place – like that in the current study. The process identified elements of similarities and differences across contexts with studies focusing on similar patterns or themes. Phenomenology deals with people's lived experiences as they are conscious of the nature and the structure of the experience as they see it.

The study adopted the phenomenological approach which is concerned with understanding the event based on the emerging data from interviews with the participants. It refers to preset conditions that cannot be used immediately; rather these must develop from phenomenological theory before any themes and patterns, themes and categories are associated with an emergent theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The philosophical underpinning of the phenomenological approach is that, globally, there exist multiple realities and truth – phenomenology has advocated for the position that meaning has to be part of the world, including human consciousness. The approach could build bridges in attempts to better understand areas involving cultural differences, ethical matters, contextual dilemmas and others. This is a critical aspect because there are differences between and among people as individuals, groups, cultural affiliations, workplace milieu and educational priorities.

The use of phenomenological theory is taken from participants' preconceptions on the phenomenon investigated – focusing on extending teaching hours. Data on participants' different preconceptions of views were constructed through face-to-face interaction. The interpretive nature of participants' accounts included language, beliefs, shared meanings and practices used. While the approach was relevant to the aim of the study, it could be seen as relying on the subjective nature of the relationship between the researcher and participants.

### **Methodology**

This paper interpreted qualitative data gathered using participants' interviews to solicit rich and thick information (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). There are several advantages in using the qualitative approach, as it “focuses on meaning in context, requires a data collection instrument that is sensitive to underlying meaning when gathering and interpreting data” (Merriam, 2009, p. 2). To this extent, the phenomenological approach contributes to researchers' understanding of the

“phenomenon with increasing depth ... also experiences growing self-awareness and self-knowledge” (p. 17); and a “breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration” (Johnson, Onwueguzie, & Turner, 2007, p. 123). It meant one needs to be cognizant of the nuances, similarities and differences in participants’ responses, which Stake (2010) referred to as an “inquiry, deliberate study, a seeking to understand” (p. 13). In this aspect, investigating extending teaching hours in schools could be linked to an understanding of students’ academic performance.

During interviews, the two researchers interviewed each of the two participants from each school separately. Consequently, each researcher had an interview schedule and a mobile phone to tape the interview which lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. The researcher’s role is critical in connecting the participants’ to the phenomenon under study and interpreting how they make meaning of their experiences.

The gathering and presentation of explanations and descriptions from teachers’ responses were classified into responses that showed evidence of either similarity or uniqueness. These were then reclassified to enable a manageable analysis of data. Thus a phenomenological approach elucidated getting rich and thick descriptions from the interviews. The interviews targeted schools and teachers chosen to specifically assist the study. Transcription of interviews took about three weeks. It involved reconstruction of participants’ experiences and perceptions of the phenomenon in their lives (Seidman, 2013).

The population selected for this study included 15 teachers from seven government schools – three from Savaii and four from Upolu. Two primary schools and one secondary school were from Savai’i and two primary and two secondary schools from Upolu. Purposive sampling of primary schools was based on the results of the SPELL tests from at-risk, developing, proficient and established levels. Two teachers were interviewed from each of the selected schools. The sample collected information from participants on their understanding of the reason for extending teaching hours, and who were more conversant with and aware of the implications of extending teaching hours. They had taught since implementation and through their experiences in the interim years they provided comprehensive and rich data.

## **Findings**

The findings from the interviews indicated the majority of primary and secondary teachers were not in favour of extending teaching hours. Interview findings were obtained from the transcriptions. The key themes solicited from the research questions are itemised under the findings: teachers’ perception on extending teaching hours; why there was a change; the benefits of the change; students’ and parents’ responses, problems and concerns; the effect on the classroom and school programme; and whether the teachers preferred extended teaching hours. As Lockwood (2008) pointed out, even if extending teaching hours do not “result in dramatically altered academic achievement, it should have some effect and, one would hope, a cumulative effect” (p. 25).

### ***Teacher perception and understanding on extending teaching hours***

Few of the participants felt that extending school hours benefitted students and teachers. One teacher said, “there is an acute need because student ability requires extra assistance and teachers can support them to complete work in the extra teaching hours.” One primary school teacher responded that, “it will give students ample time to go through each subject thoroughly and for the slow learners to have extra time with the teachers. Students’ literacy levels may improve as pointed out by two teachers “... personally extending school hours will help students achieve their goals in reading and writing. Improvements have been shown in the academic work of students especially the ones with reading problems.”

On the other hand, the majority of the teachers believed it will not increase academic performance. One college teacher said “the students’ academic performance has not made a difference with the change. Students find it so hard to concentrate during the last two periods of the day.” Another agreed, “there are no benefits from extending school hours, results are still the same.” Similarly one teacher mentioned that “children are greatly affected especially after interval when they are tired and not as receptive as in the early hours.”

### ***Need for extending teaching hours***

The interviews revealed that teachers were not consulted thoroughly about the need to extend teaching hours. One participant responded, “I don’t really know where the idea came from but we were told that school hours will be extended.” Another teacher said, “MESC had questionnaires to fill in on extending teaching hours but there was no discussion. The next thing we knew was we had to start with the new times.” Others agreed, saying, “There was no consultation about the change.”

One teacher claimed “It was a MESC initiative to encourage schools to support literacy programs and expose students to different reading materials.” Instead of extending school hours, other things can be done – as one teacher put it, “before the change, attempts were made to address problems in students’ performance but there were still gaps and problems. With the change now, there is still more work to be done.”

A teacher at a college disagreed with the change: “there is no need to change, it was good as it was and students are not doing any better with extending school hours.” Two other teachers at one college added “the new times do not work, and the students do not need the extra hours.... Personally [I think], there was no need for that.”

### ***Benefits for extending school hours***

Teachers’ responses varied on the accrued benefits of extending school hours. Three pointed to no, or almost no, benefits for students “I don’t think there are any major benefits. The results of exams in the last 3 years are still the same.” Other teachers voiced there were benefits and some improvement: “there is more time to do preparations for classes before going home ... the opportunity to find resources and materials to help with teaching the next day. Two primary teachers said it was not a problem “the school has a programme in place. In the beginning I had to get used to it because it was

new for teachers and students ... now I have time to prepare before I go home. I used to take work home without anything done.” Two secondary teachers agreed, “There is more time to prepare in the morning before school starts and moreover, hours for teaching periods are extended to 55 minutes each.” Another added, “students require extra assistance and teachers can support them in the extra hours especially in the basic skills of reading and writing.”

Teachers pointed to the benefits of improving literacy skills. One said, “Students now have time to read when they finish their work....they select reading activities to play with while waiting for the others to complete required work. Another teacher added in support “it helps students achieve their goals in reading and writing.” One teacher shared “there is a change in at-risk students as witnessed in their reading, spelling and writing.” Also, “students that live close by find it very useful. They have extra time to do their IAs and other work.” However, others pointed out “there is no PE or art program for students [as] we had in the past, as the principal tells us to focus on literacy.”

### ***Parents and students responses on extending teaching hours***

The seven college teachers interviewed expressed negative feedback from parents and students. They said parents’ complaints about the extended school hours are because of students’ safety, for those with private transport, the working parents would have to try and make time to pick up children, but previously, this task was done during their lunch breaks.

One other main reason for disagreement over the change is because of financial hardships. The long school hours require two intervals, for low-income families, providing extra lunch money is a very difficult task. For students, one teacher said, “it is always hot and humid and teachers need a lot of patience to bear with the students.”

In the primary school, eight teachers responded differently. Four teachers explained that parents supported the change. One of the teachers said “most parents said that keeping children for these hours at school also saved them from roaming around doing nothing when they get home.” Another teacher agreed: “in terms of reading and writing I think our program has helped the students and there is enough time for Visual art and PE as well.” On the other hand, teachers mentioned they face behavioural problems in the afternoon as “children are uninterested, unmotivated, lacking concentration, tired, restless.” Also “parents complain that children no longer have time to help them in the evening.”

Responses from primary teachers showed that approximately 50% of parents supported and 50% disagreed with the new school hours. Likewise, responses from secondary teachers indicated about 70% of parents did not support the extending of school hours.

### ***Problems teachers and students face on extending school hours***

A total of 12 primary teachers mentioned that “children are tired and they are not interested in the afternoon.” One teacher said, “even with prepared activities, students find it hard to listen and concentrate.” Another contributed that “class control is an issue when students sit for long periods of time.”

Secondary teachers also pointed to the difficulty in ensuring the students are productively occupied in class: “discipline and overcrowded are issues”; “there is no special program for the extended hours of the day.” Teachers also mentioned “teaching a class during periods 6 and 7 is hard work because around 3 o’clock students get bored and sleepy.” Another said, “I hardly find time to do preparations at school because we finish about 5pm or 5.30pm but before the change I had time to prepare before going home.”

Teachers and families were concerned about girls getting home late as transportation was a problem, and as one respondent said “teachers tried to provide transport for the students that live far away but then no one has the money to pay for all the expenses”; “the distance for some students to come to school and return home poses problems, for example the students from Tufulele are late unless they get up early in the morning to catch the bus and likewise in the afternoon students are late getting home because transportation is irregular.” “Also students need lunch money [so they can] eat.” The teachers also mentioned “the problems with interschool fighting could be escalated with schools finishing late where students would congregate at certain places as seen in the Avele and Maluafofu conflicts.”

### ***Concerns with SPELL***

The SPELL tests were conducted in the primary schools but secondary teachers had similar concerns in relation to the SSC and SSLC examination results. Most primary teachers acknowledged the SPELL tests are “very important in assessing children’s academic levels ... results indicate Year 4 is doing well and Year 6 shows an increase in Mathematics and Samoan results.” For one respondent, “in the last three years I have witnessed some positive change.” Another teacher believed “results definitely [need] improvement” while yet another felt “the concern is with the Year 4 English essay writing...but there is very little support.” One mentioned “the attitude of the librarian” in assisting students’ was not helpful. Interestingly, one said “literacy is a priority and all students read from 8 am-8.30am but there is almost no improvement in students’ literacy levels even with the extended school hours.”

Secondary teachers are concerned with the “lack of basic skills especially from Year 9 students. We find students in Year 9 who cannot read even in Samoan.” Another added, “students from primary level entering Year 9 bring additional literacy problems to secondary level schooling ... we are still teaching what the students should have learnt in Years 6-8 at primary level.” One other said, “students attending school have low literacy skills and one of the experienced teachers is helping out. The extended hours enable us to do something to assist those students who really need help with reading and writing.” Another teacher referred to there being “no support from parents at school and home, and there is no time for pastor schools.”

### ***Changes to classroom/school programme***

There were differences in primary teachers’ responses such as “the change has not affected classes and the school’s programme” while another said, “school-based programme should reflect a change in classroom performance but this is not evident.” In one school

where music was introduced the teacher mentioned “all are involved in the music programme ... children showing interest and enthusiasm.” One teacher was dubious, “although there is time to go over subject errors, revisions, reading and homework most children are not interested. On the teacher’s part there is no real extension or in-depth teaching because students are not concentrating or listening.” Another shared the same view, “nothing much has changed in my preparations and there is no major change in our school programmes since the change.” On the positive side, one said “the more hours at school means more preparations and activities for students ... to motivate students so that learning is not boring especially in the afternoon.” One teacher offered, “the extra programmes we implement have been useful even though it requires extra hours of commitment and patience.”

Teachers at secondary indicated contrasting views and, for some, the change had not affected the classroom and school programmes. Another participant felt “students are a lot keen[er] to learn now ... understanding of information and reading materials have improved.” Still another said, “I have to plan a lot of work activities for my classes. If I don’t then the students will find it very hard to concentrate during the last periods.” The majority were not too optimistic: “I feel tired at the end of the day... no new programmes for the extended hours; we just do our own extra reading or homework with the students.” Another mentioned, “I have 50 students in my class and most times I am not able to have time for individuals.” One other added “There are students who are not really good at reading and writing but the teachers try their best.”

### ***Change and students’ academic performance***

Generally, the primary participants referred to seeing “some positive change from what it was three years ago in spelling and writing especially in marking children’s work.” One teacher mentioned, “in drawing and writing competitions, the children have shown they have the ability especially with incentives in receiving awards from SAAB.” On the downside, one claimed, “although there are many changes I personally see a drop in student performance if I compare it to the last 30 years.” Another added, “extending school hours has not translated into any great difference from what it was before.” In addition, “there is hardly any change to most students’ academic performance.”

In the secondary schools, one teacher relayed: “positive changes in students’ academic performance in the way they write notes, discuss and interact.” Another teacher explained “there has not been much change in students’ academic performance ... community and parental support could help to improve the academic performance of students.”

### **Discussions and implications**

The teachers’ perceptions and understandings about extending teaching hours were reflections of their classroom experiences with students. A few highlighted the importance of the extended teaching hours to improving learning especially in the area of literacy development (Battistin & Meroni, 2016). However, most of the teachers who were interviewed in primary and secondary schools thought that the extended school hours seemed to provide more problems for teachers, students and parents as well.

These included students lacking concentration, boredom, restlessness and fatigue during the second half of the school day. Teachers also raised concerns about children's academic progress given the longer school hours (Meyer & Klaveren, 2013). Generally, the teachers did not believe that extending teaching hours would improve academic performance more than the problems it offered.

The responses highlighted the lack of communication between the MESC and the schools about the proposed change of school hours. Teachers were not adequately informed of the change, nor were they given justifications or explanations to convince them. It appeared teachers themselves were not sure of why the changes were made. Participants reported that they were informed of what to do without proper consultation. Dyson and Kerr (2017) believed extended services should be communicated well and not just as a means to deal with a problem. The general idea MESC indicated in their proposal was to improve students' academic performance; however, the drawback was the lack of communication and information for teachers. In addition, planned programmes to help set up the new initiative were not properly established and teachers were not sure how to go about its implementation. This is in line with what Huebener et al. (2017), Bellei (2009), and Lavy (2012) referred to as needed funding for school infrastructure and institutional changes to support longer instructional hours.

The benefits of extending school hours emphasised teacher preparation time in completing activities and resources beforehand. Additionally, the need to target reading and writing skills and spending time with at-risk students were viewed as real benefits for extending teaching hours (Fashola, 1998).

From interviews with teachers it seemed the majority of parents and students do not support extending teaching hours. Parents' main concerns were safety and financial hardships. Schools were unable to provide transport for students who travelled long distances. In addition, the extra lunch break required parents to finance children's lunches. Another issue raised dealt with students' roles at home in helping and spending time with family as part of learning cultural values which had been reduced with the implementation of the new extended school hours.

Generally, the problems teachers encountered with extending teaching hours are students' motivational levels; their ability to concentrate and be productive in the afternoon; the lack of innovative programmes in place; and class size; increased school violence; concerns about sustenance; transportation; and girls getting home late. All have implications for teachers' planning, funding and resources to run effective programmes that are productive and support students' improved performance.

Primary teachers acknowledged an acute need for improved literacy and numeracy levels in the schools. However, while efforts are made towards increasing literacy levels there is little improvement. One pointed to the need for librarians who prioritise the use of the library to support student learning. Another indicated the importance of essay writing. It would seem their needs to be a concerted effort with benchmarks and individual student profiles to guide teachers' work specifying particular processes to ensure literacy and numeracy competencies are addressed. Secondary teachers are also concerned with the students from primary who lack the basic skills in literacy and numeracy. Coupled with this is the fact that, as there is an examination-oriented system,

teachers are concerned with ensuring that the curriculum is covered and so the problem continues.

There are differences in the way teachers perceive the change; however, it is evident that planning programmes (Bellei, 2009; Lavy, 2012) to motivate, support and sustain student interest in learning are critical factors. Teacher commitment to provide learning opportunities that would enable students to make the leap should aspire to incorporate a holistic education that incorporates the traditional subjects, the expressive and practical arts and extracurricular activities (Huebener et al. (2017). This requires financial support from the government, the community and parents.

Overall, there are conflicting views held by teachers in terms of students' academic performance in the classroom. While primary teachers generally seem to see some positive changes in the classroom, there were those that felt expectations in implementation fall short. Secondary teachers also share similar views with the primary teachers. However, one mentioned programmes that could support academic learning such as programmes in the expressive arts (Hill, 2008).

## **Conclusion**

The main purpose of this study was to explore perceptions and opinions of school teachers on extending teaching hours in Samoa at primary and secondary school levels. The research focused particularly on the positive and negative impacts and effects of extending school hours on students and teachers, both academically and personally. In the analysis, the majority of teachers do not support the concept of extending teaching hours. Teachers believed there should have been more consultation and communication between MESC personnel and teachers about the initiative. As a result, teachers were unprepared and unwillingly implemented the new teaching hours. For the majority of teachers, it was the case of doing as they were told without any logical explanations.

Generally, teachers' perspectives and understanding of extending school hours did not equate with improved academic performance. They believed there were other significant factors to consider, for instance, a well-organised and consistent plan of action. Additionally, an academic programme interspersed with music and visual arts development can be a powerful incentive to get students interested in participating in a longer day. Although there were some changes in the development of literacy in some schools, there were also a lot of issues that teacher and students faced. Disciplinary problems from lack of interest and concentration discouraged teachers to continue teaching during these hours of the day. Teachers felt disheartened when faced with negative and unenthusiastic students. As such, teachers were not convinced of improved academic performance as a result of longer teaching hours.

Participants provided useful insights from parents that supported the majority view that extending school hours had more negative impacts than good. Financial difficulties, safety issues, parents' time management to pick up children (to name a few) have supported participants' views regarding the extension of school hours. Without appropriate support for transport, an effective learning environment, well-organised programmes as well as good consultation with teachers, community and interested stakeholders, improved academic results for students would be impossible. Teachers



clearly pointed out that extending school hours is not the answer for improving students' academic results.

The implications for extending teaching hours were numerous both on the positive and the negative sides. Advocates for the longer hours indicated that students gained more individual attention from teachers including direct and ongoing assistance in problem areas, homework and continuous reinforcement of earlier classroom work. Furthermore, teachers had ample time for marking and preparation for the next day's work. On the other hand, opponents of longer hours pointed to mental fatigue that affected both students and teachers and could prove counterproductive with primary students' concentration span. In addition, longer hours and more teaching was not the answer, rather it was the quality of teaching and the programmes offered and not necessarily the quantity of hours. With the 2015 SPELL test results there was certainly a mismatch between extending school hours and students' academic performance. As such, utilisation of the longer hours needed to be assessed in terms of programmes, teachers' capabilities, students' potential, and funding and resources.

### **Recommendations**

This study has highlighted important issues that have surfaced in the implementation of extending teaching hours. In addition, the research provided a challenge for faculty members at FOE to ensure graduates from the programme exit with an extensive repertoire of teaching skills and knowledge. The focus is on a holistic education that should include forging better links between academic performance, the arts and extracurricular activities.

The following recommendations are proposed:

1. There should be further studies to solicit views from parents and interested stakeholders.
2. Solicit a cross-section of students' (primary, secondary and colleges) views and opinions on extending teaching hours.
3. Meetings to be convened to include MESC, principals and teachers, FOE and the school committees to discuss whether to continue or abolish the change.
4. If the change is upheld, then it would be in the interests of the relevant stakeholders to have justified programmes to support student learning.
5. Focus groups in the different education areas to look at viable and practical ways to support the change and assist improved student performance.
6. Principals and schools to meet and discuss possible scenarios to ensure students' literacy and numeracy competencies are addressed as part of the programme.
7. Extracurricular activities such as physical exercise, visual arts, music and performing arts to be incorporated into the programme.
8. Funding and the cost of the programme should be supported by the MESC and school committees.

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## **Understanding the teacher upgrade programme in Samoa: Contextual challenges for in-service teachers, school principals and Ministry personnel**

**Epenese Esera, Dave Fa'avae, Tagataese Tupu Tuia**

### **Abstract**

This article discusses the challenges involved in Samoa's teacher upgrade programme. The teacher upgrade initiative came about because of the Samoan Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture's aim for all in-service primary and secondary teachers to hold a Bachelor of Education degree. However, challenges including time scheduling, teachers' wider responsibilities, unsupportive school principals, and communication barriers with the National University of Samoa appear to have hindered the programme's implementation. This study employed a qualitative research approach which incorporated *talanoa* (rich conversation) as appropriate to the Samoan context. The findings from the *talanoa* sessions with teachers, principals and Ministry officials, highlight the social, cultural, educational and economic challenges that the teachers encountered on their qualification upgrade journeys. We argue that the challenges between the upgrading teachers, the schools, the National University of Samoa's Faculty of Education and the Ministry could be being resolved through the Samoan notion of *va* (relational space) in which stakeholders generate mutual solutions to the challenges they encounter. This article concludes with recommendations for each of the partners involved in the upgrade programme in order to move forward.

### **Introduction**

In the past five years, the Ministry of Education, Sports, and Culture (MESC) in Samoa has taken a major step to improve teachers' qualifications, skills and knowledge. The *Corporate Plan July 2015 to June 2018* (MESC, 2015) proposed that teachers' qualifications be upgraded in order to enhance the quality of teachers and teaching in Samoa. The target was to have all primary and secondary school teachers in Samoa upgrade their qualifications from a diploma to a bachelors degree. This move is in line with other countries in the region, as well as internationally, as there is increased demand for better qualified teachers to meet the needs of school communities and the expectations of society (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2019). In following this trend, the Ministry mandated that all teachers in Samoa participate in the teacher upgrade programme (MESC, 2016b). At the request of the Ministry, the Faculty of Education at the National University of Samoa was invited to implement the teacher upgrade initiative. The small-scale qualitative study reported in this article investigated the challenges encountered by all the upgrade partners, namely, the upgrading teachers, school principals, the National University of Samoa and the Ministry, as this programme was implemented.

