

Fagogo: A Samoan Pedagogical Tool.

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Abstract

Children of every Culture learn in their own unique ways. Samoan children in particular assimilate Western ideas and models of acquiring knowledge believed to be lacking within their own Cultural traditions. 'Fāgogo' - the Samoan stories of the night– draws upon knowledge of good pedagogical ideas that are useful to inform practices that could transform and improve the teaching and learning of Samoan children. The wisdom required in the teaching and learning by Samoan children is the heart of fāgogo. Hence, fāgogo offers a useful Samoan source of pedagogical ideas. Educating Samoan children without the analysis of Samoan wisdom merely serves, ultimately, to deaden the souls and dim the minds of the people, weaken, and devalue, the foundation of Fa'a-Samoa.

Background - *Ata o le Folasaga*

My father's *fāgogo* instilled in me *A'oga mea uma* or Education is everything. His *fāgogo* enriched the foundation of my learning through warm relationships and sharing of realised dreams. My father's *fāgogo* sent me to sleep realising and understanding the valuable and loved heritage of a unique place and people. In *fāgogo*, the *a'oga* insidiously entered my young mind and I built structures and an understanding of what life is, the decisions made requiring the use and application of Samoan metaphors and relationships that became my first resource for thinking and taking action. My father's *fāgogo* elucidated in the calm and peace of the night what life was, what I was experiencing and what the future might hold. It is this context of an enriched oral tradition that I grew up to make decisions that sought answers from a Samoan experience and philosophical wisdom. This foundation imbued a confidence and assurance in my identity.

My father's words are a powerful reminder that in the abundant, bountiful, global life of today, the current generations appear to be losing their essential selves, abilities, qualities that were developed and preserved through traditional Samoan non-formal pedagogical practices.

The significance of educating young children in Samoa using *Gagana Samoa ma Aganu'u*, Samoan language and culture has been a critical and pivotal issue for the Samoan people. The deep value of the *Gagana Samoa ma Aganu'u* as a basis for learning Western knowledge has not been well understood. In the desire to keep pace with a world full of technology and economic advancement, the majority of Samoan people focused their education on the formal, pedagogical constructs, imported and used by Missionaries who arrived in 1830 (Ministry of Education Sports and Culture, 2006). For many years, the Western formal education system overwhelmed the Samoan people and their values; ways of acquiring knowledge, thinking and learning were relegated to the back.

As a consequence, the ideas and beliefs of Samoan people about the *Gagana Samoa ma Aganu'u*, as the basis of the learning process, had become quite insignificant. Furthermore, particularly the younger generation took *Gagana ma Aganu'u* for granted. This ignorance further undermined the contribution of Samoan language and culture as the foundation and means for learning and living a life enriched by meaningful production of its cultural lineage, heritage, and history.

As an educator of Samoan children, I have a clear position of the status of *Gagana Samoa ma Aganu'u*. Moreover, my own upbringing, of formal education in Samoa, compelled me to review the value of *Gagana Samoa ma Aganu'u* in view of current educational ideas and beliefs in relation to my identity. I believe that my own parents' fervent wish to imbue in their children the language and cultural significance of our ancestors contributed to an in-depth meditation about ways of thinking and searching for wisdom. It is this desire I have delved into the importance of *fāgogo* as a traditional pedagogical tool.

Fāgogo are stories told, particularly by the elderly to the very young, at night. *Fāgogo* can be counted in the same pedagogical category as night tales, sagas, wisdom tales, ballads and bed time stories. In my position, I believe it is my profession and obligation to continue the relentless work that had been laid by forefathers and past generations. The fruition of this dream would require investigating local pedagogical tools to enhance the education of young children to appreciate the Samoan language and cultural practices as opportunities for acquiring knowledge and skills.

It is through exploration of *fāgogo* in *talanoaga* or critical conversation which would provide evidence and reveal it as a pedagogical tool incorporating knowledge and values. *Fagogo* as a creator and co-creator targets stories of childhood experiences, the history of navigation, the legends of the warriors of the land and sea, of evolution and procreation, and the many islands that make up Samoa. *Talanoaga* is the framework for understanding the learning system of Samoan children in the culturally attuned context. Participants identify the significant cultural elements in *fāgogo* that are unrecognized in building practical knowledge and skills and central to the question 'How is *fāgogo* a source of Samoan pedagogy?' Recognizing policies on the use of Samoan traditional pedagogical practices would benefit children in learning about themselves, their heritage and other people.

Brief History of Samoan Education - *A'oa'oga i Samoa*

The formal education system in Samoa was introduced during the colonisation period of the nineteenth century through the London Missionary Society (LMS) (Meleisea 1987). In its establishment, the Western system of formal education replaced informal and non-formal learning in traditional Samoa. The pedagogical practices and values used in formal Western education began influencing the Samoan people in how they acquired knowledge and skills which departed from their own values and culture. In this situation it designated the status of *Gagana Samoa ma aganu'u* in educating Samoan children to a lesser position.

In the early eighties, twenty years since Samoa gained independence; my experience at school indicated a lack of confidence in the Samoan language and culture as a basis for learning. This was evident in schools where speaking Samoan was forbidden despite the high percentage of Samoan students that spoke Samoan as their first language. Learning continued to focus on success in external examination from learning foreign concepts and ideas that were unrelated to Samoa and its way of living and knowing. Learners were content to learn formal Western knowledge and pedagogy but they also ended up being further detached from the Samoan way of life. In general, the ideas and assumptions of Samoans largely remained unchanged even after independence and taking control of its education system.