## Context

Samoa is no exception among countries in attempting to raise the standard of education by focusing on improving the qualifications of its teachers (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2019). Upgrading teachers' qualifications from diploma to bachelor level is seen as a significant way to improve both the educational levels of students and the overall quality of the education system. To this end, the Ministry and the Public Service Commission agreed to upgrading teachers' certificate and diploma-level qualifications to a Bachelor of Education or Postgraduate Diploma of Education through the Faculty of Education at the National University of Samoa.

Teacher upgrade discussions between the Ministry and the Faculty of Education began in 2013. At that time, the Ministry noted that the majority of teachers only held teaching certificates with very few teachers holding degrees. In 2016, those concerns were confirmed as Ministry reported that, across government, mission and private schools, around 1300 Samoan teachers held certificates whereas only 129 held degrees (MESC, 2016a). It was at this time that the teacher upgrade programme was introduced with an ambitious five-year plan that, by 2020, all practising teachers would hold a Bachelor of Education degree. To ensure the initiative was successful, the Ministry proposed implementing the teacher upgrade programme for cohorts of teachers, whereby a small number of in-service teachers would undertake the upgrade programme each year.

The idea of a teacher upgrade programme was met with approval from both primary and secondary teachers in Samoa. They recognised that it would help to improve the quality of teaching and learning in schools, and many also welcomed the chance to upgrade their qualifications to a degree level, and the salary increase that would come with this. However, along the way, the programme encountered a range of obstacles. First, although teachers were eager to participate, the teacher shortage meant that only a small number were able to be released from their teaching duties at any one time. Second, those teachers who were able to undertake the training encountered a number of challenges, such as unfamiliarity with new technologies. Adeosun (2011) notes that the teaching profession is facing "challenges such as rapid technological advancements, changing patterns of work, explosion in information access and use [which] all make the inculcation of 21st century skills imperative" (p. 3). Most teachers from developing nations like Samoa have very little exposure to, or understanding of, these technological advancements. In fact, different conceptions of technology, work and education, such as those experienced by people in developing nations like Samoa, also create conflicts between well-educated Samoans, ethnic minority groups, and Samoans with limited resources and education. Collins (1978, cited in Sadovnik, 2004, p. 8) argued that "education is increasingly used by dominant groups to secure more advantageous places in the occupational and social structure for themselves and their children." There is a lack of research into the impact that the upgrading of teacher qualifications has on the teaching profession and teachers' status in wider society, especially in the Pacific region, an area made up primarily of developing countries. This study begins to fill this gap by contributing to understanding the complexities faced when implementing a programme in these settings.

## Literature review

The research literature on teacher upgrade programmes raises a range of issues that are pertinent to the situation in Samoa. The first of these concerns the literacy levels of teachers. There have been questions raised in recent years about the literacy skills of teachers in Samoa, and, through this, questions about the quality of education itself. Many teachers in Samoa speak English as a second language, but are required to deliver the curriculum in English. Unsurprisingly, some teachers struggle with the literacy expectations of English. Bernstein (1990, cited in Sadovnik, 2004) explains that, “speech patterns reflect students’ social class background and notes how students from working class backgrounds are at a disadvantage in educational settings because schools are essentially middle class organisations” (p. 8). Limited literacy levels in the language of instruction, therefore, cause difficulties for both the upgrading teachers and the education system. Also, the current education system at primary, secondary and tertiary levels relies heavily on Eurocentric rather than Samoan values, and such a belief system benefits middle-class Samoans who have backgrounds with higher levels of literacy and wider educational experiences. The difficulties with English are at the heart of the problem for many upgrading teachers. Without a good command of English, the upgrading teachers are not able to reach their potential and they struggle to achieve the expected qualifications. Their underachievement in education is also exacerbated because the English language carries with it the values and ideas of the middle class (Bernstein, 1990, cited in Sadovnik, 2004). One example of how students’ underachievement in the education system was viewed as a concern appeared in a letter to the editor in the *Samoa Observer* newspaper in 2017. In this letter, a former teacher and principal, expressed a serious concern about teachers’ literacy and numeracy skills. Maiava (2017) also claimed that, “inadequacy in teachers’ understanding of English is and will remain the biggest stumbling-block to achieving quality education” (p. 10). Issues with teachers’ literacy comprise, however, an area which, with support, the teacher upgrade programme should be able to address. *The Pacific Benchmarking for Educational Results* analysis of Samoa’s current education development (Luamanu, 2017a) has recommended to the Ministry that “more support is needed to increase teacher knowledge, time and motivation” (p. 1) if teachers are to receive quality education. Luamanu (2017a) also argues that more specialised training for teachers will enhance their self-reliance in teaching the curriculum bilingually in Samoan and English.

Another key concern in the literature, as highlighted earlier, is teachers’ unfamiliarity with technological tools and changes. Teacher upgrade programmes, such as Samoa’s, can provide new knowledge and skills for in-service teachers to enable them to face the technological changes that have altered the modern classroom. The opportunity to upskill teacher’s technological competence was also highlighted by research in Nigeria in which Arikawei (2015) noted that an important factor of the teacher upgrade programme in that country was to support teachers to acquire an understanding of the “use of instructional technology such as computers, and [the] internet” (p. 4). To achieve this, Arikawei (2015) recommended that upgrading the teaching profession would involve “a mechanism of redesigning teacher preparation” (p. 4) in order to

achieve these new skills and knowledge. There is a similar expectation that most schools in developing nations, including Samoa, will be introduced to these technologies and so teachers will need appropriate training to gain personal and professional competence.

The literature also raises the issue of the academic preparation of teachers for advanced study. Malawi, a former colonised nation like Samoa, had similar challenges with their teacher upgrade programme. Many upgrading teachers showed frustrations of “lacking in confidence, [where] feelings of inadequacy [were] compounded by the introduction of the new curriculum at both junior and senior levels with next to no training” (Tudor-Craig, 2002, p. 10). Similar concerns were raised by Junaid and Maka (2014) pertaining to the Sub-Saharan Africa teacher upgrade. They observed that the “academic and pedagogical skills required to prepare teachers for effective teaching are rarely consolidated by the end of training” (p. 36). Most teachers used the programme to upgrade to a bachelors degree but without understanding the vital academic skills and knowledge that would be required of them. These academic requirements include the acquisition of new knowledge, teaching, learning, speaking and reading skills, critical thinking, and the ability to craft an academic argument. The Samoan Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture (MESC, 2006) also saw the teacher upgrade programme as an opportunity and a second chance for in-service teachers to upgrade “skills and pursue academic qualifications” (p. 26) for the betterment of teaching and learning for both teachers and students in order to achieve quality education in Samoa. The present study aims to explore whether teachers in Samoa faced the same challenges with the academic requirements as teachers in the other developing nations discussed in this review.

### **Objectives of the teacher upgrade in Samoa**

The teacher upgrade programme was an initiative that sought professional and personal development for teachers. It envisaged teachers undergoing professional development that would focus on the dynamics of subject knowledge and the pedagogical practices linked to knowledge transmission. The idea was to improve teachers’ knowledge and skills across all areas of the education system. Samoa is bombarded by literacy and numeracy concerns which have led to the call for quality teachers to address the problem by participating in professional development. This was the main claim highlighted in the *Pacific Benchmarking for Education* results (Luamanu, 2017b). The report recommended that “teachers are required to participate in professional development” because “teachers have limited capacity and skills to effectively teach literacy and numeracy” (Luamanu, 2017b, p. 1) in the Samoan classroom. Therefore, having teachers upgrade their qualifications at the National University Samoa would contribute to improving teaching knowledge and skills across all subject areas. When teachers are trained to meet the current learning demands of students in Samoa, it would open the frontiers to improving student learning outcomes and provide better access to understanding and utilising current technology. Moreover, it would also help teachers and their students to become better teachers and learners, respectively. The personal and professional benefits accrued through the programme could also lead to leadership opportunities, positions of responsibility, and an increase in salary and marketability.



## Theoretical framework

This study combines Samoan and Western concepts in order to provide a relevant and coherent theoretical and subsequent methodological framework. As a Polynesian concept linked to relational space, *va* is the overarching theoretical concept that is used to explore the challenges and complexities associated with the teacher upgrade programme in this study. For Samoan people, *va* is where one learns to understand her or his role and responsibilities in relation to others. Another form of *va* can be understood through *va tapuia* (Amituanai-Toloa, 2006). It is through the sacred space of *va tapuia* that we, as the researchers, learn to mediate our position and conflicts in relation to the participants in the study. This means that we are obligated, and have the responsibility, to bridge and build relationships through the *va tapuia* because “that is far more important than any research results can ever be” (Amituanai-Toloa, 2006, p. 203).

The Western concepts are drawn from conflict theory (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008; Wilson, 2011). This article describes the challenges encountered by in-service teachers, school principals and the Ministry’s Assistant Chief Executive Officers during the early implementation of the teacher upgrade programme in Samoa. The challenges are associated with the social, cultural, educational and economic conflicts that hinder individuals’ progress in society. Wilson (2011) described such conflicts as an “arena or social battlefield where different individuals and groups contest one another in order to obtain scarce and valued resources, most of which have economic implications” (p. 1). Conflict theorists view schooling as a tool utilised by the elite to socially, culturally and educationally reproduce individual class systems. Those from different class systems struggle to survive. As Wilson (2011) explained, “education institutions attempt to makeover the knowledge, dispositions and values of lower class” (p. 1) or minority groups where English is their second language. As a result, many students fail or gain only marginal passes due to their limited knowledge of English. Within the context of this study, most of the upgrade teachers are from non-English-speaking families yet the language of instruction in the country’s education institutions is English. The English language is a code that only children of dominant elite class families are more familiar with because they speak it at home and in school (Echevarria et al., 2008). These social and cultural differences create conflicts for the teachers as they engage in the upgrade programme.

We argue that any resolution of conflicts can be mediated through *va* and *va tapuia* because it is within such spaces that people learn to negotiate challenges. While conflict theory helps to understand the socio-political order between groups of people competing for resources, *va* and *va tapuia* provide a more holistic and inclusive context for relationship mediation and re-building (Amituanai-Toloa, 2006).

## Methodology

A qualitative research approach was selected for this study as the underlying concepts resonate with the theoretical concepts and indigenous research methodologies that include *va/va tapuia*, *talanoa* and *nofo*. In order to understand the challenges related to implementing the teacher upgrade programme, the perceptions of the in-service

teachers, school principals, and Ministry officers were explored. As outlined above, engagement with *va/va tapuia* in research practice requires one to know oneself first in one's relationship with others as in the *va tapuia* (Amituanai-Toloa, 2006). This is paramount to determining an appropriate and ethical practice that does not cause conflict or undermine others within the research project (Amituanai-Toloa, 2006).

*Talanoa* and *nofo* have also guided the operation and organisation of the study design. Tuia (2013), writing from a Samoan perspective, described "*talanoa* as to do with telling stories (*tala*) that are spun, strung and bound (*noa*) by people's honesty, confidence, and shared political, historical, and socio-cultural interests" (p. 104). In Samoa, people usually conduct *talanoa* through face-to-face conversations between two or more people, in close proximity to one another as informal interchanges. In fact, the respectful way of conducting *talanoa* in the Samoan cultural context is through both *talanoa* and *nofo*. As described by Tuia (2013), *nofo* is sitting or staying. It is important in Samoa for any untitled female and male adults, teenagers or children to *nofo* and *talanoa* if there are *matais* or people of higher status in the setting. The dual relationship between *talanoa* and *nofo* requires time for the researcher to solicit appropriate responses from participants. Because the social and cultural context of the research is Samoan, it was deemed appropriate for the *talanoa* and *nofo* to be part of the qualitative research methodology. The research findings from the *talanoa* and *nofo* will be used to inform the responses to the research question: "What were the challenges faced during the implementation of the teacher upgrade programme and how could these be overcome?"

All participants willingly agreed to participate as per the ethical guidelines of the National University of Samoa. The responses in the *talanoa* were recorded in written form so that they could be later analysed. Sarantakos' (1998) cyclical analysis process and Neuman's (1994, cited in Sarantakos, 1998) typology were used to analyse the data. These methods require the researcher to look for patterns in the data, such as recurring behaviours or events. When such patterns are identified, "the researcher will then interpret them, moving from description of empirical data to interpretation" (Sarantakos, 1998, p. 314). The cyclical process of analysis and accompanying typology also links qualitative research to *talanoa* and *nofo* as the *talanoa* process is also one of unfolding meaning. The *talanoa* and *nofo* revealed participants' educational views and opinions in relation to teacher upgrade. Neuman's typology method of analytic comparison was used to complement, classify and confirm the different views from participants. In addition, analytic comparison assisted the discovery of similarities in meanings and views on the teacher upgrade across the different categories of participants. After going through the cyclical process, the raw data were sorted into emerging themes which will be the basis for outlining the findings and the discussion of the research that follows.

### **Discussion of findings**

The *talanoa* and *nofo* between the researchers and upgrading teachers, principals and the Ministry officers uncovered interesting responses from the three groups and highlighted their views on the challenges of implementing the teacher upgrade programme. The findings will be set out group by group beginning with the upgrading teachers.

### **Focus group talanoa with the upgrading teachers**

Three themes emerged from the upgrading teacher participant data. First, that undertaking their study in English was a barrier to their success; second, that there was mixed support from the Ministry and schools; and third, that they faced challenges with technology and time management.

#### ***Theme 1: The English language barrier***

The upgrading teachers' responses revealed that English language competence was a major problem in their studies. Almost all participants had difficulties understanding the instructions and reading materials. Upgrading teachers identified terminology in the readings that was often difficult to understand. For instance, participant TU106 stated that "one of the challenges for me is the education course reader because the vocabulary is difficult and the essays are between 1,000-1,500 words." TU100 faced similar challenges: "English is the language of instruction and there is no way but to try and understand what is already there." These quotes highlight several of the English language-related issues the upgrading teachers faced as they struggled to read and make sense of the materials, contribute in class or complete written assignments. In order for the upgrading teachers to successfully complete their programme they need further support to improve their command of English.

#### ***Theme 2: Receiving support from the Ministry and schools***

Upgrading teacher participants also struggled with the amount and quality of support from the Ministry and their schools. Upgrading teachers had mixed perceptions of the support available from these institutions. TU100 said that "we always listen to the principal and they can't really do much unless they receive permission from Ministry of Education for us to be released for our National University of Samoa classes." TU100's response suggests that there was very limited communication between the Ministry and the school principals which contributed to the teachers' inability to successfully complete the upgrade programme. However, TU106 added that, "good communication between the teacher and principal is not enough, and they need more support from the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture, parents and teachers." This response indicates that many upgrade teachers had problems with their studies because they also believed they were not receiving proper assistance from either the Ministry, their schools or parents.

#### ***Theme 3: Technology and time management***

The final theme to emerge from the *talanoa* with the upgrading teachers was how their limited technological capability and access to technological tools impacted on their ability to complete their studies and manage their time well. For instance, TU106 stated that "internet services is always down and we have problems accessing emails so we always use our mobile phones to contact our lecturers." Similarly, TU107 identified that "poor internet services have a negative impact on my studies which contributes to difficulties in time management, and slow work progress." In addition, even when

access to computer and internet services is available, not all of the teachers had the necessary skills to use these tools effectively in their studies. According to participant TU100, “the use of technology is so hard for me; although I took a computer course I still have very limited understanding”. Interestingly, TU103 found that the course had increased their computer skills and so improved their confidence in using such technology in the classroom: “I have gained a lot by using modern technology and I also apply it in the classroom in using the computer”. As these quotes indicate, the teacher upgrade participants noted that access to reliable internet services affected their time management, and was a major challenge in their efforts to complete their studies. In fact, not only did these problems delay their ability to complete their studies on time, but they also affected their chances of doing well in their assignments. The difficulties they faced in being able to manage their time also relates to one of the key concerns that principals had of the upgrading teachers. The principals expressed their frustrations with what they perceived as the upgrading teachers’ inability to balance their studies with their school roles.

### **Talanoa with the school principals**

While school principals also perceived there to be many challenges associated with the teacher upgrade programme, they viewed these challenges differently to the teachers. The challenges identified by the principals have been categorised under two themes: first, frustration with the support provided for teachers by the Ministry and the National University of Samoa; and second, the perceived difficulties teachers had balancing studies with their teaching responsibilities.

#### ***Theme 1: Support provided for teachers***

The different groups involved in the upgrade programme expressed frustration with each other in relation to support for the teachers’ involvement. Participant 011, for example, shared a frustration with the Ministry and the University: “I want to support them in what they do but I also want their support as well like notifying me when they have exams”. Principal participant 016 also expressed his frustration with the Ministry and the University:

*Those in the upgrade programme are in a dilemma as the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture has stipulated all teachers in the programme should not be released during school hours but can attend the Faculty of Education of the National University of Samoa classes after hours.*

However, this conflict in scheduling places both the University and the upgrading teachers in a very difficult position. This lack of communication highlights that the parties involved need better communication and co-ordination in order to provide the support needed for the upgrading teachers to be successful in their studies.

***Theme 2: The difficulties associated with balancing studies with teaching responsibilities***

Another important theme that emerged from the *talanoa* with school principals was the challenges teachers faced in balancing their responsibilities as teachers with their study requirements. The principals generally thought that teachers should spend less time on their studies. Principal participant 015 stated that he “talked to the teachers about the importance of time management and balancing their teaching and studies to benefit everyone”. Similarly, principal participant 014 reported that “I invited them into my office and advised them to leave whatever assignments they are doing for another time and concentrate on teaching”. Additionally, some principals thought teachers were taking advantage of them by pretending to be studying in order to get time off from school. Principal participant 010 said, “I told them that it is unfair to lie to me, your students is your first priority and not to use upgrade classes as an excuse and leave them unattended”. Balancing time between studies and teaching was clearly a challenge for the upgrading teachers, and also an area of conflict between the teachers and their principals.

While the upgrade programme caused many challenges for teachers and principals, the Ministry of Education Assistant Chief Executive Officers’ *talanoa* and *nofo* sessions also revealed the challenges they perceived with the upgrade programme.

***Talanoa with the Ministry’s Assistant Chief Executive Officers***

The Ministry’s main priority was to ensure that all teachers with certificates and diplomas upgraded to a Bachelor of Education through the National University of Samoa. However, the Ministry officers indicated that this goal was not easy to achieve due to numerous challenges, which were categorised into the following themes: first, the challenges in implementing the programme; second, a lack of communication between the Ministry and the National University of Samoa; and third, limited technology infrastructure.

***Theme 1: Challenges in implementing the programme***

Ministry participants’ responses revealed the difficulties the Ministry was going through in its first attempt to implement the teacher upgrade. According to Ministry participant 020, “the implementation challenge for the first time was the lack of funding”. Furthermore, “we implemented the policy two years ago in 2016 but when I started there was no policy to guide teacher upgrade and that’s one of the tasks that I had to complete.” However, it did not stop the Ministry from activating the teacher upgrade programme. In fact, the Ministry consulted with the Faculty of Education at the National University of Samoa asking them to align their academic policies with the aims of the programme in order for it to start. To support the Ministry’s initiative, the Faculty of Education was willing to provide courses and lecturers to accommodate the teacher upgrade on the main islands of Upolu and Savai’i. However, after the programme was under way, more challenges were noted by the Ministry and the Faculty of Education. As described by Ministry participant 023, “the implication is that teachers would leave the school during teaching time for the National University of Samoa classes and that

left a huge gap for the principals without the upgrade teachers.” The problem mentioned by participant 023 was similar to the concern raised by school principals of the teachers needing to attend to their own classes during school time. This relates to the next theme: the lack of communication between the Ministry and the National University of Samoa.

### ***Theme 2: Lack of communication between the Ministry and the National University of Samoa***

The response from the Assistant Chief Executive Officer participants reveals the Ministry’s point of view pertaining to teachers’ claims that there was poor communication from the National University of Samoa (NUS). According to Ministry participant 020, “teachers say that they never received any communication”, but “we have gone to the student admin, we’ve gone to the Dean, we’ve done public notices, trying to make sure that the teachers are aware of this process.” Ministry participant 020 further explained that “in terms of hours and in terms of delivery, the Ministry has no control of scheduled NUS class times”. The Ministry anticipated that all the upgraders’ courses would be made available in the evening after school, yet this was not the case. Ministry participant 022 also echoed the earlier sentiment that “communication is another challenge especially when there are competing priorities running parallel.” Evidently, there needs to be clearer communication between teachers, school principals, the Ministry and the University to ensure everyone has the same expectations and knowledge around classes and assignments, as well as when these are to take place.

### ***Theme 3: Technology infrastructure***

The final problem identified in the *talanoa* with the Assistant Chief Executive Officers was the lack of appropriate technological infrastructure resulting in poor communication. According to participant 021, “the ongoing challenge with the Ministry is the network and the break-down of the network; it’s a never ending struggle with the Ministry”. It has led to many complaints by teacher upgraders when they are unable to contact the Ministry or the National University of Samoa. In addition, Ministry participant 020 explained the “infrastructure is one of the challenges because the network sometimes doesn’t work properly in remote areas, like Savai’i.” Likewise, Ministry participant 022 blamed the Ministry’s lack of funds as resulting in poor internet services in remote areas. According to Ministry participant 022, “the Ministry of Education’s financial problems are the cause of poor network and we are not able to achieve what we set out to do in terms of the upgrade”. As a result, upgrading teachers often ended up with numerous problems that interfered with their studies leading to discouragement and demotivation.

## **Discussion**

There is a world-wide expectation that teachers, especially in developing countries, should upgrade their qualifications to keep up with the changes in global technology and the modern school curriculum. The former Ministry of Education Chief Executive Officer Matafeo stated that:

*Research has shown that the quality of education depends on the quality of our teachers. Times have changed and things have changed. Also the approach to teaching, the approach to learning in terms of the curriculum has changed and therefore we really need to be serious about this and set up this body and make sure that the teachers are well qualified to teach our children. (CEO, MESC, 2015, p. 1)*

Quality teaching is important if Samoa is going to have an education system that meets the needs of its students, and prepares them for a globalised, technologically advanced world. This is why the teacher upgrade programme is of such great importance. Through this programme, the Ministry wanted to ensure that every child in Samoa would be taught by a highly qualified teacher who has the appropriate knowledge and skills to deliver the highest quality education (Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture, 2006). Education is perceived to be particularly important in developing countries like Samoa. Indeed, teacher upgrading is seen by UNESCO as the only way forward for former colonised nations. This is reflected in the Samoan educational documents that highlight the ongoing directive from UNESCO (MESC, 2006, 2015, 2016a) in their attempt to guarantee quality education for every child.

A good education system in a developing society is one that recognises, embraces and incorporates all cultures, values, and ethnic groups by providing educational opportunities for all to reach their educational goals. Moreover, a good education system needs to recognise the values of society and, in the Samoan context, the concepts of *va* and *va tapuia* are particularly helpful in allowing the various stakeholders involved in education to negotiate through potential conflicts. According to Amituanai-Tololoa (2006), *va tapuia* “creates, instigates, mediates, negotiates all aspects of relationships and negates societal or conflictual differences and disputes before they arise” (p. 201). If a successful education system is one that keeps abreast of current information and knowledge, pedagogical skills and know-how then teachers need access to relevant and practical experiences to pursue further studies and expand their repertoire of knowledge and skills in the classroom. With the world undergoing tremendous change socially, educationally, politically, economically and culturally, technological advancement has become a vital contribution to the 21st century classroom. Research, best practices and the discovery of innovative teaching resources in the education field can provide examples of pedagogical understandings and techniques that 21st century teachers need (Crompton, 2013; Goldin & Katz, 2018; Kukulska-Hulme, 2012).

The *talanoa* with upgrading teachers, school principals and Ministry officials highlighted the many challenges associated with the current upgrade programme that are hindering the acquisition of knowledge and skills needed to improve teaching and learning in Samoan schools. The teachers upgrading their qualifications are facing significant personal challenges, including access to the necessary technological infrastructure and competence in the language of instruction. Such challenges are described by Wilson (2011) as the education system’s “hidden agenda” used by schools and tertiary institutions “to reproduce those same inequities thereby maintaining the position of power for the dominant social group” (p. 1). The result of such an agenda is

the continuation of educational conflict between upgrading teachers from backgrounds where English is their second language and the dominant education system in tertiary institutions where English is the language of success.

To assist upgrading teachers' performance and achievement in tertiary institutions, lecturers need to provide high-quality educational learning opportunities. As the teacher participants indicated, they encounter on-going challenges with the course materials because of the level of English competence required. It is vital for the Ministry and the National University of Samoa to provide the support needed by upgrading teachers to ensure that they are able to participate in the programme fully and acquire updated knowledge and skills. Success in the upgrade programme also requires the Ministry and the National University of Samoa to establish strong systems of communication with both schools and teachers so that the current opportunities for miscommunication are eliminated. This will also ensure that all parties understand what is expected, where and when.

Technological advancements in the field have also given rise to the knowledge explosion which has contributed to interactive and practical innovations in tertiary education. These changes bring new theories and methodologies that most upgrading teachers, the Ministry and the school principals view as complications. In fact, such changes create "increasing disconnection between the social class and cultural values of educators and those of their students" (Wilson, 2011, p. 2). This disconnect is due to the differences in knowledge, resources, culture, socialisation and society which are not always recognised or acknowledged. Conflict theorists argue that "portraying society in this manner ignores the obvious conflict of values and interests that exists throughout society" (Wilson, 2011, p. 2). These challenges need to be further addressed, and we argue that *va tapuia* could provide the means through which to acknowledge, discuss and negotiate a way through these changes and their effects.

Despite the many challenges faced by the different stakeholders, the upgrading teachers' aspirations, the Ministry's determination and National University of Samoa's support have ensured that the teacher upgrade has proved successful. Upgrading to higher qualifications has become a milestone for many teachers, not only with the gaining of new knowledge, skills and techniques for teaching but for most of them, a promotion and salary rise. Ultimately, the teachers who have completed the upgrade programme will have a positive effect on students and education in Samoa as a whole. Further success will be seen as the programme contributes to more effective and efficient teaching, which ultimately helps students to learn, grow and achieve their potential.

## Conclusion

Despite the challenges faced by the teacher upgrade participants, school principals, and the Ministry of Education Assistant Chief Executive Officers, the upgrade programme has proved to be beneficial for teachers in Samoa. The implementation of such a programme, however, requires ongoing communication between all partners involved in the design and delivery. This study has identified areas of contestation between the upgrading teachers, school principals and the Ministry before, during and at the completion of the initial teacher upgrade programme. Some of the issues can be



explained by conflict theory which reminds us that the dominant education system shows bias towards middle-class social and cultural values, and thus creates extra challenges for students from developing nations who speak English as a second language. What this study has demonstrated is that, despite the challenges facing the participants, the issues can be navigated. *Va tapuia* (Amituanai-Toloa, 2006) is one way that upgrading teachers can negotiate the challenges that they face. Although the upgrading teachers struggled with the English language and academic demands of the programme, they can complete their Bachelor of Education studies with support from their school principals and the Ministry. The Faculty of Education at the National University of Samoa also has a role to play in ensuring that their services appropriately cater for the upgrading teachers, and that ongoing communication with the Ministry and the school principals are maintained. It is important that all stakeholders work together, through *va tapuia*, to overcome these challenges in order to have an enduring effect on the improvement of educational standards for Samoan students.

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## **Upgrading teachers' challenges with university foundation mathematics courses**

**Tagataese Tupu Tuia, Taulauniu Pule Mariota**

### **Abstract**

Mathematics education is currently a concern in Samoa's education system. To address this concern, two mathematics courses are included in the programme for primary school teachers who are upgrading their qualifications at the National University of Samoa (NUS). The courses are designed to strengthen teachers' mathematical and pedagogical knowledge. International research shows that advanced mathematics courses in teacher education leads to increased knowledge and skills in teaching. However, many upgrading teachers at NUS refused to take these papers. They complained about the advanced level of content of the university foundation mathematics papers and the lack of alignment with the primary school maths curriculum. The study utilised qualitative research methodology to examine teachers' perceptions of foundation mathematics courses at NUS. The study found that upgrading teachers found the courses challenging and experienced high levels of anxiety that were related to their limited understanding of the mathematics, mostly gained in their primary school education. This article concludes with recommendations that mathematics is vital for all upgrading teachers to study at a tertiary level so that their prior mathematical knowledge and skills can be upgraded.

### **Introduction**

In 2017, The Pacific Benchmarking for Educational Results report was published by the Samoan Observer. It stated that "teachers have limited capacity and skills to effectively teach literacy and numeracy" (Luamanu, 2017, p. 1). There were two immediate responses to this claim. First, all upgrading primary school teachers currently completing their Bachelor of Education at NUS were required to complete two foundation mathematics courses. Second, the Ministry of Education, Sports, and Culture (MESC) in Samoa started work on a process whereby all teachers without a teaching degree would be required to complete an upgrade programme at NUS.

The aim for upgrading teachers is to ensure that teachers will acquire mathematical and pedagogical knowledge required to lift the standard of teaching and learning in Samoan classrooms. The acquisition of new knowledge and skills will also assist with the reported current numeracy problem in primary and secondary schools in Samoa. While students considered to be 'at risk' in numeracy appears to be decreasing at the primary levels of schooling, it remains an area of concern for the MESC (MESC, 2016) and continues to be prioritised in the teacher upgrade programme at NUS. However, the maths foundation courses are not popular with upgrading teachers. They claim that these

courses include mathematical knowledge that is far in advance of what is required in the current mathematics curriculum, and is, therefore, irrelevant. Upgrading teachers state that in order for these mathematics education courses to be relevant, they should align with the primary mathematics curriculum. However, due to the level of knowledge and skills expected of students in a university programme, as well as the culture and social values tertiary institutions are founded on, the course cannot be limited to only the instructional material teachers need in their primary maths programme.

Upgrading teachers concerns about the nature and content of two foundations maths papers can be understood in terms of what Whyte (2009, cited in Anthony and Whyte, 2012) describes as ‘mathematics anxiety’. He explained that students who have encountered feelings of confusion and hesitation derived from “mathematics anxiety, considered a fear or phobia, produces ‘a negative response specific to the learning, or doing, of mathematical activities that interferes with performance’” (p. 7). Similarly, upgrading teachers’ mathematics anxiety was based on the new learning circumstances that creates fear that led to mathematic anxiety. This anxiety is reflected in upgrading teachers’ complaints that the two mathematic papers are too difficult and the level of content is above the level of the primary mathematics curriculum that they teach.

This article provides a brief background of primary and secondary mathematic curriculum in Samoa. It also describes the context for the MESC’s requirement that upgrading teachers must lift their level of mathematics knowledge and skill to address statistics that show significant levels of ‘at risk’ students in the primary sector. Literature is discussed which supports the development of mathematic knowledge and skills to ensure that the education system serves the education needs and interests of the nation.

### **Background Mathematics Curriculum in Samoa**

The mathematics curriculum for the primary and secondary sectors of schooling has been identified as problematic in the Samoan education system for some time. Results from national examinations show a high level of failure rate in mathematics examinations. In 2006, the MESC’s Strategic, Policy and Plan introduced new educational alternatives to improve students’ knowledge and skills. The MESC’s aim for the primary sector was “the systematic development of numerical concepts and mathematical computational skills” (MESC, 2006, p. 13). The secondary sector goals emphasised a “maintenance of a strong academic curriculum with focus on the development of general education in mathematics as the foundation for intellectual development” (MESC, 2006, p. 14).

In the same year, the MESC reported that maths classes were facing a major teacher shortage (2006, p. 21). It also planned to review the mathematics primary curriculum to address limited teacher content knowledge and the “decrease in the number of students opting for science and mathematics in the higher levels” (p. 41). Student performance in mathematics remained a concern. While “an improvement in the students’ performance in mathematics and science” was reported in 2015 (MESC, 2015b, p. 47), the following year “only 1% [of students were] achieving excellent level, hence the majority of students were at the beginner level” (p. 52). The Ministry of Education Corporate Plan July 2015 – July 2018 (2015a) reported that the Ministry of Education would “conduct teacher development programme for mathematics and science subjects” (p. 11), with the hope

of producing quality teachers in mathematics.

In the last four years, the MESC initiated the teacher upgrade programme to advance teachers' qualifications to degree level. The aim, as stipulated in the MESC strategic plan, was to provide in-service teachers with the opportunity to upgrade and acquire current knowledge and skills in mathematics and other subject areas. In addition, the Ministry of Education Chief Executive Officer requested that the Faculty of Education at NUS include two content maths papers for upgrading teachers to study. The understanding was that these two maths papers would provide primary upgrading teachers the knowledge and skills considered essential to teach mathematics. This was implemented in the Faculty of Education Bachelor of Education programme. In addition, teachers that graduated after the teacher upgrade without these two mathematics papers would return to NUS to complete the papers.

### **Literature Review**

Teaching primary school mathematics in Samoa has been a major concern in the education system due to a high failure rate in both primary and secondary schools mathematic results. In 2004, the MESC established a taskforce “to support teachers in raising the achievement levels of students in literacy and numeracy” (2006, p. 49). As explained in the previous section, the MESC recommended that all primary upgrading teachers take two foundation mathematics courses. However, upgrading teachers took issue with these courses. Their concerns derived from the fact that the course content was too difficult and did not cover the pedagogic elements of primary school maths., Meece, Wigfield, and Eccles (1990, cited in Siebers, 2015) explained that “strong mathematical backgrounds are critical for many careers in our very demanding technical society. Our changing world is becoming more economically competitive and doors of opportunity are closing for students who struggle in mathematics” (p. 4). The importance of mathematics in primary school teaching contributes to the future of young students, and primary school teachers must prepare their students with a strong mathematical base.

Primary teachers that enrol in the upgrading programme are expected to complete their teaching degree so that they can be equipped with knowledge and skills in different subject areas for the betterment of teaching and learning in the classroom. In this issue, Tuia, Esera, and Faavae explain the importance of teacher upgrade to Samoa's education system. The study found that upgrading teachers expected to generate new knowledge and skills into their teaching practice in schools as a result of their study. This expectation aligns with the aim of the mathematic content papers offered at NUS. The foundation mathematics courses have a framework that enable upgrading teachers to acquire more advanced mathematical ideas and ways to resolve mathematic problems, numbers and word problems. The importance of upgrading teachers acquiring appropriate knowledge and skill to assist with mathematics classroom teaching is explained by Perso (2006): “If teachers are unclear about how mathematics and numeracy connect they will be unlikely to be able to respond effectively to the demands that developing numerate children and young people place on them” (p. 21). Many upgrading teachers come with their prior mathematical knowledge and skills which are insufficient to meet

the mathematical needs of their students.

Studying mathematics seems to be a problem for some teachers, which causes a feeling of nervousness, fear and hesitation. Studies have described math students' reluctance to study due to maths anxiety, where "people feel tension, apprehension, discomfort, disturbance and fear of problems and situations that involve mathematics" (Anouti & Shehayeb, 2018, p. 1). Such feelings tend to prevent upgrading teachers from taking higher level mathematic papers in the university because of fear that they might fail. Ashcroft and Kirk (2001, cited in Ferguson, Hooper, Kersting, Ramirez, & Yeager, 2018) explain that "individuals who are math anxious experience intrusive worries that disrupt performance" (p. 1). In addition, Nath and Vineesha (2009), have echoed that "the language problem is one of the major factors contributing towards the poor performance of many students in mathematics" (p. 4). Although the content level of mathematic foundation papers are incompatible with the primary mathematic curriculum, as many upgrading teachers have claimed, this is, nonetheless, the nature of university courses, which are taught at an advanced level, and the MESC requires that primary upgrading teachers enroll in these foundations mathematic courses to generate appropriate knowledge and skills to assist with mathematics education in Samoa.

### **Methodology**

Qualitative research methodology was used in this study to guide data collection and analysis in order to collect meanings and narratives from the participants and to allow the researcher to study the context or setting of the participants (Creswell, 2003). Qualitative research attempts to extend and deepen our knowledge of how information came to be in our culture, social and educational world. The qualitative research aim in this study was to allow participants to voice their perceptions of and experiences in two Foundation Mathematics courses at NUS. This was done through interviews with individual participants. The two lecturers and ten upgrading teachers involved in the interviews during data collection included the former and current lecturers of the foundation mathematic papers at NUS. The following focus questions solicited participants' perspectives and experiences:

- What is your personal view of the two courses: Foundation Mathematics 1 and 2?
- What is your view of Foundation Mathematics 1 and 2 in comparison to the primary school mathematics curriculum?
- Are there any changes with the teaching of primary mathematic curriculum after the former upgrading teachers completed the two Foundation Mathematic 1 and 2?
- What is the relevance of the Foundation Mathematics 1 and 2 to the primary mathematic curriculum?

The former and current course lecturers were interviewed regarding the two courses' relevance to primary school mathematics curriculum, as well as their opinion about upgrading teachers' concerns about the these courses.

Creswell's (2014) model of data analysis was employed to analyze the data. Schatzman and Strauss (1973, cited in Creswell, 2014) "claim that qualitative data analysis primarily entails classifying things, persons, and events and the properties which characterize

them” (p. 258). Creswell (2014) referred to data analysis as a tool that identifies and clarifies patterns and themes from participants’ perspectives. After collecting the data, it was coded in order to identify emerging themes that represent participants’ views throughout the research discussion.

There were two kinds of participants: the upgrade students that took the courses; and the former and current lecturers teaching the courses. The in-service teachers selected for this study were experienced teachers and were in the field of teaching for 20 plus years. Some of the students currently taking the courses also took the courses in the previous years. One of the lecturers no longer teaches these courses, and the other is currently teaching both courses for the upgrading teachers.

### **Discussion of findings**

The purpose of this study was to find upgrading teacher participants’ views about two foundation mathematics courses in the Bachelor of Education at NUS. In addition, the former and current lecturers were interviewed to ascertain their views on the relevance of the two mathematic papers to primary upgrading teachers.

The data collected from the participants revealed some interesting findings relating to the research topic. The four themes arising from the analysis of the data are: 1) The challenging nature of the courses; 2) The advanced nature of the courses; 3) The courses produced high anxiety; and 4) Lack of relevance of the courses.

Theme 1 reflects some upgrading teachers’ beliefs that the two mathematic papers have challenged their way of understanding mathematics when compared to what they had been teaching in their respective schools. Theme 2 revealed that upgrading teachers believed the content of the two papers were too complex compared to the content of the current primary curriculum they use in school. Theme 3 indicated that the advanced level of the mathematic content is difficult for upgrading teachers and contributed to their levels of anxiety and their unwillingness to continue with studies. The final theme of irrelevance, indicates the teacher participants’ dissatisfaction with the courses. The majority of the upgrading teachers felt the courses were too advanced for their understanding. This has led to some participants thinking that it is unfair and irrelevant to take these papers. They believe the students will be more confused and lose interest in maths if they apply these methods and ideas in their mathematics classes.

#### ***The Challenging Nature of the Courses***

Upgrading teachers’ responses revealed their concern over the incompatibility of the two content mathematic papers with the mathematic curriculum taught at primary school. According to student participant 1 “the language used, terminology, formula covered are complicated”. The participant felt that the language and terminology used by the lecturer would not be useful if they were to use it in their primary school maths class. Student participant 3 agreed about the difficulty of the courses, but was also surprised by the content. She said, “It is too hard to imagine and it is a surprise to us all”. Furthermore, the current mathematics lecturer also supported the student teachers’ frustration and argued that the two mathematic papers are unsuitable for primary school mathematic teachers because of the content level that the courses target:

*The mathematics is too difficult for them, and upgrading teachers should be given relevant or optional mathematics papers to study ... student teachers should not be taking these maths courses. They should be given mathematics courses that are not only challenging but they can be successful [rather than] failing it because it is difficult.*

Student participants and the current lecturer viewed the two mathematics courses as difficult for student teachers due to the content, language, and relevance.

### ***The Advanced Nature of the Courses***

Theme 2 relates to the advanced content of the two maths courses, which were viewed as incompatible with the level of the primary maths curriculum. According to student participant 4, “[The course] is too advanced and complicated”. Student participant 2 added, “There is no point in teaching high level mathematics if it is not included in the primary school curriculum”. However, the former lecturer stated that “the two mathematics papers are suitable for the student teachers to take due to their relevance to the primary mathematics curriculum”. The former lecturer also argued that “any student teacher must be familiar with any mathematics problem, in terms of language and word problems to prepare them to teach mathematics at any level”. This view contrasts with that of the current lecturer who saw the course as unfair for upgrading teachers as the courses were too advanced for them. Furthermore, the current lecturer considered that “the content of the courses need to be revisited or revised to fit the understanding and ability of the upgrading teachers”. Student participant 5 responded “I like mathematics and I am willing to learn but I want my mathematics lecturer to simplify their teaching especially problem solving, word problems and language”. Student participant 5 supports the level of content in the two maths courses, but believes that the delivery methods should be simplified for them to understand the content.

### ***The Courses Produce High Anxiety***

Many upgrading teacher participants described the stress and anxiety they experienced in the two maths courses. Upgrading teachers view these courses as unsuitable for those who teach at the primary level of schooling and claim that it is producing undue pressure on them. Student participant 2 explained, “New changes bring a lot of pressure”. This pressure is related to the lack of alignment between what they are learning in the maths course and what they teach in their maths classroom. According to student participant 1, “The primary school students are at the lower level, so the teachers need time and effort to re-adjust everything to suit the level of the primary school students, and that is stressful”. Furthermore, student participant 6 explained, “The content in these papers is not in the primary school curriculum yet, so nobody bothers to do anything about these new concepts and skills”. However, student participant 5 stated that “only the year 7 and year 8 teachers should be studying these courses because of the year 8 national examination which includes some of this complicated content”. Student participant 7 was less concerned with the level of maths knowledge in the course and argued, “We are here to learn to teach and what we learn from here we pass on to the primary school



students in simplified forms but it can be very stressful”. Similarly, student participant 8 agreed that “it is very stressful if the content is not well taught at the university level”. These participants’ comments also reveal that most student teachers have limited time to consolidate the ideas from their studies and apply them their maths programmes. However, the former lecturer believed, “New content brings new perspectives in teaching mathematics” and this is the change she believes that will allow teacher improvement in skills and knowledge in order to lift the achievement of Samoan children.

### ***Lack of Relevance of the Courses***

Upgrading teacher participants’ felt that the two mathematics courses that they study at university were beyond their understanding. This has made things more complicated because most of these teacher participants did not take secondary level mathematics or did not achieve higher level mathematics. This led them to question their ability to develop their students’ mathematical knowledge. “If we do not understand [maths ourselves], how can we expect our students to learn and take in new [maths] content?” (student participant 6). Again, the importance of the courses was argued by the former lecturer: “These papers represent university mathematical levels. Everyone who teaches mathematics in the primary school shall pass university/higher level math or should know more ... than what the primary school curriculum is currently covering”.

### **Conclusion**

Mathematics in primary school is not an easy subject to teach or to learn as many participants have argued throughout this study. According to Nath and Vineesha (2009), “mathematics is generally seen as a difficult subject and how this subject is communicated to pupils will influence how pupils learn the subject” (p. 2). Therefore, it is important for Samoan teachers to return to NUS to upgrade their teaching qualification so they can acquire appropriate skills and knowledge to address mathematical problems and become familiar with mathematical language. Barton and Barton (2003, cited in Nath and Vineesha, 2009), explained that “those who are bilingual and multilingual” (p. 8) may struggle with tertiary mathematics due to mathematical language use. In this study, teachers participants’ found maths courses difficult because of the language used, especially mathematical terminology. The perceived difficulty of the courses has led to avoidance. Teachers have been unwilling to complete the two foundation maths courses and have not enrolled in these courses. These feelings are described by Ferguson, Hooper, Kersting, Ramirez and Yeager (2018) as ‘math anxiety’, which is a “persistent fear, tension, and apprehension related to situations that require math” (p. 1). The problems upgrading teachers went through in the foundation maths courses were due to their level of difficulty as well as their incompatibility with the primary mathematics curriculum. The challenges that upgrading teachers encountered during their studies revealed that some had very little understanding of the mathematics they taught in primary schools. If student achievement is to improve, teachers will need to improve their mathematical skills and knowledge. Perso (2006), pointed out “to be numerate is to use mathematics effectively to meet the general demands of life at home, in paid work, and for participation in community and civic life” (p. 21).

Mathematics, therefore, is a subject for all to be familiar with because of its significance to school students at different school levels and also when they become adults in life.

Due to the level of mathematic courses at NUS, all students taking mathematics should have some familiarity with the subject before taking it. Upgrading teachers who have returned to university to upgrade teaching degrees should also bring with them their primary school mathematics skills and knowledge to help them with their studies. However, all upgrading teacher participants in this study viewed the level of mathematics courses as irrelevant and beyond their understanding. There is much work to be done in this area to bring primary school maths teachers to a level where they are both knowledgeable and skilled in maths education. The New Zealand Education Review Office (2018), offers the following advice, suggesting that teacher development is part of “ongoing mathematics professional development to foster and sustain improvements, and working collaboratively to develop and implement an agreed mathematics curriculum and consistent, high quality teaching practices” (p. 6). Teachers of all school levels should always be mindful of the new ideas, skills and knowledge in mathematics education that will help improve teaching in school. Whether by upgrade classes or by ongoing professional development, improvement in mathematics teaching skills and knowledge which will also improve primary school students’ mathematical skills and knowledge.

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## **First-year students' experiences at university – A Samoan case**

**Rasela Tufue, Jackie Ah Hoy, Su'eala Kolone-Collins**

### **Abstract**

Student attrition in the first year at university is a global issue. This article reports on a study of 143 first-year students from the Faculty of Education (FoE) at the National University of Samoa. While students appeared to be positive about the technical support available to them, they did not fully utilise other support services such as academic advising, counselling and learning support services. The study findings suggest that many participants were not autonomously motivated to access the services available to them, nor did they fully participate in tutorial classes. "Self-determination theory" is used to explain the relationship between attrition at university and levels of self-motivation. We argue that many students are not fully prepared for university life and suggest that a collaborative relationship between colleges and universities is important to prepare students for university life.

### **Introduction**

Student attrition in the first year of university is an ongoing global concern (Brinkworth, McCann, Mathews, & Nordstrom, 2009; Soiferman, 2017). Wilcoxson (2010) notes that "approximately half of all attrition occurs in the first year of studies" (p. 624). This concern is also prevalent in Samoan universities, although no research has been undertaken to explain this phenomenon. Driven by the desire to know more about why many students dropped out during their first year, we surveyed first-year students from the Foundation Certificate of Education (FCE) program at the National University of Samoa (NUS).

The FCE program targets first-year students who have an interest in teaching. An ongoing concern in the FoE has been the high number of students who, once enrolled, do not complete the program. Some students failed and others withdrew. In early 2016, an analysis of the graduation rates of students who enrolled in four foundation programs at the University from the period 2006 to 2015 was undertaken. The analysis indicated that the graduation rate for FoE students has always been very low compared to other faculties at NUS (refer Table 1) and further confirms the high numbers of student withdrawal or failure during their first year.

**Table 1: Graduation Rates Compared of the Foundation Certificate Programmes of Four Faculties between two five-year Periods: 2006–2015**

Faculties	2006 - 2010	2011 - 2015	% Change
Faculty of Arts	65.9	67.7	1.8
Faculty of Nursing	46.4	46.6	0.2
Faculty of Science	69.8	68.3	-1.5
Faculty of Education	35.2	31.7	-3.5

(Adopted from a presentation by Asofou Soò during a FoE staff meeting June 2016).

The aim of this study was to:

1. survey students enrolled in the 2016 foundation education program at the FoE about their views and experiences as first-year students at the National University of Samoa;
2. report on how their university experiences may have affected their academic performance at the university.

### Literature review

A common assumption made by many university educators and those in academic institutions is that first-year students who are fresh out of high school are ill-prepared for university life (Krause & Coates, 2008). The perception is that these students are “disengaged academically, unmotivated, can’t write and spell, have a ten-minute attention span and expect instant gratification” (Barefoot, 2000, p. 13). Inherent in this view is the notion that first-year students are too dependent on lecturers and lack the autonomous skill expected of a university student.

In spite of these assumptions, the literature also notes that the transition from high school to university can be a very stressful and challenging experience for most students leading to many either dropping out or failing in their first year of university study (Brinkworth et al., 2009; Soiferman, 2017). Factors which seem to affect students’ transition from high school to university include: students’ level of expectations, their goals for entering university and the manner in which they prepare for and adapt to university life (Holdaway & Kelloway, 1987). Other factors include the lack of support mechanisms which are available at university to support students (Awang, Kutty, & Ahmad, 2014) and the university’s expectations of students (Lowe & Cook, 2003). These factors, as reported in the literature, will be explored further in the next sections.

Students’ expectations of university life can affect the way they adapt to the university environment. Holdaway and Kelloway (1987), while acknowledging the university as an alien world to many high school graduates, also added that students have varied expectations and aspirations of university life. While some students are excited and enthusiastic, others will be apprehensive and uncertain as to what university life will be like. Many students enter university assuming that the academic demands they

experienced at secondary school will be no different from that which they will encounter at university (Lowe & Cook, 2003).

Universities' expectations of students can also impact on a student's transition. Universities often expect students to adjust immediately to the teaching and learning style at university. The learning approach at university can be quite different from the type of teaching and learning that occurs at high school. There is also an expectation by the university for students to become independent (Leese, 2010) and self-regulated learners at the tertiary level (Lowe & Cook, 2003). If students are not already independent, self-regulated learners, they will not automatically become so upon entering tertiary-level study. The fact that students are not a homogenous group, while obvious, is worth noting as students adjust and adapt to university life.

Student rates of adjustment and of academic success in the first year are closely linked to how well prepared students are upon entering the university (Holdaway & Kelloway, 1987). The university can play a significant role in easing student transition. Most universities provide an orientation programme for new students. These vary in length, although most are reported as being too generic and providing insufficient time and information to assist students become familiar with the new environment, programs, courses, and timetables (Leese, 2010). Furthermore, orientation programmes, irrespective of their initial effectiveness, do not preclude the importance of ongoing support, particularly throughout the first semester (Beaumont, Moscrop, & Canning, 2016).

Another way that the university can contribute to student transition to university is by supporting students' sense of well-being (Awang et al., 2014). Peel (2000) found that many first-year students felt secluded, had the perception that they were just a number, and felt that most staff displayed a lack of interest in them. They "struggled for motivation and quietly slipped away" (p. 32). Awang et al. (2014) stressed the need for universities to address concerns of students and to consider ways to support them. They also emphasised social support from family, peers, and the university community.

While a smooth student transition is important in the first-year university experience, student goals and motivation for attending university are also significant. Holdaway and Kelloway (1987) cited results of a survey by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (1986) of more than 192,000 US freshmen about their reasons for entering university. They found that the most important reasons students identified were to get a better job (83%), followed by learning more about things of interest (74%); to be able to make more money (70%); and to gain a general education and appreciation of ideas (61%).

Lowe and Cook (2003) explained that, while students seemed motivated to enter university, once at university some tended to lose the motivation to pursue their studies and then withdrew. Whether this loss of interest is the result of the mismatch of expectations between students and the university, a lack of general preparation by the student, the lack of support from the university or student motivation, is the focus of this study.

## **Theoretical framework**

To understand factors that affect students' attitudes to their studies, self-determination theory (SDT) is used in this study to understand and explain the affect that students' attitudes have on their studies. This section offers a brief explanation for SDT, its nature and how it works as a theory to frame this study. According to Deci and Ryan (2015), SDT is a theory of human motivation that examines a wide range of phenomena across gender, culture, age, and socioeconomic status. As a motivational theory, it identifies and explains the forces that influence behaviour leading to action. Further, it addresses how people's behaviour is regulated in the various domains of their lives. Self-determination theory categorises two types of motivation: autonomous motivation and controlled motivation. Individuals who are autonomously motivated are self-regulated and can act under their own volition. Controlled motivation, on the other hand, involves an individual who acts out of obligation or by use of force or coercion. An individual who is motivated to act by controlled motivation is driven by external forces and without the privilege of choice. Autonomous and controlled motivation can be differentiated by the intrinsic or extrinsic forces that lead to action.

According to Deci (1975), intrinsic motivation means people are engaged in an activity because they find it interesting, enjoyable, or fun; this is analogous to autonomous motivation. Intrinsic motivation is reflected in individuals who act of their own volition because of their interest or love for the activity, such as gardening or playing a musical instrument. Autonomous individuals are not driven by an external force but from an inner drive. Extrinsic motivation on the other hand, involves the use of stimuli to prompt behaviour. Stimuli can take the form of incentives such as rewards, prizes or scholarships or even the desire for social approval. Students can also be extrinsically driven to succeed by threats of punishment (Deci & Cascio, 1972), assessment deadlines (Amabile, DeJong, & Leper, 1976), and surveillance (Plant & Ryan, 1985). Some students may also be extrinsically motivated if they wish to gain approval from friends or to fulfil family obligations. In Samoa, where competition seems to be the norm, students who compete in their exam results in order to bring status and esteem to the family name can be viewed as being extrinsically motivated (Fairbairn-Dunlop, 1991).

Another factor that affects motivation is the psychological needs of individuals. Maslow's hierarchy of needs espouses that higher needs can only be met after basic needs are satisfied (Maslow, 1943). Thus if the social and learning environments are unsafe and unsupportive of the learner's needs, learning is unlikely to occur. Ryan and Deci (2009) maintain that supportive instructors lead to autonomously motivated students, who internalise the course material better and achieve higher grades. The concept of autonomous motivation could be negligible for participants in this study. This is because students have come through a schooling system where learning is strictly controlled. At the university, lecturers tend to control the learning situation. One may also argue that, in Samoa, as in learning contexts elsewhere, the use of a grading system and competing for scholarship awards seem to drive students more than autonomous and intrinsic motivation. In addition, the very hierarchical nature of the Samoan culture may inhibit individuals from becoming autonomous learners (Tufue-Dolgoy, 2010).

The present study reports on findings from a group of first-year students who



enrolled to study in the Faculty of Education at the National University of Samoa in 2016. We have investigated the experiences of these students including: the extent to which their expectations were met; how they adapted to university life; and the type of support they received at university. Our interest was in finding what factors may have contributed to high attrition rates for first-year students enrolled in the FoE program at the National University of Samoa over the past decade. We acknowledge the importance of gathering the views of students concerning higher education (Alderman, Towers, & Bannah, 2012). Our hope is that, by listening to students' voices concerning issues they encounter in their first year will help administrators and the university to design programs to support first-year students at university. This research is of interest to individuals who teach first-year students and those who design programs for this cohort. In a wider context, it is of interest to universities who are seeking ways to retain students beyond their first-year experience.

## **Methodology**

As the literature highlighted, there are several factors that affect students' transition to university. The main goal for this study was first, to gain an understanding of these factors by surveying first-year students' experiences at university. A second goal was to report on how these experiences may have contributed to high attrition rates for FoE students over the years. The most effective way to achieve these objectives was to survey views of 143 first-year students from the FoE at the National University of Samoa. Surveys are appropriate for gathering data about abstract ideas or concepts that are otherwise difficult to quantify, such as opinions, attitudes, and beliefs (Rickards, Magee, & Artino, 2012). The researchers, who were full-time lecturers, found the use of a survey to be efficient since they were interested in gathering information from a large number of students within a short period of time. Although the survey allows for speedy collection of data from a large number of cases, it is however, limited, in that it does not allow the researchers to delve deeply into the experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2003).

The study utilised a survey designed by the Canadian University Survey Consortium (CUSC) in 2013 to learn more about the experiences of first-year students in order to improve their transition into university. Only Likert-scale-type questions (see below), were used for this investigation in order to focus on less concrete concepts such as motivation.

The survey questionnaire consisted of five sections. Section A collected data about students' reasons for attending university such as: job preparation; desire for a higher education; preparing to earn an international scholarships; to develop academic skills and knowledge; to meet family expectations; and to make friends.

Section B collected information about their orientation experience and their level of satisfaction with their orientation at NUS. This included: their sense of feeling welcome; understanding of the university's academic expectations and how it eased their transition into university life; provision of information about university life and student services; and confidence building.

Section C focused on how successful students adjust to university in three areas:

academic; personal; and practical. In the academic area, the students were asked about adjusting successfully in meeting educational study needs; the program of study that met their objectives; getting academic advice; performance in written assessment; understanding course content; and getting help. In the personal area, questions targeted success in making new friends; involvement in university activities; new living arrangements; a sense of belonging at university; and time management. In the practical area, the questions asked about students' success in moving around the university, as well as library usage.

Section D questions included information related to the level of satisfaction with the university under the following aspects: size of class; instructional facilities; personal safety on campus; concern shown by the university to the student as an individual; general conditions of buildings and grounds, study spaces as well as places for social gathering. Section D also asked about the utilisation of services provided at NUS in addition to levels of satisfaction concerning these services: library facilities; recreation facilities; parking facilities; university social activities; university bookshop; personal counselling services; students learning support services; canteen; academic advising; tutoring services; university email; and computer support services (ICT). In addition, this section collected information about student satisfaction with tutor support; tutor-student relationships; tutor accessibility; and the quality of teaching.

The final section focused on information on students' academic profiles and the grades they expected to receive at the end of their first year at university. It also sought to identify factors that influenced students' decision to attend NUS as well as their level of satisfaction with the program they were enrolled in at the time of this study.

The questionnaires were self-administered within the university premises. Participants were required to complete the questionnaires and return them within a week. Of the 200 questionnaires that were distributed, 143 (more than 90%) were returned.

## **Results**

Since the survey instrument to gather data was more quantitative in nature, a basic descriptive statistical analysis was used to analyse data. The Excel Microsoft application was used to process data into tables and calculate the percentages. We were more interested in the percentage of participants in relation to their responses to questionnaire items.

### ***Section A: Reason for attending University***

**Question:** What was the most important reason to attend university?

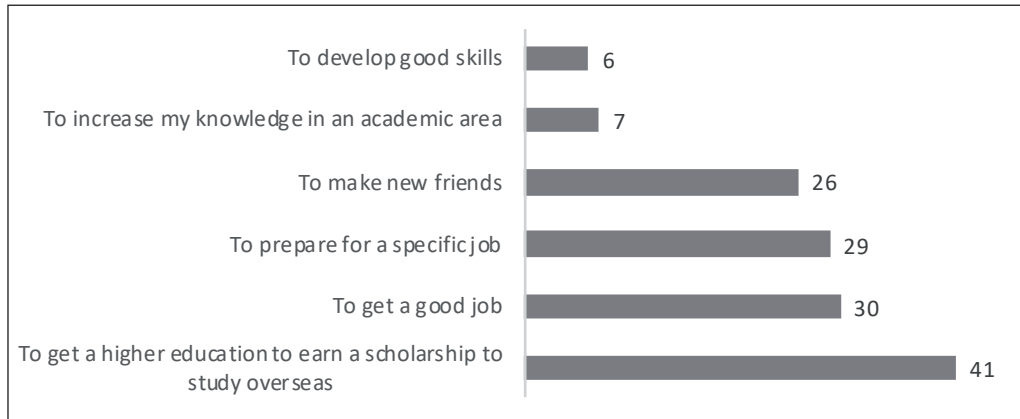
**Table 2: Reason for attending university**

Table 2 shows that earning a higher education to earn a scholarship to study overseas (41, 28%) was by far the most important reason that drove the participants in their decisions to enter university. The next three most important reasons were to get a good job (30, 21%), preparation for a specific job (29, 20%), and to make new friends (26, 18%). Other reasons such as attending university to increase knowledge in an academic area, develop good skills as well as to meet their parents' expectation (3) were rated quite low. The results confirm that the reason most students decide to enter university at NUS is to gain a scholarship to study overseas as also noted by Dolgoy (2000). Many Samoan families have high expectations for their children and to enter university and study overseas is a desire of every family – these expectations seem to be reflected in the results.

### **Section B: Level of Satisfaction with NUS Orientation**

**Question:** How satisfied were you with each of the following aspects of the NUS orientation?

**Table 3: Satisfaction with orientation at NUS**

	Very dissatisfied		Somewhat dissatisfied		Somewhat satisfied		Very satisfied		Don't know		No response	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Feel Welcome	78	55%	38	27%	4	3%	4	3%	7	5%	12	8%
Help understand university academic expectation	9	6%	6	4%	31	22%	81	57%	5	3%	11	8%
Easy transition to university life	8	6%	10	7%	36	25%	69	48%	8	6%	12	8%
Information about university life	8	6%	8	6%	40	28%	67	47%	10	7%	10	7%
Information about student services	13	9%	13	9%	46	32%	49	34%	8	6%	14	10%
Build confidence	6	4%	13	9%	29	20%	68	48%	9	6%	18	13%
Other	16	11%	14	10%	23	16%	22	15%	21	15%	47	33%

Table 3 shows the results of participants' level of satisfaction with aspects of the orientation at NUS. Results show that 57% students were very satisfied with the orientation as it helped them understand academic expectations. The next three aspects of orientation which students found satisfactory but by less than 50% participants include: confidence building (48%), as a means for an easy transition into university life (48%), as a source of information about university life (47%) and to gain information about student services (34%). As noted, apart from the aspect 'help understand academic expectation,' which was rated *very satisfactory* by half of the participants, all other aspects of orientation sat below 50%, which indicates that the orientation program was not to the satisfaction of participants. Another finding that is disturbing is that which relates to students feeling welcome. A total of 55% of participants rated this as an aspect of the orientation with which they were *very dissatisfied*.

### **Section C: Adjustment to academic, personal and practical aspects at NUS**

Results relating to participants' level of success adjusting to academic aspects at NUS indicated that the highest number of participants had success in adjusting in three areas: the study program (83%, 62% *very much*, 21% *some*), understanding course content (81%, 52% *very much*, 29% *some*), as well as success in written assessments (81%, 52% *very much*, 29% *some*). The next three areas where approximately 70% participants seemed to have success adjusting were: finding help with problems (78%, 48% *very much*, 30% *some*), getting academic advice (73%, 55% *much*, 18% *some*), as well as meeting educational study needs (71%, 50% *very much*, 21% *some*). Overall, results in this section indicate that, in all academic aspects more than 70% participants had either *very much* or *some* success in adjusting to all of these aspects. Nevertheless, even though all areas sat above 70%, we still find the result concerning. This is because there are a number of students (approx. 20%) who seem to struggle with adjustment. It is important that all, not just some, adjust well to their academic life.

**Table 4: Degree of adjustment to personal aspects at NUS**

	None		Very little		Some		Very much		Not applicable		No response	
Making new friends	10	7%	33	23%	35	24%	44	31%	7	5%	14	10%
Becoming involved in university activities	11	8%	21	15%	24	17%	66	46%	5	3%	16	11%
New living arrangements	14	10%	13	9%	46	32%	49	34%	11	8%	10	7%
Feeling as if I belong at university	9	6%	14	10%	37	26%	55	38%	8	6%	20	14%
Organising my time to complete my studies	4	3%	14	10%	28	20%	77	54%	6	4%	14	10%

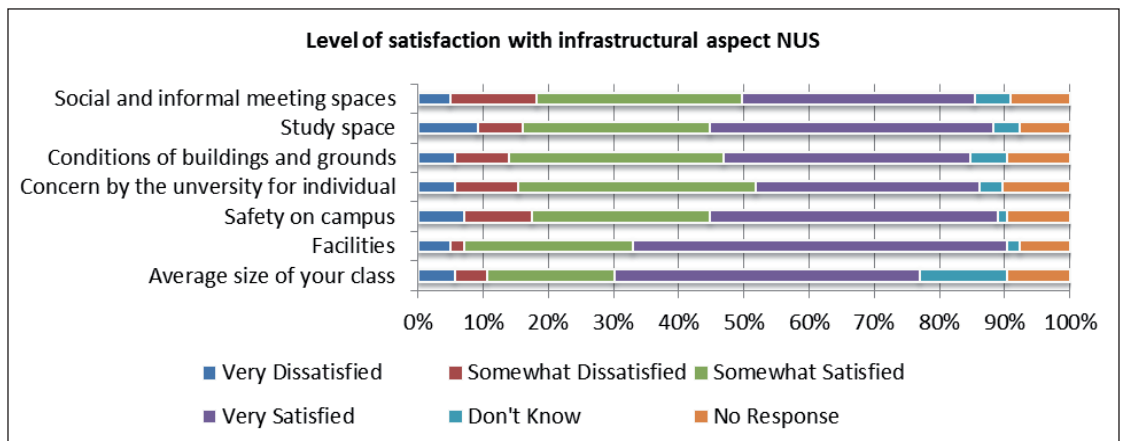
Results (Table 4) relating to participants’ level of success in adjusting to personal aspects at NUS indicated that the highest number of participants adjusted well to time organisation to complete studies, (74%, 54% *very much*, 20% *some*). Students also indicated much or some adjustment in areas related to: living arrangements (66%, 34% *very much*, 32% *some*), sense of belonging (64% 38% *very much*, 26% *some*), and involvement in university activities, (63%, 46% *very much*, 17% *some*). The area where students felt the least level of success was related to making new friends (55%, 31% *very much*, 24% *some*). Results revealed that, in all five aspects, participants seem to be adjusting in some way although the percentages are not very high. We are concerned about the 30% of participants who seem to be struggling with adjustment in all these five aspects. Results showed that only 38% participants seem to have a strong sense of belonging. Students need to have a sense of belonging as, according to Awang et al. (2014), it has a positive impact on students’ attitudes.

Participants’ degree of adjustment to practical aspects at university revealed that most were confident using the library (75%, 55% *very much*, 20% *some*) and finding their way around the university (62%, 41% *very much*, 21% *some*). Results suggest that 25% participants do not seem adjusted to using the library while 38% seem to have issues finding their way around the university. It is disconcerting to realise that there are students who appeared to be lost within the university campus seven weeks after university started. Many lecturers complain about students walking aimlessly around the campus without attending classes. The results however, indicated that a number of students were still not familiar with university life half-way through the year.

**Section D (i): Satisfaction with NUS infrastructural aspect**

**Question:** How satisfied are you with each of the following parts of the university?

**Table 5: Percentage level of satisfaction with infrastructural aspects of NUS**



Results (Table 5) on level of satisfaction with university infrastructures shows that the highest number of participants were satisfied with facilities: 83% (57% indicated being *very satisfied*, 26% *somewhat satisfied*). The next aspects were around 70%

of participants finding *satisfactory* were: study spaces (72%, 43% *very satisfied*, 29%, *somewhat satisfied*); safety on campus aspect (71%, (44% *very satisfied*, 27% *somewhat satisfied*); conditions of buildings and grounds (71%, (38% *very satisfied*, 33%, *somewhat satisfied*); and university concern for individual (70%, 34% *very satisfied*, 36% *somewhat satisfied*). The areas that received the lowest scores were: average size of class (67%, 47% *very satisfied*, 20% *somewhat satisfied*); and social and informal meeting spaces (67%, 36% *very satisfied*, 31% *somewhat satisfied*). Results indicated participants' satisfaction with all aspects, however, one needs to note that, except for one aspect that was rated satisfactory by 83%, the rest were rated at 70% and below. This means that there are still students who do not find satisfaction in the university's infrastructure. There is a need for infrastructural aspects to be improved so all students will feel supported in their learning. Students are more likely to be motivated to learn and remain in the university if the infrastructure serves students' needs.

#### **Section D (ii): NUS Support services consumption**

**Question:** Please indicate whether you have used each of the following services at NUS?

Section D of the survey required participants to indicate their usage of services at NUS. Results indicate that the three most-used services are: library facilities (76%), tutorial classes (75%), and the university bookshop (71%). These are followed by the food services/canteen (59%), learning support services (53%), academic advising (52%) and ICT Services (57%). Areas that were used less by participants were: university social activities (47%), counselling services, (43%), recreational and sports facilities (43%), university email (38%), and parking facilities (14%). Results in this section are a cause of major concern as use of these services may be a significant contributor to students' academic performance. For example, results showed that less than half of all participants (43%) utilised counselling services. Another concern relates to the utilisation of learning support services. About half (53%) used learning support service while 36% never accessed this service. The learning support service at NUS was established less than a decade ago mainly to support students in their academic work. A similar number of participants used academic advice services (52%), while 36% indicated they never used these services. Another surprising finding relates to tutorial attendance. Although 75% attended tutorial classes, the number of students (35%) indicating otherwise is a major concern. These responses show that a significant number do not use the services that will assist them to find success in the program. The cultural context may provide an explanation. For example, the very hierarchical system of the *fa'a Samoa* may inhibit students from being forthcoming about their personal views as they may expect to be directed as opposed to being self-directed.

#### **Section D (iii): Satisfaction with NUS technical support services**

Participants were also asked to rate their level of satisfaction with the technical services at NUS. A significant number indicated they were satisfied with the library facilities (70%, 50% *very satisfied*, 20% *somewhat satisfied*). Satisfaction levels for other services sat at 60% and below: the university bookshop 66% (40% *being very satisfied*, 26%

*somewhat satisfied*); social activities 51% (24% *very satisfied*, 27% *somewhat satisfied*); and recreational facilities 50% (19% *very satisfied*, 31% *somewhat satisfied*). Responses related to academic advising were notably low with more than 90% of participants not responding and only one percent (1%) being satisfied with this service. Other aspects of the questionnaire which received low responses included: counselling services, learning support services, food service/canteen, tutorial classes, university email, and ICT services. There is some concern about the manner in which this section of the survey was completed. Failure of students to complete sections as noted, may be attributed to students' misinterpretation of the questionnaire. Thus one can see this as a limitation of the research. What is interesting to note is that there seems to be a correlation between the responses in this section and those in the previous section. Aspects of service consumption that sat at 50% in the previous section are the same aspects that received no response in this section.

#### **Section D (iv): NUS academic support services**

In Section D of survey, students were also asked to indicate their level of satisfaction of the academic support offered by NUS. Results indicated that the majority are satisfied with the way lecturers and tutors encourage class participation (86%, 59% *strongly agree* and 27% *agree*). Participants also expressed satisfaction with: their decision to attend university (84%, (55% *strongly agree* and 29% *agree*), and the quality of teaching at NUS (81%, 41% *participants strongly agree* and 40% *agree*). A slightly smaller percentage of participants were satisfied with: lecturers' accessibility outside of class (75%, 36% *strongly agree*, 39% *agree*) and lecturer treatment of students (74%, 36% *strongly agree*, 38% *agree*). The results in this section showed that the majority of participants are satisfied with the academic support available at the university. However, the item, 'lecturer availability' even though it sits at 75% is still a concern for only 36% *strongly agree* while 39% *agree*, and 25% *disagree*. These responses indicate that some lecturers are perceived to be accessible by some students. Lecturer availability is, therefore, a concern as it is an important support for new students who are trying to settle into the university environment.

#### **Section E: Expected grades, influences, and overall satisfaction**

In the final section of the survey, participants were asked three questions:

1. What average grade do you expect to have at the end of your first year at university?
2. Who or what influenced your decision to enrol in this program?
3. How satisfied are you with your current FCE program?

In response to the question about the average grade they expected to attain after their first year of study, survey results show that about half of all participants expected to receive an average grade of 'A' (56%), 29% expected to receive a 'B' grade, while 6% participants expected to receive a 'C' grade. One student expected to receive a 'D' grade, and 11 (8%) participants did not respond to this question. On the whole, students appeared to be confident about their expected success in the program. However, there is

some concern about the confidence levels of those who did not answer this question as well as the one participant that expected to fail.

Participants were also asked about who or what influenced their decision to enter university. Almost half of the participants (42%) made this decision themselves, while 25% were influenced by their parents or other family members. A further 18% decided to enrol at NUS as a result of their Secondary School Certificate (SSLC) score. These responses indicate that almost half of the participants made autonomous decisions to enter university. The importance of autonomous motivation for first-year students is discussed in the following section.

The final summary question asked participants about their general satisfaction with the Foundation Education program. More than half (69%, 48% *very satisfied*, 21% *fairly satisfied*) indicated satisfaction. A small number expressed dissatisfaction (11%, 4% *fairly dissatisfied*, 7% *dissatisfied*). A further 13% indicated that they don't know, and 7% provided no response.

## Discussion

This study aimed to understand and explain students' experiences as first-year students at the National University of Samoa with a view to improving their transition from high school to university. While findings revealed some positive experiences, they also highlighted some challenges. On the whole, participants seemed to adjust well to the academic, personal and practical aspects of university life. This also applies to participants' level of satisfaction with aspects of the university's infrastructure. These findings notwithstanding, there were areas of major concern. For example, the under-utilisation of services such as counselling, learning support, academic advising, as well as tutorial classes is a challenge. Results indicated that 44% of participants never using counselling services; 36% did not use learning support services, and 36% did not seek assistance from academic advisors. The 35% of students who claimed that they did not attend tutorial classes is also very worrisome. Tutorial classes are compulsory at university so that students will have access to individual support within a small group. While these data indicate that a smaller number of students are accessing academic services, this remains a concern for the authors, who are also lecturers at NUS. The underutilisation of these services may be contributing to the poor academic performance and high attrition rate of foundation education students over the years.

While the data do not give reasons for the poor utilisation of support services, we can look to the literature for possible explanations. For example, half (55%) of all participants were highly dissatisfied with the welcoming aspect of orientation. If the orientation is perceived as dissatisfactory, that first experience may have a negative influence on further university experiences. Only 38% of participants felt a strong sense of belonging to the university. Awang et al. (2014) explain that students need to have a sense of belonging in order to have positive experiences at university. Further, Leese (2010) argued that students need more time than a few days of orientation in order to develop sufficient familiarity with the expectations and support available at the university.

Another possible reason for students' failure to use the support systems could be



attributed to a lack of self-autonomy once enrolled in their university program. While almost half (42%) of participants seemed to be autonomously motivated to make informed decision to enter university, this may not extend to seeking advice from counsellors and academic advisors. This may be attributed to the hierarchical nature of Samoan culture (Tufue-Dolgoy, 2010). Students may not feel that it is appropriate, nor would they be confident to initiate an approach to people in authority within the university structure. Peel (2000) found that some of the reasons why students slowly disappear from university, is that students perceived that staff were not interested in them; that they are just a number, which they found very demotivating. The correlation between supportive instructors and autonomously motivated students was also explained by Ryan and Deci (2009). They claimed that students who received support from their instructors were likely to become more autonomously motivated and successful in the academic achievement. The same kind of autonomy in students' personal lives will also lead to positive experiences and academic outcomes. Parker, Summerfield, Hogan, and Majeski (2004) explained that one of the most common reasons for first-year students leaving the university is the inability to manage their social life, time, and finances. The role of the university appears to be not just providing this support, but assisting students to access the support that is available.

Findings also seem to suggest that students may not be prepared for this new phase of their academic journey. The widespread responses about overall satisfaction in Section D of the survey seem to indicate students' indecisiveness regarding their program of study. Some students (13%) were undecided about their satisfaction with the program, and others (7%) had no response. This indecisiveness may indicate that students were unsure about what to expect in the program. Geer's (1964) and Becker's (1966) early work suggests that indecisiveness is not unusual. They noted that students had no clear idea about the academic and social demands of university life.

One of the findings that was not surprising relates to grade expectations. Only 58% of participants saw themselves as 'A' grade students. Many students enrol in education and teaching programs as a last option. If their secondary school grades do not qualify them for the Arts, Sciences, and other academic programs, their second choice is often Education. Therefore, many students with lower qualifying grades enrol for programs in the Faculty of Education.

## **Conclusion**

Overall results of this study indicate that, although participants appear positive about most aspects of their university experience, there are also challenging areas which could have contributed to foundation education students' poor academic achievement since 2006. For example, although technical support is accessed by most participants, the same cannot be said for academic support such as academic advice, counselling and learning support services. Similarly, not all students seemed to participate in tutorial classes. We have identified the need to ensure that all new students at NUS value and can easily access these services. Furthermore, we cannot assume that first-year students understand the nature and value of lectures, tutorial, academic counselling and the like, as these concepts may be alien to them. Leese (2010) explored differences between

students' expectations and the reality of university and found that one of the highest challenges encountered by students was "understanding instructional language and terminology" (p. 24). In addition, we note that many participants were not autonomously motivated to seek these services at NUS. We have identified the tension between the cultural context of a strongly structured, hierarchical Samoan society and the context of the university which favours autonomously motivated and self-regulated individuals. This is an important matter which is beyond the scope of this paper.

The study is limited in a number of ways. First, the survey instrument provided quantitative data that did not allow participants to explain their responses; a qualitative approach using interviews could have provided richer data where students could elaborate on their experiences. Second, the study was located within one faculty. Expanding the research to include other faculties would enable a closer examination of its generalisability. A future comparative study could utilise both survey and interviews, to gather information from first-year students and lecturers in other faculties. The study could also explore the concept of autonomous learning within the Samoan context.

### Recommendations

Some recommendations are worth consideration if the university aims for high student retention. Findings clearly indicate the need to prepare students well, while still at college, to ease their transition into university. The National University of Samoa might consider working with local colleges preparing students for their first year at university. The Pre-University Prepared Students (PUPS) program (McPhail, 2015), that was used at Queensland University to improve students' transition into university is the kind of program we refer to. The program is embedded in the senior years of secondary education to prepare students for reality of university. The reported success of the program makes it an appealing option for NUS. Finally, we suggest that NUS reviews and extends the length of its orientation program so that students are more aware of the nature and value of the range of academic support that is available to them and so that they can feel a strong sense of belonging to NUS.

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## **The novice Health and Physical Education Teacher in Samoan secondary schools: Needs assessment of the preparedness, challenges and constraints**

**Suzie Schuster**

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to analyse and explore the experiences, challenges and preparedness of novice physical education teachers in Samoa during their first and second years of teaching. This case study uses the conceptual framework of socialisation. Recently, the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture has raised a concern about the preparedness of novice teachers for teaching in schools. While the evaluation at the ministerial level focuses on the Bachelor of Education (primary) programme, it also identifies the needs of all novice teachers who received pre-service training at the National University of Samoa. This study reports novice teachers' perspectives on the effectiveness of their teacher training and the subsequent challenges they experienced during their first two years of service. The study attempts to understand the challenges and concerns that novice physical education teachers as they are socialised into their new profession. Findings reveal that they experience issues of marginalisation, role-conflict, reality shock and wash-out. This article provides insights into these experiences, explores curriculum design and improvement for pre-service training teachers, and recommends the development of further induction programmes for more effective novice teacher transition.

### **Background: A snapshot of Samoan secondary school health and physical education**

Samoa is a small archipelago in the Pacific Ocean comprised of seven islands, of which four are inhabited. Most of the 190,000 population live on the more developed island of Upolu where 30,000 reside in the capital city of Apia. There are 192 traditional villages throughout Samoa situated within 49 districts. Within each district, there is at least one government secondary school. Some districts also boast one of the numerous mission secondary schools. Every government school follows the prescribed curriculum from the Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture (MESC) from primary school until Year 13, the final year of secondary school.

In 2004, the MESC approved a full curriculum statement and commitment to Health and Physical Education (HPE) as a compulsory subject within Years 9 and 10, and as an option for Years 11–13. The overall intention of the 2003 Health and Physical Education Curriculum is “to develop student’s knowledge and motor skills, through physical activity, to promote healthy, active lifestyles and foster moral behaviour and other generic skills” (MESC, 2004 p. 4). From the introduction of the HPE curriculum,

it has been considered a minor subject, likened to visual art, computer, language, food technology and music.

The MESC Strategic Policies and Plan July 2006–June 2015 (2006) included a policy statement which advocated for the participation of all students in physical education, physical activity, and sports. It also stated that HPE was to be compulsory for one hour a week for Years 9–13 and that HPE was to be made examinable in Years 12 and 13. The curriculum was also revised for inclusiveness identifying needs of girls, boys, disability and children with unique learning needs. The HPE curriculum was implemented in schools in 2005.

Very little research on the teacher training of HPE teachers in Samoa has been documented since the advent of the HPE curriculum in 2005 when the curriculum was offered at an initial six secondary schools. By 2016, 23 of the 46 colleges across Samoa offered the curriculum at various grade levels based on teacher availability (Schuster, Schoeffel, & Heard, 2018).

According to Schuster et al. (2018) there are few teachers qualified in the subject of HPE as it is not regarded as an important subject. HPE has been made examinable since 2010, though it is not a required course to offer if teacher resources are overextended at the schools (Schuster et al., 2018). Priority subjects, sciences, mathematics and English, remain competitive subjects at colleges in Samoa as those are defined as the major and compulsory subjects within the government curriculum. The government sports policy states:

*HPE in the schools is a presently a low priority despite being one of the curriculum subjects in the official school program at all levels. Because of the emphasis on examinations and academic excellence, subjects like HPE have often been sacrificed for additional lessons like Maths, English or other subjects. (MESC, 2006, p. 10)*

In 2012, the Faculty of Education at the National University of Samoa initiated a Bachelor of Education, an upgrade from the previous Diploma of Education. In 2016, the first cohort to receive a Bachelor of Education with a major in HPE graduated and transitioned into the teaching field in 2017.

## **Introduction**

Government schools in Samoa have been involved in significant educational reforms and adjustments over the past two decades. With the introduction and implementation of the HPE curriculum in 2005 for grades 9–12, there has been some documented research on the success and weaknesses of this new curriculum. According to Rasmussen's (2010) study, the new curriculum needs strengthening in the areas of in-service training, adoptions of appropriate models of teaching, provision of adequate and appropriate resources to support HPE and commitment to monitoring and timetabling the curriculum at all schools.

Recent research findings by Schuster and Schoeffel (2018) show that only 50% of schools offer HPE at some level and the constraints of delivering HPE effectively remain unchanged from Rasmussen's 2008 report. Furthermore, the anticipation of the

graduates from a Bachelor of Education with a major in HPE proved disappointing with most graduates teaching other subjects outside their area of specialty (Schuster et al., 2018). HPE teachers were reported to experience constraints in teaching the curriculum effectively due to a lack of resources, facilities, and support for the subject, as well as insufficient access to their professional networks (Schuster et al., 2018).

Although HPE teachers have been delivering the HPE curriculum for the past 13 years, little progress has been made to address the repeated concerns expressed by these teachers. “Progress on establishing HPE as an important part of the secondary curricula has been slow (Schuster et al., 2018, p. 339). Schuster et al. further concluded that HPE teachers in Samoa secondary schools continued to grapple with the daily challenges of English language barriers, limited curriculum support, teacher knowledge base and pedagogical skills.

While there is limited research on HPE in Samoa, most research has been focused on experienced teachers and their perspectives within the field. There is no research on novice HPE teachers and their challenges and perceptions of teaching are low priority. While the HPE curriculum is still in its infancy, the added challenge of being a novice HPE teacher in an unsupported specialisation may be a double burden.

In 2016, the first cohort of five students of the Bachelor of Education (Secondary) with a major in HPE graduated and were placed in the teaching field. This study focuses solely on the graduate from cohort 1 (the 2016 cohort) and their journey from being a student to a novice teacher in Samoa. Novice teachers are defined in this paper as teachers in their first three years of teaching (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). In Samoa, a novice teacher could be broadly defined as a teacher in the first five years of their career, as each graduate must serve a five-year government bond to the ministry when their teaching service commences.

The purpose of this article is to add to the existing body of literature about the experiences of novice teachers by examining their perceptions of their preservice training at NUS. It will also document their successes and challenges as novice physical education teachers in Samoa during their first two years of service.

## **Literature review**

### ***The novice teacher explained***

According Gravett, Henning, and Eiselen (2011), new teachers may be prepared for teaching, but not for life in the classroom. Novice teachers’ struggles and successes have been the focus of a growing body of literature in the past decade (Banville, 2015). The transition alone from being a student to being a teacher is an important element in the career of teacher: “for new teachers, the transition from student to teacher and the unknown of their new roles and academic workplace may cause anxiety” (Gordon, 2016, p. 652). Gordon also noted that novice teachers in the field of HPE may have a more difficult transition than teachers in general education since they often experience subject matter marginalisation and role conflict as a result of the extra coaching demands put upon them. Further issues identified in the literature include:

*... the low status of the subject matter and a lack of respect given to PE by members of the school community. Physical isolation in the school setting, fewer colleagues for collaboration, role conflict, and the lack of appropriate resources or teaching space are also problematic. (Banville, 2015, p. 260)*

The majority of novice teachers begin their career in a teaching environment with little or no professional assistance while expected to carry a full educational load immediately and some may teach disciplines that differ from their area of specialisation (Moeini, 2008).

### ***The role of pre-service and in-service training***

According to UNESCO, the purpose of teacher training is to equip individuals with the personal and professional skills needed in schools and other learning contexts. Teachers are required to deliver content knowledge, develop skills and foster attitudes that will enable learners to reach their potential. Pre-service and in-service teacher training form a continuum of professional development and may take place over a number of years, in a range of different settings and with differing purposes. Millwater, Wilkinson, and Yarrow (1996) stated that “the quality of teaching depends on the quality of the teachers which, in turn, depends to some extent on the quality of their professional development. This, in turn, depends on the quality of teacher educators and their courses” (p. 41). As novice teachers do not initially undergo professional development training, much of their ability and many of their pedagogical skills stem from their pre-service training.

Although there is little research directly on HPE curriculum, implementation and evaluation in Samoa, Rasmussen (2010) concluded that professional development was a key area of concern. Wasonga, Wanzare, and Dawo’s (2015) work on the gap between pre-service training and in-practice reality found that novice teachers are often ill-prepared for their roles in schools and experienced inadequacies related to their transition into schools in the areas of orientation, mentoring, and ongoing seminars and workshops. In addition, Farrell (2016, p. 13) found that, “unlike in many other professions, novice teachers are asked to carry out all of the same activities as their most experienced teacher colleagues. Once they hit the ground, novice teachers immediately become responsible” for a wide-ranging and unexpected list of tasks.

### **Theoretical framework**

This study draws on teacher development theory to explain the different stages of development and concern that teachers will experience during their career. Franey (2016) explained that, if teachers can recognise these different stages of development, they are better able to understand the concerns that can accompany that development. He likened it to the way “educators cater the way they teach to fit the development stages of their students, understanding where teachers are at in their career will help school leaders provide differentiated professional development based on teachers’ development levels” (p. 1). Most teacher development theories originate from the early work of Frances Fuller (in Franey, 2016) which documented how teachers move



through three stages of concern: self, task and impact. The first stage of development is of interest in this study, as this is the phase where novice teachers begin and it focuses on survival, self-adequacy and acceptance. Franey also referred to this stage as the self-centred survival stage as the teacher is working on classroom management, instruction, content knowledge and impressing their supervisors.

In addition, to teacher development theory, Lawson's (1986, in Stroot & Williamson, 1993) occupational socialisation theory provides a means to understand physical education teachers' induction into their school environments. Stroot, Faucette, and Schwager's (1993) research draws on occupational theory to show how marginalisation, role conflict, reality shock and wash-out are the major concerns for novice HPE teachers. While there will be cultural and contextual differences between Stroot et al.'s work and the HPE novices teachers in Samoa, they may be very well experiencing the same issues within the self-stage of their teaching career. In other words, while they are focusing on the concrete tasks of classroom management, instruction, content knowledge and impressing their supervisors, they may also be experiencing the issues Stroot et al. (1993) also found in previous research regarding marginalisation, role conflict, reality shock and wash-out during their initial phase as a novice teacher.

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this qualitative research is twofold: (1) to ascertain how teacher preparation has prepared novice teachers for the teaching environment; and (2) to identify cultural, contextual and preservice challenges within the teaching environment. A single, wide and over-arching research question was used to guide the entire study: "What were the main challenges faced by the novice HPE teacher during their first two years of teaching and what could have been provided during pre-service training to address these job-related challenges?"

### **Participants**

The sample consisted of five graduates who were teaching in government secondary schools. They consisted of four males and one female, all teaching within Year 9–13 and were all citizens of Samoa. The participants were all graduates of the National University of Samoa (NUS), Bachelor of Education programme. They were the first cohort to complete a major in health and physical education coupled with a bachelor degree. The study took place at the end of their second year of teaching.

### **Data collection and analysis**

The methodology was designed to collect data for both pre-service and in-service needs and challenges perceived by the participants. This study was set in one particular context (Samoan secondary schools) and the topic was inquiring into both HPE implementation as well as novice teacher challenges, therefore a qualitative case study method provided an appropriate research design. In this study, the *case* was focused on participants' perspectives and insights into the issues surrounding the HPE curriculum and a broader context of novice teacher experiences.

The multiple data collection methods used were semi-structured interviewing, focus groups and informal conversation. These were all consistent with the purpose of this research and provided baseline details for thematic discussion. The interviews aimed to capture the personal perspectives and lived experiences of the research participants, which are strengths of the qualitative paradigm (Mutch, 2005). Listening to the teachers' discussions on teaching strategies and other issues also contributed important data to this study.

Qualitative data were collected through participant interviews lasting 30–45 minutes each. The research question guided the construction of the interview questions. Specific in-depth questions were:

1. Do new teachers feel prepared to work in the school setting after pre-service training?
2. What do you wish you had during pre-service training to prepare you more?
3. Do new teachers feel they are given the support needed to achieve quality teaching in the school setting?
4. What are the constraints or issues you face that impacts quality teaching and learning?
5. How do novice teachers perceive the role of school and ministry administrators?
6. What is the role of your principal and what are your perceptions of how the principal should assist you in your teaching capacity?
7. What are the current issues novice teachers perceive to be the greatest challenges?

Participants were also invited to a focus group consisting of the sample participants as well as four current HPE teacher training students. The focus group used a narrative approach for novice teachers to share their stories of their first two years of teaching as well as group sharing on the perceived gaps in the curriculum.

### ***Confidentiality***

The challenge of maintaining respondent confidentiality while presenting useful, detailed accounts of their narrative interviews was controlled. For the purposes of this research, every effort to maintain participant confidentiality was done by using pseudonyms, altering the environmental descriptions, not applying gender identity to any respondent and grouping data sets versus using direct quotations. As the situational environment (secondary schools in Samoa) and participants (novice HPE teachers in Samoa) are from a very small population and subset of a specialised population, deductive disclosure was explained to all participants. In the unlikely event that the participants were identified, the participants signed the ethics form stating that it would not be problematic for them. For any research project on a small island state, the likelihood of knowing the participants is an ever-present issue. Methods to control for confidentiality were employed, though the dominant approach was not taken for reasons that external confidentiality, data cleansing and data modification were not warranted for this type of research.

## Findings

The findings presented in this section, draw on the data collected in interviews and focus groups with the five novice teachers. The novice HPE teachers encountered challenges in the following areas:

1. Pre-service training teacher practical attachments
2. Pre-service education curriculum
3. Workload and reality of teaching profession
4. Classroom management and quality teaching
5. Ministerial and Administrative demands
6. Life/work balance

Each of the six needs or challenges identified by the participants was applied to the framework designed by Faltado and Faltado (2014) to assess teacher needs. The following categories from that framework were used to present the data: job-related needs; professional development needs; environmental-related needs; and social adjustment needs.

### *Job-related needs*

During focus group discussions and individual interviews, all novice teachers expressed their concern that they did not have enough teaching practice with students during their pre-service training. They explained that being placed in only two schools, one rural and one urban, is not enough exposure or experience to develop realistic teaching and management strategies.

One respondent reflected:

*Why do we only go to two schools to practise at? Those two schools are just that- two schools. Whatever we learn there really can't be used at another school placement. Every school is so different- different students, different setting, different needs. I would have rather gone to at least five-six schools to really figure out ways to teach at each of those schools. I would have learned more.*

Responses indicated that the teaching practical time spent in those schools was lacking in fine-tuning pedagogy, but rather off-task activities such as working on plans in the staff lounge, reading assessments or writing individual lesson plans. Classroom engagement, classroom management, and teaching the topic were not prioritized. Further, the participants felt they did not receive practical or relevant feedback during their student-teacher internships.

*When I was assigned my first teaching placement after I graduated, I was not prepared for the realities of the classroom due to the large number of students in each class.*

Another participant considered the teaching practical experience within the bachelor programme and responded:

*I would be more like a relief teacher. My mentor teacher was never around and never gave me feedback on my lessons. If she did, she just said everything was “good” and I didn’t need to work on anything. Now that I am a teacher, I realize that she was not helping me at all because I ended up thinking I was a really great teacher and that is not the case now that I am teaching.*

During the focus group, participants reflected on the skills or tools that they felt were not addressed during their Bachelor of Education programme. A summary of their assessment of gaps within the Bachelor of Education programme highlighted the need for pre-service training to address assessment analysis, how to mark assessments, and how to use assessments to achieve learning outcomes. Students felt that they either under-assessed their students as the assessment was only used to test basic knowledge or over-assessed students. Further, one participant admitted to lacking the time and ability to mark the assessment and did not know how to use to inform the learning process. The participant disclosed to the group:

*I usually do short quizzes, true and false mainly, to see if the class remembers information from the previous lesson. I really am not sure how else to use assessments in a classroom, especially with over sixty students in my class.*

In addition to concerns about assessment and class size, participants commented on their lack of skill in setting student goals for achieving learning outcomes. For example:

*I do really good yearly plans, unit plans, and lesson plans. But I don’t know how to make sure the student is learning or achieving the goals. I don’t know how to adjust the lessons to match all the students’ needs, especially my less skilled students. I know I am leaving them behind. Especially as their English skills are really low or non-existent. How can they even understand the lesson if they can’t understand English?*

Participants also indicated that they wished they had more instruction on creating useful assignments for their students.

*I use all the games and activities I learned from my pre-service training. I am bored so I think my students must be too. I look up games and activities too but can’t find new and interesting ones. I wish I had more training in this area so my teaching is fun.*

Another area that participants felt they lacked in pre-service training is effective administration, such as roll call. All interviewees expressed frustration and some bewilderment at the requirements and demands of roll call, yet they said there was a general disregard of this topic during their tenure as a Bachelor of Education student.

The participants also expressed concerns over the national examinations. Although they said they were fully aware of their role and responsibilities as teachers to teach the HPE curriculum and prepare the students for the national examinations, there was a

general consensus that they could have been better prepared during pre-service training by working, exploring and dissecting previous national examinations, assessment templates and the taxonomy. They felt that during their first years of teaching, the national exam, the language, the design and the taxonomy were too new and created stress on them to learn it well enough to turn around and teach it to their students.

### **Professional development needs**

Most participants agreed that there was insufficient quality time working with a mentor during teaching practice. One participant reflected:

*I wish I was told that being a student teacher is much different than a novice teacher. I was treated like an equal when I was a student teacher. I could no wrong. The teachers and school seemed to like everything I did. As a novice teacher, I am not respected, I am quite low and not treated fairly. I didn't expect that. I thought we were all equal as we are all teachers. That has been really hard on me.*

However, one novice teacher was placed at the same school as the student-teaching tenure of their preservice training.

*I already knew the school, the teachers, the students and principal. It was easy for me to start my career at this school so I didn't have any issues when I first started teaching.*

The participants thought that the first year of teaching was difficult. One novice teacher commented:

*I couldn't believe we had to teach a full load. I thought that I was going to observe for a while and be able to slowly get into to teaching. I was never told during my pre-service training that we would go from student to teacher in such a fast way.*

Concern was also raised about resources. One participant said:

*There was nothing at the school – only the MESC curriculum statement. I didn't realise I was expected to prepare everything and research everything and find my own resources. I wasn't really clued into that during my time as a university student. The thought never occurred to me that there would be nothing to use (resources) and nothing to give to my own students unless I prepared it myself.*

As a novice teachers, the participants said they often felt that didn't have a voice in the decision-making process and that they weren't always treated fairly. Teachers expected to develop work plans and annual plans. However, some found that they didn't teach using their own plans.

*All I can say is to be prepared as a new teacher. My school had three HPE teachers, then one requested a transfer, one went on maternity leave, leaving only me to teach HPE. But now I teach English as we have a teacher shortage overall at our school.*

During the interviews and focus groups, the interviewees were asked what they wish for as a novice teacher. They agreed that they wished they had more knowledge, skills, equipment, teaching methods and experience as a novice teacher.

*I would tell a new teacher to bring their textbooks and any resources they have from university with them. The schools have no resources so you are on your own.*

I wish someone had told me that I won't be observing anymore – that I am wearing my teaching hat from day one, as I am there to teach.

### ***Environment-related needs***

The interview participants were asked a series of questions regarding the nature of their schools, the work environment, the classroom situations and the staff culture.

Another respondent stated:

*I love sports. I love it when we can enter the school and national sports competitions. But I know I don't have the time to make up my classes. The students miss out but I do like getting away from school and doing sports with the students.*

Discussions about the role of the school in their professional development led to participants raising their concerns about access to their ongoing learning and mentoring. Many felt that there was not a unified system for teachers to work effectively together or to address the diverse needs of their students. This is something they thought they would receive on the job. One participant, however, worked at a school that provided weekly professional development (PD) after school. These PD meetings were designed to give support to teachers who did not have a Bachelor of Education, but who had an undergraduate degree in a subject area and so lacked pedagogical skills.

As novice teachers, the participants were asked what their biggest concerns “on the job” were during the first two years of their teaching careers. Teaching and the skills needed to give quality lessons was the biggest concern. Topics such as determining students' ability, unit planning, time management and motivating students were at the forefront of the discussion. When follow-up questions regarding time management were asked, the participants attested that behaviour management and student discipline took up a lot of time.

*I only have 45 minute classes. I try to start that 45 minutes right at the class exchange. But I must spend at least 15 minutes every class time dealing with bad student behaviour. They end up being kicked out of my class, it seems to work but I am wasting so much time on disciplining them.*

### ***Social adjustment needs***

Samoa culture is very family and village oriented. Priority to family *fa'alavelave* (life events and hardships) is acceptable practice and emphasizing family needs over work demands is common. Observing, nurturing and maintaining space and respecting

relationships is pivotal to the *faʻasamoa* or the Samoan way of life (Tiatia, 2012). Being novice teachers and having their first full-time job brought an awareness of the demands on their time. The participants also said that managing their own time for lesson preparation, grading and writing assessments was hard to manage.

*I admit that I don't think much about school or my teacher duties once the school day is finished. I don't bring my work home with me.*

*I don't really look at my teaching. I don't reflect. I just do my lessons, make my plans then move on. Even over the summer I don't reflect. I just enjoy my break.*

The concept of reflection was discussed in the focus group with every member admitting that they do not practise any reflective activities such as journaling, lesson reviews, peer counselling, self-observation or self-evaluation.

## Discussion

### ***Job related needs: Can pre-service training cushion the shock of the realities of teaching?***

In order for a quality teacher to begin an effective career, quality pre-service training is critical. Novice teachers have not had the time to build up a repertoire of skills they can call on when attempting to take on the complete duties of an experienced teacher, therefore, many novice teachers feel unprepared when they begin teaching (Weinstein, 1988). However, is it unreasonable to expect that pre-service training can prepare them for every aspect of their role as a teacher?

The HPE novice teachers in this study felt there were areas where their university education that could have better prepared them for their first year teaching. They outlined needs such as having more teaching practice experiences, compiling and vetting teaching resources, classroom and behaviour management strategies, and awareness of the hierarchies within the school environment. It is reasonable for a needs analysis to focus solely on pre-service training to ensure a graduating student has all the tools and resources needed to be effective in his/her teaching placement. However, pre-service training cannot completely remove the ultimate shock that novice teachers will inevitably face when they transition from student to teacher. Addressing the apparent gaps in the Bachelor of Education (secondary) curriculum is an obvious solution to some of the perceived needs articulated in the findings.

### ***Professional development needs: In-school support and the marginalization of PE***

Novice teachers are expected to take equal responsibility in their teaching capacity as their more experienced peers. It can be a defining moment when a beginning teacher realises that they are now expected to teach, expected to perform, and expected to fall in line with all the roles and responsibilities of a teacher within a school (Shoval, Erlich, & Feigin, 2010). However, the findings of this study indicated that novice teachers do not feel that they have the same professional status as their colleagues. Marginalisation was a common experience for the participants. The culture within the schools seem to

place novice teachers at the low end of a teacher hierarchy which leads to stress, doubt, concerns and overall apathy towards their job. The shock of being treated as an equal while a student-teacher during pre-service training and then feeling demoted after transitioning to novice teacher within the school, with little voice, can have immediate and lasting impact on the new teacher. This positioning demotivates HPE novice teachers as feel that they have little status while teaching a low-valued subject.

Further, the evidence from the participants reveals that, in the transition from student to novice teacher they feel isolated from a professional network where they can learn about resource development, receive mentoring, and have the opportunity to develop and receive feedback about their teaching practice. The novice teacher only has the limited resources and knowledge they gleaned from pre-service training. Some novice teachers are able to build their own network of teachers and professionals beyond their school environment, but those who solely rely on their new environment for professional development struggle in their new capacity.

As the findings show, novice teachers who were placed at the same school as their teaching practice had an easier time with understanding the school system, culture, expectations and students. Although all novice teachers recognised the apparent hierarchy within their new school placement, those that had previous experience at that specific school had less conflict and concern of their own expected roles and responsibilities.

### ***Environmental needs: Addressing the realities of the school culture and the wash-out effect***

The findings strongly indicate the participants' struggles with classroom management and student discipline. When this occurs, behaviour management takes precedence over teaching the curriculum. Novice teachers often wade through a sea of behaviour management practices that were only touched upon during pre-service training, in an attempt to manage the behaviour and learning in their classes. The findings showed that the school may have a policy on behaviour management, but practices remain at the discretion of the teacher which leaves a novice teacher struggling to implement grounded and proven strategies based on proactive measures. As a result of these struggles, teachers can often resort to using survival strategies, which may lead to what Stroot et al. (1993) describe as the wash-out effect. This effect occurs when new ideas and beliefs are developed in university-based teacher education, but then are not held on to by student teachers once they enter the field. These principles and skills are meant to provide support for the novices' professional and pedagogical judgment (Joerger & Bremer, 2001, cited in Shoval et al., 2008).

### ***Social needs: Creating a new social support group***

The first year of teaching also is a time when the skills of effective teaching are developed and refined. During these early stages of development, novice teachers may experience an array of issues which can cause tension, insecurity and lack of confidence (Cakmak, 2013). In this study, the terms *support*, *resource provision*, *feedback*, *evaluation*, *network*, *mentoring* and *training* were used with frequency in the interviews and focus group discussions.



There was a common theme that the novice teachers all shared: that they have social needs within the constructs of being an effective HPE teacher and they felt those needs were not being met. The participants were particularly concerned over the welfare of their students, disillusioned over their lack of voice, a lack of recognition as qualified teachers, and eager to engage with principals, experienced colleagues and the greater network to assist them with solving problems, providing feedback and becoming more effective teachers. The results showed that the novice teachers were very aware that learning and effective teaching are influenced by peers and teachers as well as relationships within the school, community and family. There were indications that the culture of the school was likened to a Samoan village, though they felt that care and overall concern for individual student well-being was not prioritised, nor was their place in the school as novice teachers.

### **Conclusion**

This study supports the research that concludes that the first two to three years of being a teacher are still internship years when teachers begin to think, know, feel and act like a teacher. Feiman-Nemser (2001) states that even the best preservice programme cannot prepare novice teachers for all they need to know about teaching and that some skills have to be learned on the job. Although no one part of the novice teachers' training can fully support all the needs necessary for real-world practice, the findings of this study identify gaps in preservice training as well as challenges during their initial career.

### **Recommendations**

*Strengthen the pre-service curriculum:* Addressing the gaps in pre-service training identified in this study, could mitigate some of the shock novice teacher first experience in the field. In particular, ensuring that the constructs of the curriculum of pre-service training are an accurate reflection of present-day student, classroom and school environments should establish a clearer alignment between university and the field. Further research and improvements to the existing curriculum could easily lessen the feeling of being ill-equipped at the onset of their career. Ministerial professional development for teachers could be linked with the pre-service training programme which would provide novice teachers with relevant skills in their preparation to teach in the field. Continuity in teacher practice and school placement after graduation can also provide the desired support network as expressed in the findings.

*Developing supportive school environment and cultural practices:* This research identifies the school as a place where the novice teacher can continue to offer professional support, development and feedback for the novice teacher. Without direction, feedback and mentoring in the school context, novice teachers can revert to survival strategies and feel the effects of wash-out. In the Samoan context, investigating the symmetry between school and village cultures may uncover existing structures and values that could ultimately support teaching and learning.

*Identifying effective mentorship models:* The novice teachers who were interviewed for this study expressed their difficulty dealing with the professional issues they were faced with as they began their teaching careers. They also experienced what Stroot et al. (1993)

described as “reality shock” as they transitioned into their own teaching practice in the field. These issues could be alleviated if novice were supported by educative mentoring, a practice by whereby mentors attend to beginning teachers’ present concerns, questions, and purposes without losing sight of long-term goals for teacher development (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Mentorship throughout pre-service training and in the beginning phase of teaching may be one way to reduce concerns and struggles encountered by novice teachers. Educational research explicitly targets the induction phase as a logical area for novice teacher support intervention. Further research and investigation into this type of induction phase for novice teachers in Samoa may uncover relevant information which could support the novice teacher’s transitional process into full-time teaching.

By directly addressing each of the challenges described in this article could also inform ministerial efforts in teacher training curriculum, professional development and teacher retention. Understanding the journey of the teacher, from pre-service training to seasoned teacher is a valuable exercise to ultimately address their needs in order to ultimately improving the teaching and learning processes currently in Samoa.

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## **Professional development in Food and Textiles Technology in Samoa: How can we improve learning in the classroom?**

**Onelau Faamoemoe Soti**

### **Abstract**

In this article, professional development for Food and Textiles Technology teachers in Samoa is discussed with particular reference to teacher learning, teacher reflective practice, and improvement in student learning outcomes. Prior research highlights that teacher professional development links to improvements in teaching. There is a significant relationship between teacher learning and improvement in student learning, which contributes to addressing the problem of poor student outcomes. Effective teacher learning also leads to increased student engagement. Continuing professional education is important for teachers, and the research recommends that principals take a lead in supporting professional development for effective teaching. This study focuses on the analysis of findings from a small-scale study of Food and Textile teachers' experiences of professional learning. The teachers reported that, while they understood the need for further professional learning, insufficient opportunities for professional development were provided by schools and the Ministry of Education, Sports & Culture – and, even where it *was* available, either not enough teachers took the opportunity or the content provided was of limited value. The study aims to add to our research-based knowledge on how to improve and enhance teacher learning in schools in Samoa, in particular, in the area of Food and Textiles Technology.

### **Introduction**

There is a need for the effective implementation of teacher development in secondary schools in Samoa in order to meet the change in teaching and learning styles, and to help improve student learning outcomes. Both the report into professional development for secondary teachers by the Ministry of Education, Sports & Culture (the Ministry) (2004b) and more recent research conducted by Soti and Mutch (2011) reveal that professional development for teachers in secondary schools in Samoa needs improvement. Teacher professional development ought to be transformational, whereby it leads to the promotion of teacher values, beliefs and skills that improve students' learning outcomes. The present study was carried out to ascertain the challenges associated with the effective implementation of professional development for Food and Textile teachers in secondary schools in Samoa. Despite the importance of food technology to the development of both individuals and society at large, this is an area into which there is currently little research.

## **Background to the study**

Enhanced professional development for teachers of Food and Textiles Technology in secondary schools in Samoa will assist in making teaching and learning more effective in this subject area. All Food and Textiles teachers, and their students, can benefit from improving the effectiveness of teachers' practices in the classroom (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007). Improved quality and quantity of professional development will make an important contribution to the knowledge and skill sets of teachers, and so enhance students' own strengths and support them in their weaknesses (Timperley et al., 2007). Teachers also need to collaborate with researchers (Timperley et al., 2007) to ensure that valid conclusions are drawn from research and, in this case, can contribute to teacher in-service programmes conducted by the Ministry.

There are several areas in which this study can offer useful insights. Firstly, research into professional learning provides the Ministry, principals, Food and Technology teachers, and students with detailed information about the actual picture of effective professional development in Samoan schools. It suggests ways to improve the current professional development situation, and in turn, assists with the formulation of future professional development policies which ensure all teachers have access to ongoing learning opportunities.

Secondly, the study also opens opportunities for further research in the area based on the knowledge gaps other scholars will have found. Timperley et al. (2007), focused their report using a constructivist direction in studying the evidence about teacher learning. This concept of constructivism provided a combined account of teacher professional learning so that the teachers can construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through experiencing things and reflecting on their experiences, (Tasker, 2002). Significantly, the constructivist teacher provides tools such as problem solving and inquiry-based learning activities in which students formulate and test their ideas, draw conclusions and express their knowledge in a collaborative learning environment.

In this study, I set out to explain the state of teacher professional development in Samoa, focusing in particular on the area of Food and Textiles Technology. It is important to enhance professional development opportunities for teachers because as teachers practise in the classroom, they become more aware of the need to improve or change. Burnaford, Fisher, and Hobson (2001, p. 20) stated, "Teaching ... involves reflecting on the nature of human development ... and personal philosophy of education." Effective professional development becomes a journey for teachers in which they apply new knowledge, skills and understanding to their own classroom practices (Kennedy, 1997).

Having trained Food and Textile Technology teachers for over 10 years, as a researcher I found that many teachers experience translating their knowledge and skills about teaching Food and Textiles into effective teaching practice difficult due to a lack of resources. This observation is mirrored in research by Franken and McComish (2003) and Kennedy (1997), who stated that students do not have the power to learn more because of the quality of resources available for use in the teaching and learning process. In this process for Food and Textile Technology, the supply of resources such as consumables, tools and equipment are very important if practical tasks are to be carried out in the classroom. Unfortunately, if there are no resources then the teacher

may not be able to offer the practical component of the Food and Textiles learning. The lack of practical opportunities has serious impact on learning in Food and Textile Technology. Many of the students who opt to take these subjects do not perform well in more traditional academic subjects, and select Food and Textiles because they want to learn more practical skills.

Effective teaching strategies and teacher learning are attributable to factors like frequent professional development and improved classroom practice being acknowledged as priorities. Guskey (2002) noted that it was important to link professional development with classroom learning activities. Furthermore, Guskey (2000) also recommended linking evaluation with the planning of future professional development. This approach is important as most teachers need to see the feedback of whether they had improved or hindered their teaching practice through the professional development.

Ongoing professional development of teachers is important because education is an ever-growing and an ever-changing field (Gay, 2010). This simply means that teachers must be lifelong learners in order to teach students effectively. Ongoing professional development is critical for teachers who wish to improve their practice and interactions with students. McDonald (2010) also indicated that it is important to communicate with educators from other subject areas to improve teacher learning in the classroom. This cross-curricular interaction allows more room to offer the best learning experience for students.

### **Context of the study**

The small-scale study of teacher professional development for Food and Textile Technology teachers reported in this article was conducted in 2017. While working with Food and Textile Technology teachers, I developed a range of authentic tasks to enhance teachers' learning experiences. I believe that many researchers and educators support the constructivist theories of education where learners are taught to question, challenge and critically analyse information on content knowledge and skills (Gay, 2010). I wanted to find out how teachers found these learning experiences, as well as how these learning and other professional learning experiences, translated into classroom practice.

Professional development for Food and Textile Technology teachers is structured and organised by the New Zealand Agency for International Development, the Samoa Secondary Education Curriculum and Resources Project, and the Government of Samoa/ Asian Development Bank Education Sector. Consultants from New Zealand have worked with representatives from the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture's Curriculum Division to create programmes that are designed to be interactive, rigorous, and intellectually challenging for the students, and professionally prepared and delivered. The overarching aim of this professional development is to enhance Food and Textile Technology teachers' learning in order to improve student learning outcomes. Teachers are expected to evaluate where they have a need for professional development, to acquire subject knowledge, to develop a wider range of classroom techniques and to consistently deliver education at a high standard to which the students of Samoa are entitled (Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture, 2004a).

## Literature review

Learning as a teacher does not cease after initial teacher education, and Food and Textile Technology teachers, like all teachers, require ongoing professional development. This is well-attested to in the literature. Teachers are expected to keep learning new techniques, update their curriculum knowledge and reflect on their practice (Day, 2000; Timperley et al., 2007). There is also ample research that shows that teacher professional learning increases teacher quality and improves student outcomes (Avalos, 2011; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; de Vries, Jansen, & van de Grift, 2013; Timperley et al., 2007). As de Vries et al. (2013) stated, “Teachers who themselves are more learning and development oriented thus express more learning and development orientations towards their students” (p. 86). It is accepted that teacher professional development can vary in focus, length and setting but, “... always at the core of such endeavours is the understanding that professional development is about teachers learning, learning how to learn, and transforming their knowledge into practice for the benefit of their students’ growth (Avalos, 2011, p. 10).

The literature on teacher professional development is vast and a number of researchers have undertaken meta-analyses or syntheses of the literature to highlight the most common or significant factors in the field. For example, Avalos (2011) reviewed the articles on teacher professional development over 10 years of the publication of the journal, *Teaching and Teacher Education*. Over the period 2000–2010, she found that there had been a move away from shorter, off-site, one-size-fits all approaches and in her summary of the articles she reviewed it was revealed that successful teacher professional development was impacted by external factors, such as political and economic conditions. Some overall trends observed in the literature included the following:

- Teachers’ prior beliefs, perceptions of self-efficacy and opportunity to discuss what they are learning influenced successful teacher learning. It is clear that an important part of teacher learning is mediated through dialogues, conversations and interactions centred on materials and situations as supported by LePage, Maier, Robinson, and Cox (2001) in their study, whilst others like Vescio, Ross, and Adams (2008) have emphasised that teacher learning often involves horizontal sharing of ideas and experiences, active participation in projects or becoming aware of problems that need solutions.
- Prolonged interventions were more effective than shorter ones. As noted by Baldwin and Ford (1988), more time for teacher transfer of learning is necessary for the teacher-learner to model and understand the transfer of ideas and skills. In Samoa it is observed that some experienced Food and Textile Technology teachers are willing to assist their less-experienced colleagues in developing an understanding of successful Food and Textile Technology curriculum strategies and how to transfer teacher learning into improved student learning.
- A combination of tools and resources for learning with combined with opportunities for reflection provides the best opportunity for growth. Avalos (2011) made the point that such ideas are important. As noted in the classroom situation in Samoa, limited equipment and resources are available, which



therefore limits the development of knowledge and skills.

- The development of collaborative activities such as peer mentoring, co-learning and professional networks support enhanced learning. As Avalos (2011) noted, the ideas in co-learning place emphasis upon teacher dialogues. However, although classroom teaching continues to be a solitary activity, it is important to move co-learning to observation and feedback which would promote improved classroom practice.

Timperley et al. (2007) also conducted a synthesis of 217 studies related to teacher professional development. These researchers found seven elements of teacher professional development that impacted on student outcomes: providing sufficient time for learning; engaging appropriate external expertise; engaging teachers in learning; challenging prevailing discourses; participating in communities of practice; consistency with wider trends in policy and research; and active school leadership.

Despite the wealth of research on professional development, little research has been reported on the professional development of Food and Textile Technology teachers. Accordingly, this study was designed to investigate what was happening in one localised context, that of teacher professional development in this curriculum area in Samoa. It was noted and confirmed by the Ministry, that principals should organise more school-based training for Food and Textile Technology teachers in schools. Unfortunately, this training is not thoroughly carried out in some schools. Principals also need to ensure that the professional development opportunities are useful and meaningful so that the learning is actually beneficial for the teachers involved.

## Methodology

This study was centred upon the exploration of participants' perspectives and insights into the professional development of teachers in Samoa. Essentially, the study used a qualitative approach in which the participants were interviewed using a *talanoa* method. Listening to the teachers' stories of their professional development, teaching strategies and other issues like curriculum and Ministry requirements also contributed important data to this study. I had the opportunity to interview teachers of Year 13 Food and Textiles Technology at the end of a training course, and they were able to choose whether to contribute to this research study. If they agreed, I outlined the purpose and what the results would be used for.

The methodological approach to this study was *talanoa*. *Talanoa* is a word used in several of the native languages in the Pacific to refer to story, act of telling and occasion of conversation (Havea, 2010). *Talanoa* is more than storytelling. Storytelling is not a meaningless activity, and storytellers do not retell stories just for the sake of retelling. The practice of *talanoa* enabled me to get more insightful responses from the teachers regarding the significance of their professional training when they are invited by the Ministry to participate at any Food and Textile Technology professional development. Since conversation works best when it happens face-to-face, I acknowledged the events in *talanoa* as the participants respond and interact with the reality of their emotions. The *talanoa* aimed to capture the personal perspectives and lived experiences of the

teachers, which are strengths of the qualitative paradigm (Mutch, 2013). *Talanoa* was responsive and culturally appropriate for the Samoan context in which this research took place.

### **Research participants and questions**

As this study aimed to investigate the significance of professional development for Food and Textile Technology teachers in Samoa, the participant pool for this research was relatively small. Six Food and Textile Technology teachers working in schools were chosen because they have experienced what is happening out in the schools, as well as how teacher professional development was organised in each of their schools. Three of these teachers were teaching full time in urban schools and the other three were teaching in rural schools. The following questions framed the qualitative discussions that ensued:

1. How could the teacher improve teacher learning?
2. What makes the teacher want to learn?
3. Are there any gaps in the learning achievements of students?
4. What are the teachers' practices to encourage students to learn better?
5. How can the teacher improve significant relationship between teacher learning and improvement in student learning outcomes?

Each interview/*talanoa* lasted approximately 30 minutes. The responses to the interview questions were recorded by hand. If the responses were in Samoan, they were translated. The transcripts were thematically analysed (Mutch, 2013). Key insights are shared below through a discussion of the themes from the analysis.

### **Findings and discussion**

This study revealed that professional development had a central and pivotal role to play in the teaching of Food and Textiles Technology but it was noted that insufficient professional development had occurred; that it was not ongoing; the quality varied; and not all teachers participated in the professional development programmes. Teacher knowledge and skills in curriculum areas are important because, as Hattie (2009) has argued, teachers can make a difference and therefore teachers must be recognised as, and equipped to be, powerful agents of change.

#### ***Insufficient opportunities for professional development provided by schools***

Not all teachers interviewed had the opportunity to attend the professional development due to the Ministry's choice of timing for these training sessions. When the professional development sessions were conducted during school hours, then the Food and Textile Technology teachers were asked to remain at school to look after their classes. As noted earlier, teachers who taught "core" subjects (such as Science, Maths and English) were given the first opportunity to participate in professional development. Unfortunately, the Food and Textile Technology teachers had few opportunities to participate. This means that the evidence related to the effectiveness of these training days is very thin.

Teacher 3 noted:

*In terms of teacher learning schools should conduct more school based training workshops for teachers to challenge and critically analyse information gained from the National training workshops rather than blindly accept what is taught. This school based training is to adapt more relevant teaching strategies to change teaching approaches and to learn new information and new learning.*

### ***Lack of opportunities for professional development provided by the Ministry***

The Ministry offered professional development for Food and Textile Technology teachers only once or twice a year. Furthermore, when teachers did attend, there was no follow-up evaluation conducted by the Ministry to evaluate the strategies learnt by participating teachers, or the impact they were having in the classroom. The Ministry should confirm that the teachers are being equipped with the new knowledge and skills when they are engaging with ongoing professional development. This would also allow teachers to gain more knowledge on student learning, particularly in their ability to understand students' thinking, an area which can be problematic. As Teacher 3 explained:

*I wanted to see that the curriculum officer needed to organise more PD [professional development] at the Ministry to involve all FTT new teachers to be advised and supported on how to adapt to the curriculum, methodology, teaching methods, and instructional materials to connect with the students' values and learning.*

Ongoing induction for beginning teachers is also needed to develop the teaching goals, knowledge and strategies that are needed. Unfortunately, this does not always happen in Samoa. Some plans for an ongoing teacher training at school level do not get fully implemented due to lack of support from principals. Teacher 5 raised the issue that:

*The same teachers added and pushed the ongoing professional development of FTT teachers and all teachers teaching programmes should be involved in the professional development to increase their pedagogical knowledge and curriculum learning. Teachers also need to teach students to give feedback and to construct their deep thinking to analyse their progress.*

### ***Variation in quality***

One of the struggles Food and Textile Technology teachers face is attempting to teach a practical subject without the resources necessary to do so. Without resources, the teacher may not be able to cope with the practical tasks to be handled in the classroom. It is equally important to see and describe the conditions that surround teacher professional development, assisting schools to be more selective when focusing their training and development on student learning needs and developing strategies to change classroom teaching practice. Professional development for teachers should emphasise not only

skills and knowledge but allow teachers to explore their own values and beliefs in the development of content and pedagogical experiences to change teacher practice. Teacher 5 stated:

*I found it very useful for the teachers to come together to attend PD and share the practical tasks to further improve their practical skills. These are the key instruments to activate development, not only for the students' learning but for the teachers themselves.*

Furthermore, teachers need more power to explore teaching and learning in the classroom and its capability to develop intellectual skills and higher level thinking. This requires commitment at all levels — policy development, professional development funding and organisation, teacher preparation, school leadership and classroom practice. Teacher 6 claimed:

*Teachers can make a difference and therefore credibility must be given to teachers as powerful change agents in FTT.*

Teacher 5 also stated that the teacher should be able to prepare students to learn and interact positively with others to enhance learning in the classroom:

*Attention is required to enhance teacher change in attitudes, beliefs and practices and promote teacher as role models. Teacher needs to put into action the importance of training feedback and learning outcomes.*

### **Limited participation**

It was clearly noted that there was inconsistent and insufficient participation of teachers at the training workshops conducted by the Ministry. Some Food and Textiles Technology teachers were not able to attend the training. Often these were teachers who also taught other subjects. As principals often “favour” core subjects like English, Maths and Science, professional development for teaching and learning in these subjects is given priority. During the training, the beginning teachers in particular lacked the information on the knowledge base and the research skills that they should learn from the professional development. Teacher 2 said:

*Teachers can improve learning if they are passionate to learn more content of their own subject areas. They need to read, research, investigate and practice. Teachers need to be confident in their FTT [Food and Textile Technology] skills to acquire new information, to promote learning more effectively and create interactive learning experiences.*

Then Teacher 2 suggested:

*I want more professional development of teachers under the leadership training and partnership with the Faculty of Education lecturers and stakeholders from the Ministry of Women and Youth development. I also think that working collaboratively with the Faculty of Education lecturers at the National University in conducting trainings that can be able to merge the use of equipment and tools (resources) available at*

*the University. The lecturers at the University would also help with the new teachers to examine their own practice in the light of achieving and supporting their goals.*

Professional development should be primarily school-focused and embedded in the job of teaching. As Fullan (1998) indicated, to create these conditions to support teacher learning and development, teachers must hold their discussions within their school context and these discussions need to occur over a sustained period of time. The teachers interviewed as part of this project had views which aligned with Fullan's research, and advised that they really needed to have conducted more learning activities in their teacher training programmes.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

Effective professional development requires groups of teachers to work actively and collaboratively together (Stoll, 2000), and developments in Food and Textiles Technology mean that teachers need to plan for this to occur. The mentoring occurring in one of the schools was a positive development. However, effective learning is not just about building teacher knowledge, it is also implies that learning should be transferred to classroom practice (McDonald, 2010).

It was clear, however, that a range of learning activities from the teacher training workshops were of value for the contexts but the transfer of this learning to the classroom was not always well planned. A strategic approach needs to be adopted including planning for before, during and after training. Attention should be given to specific transfer strategies, motivating teachers to transfer their learning and ensuring there is support for the Food and Textile Technology teacher on return to their school settings (McDonald, 2010).

When the Ministry conducts monitoring visits, it is important to generate a report on the spot for any particular teacher who has worked extra hard to achieve a reward. This approach would be good motivation for hard-working teachers who themselves have motivated students in the classroom. Such a report would also be effective as it would encourage teachers to further promote student motivation, class participation and individual learning strategies for improved student learning outcomes (Ross & Bruce, 2007).

It is also important to note that the teaching and learning will be successful only if administrators and educators alike are adequately prepared with the skills, knowledge and positive attitudes associated with this subject area. Therefore, training and workshops for Food and Textile Technology teachers should emphasise, not only skills and knowledge, but also develop a positive predisposition towards the subject so it can act as a doorway into a career that could support families and promote economic growth. Collaborative and collective professional development by teachers will improve their skills and capacities to teach the curriculum in schools effectively and so allow this to happen. West (1994) concludes that teacher professional development is the bridge that links whole-school improvement with the changes in teaching practice that are fundamental to improved student learning. Similarly, Fullan (1994) cites evidence

from case studies of improvements in student reading abilities was linked to highly focused and carefully designed staff development. In the light of emerging evidence, the relationship between teacher learning and student learning is the fundamental issue to be addressed. Research can also look at how a teacher can contribute to improvements in student learning outcomes. The findings of this study remain important to the planning of the future professional development of teachers. As Teacher 1 said:

*It is crucial for teachers to be confident in teacher learning and be the role models.*

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## ***O le Fe'e Avevalu: The Thematic Approach to Teaching***

**Kuinileti Lauina Viliamu, Epenesa Esera**

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this article is to describe teachers' knowledge and use of thematic teaching in a Samoan pre-school. Thematic teaching has been used in Samoan pre-schools for some time but there is limited research about how teachers understand and use this approach. Consequently, a qualitative case study was conducted at a mission pre-school. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data on teachers' knowledge and the use of thematic teaching. The findings revealed that factors such as initial training and continued professional development affected teachers' knowledge of thematic teaching. Results from the study indicated (i) there should be greater emphasis on hands-on practice at the teacher training institute and (ii) sufficient resources and materials are required to facilitate thematic teaching in pre-schools if teachers are expected to teach this way.

### **Introduction**

A range of terms are used to describe an integrated curriculum (Shriner, Schlee, & Libler, 2010). Fogarty (1991), for example, commented on thematic teaching as an example of an integrated curriculum. Similarly, Ward (1996) described the approach as "thematic work, centre of interest and project work, however, all of these shared the common integration of curriculum" (p. 72). This study draws on Fogarty's (1991) view of a thematic approach as being "across several disciplines" showing the integration and "overlapping of content and skills" (p. 62).

The most powerful tool in teaching and learning is the ability to make it interesting and relevant to students (Johannessen, 2000). A thematic approach to teaching brings the real world into the classroom environment (Min, Rashid & Nazri, 2012). It is a functional teaching method where children are immersed in hands-on, practical activities which are applied to many areas of learning. In addition, teachers use this practical approach as a strategy to solve problems in real life issues. We propose that a thematic teaching poses challenges as it exposes children to different ways of seeing the world. Furthermore, the study seeks to highlight the constructivist element of the approach as a valuable teaching strategy for early childhood education.

### **Context and Background**

In Samoa, the first curriculum designed for the early childhood sector in the 1970s was based on the thematic approach. It was deemed beneficial as themes were developed

from real life experiences and were contextually relevant and stimulating for children and teachers. The use of themes as a functional approach ensured learning was comprehensive and integrated, paving the way for children to achieve and succeed in school, increase interest levels and develop positive attitudes. It was envisaged that using the thematic approach would support teachers' holistic planning as an alternative to traditional teaching of subjects in isolation (Johannessen, 2000).

In 2017, the preschool curriculum was reviewed and the Early Childhood Education (ECE) committee comprising of the Ministry of Education, Sports, and Culture (MESC) personnel, the National University of Samoa (NUS) lecturers, and the National Council of ECE in Samoa (NCECES) together with teachers from the primary and preschools made the decision to continue using the thematic approach. They pointed to research and practice that supported this approach as being more conducive to children's learning and achievement (Nurlaela, Samani, Asto & Wibawa, 2018). Furthermore, teaching thematically was viewed as applicable to the Samoan ECE as the approach supports children where the learning context is an integral component of their experience.

### **Literature Review**

The justification for the study is, in part, related to ongoing discussions between the Government of Samoa, the MESC and the NCECS for ECE to come under the jurisdiction of the MESC. This would have implications for the ECE curriculum given the changes to an outcomes-based curriculum in the primary sector. The research is an attempt to find out how preschool teachers perceive the use of thematic teaching in ECE and its effect on children's learning.

Thematic teaching is one approach to curriculum integration. Fogarty (1991) described three different categories of integration. The first category was integration within single disciplines which included the fragmented, connected and nested models (intradisciplinary models). The second was the integration among several disciplines of sequenced, shared, webbed, threaded and integrated models (interdisciplinary models) and finally the integration within and across learners which included the immersed and network models (transdisciplinary models).

#### ***What is thematic teaching?***

Thematic teaching has been defined in a variety of ways. Jacobs (1989), for example, described it as a curriculum approach "that consciously applies methodology and language from more than one discipline to examine a central theme, issue, problem, topic or experience" (p.14). Loughran (2005) describes thematic teaching as a process of integrating and linking multiple elements of a curriculum towards many aspects of a subject. Shoemaker (1989) described thematic teaching as an organisational tool that "cuts across subject-matter lines, bringing together various aspects of the curriculum into meaningful association to focus upon broad areas of study... [and supports] learning in a holistic way that reflects the real world which is interactive" (p. 10). In spite of these varied definitions Mustafa (2011) explains that there is no specific or single definition of thematic teaching but identified the most important component as "connecting the teaching to real life" (p. 925).

### ***Why use thematic teaching?***

Those who favour thematic teaching and learning argue that it can benefit children in many ways. First, it can help children make “genuine connections ... provide depth and breadth in learning, promote metacognitive awareness, develop positive attitudes and provide for effective use of time” (Lipson, Valencia, Wixson & Peters, 1993, p. 253). A thematic approach is also purported to enable children to achieve success in school (Campbell & Henning, 2010). Thematic teaching also “[satisfies] the essential human need for meaning ... in which curriculum developers and planners offer unique and meaningful experiences for students to be successful and achieve their goals in the future” (Kritsonis, 2007, p.15). In addition, thematic teaching is said to create a rich and positive classroom environment (Costley, 2015). Perhaps one of the most prevalent reasons for following a thematic approach is that it allows teachers the opportunity to develop children’s interests (Cunningham, 2010). Yorks and Follo (1993) claimed “students learn better using thematic teaching than from a single subject curriculum” (p. 1). Thematic teaching reinforces engagement, interaction, motivation, children’s critical thinking skills, and enthusiasm for learning.

Of interest to the ECE sector is the claim that children’s development and learning takes place in play. Learning includes “activities that are freely chosen and directed by children and arise from intrinsic motivation” (Miller & Almon, 2009, p.15). In ECE, teachers want their teaching to be interesting and fun which should be reflected in their lesson planning where play is used as a strategy to facilitate teaching (Van Hoorn, Nourot, Scales, & Alward, K., 2007). Thematic teaching in ECE can be supported through collaborative planning with colleagues, professional development with curriculum specialists to strengthen knowledge across different subject areas. In addition, peer teaching and teacher-student collaboration enables teachers to gain knowledge and enhance practice (Loughran, 2005).

In spite of the support for a thematic approach to teaching and learning, barriers to its implementation have been identified. These include time constraints; curriculum demands and traditional thinking which discourages its implementation (Bergeron & Rudenga, 1993). Cook (2009) reported that some teachers felt that thematic teaching required extensive planning time. Often, teachers are not adequately prepared to make the transition from an isolated subject-based curriculum to a more integrated one. Consequently, early childhood teachers have had difficulty thinking in a holistic and integrated way. George (1996) argued that most teachers do not understand thematic teaching nor did they feel comfortable with the integration of various subjects.

### **Research Questions**

This article presents a study of teachers’ knowledge and use of thematic teaching in one Samoan preschool. With the new ECE curriculum being implemented in 2019, the study may provide recommendations for future policy and planning. A qualitative study was conducted to gather information about preschool teachers understanding of thematic teaching. Participants comprised of seven teachers and the principal from the chosen school. The interviews were based on three main questions:

1. What is the nature of teachers' knowledge about thematic teaching?
2. How do teachers implement thematic teaching in their classroom?
3. What are teacher's perceptions of using thematic teaching for children learning?

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study was influenced by the philosophical perspective of the researcher which reflected "philosophical notions of what is knowledge" (Leacock, Warrican & Rose, 2009, p. 7). The study adopted a constructivist philosophical assumption which is concerned with understanding the world based on participants' construction of knowledge from their experiences. From a constructivist perspective, teachers are constantly assessing how an activity helps children learn. Teachers that question themselves and their strategies help their children to do likewise. This approach builds children's knowledge.

The use of constructivism allowed the researchers to determine how preschool teachers constructed knowledge using thematic teaching. For the constructivist, there is no reality or absolute truth, but meaning is constructed through face to face interaction. Knowledge construction was gained by conducting interviews. Social constructions included language, beliefs, shared meanings and the tools used. While the approach was relevant to the aim of the study, it could also be seen as relying on the subjective nature of the relationship between the researcher and participants.

### **Methodology**

A qualitative case study design was chosen to examine teachers' knowledge and the use of thematic teaching in one mission school. This method targeted participants' perspectives, their meaning and subjective views (Hatch, 2002). Participants experienced thematic teaching differently and held varying perspectives and views. The qualitative case study approach (Njie & Asimiran, 2014) was used as it specifically focused on a particular case or bounded system to get rich and thick descriptions of the phenomena. Additionally, the natural setting assisted the researchers understand participant's behaviour, attitudes and their interactions.

Participants were involved in individual, face-to-face interviews which were conducted in the school staffroom. The interviews were audiotaped and each participant was interviewed for 30 minutes. These took one week to transcribe and another week to translate into English.

### ***Data collection instruments***

Interviews were the main instrument used to collect data. A semi-structured interview schedule was designed for preschool teachers and the principal. The same questions were asked of the participants with differences when there were areas the participants needed to elaborate or when prompting or probing was necessary. The interview schedule focused on how teachers gained knowledge, and how they planned and implemented thematic teaching in the classroom. The interview schedule for the principal differed in that it was based on her role and responsibilities in the school and the programme conducted to improve teachers' knowledge.

### **Data collection analysis**

Information gathered from participants was categorised as emerging themes, concepts and patterns (Creswell, 2007). Reading through the transcribed descriptions of participants' experiences helped to make connections. Meaningful patterns or themes, referred to by Corbin and Strauss (2015) as “integrating the concepts around a core category” (p. 81), revealed the extent to which participants use and apply thematic teaching in practice.

Data analysis started once the participants' transcriptions were completed in order to make comparisons of participants' explanations, descriptions and interpretations. Moustakas (1994) posits, “Reflective interpretation of the text is needed to achieve a fuller, more meaningful understanding” (p. 10). Categorisation assisted in isolating emerging patterns and themes for coding. Predefined codes and emerging ones were sorted and cross checked for common patterns and utilised in the thematic analysis.

### **Findings**

The findings indicated the teachers at the mission preschool used thematic teaching in their classroom. Preschool teachers' responses to the first research question on teachers' knowledge about thematic teaching included definitions of the thematic approach, teachers' experience at teacher training institutions, and their exposure to professional development and in-service training. The second research question about the implementation of thematic teaching focused on visual displays and play as a technique. The last research question asked about thematic teaching's contribution to children's learning, targeted active learning, effective planning, language development, creativity, holistic development and parental and community support.

#### **Research question 1: What is the nature of teachers' knowledge about thematic teaching?**

**Teachers knowledge of thematic teaching.** Teachers and the principal defined thematic teaching differently based on their knowledge, experience and use of the approach in class. However, their definitions shared the understanding that teaching was linked to subject integration under a theme.

*Thematic teaching is curriculum integration because it plans the curriculum in line with a theme. A broad theme is selected and then integrated to subject areas using scaffolding to assist children's learning. (Principal)*

*It is a method of teaching which links and connects all different subject areas under a topic. If transportation is the theme then science, math, language, social science and health are linked to that theme. (Teacher 1)*

All eight participants provided various definitions and terminologies of thematic teaching. Furthermore, their knowledge and understanding of thematic teaching indicated the interdisciplinary model (Fogarty, 1991). This involved integration among

several disciplines using various models such as the *fe'e avevalu* (eight-armed octopus).

**Teachers experience at the training institutions.** Most teachers and the principal indicated they were trained in thematic teaching at the Sogi Teacher Training Institute. One went through the Faculty of Education programme and as a volunteer had understudied teachers at preschools.

*I graduated from the Teacher Training Institute where I gained knowledge and skills. I have shared with other teachers the fe'e avevalu that integrates all curriculum areas in the use of thematic teaching. I learnt to develop thematic and curriculum webs to facilitate teaching ... Through practice and the use of hands-on-activities I taught a seamless curriculum which I learnt at the teaching institution and I did the same when I was given my own class. Children were immersed in constructive, productive and fruitful work. (Teacher 3)*

Teacher 6 agreed that,

*The teacher training college provided the opportunity to practice thematic teaching. We go out to preschools to practice our skills and this is one of our teaching strategies and preferred method.*

Participants found their training supported thematic teaching in the classroom particularly in designing the webbed models and in narrowing and extending the thematic focus.

**Teachers exposure to professional development and in-service training.** The MESC and NCECES conducted in-service training at the beginning of every year for ECE teachers to encourage teachers to be flexible in their own contexts. In-service training also broadened their knowledge and skills. Teachers expressed a range of views about their in-service training:

*I was trained in the use of the thematic approach when I started teaching at primary level. When I came to the preschool there was hardly any training but my experience from the primary school helped. (Teacher 2)*

*We have professional development and the principal shares with staff ideas on the thematic approach. We also meet as a staff at the beginning of each term to discuss appropriate themes for each level and we usually spend 2 weeks on each topic. (Teacher 3)*

*We have staff development every year but not specifically on thematic teaching. (Teacher 8)*

*[We] have in-service training for new teachers each year and MESC is invited to take part as well ... we also conduct staff development at the school to extend teachers' previous training. (Principal)*

Importantly, training enabled teachers to qualify as professionals and be equipped with further knowledge and skills to promote teaching.

**Research question 2: How do teachers implement thematic teaching in their classroom?**

**Storytelling and children's books.** Teachers use storytelling to engage children in their learning. Storytelling and children's books support thematic teaching as this strategy provides opportunities to extend children's intellect and imagination on themes. According to Teacher 2:

*Children love different themes and the sea which is close by is the one they are familiar with. Reading a story about the sea, children are able to list objects that they have come across before. Questions that prompt and probe their understanding are asked before and after the visit. When they return they work in groups on different activities that are displayed in the room.*

Storytelling is also based on the children's experiences. Teacher 3 explained:

*I talk with the children about special days or occasions, for example Independence in June, Good Friday in April and White Sunday in October: what they wore, where they went, what they did, who they interacted with and the food they ate. They draw their own pictures for display.*

Teacher 4 added:

*When you're teaching small children you're connecting everything under a topic. For example, telling a story and then asking the children to act out the characters which involves listening and speaking. Thematic teaching links children to the environment of characters, people, animals or birds, for example animal classification in mathematics, preferred animal food for science, animal pets for social studies and in the arts visual displays.*

Teachers' questions link concepts and ideas from stories to the theme explored. Teacher knowledge captures children's enthusiasm and extends their understanding.

**Displays.** Teachers spoke about display as an important aspect of children's learning. During the interviews, teachers indicated displays showed thematic teaching was successful. Children's work activities were displayed in the classroom as part of storytelling, recording excursions to places of interest; and demonstrating exploration of their natural environment. Teacher 2 said,

*I display and decorate the classroom with activities children worked on like drawings, paintings and worksheets for the parents, principal and teachers to view the children's work, the topics covered and the interrelated subject areas.*

Teacher 4 explained that classroom displays contributed to children's knowledge and skills:

*Display corners enable children to use their time to explore and enjoy what is exhibited. They become busy interacting with the displays and they learn at the same time.*

In addition, Teacher 5 reflected,

*I display children's work to let them know their work is important to me. I also exhibit what they do so they can see the different activities and how ideas and concepts are linked.*

Teachers reported that creating a rich classroom environment promoted positive learning. Display of children's work encouraged them to work harder because they like to see their work displayed and to interact with learning materials.

**Play as a technique.** Some teachers reported using play to introduce lessons in thematic teaching. They found that play naturally interested and motivated children to take part.

*Children love to play and this is understandable as they enjoy participating in physical activities and games. Play is significant as it connects both teachers' ideas and children's thinking. (Teacher 3)*

*Children love to play at this stage of their development and I always use play as a technique to draw their attention to my lesson. (Teacher 4)*

Teachers described that young children loved to play therefore, they used play to motivate, draw interest and increase concentration span throughout the lesson.

### ***Research question 3: What are teachers' perceptions of using thematic teaching for children learning?***

**Active Learning.** Most of the teachers responded that thematic teaching and active learning had a positive impact on children's understanding. Active learning included teacher and class engagement, encouraging children to talk and speak using their own ideas and thinking. It allowed collaboration, participation and interaction with activities for children to learn and adapt to teaching materials readily.

*Teachers use this approach especially in teaching young children as the familiarity of the theme and the concepts discovered helps the children. It indicates the role of scaffolding and the interconnectedness among different subject areas. (Teacher 1)*

*Children participate in discussions [and] demonstrate, interest and involvement that allows them to develop language in expressing ideas and saying what they want. (Teacher 2)*

Child-to-child interaction enabled children to work among themselves and become independent learners. They work in groups and with peers to experiment, explore,



research and solve problems. Teachers reported that children were willing and eager to find answers and solutions to problems and used scaffolding to build their learning capacity. Hands-on activities encouraged children's thinking through physical manipulation and exploration.

**Effective Planning.** Term planning allows teachers to discuss, share, and develop themes and topics for the whole term. Additionally, they also looked at different types of activities which suit the children's abilities. The curriculum coordinator, principal and experienced teachers assist in developing term plans including special occasions and events such as Good Friday, Independence Day, Fathers' and Mothers' Day. Additionally, lesson planning increases teachers' confidence in thematic teaching to plan lessons linking different learning experiences under a theme. Plans include activities and assessment and identifies areas that children need assistance with.

*[Planning] provides guidelines and it's easier in terms of narrowing directions. (Teacher 1)*

*[We] plan lessons according to the children's social, thinking, physical, emotional and spiritual development based on the themes that interests them. Activities are designed to support children interaction and engagement as well as promoting motivation and collaboration. (Teacher 4)*

Teachers are encouraged to plan together, express and share their ideas and thinking using a thematic approach. After planning, they meet to reflect and evaluate the plan, critique areas for improvement and to pre-plan for the next teaching weeks.

**Language Development.** Participants said they found thematic teaching helped children to develop their language through collaborating and engaging in class activities. One teacher mentioned a shy child that would not speak during group discussions when the teacher was present. However, when children interacted amongst themselves he dominated the whole discussion. Teacher 5 explained,

*Play encourages children to develop their language. When they play they interact with other children by sharing, talking and laughing which indicates that they are learning a lot from each other.*

Teacher 7 agreed,

*I always give children activities to play so that they can interact amongst themselves and develop their language. Some children are shy to talk in group discussions but when they are engaged in activities they do.*

In addition, Teacher 8 described her use of constructivism and active learning.

*The teacher focuses on thematic teaching that looks at ways children use language to gain understanding. Children's cultural background provides rich language that, if built upon, enhances learning.*

**Creativity:** Preschool teachers mentioned that due to the lack of resources and materials to implement thematic teaching, they had to buy or create their own materials to assist with teaching. They explained that the lack of resources made teaching less effective.

*I always need resources but I can't afford it so I create my own resources using newspapers and dry leaves to make some of my displays. (Teacher 2)*

*My planning focused mainly on activities for children because they are young and they need to learn with hands-on activities. However, lack of resources made me realise that I need to create my own to assist them. (Teacher 6)*

*I encourage staff members to create their own resources using recycling materials as it saves money. (Principal)*

**Holistic development.** Teachers described the importance of child development in the process of thematic teaching. Children's development and the motivation to learn were dependent on their physical, social, emotional, intellectual and spiritual skills. Physical activities allowed the use of hands-on activities and promoted speed and accuracy. Social development supported interaction with teachers, peers and the environment. Children's feelings and emotions towards others and the environment involved their senses and instincts. Intellectual development focused on the children's thinking through experimenting, exploring and researching. Teachers reported that children at this stage of development are more open to investigating, exploring and finding things on their own. Teacher 2 pointed out,

*At this stage children always try to understand things that happen around them. They are like "cameras." They do not relax until they find out what they need to know. I encourage movement and play in my classroom to allow children to develop their body physically. Once the child is healthy and in a good mood, teaching and learning occurs. Holistic development is very important.*

Teacher 3 added,

*Thematic teaching provides a holistic approach to child development as learning areas are integrated and the links are visible.*

**Parent and community involvement.** The principal and teachers discussed the importance of parental and community involvement. They described the home and school partnership as supporting thematic teaching and children's learning. In this way, parents share the responsibility of helping children learn about the theme. They question, respond to questions and share experiences. Teacher 2 said,

*Some parents are very keen to know about their children's progress and support thematic teaching when children bring artefacts from home related to the theme. (Teacher 2)*

*Children can apply the thematic approach to their homes and communities. For example, if the theme is water they learn its uses and how people need to take care of the streams and rivers for humans and animals. (Teacher 4)*

In summary, participants agreed that thematic teaching was beneficial to children's learning. Active learning allowed children to interact, engage and be involved with a range of classroom activities. Effective planning allowed teachers to prepare according to children's level and interest. Moreover, teachers mentioned the importance of parent and community involvement in the development of the child. While teachers indicated the lack of resources and materials to facilitate teaching, they were able to create their own resources and activities from local materials available in the environment.

### **Discussion and Implications**

The findings from participants' responses reported significant and substantial themes that are grouped under three main themes: teacher knowledge, classroom implementation and children's learning.

#### ***Teacher Knowledge***

The findings included factors that contributed to teachers' knowledge about thematic teaching. These included initial teacher training, professional development programmes, in-service training, and group/peer teaching. Teachers' preservice training developed their understanding of thematic teaching. They understood that thematic teaching had different definitions and terminology but shared a common meaning. Furthermore, professional development programmes and activities such as in-service training and workshops broadened teachers' knowledge and understanding. These factors positively obligated teachers to develop their knowledge towards integrating and connecting thematic teaching in the teaching and learning process.

#### ***Classroom implementation***

Participants' responses mentioned creating unique learning environments such as storytelling using puppets and reading with expression to build children's language capability. Class excursions enabled children to link their prior knowledge and home experiences to other places outside the home. Display corners were set up to motivate, assist, and encourage children to learn and connect concepts and ideas developed during play activities. Moreover, display corners were arranged and organised from various learning experiences to allow independent learning and to develop children's cognitive skills in ways explained by Bain and Jacobs (1990).

Teachers reported ways they implement thematic teaching in their classrooms similar to that described by Erlandson and McVittie (2001), where thematic webs were used to create links across subjects. Integrated activities were designed from the thematic web and teachers were given the flexibility to teach the theme depending on sustained student interest. Play was used to maintain motivation and interest levels.

### ***Children's learning***

The findings establish that the use of thematic teaching contributed to children's learning which included active learning, parental involvement, language development and holistic development. Teachers emphasised active learning and participation which allowed students to engage, interact, collaborate, experiment and research. Active learning was evident in the way teachers organised the classroom to become a rich and resourceful environment for learning. It also included planning topics that were related to the children's context to create interest, play and exploration. Thematic teaching encouraged children to develop language especially through listening and speaking.

The benefits to children's learning at this school aligned with claims made in international literature. For example, using a thematic approach to learning emphasised children's abilities, especially students with special needs as explained by Smith (1998). Teachers' planning focussed on goals, aims and objectives for children to achieve (Cawelti, 2004) and activities to meet children's needs. Teacher planning allowed integration across the curriculum "to provide instruction that engages students, keep them excited and keep them learning" (Bolak, Bialach & Dunphy, 2005, p. 19).

Finally, all these factors had a positive impact on children's development. Lake (2000) pointed out, "integrated curriculum allowed teachers to move away from traditional and isolated facts towards a more constructivist view of learning which values in-depth knowledge of subjects based on the work of Piaget, Dewey and Bruner who hold a holistic view of learning" (p. 6). We claim that this study shows how thematic teaching benefits both teachers and students.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

This study showed that thematic teaching is an effective approach in this specific school because it had positive impacts on children's achievements and active participation, promoted interactions between teachers and students, and it helped children's language development. However, some challenges continue to hinder the implementation of thematic teaching. The following recommendations are made to assist teachers maintain the use of this approach to enhance the academic development and the performance of children.

- Strengthen the role of the MESC Early Childhood coordinator to include: regular in-service training, and in-school visits to assist teachers with planning and implementation of the integrated curriculum.
- Strengthen the relationship between ECE schools and the Teacher Training Institute at Sogi to assist teacher trainees develop knowledge and skills about curriculum implementation and planning.
- Provision of ongoing professional development for teachers, which includes evaluation and appraisal systems to promote effective teaching.
- A continued focus on constructivism, active and inspirational learning to facilitate teaching and learning in the early childhood setting.

The study highlighted the importance of the thematic teaching and its application in the preschool learning environment. Thematic teaching benefits children's learning

achievement. This approach is inclusive and provides opportunities for all children to find learning meaningful and relevant. This article adds to the many studies that have attested to the efficacious nature of thematic teaching due to it being interactive, activity-oriented and collaborative.

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