The beginning of the 21st century was envisaged to bring a new era to education in the Pacific including Samoa. Throughout the Pacific, failure of education systems to graduate young people to become productive members of society continued to be a major concern (Puamau 2005). As a result Ministries of Education reviewed policies, designed and implemented curriculum to provide effective education for all learners. The Samoan Education Strategic Planning and Policies 2006-2015, articulated "...a process realized through informal, formal and non-formal systems, to which family values, traditional rituals, cultural and spiritual beliefs contribute towards its success" (Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture 2006: 12). The document stipulated that an educational system that recognized and used cultural values and practices would be successful. The Samoan Prime Minister in 2007 called for the revival and strengthening of the Samoan language and culture at all levels of the education system. Obviously, the need to blend the best global approaches with local values and ways of thinking was recognised. In this way traditional Samoan pedagogy and *fāgogo's* contributions to the system of education, as a traditional, non-formal pedagogical practice was acknowledged.

Retrospectively, for a Samoan in Samoa, the culture is our education, because life revolved around our *fanua* or land. Education established that successful use of the *fanua* enriched people's lives by integrating western and traditional pedagogies. Today globalisation has challenged people to merge their traditional practices with Western knowledge for effective learning nationally and globally. Our *fanua* is educative and inherent opportunities of traditional pedagogies would be significant, contributing to academic pursuits as many Samoans have come to know and believe.

Opportunity - O 'Avanoa

Educational policy made attempts to ensure Samoan society is equipped to engage confidently in a 21st Century of rapid change. However, Samoa should consolidate a common foundation of learning based on local traditional, social and cultural practices, which can subsequently be used as a shared plan and common 'ground' for a comprehension of culturally-external, professional and technical knowledge and skills. When the core values of *fa'a-Samoa* are in place and underpinning learning, then academic, social behaviour and cultural excellence are likely outcomes. For more successful learning, decisions of educational planners, policy makers, educators and parents utilising society and culture's past experiences, could shape change in a

more co-ordinated and integrated way. Decisions would now require an acceptance of Samoan indigenous knowledge, skills and values. Samoan educators and people need to re-affirm faith and trust in the deep values, principles and practices of their traditional culture in order to re-develop and reclaim solutions to Samoan educational challenges and problems. From a Samoan perspective on language and culture, unpacking *fāgogo* for insights and understanding of the essence of Samoan culture is an essential base for learning. In particular, the pedagogical elements of *fāgogo* are critical. These elements could inform the teaching of Samoan children in their traditional language and culture and be used as the foundation for learning other foreign languages and knowledge.

As Western influences and globalisation expanded, the desire for Samoan children to keep abreast with the change has encouraged a one-sided pursuit and disregarded the significance of the Samoan language and culture to learning. The acculturated ideas and beliefs from external sources have literally eliminated Samoan trust in their own inherited wisdom, as well as self-confidence and self-respect in the Samoan language and culture. The importance of learning other cultures' knowledge and skills that have contributed and continued to input into the development of education in Samoa cannot be overlooked. Subsequently, *fāgogo* needs reaffirmation and recreation as a source of success that existed in the Samoan language and its cultural practice.

The Samoan language words and expressions as used in this article highlighted its significance in educating young Samoans. Often, translations of Samoan words fail to capture the essence and deep contextual significance which best and artfully communicated meaning.

What the Literature Offers - Nisi Su'esu'ega

(Freire 1970, 1987) and (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000) worked with the education of indigenous people. The ideas addressed converting 'the poor' and 'oppressed' into self-initiated learners and actors. Freire stated that "man's ontological vocation" (as he called it) was "...a Subject who acts upon and transform his world, and in so doing, moves toward ever new possibilities of fuller and richer life individually and collectively," (1970: 140). Freire's suggestions ideally suited the situation that educating man about himself and his immediate surroundings also defined and suggested possibilities of a successful life. Freire believed that understanding the strengths of one's own culture is a source of pride and empowerment. The importance of *fāgogo* to Samoan people in search of richer pedagogical ideas visualised transforming thinking and practice of conventional Samoan educators who currently use mostly Anglo-Western originated models and techniques to the exclusion of traditional approaches. To begin with, the studies by (Freire 1970, 1987) and Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) provided lens through which the literature had been reviewed. At the heart of these authors' work was a deep-seated desire to inspire students to have strength and faith in their own language and culture that would equip them for the struggles in the world around them. The authors constantly reminded the reader that people's pride in their identity are strengthened and empowered through having profound knowledge of their own language and culture.

Similarly, the studies of indigenous communities by Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) also highlighted how devaluation of heritage language and culture of indigenous people disempowered and removed their source of knowledge and strength. Authors suggested that people must not discount their own ways of learning as losing them meant denying their power and freedom to express themselves. The ideas from the work of Skutnabb-Kangas and Freire pointed to the significance of one's language and culture through education to develop self-awareness of what was offered and interpreting the world in one's own words. The outcomes of working with indigenous people in their struggle for empowerment prompted similar communities around the world.

Samoa people are natives of their own land; however, the process and ideas used in their education during the period of colonialism greatly impacted Samoa people's thinking about their language and culture. The educational message that was hammered into generations up to the 1980s was learning to speak the English language was deemed superior to learning and speaking the Samoan language. English provided additional opportunities beyond what the Samoan language and culture possibly could offer and so the oppression of Samoan-specific deep philosophical structures and understanding developed over a millennia of living was downgraded. The ability to explain life and cultural-educational concepts in the familiar Samoan context was degraded. Samoan language and culture were further devalued and diminished through lack of formal use during the formative and foundational years of schooling from ages five to eighteen.

In a desire to change the colonial perception of the value of Samoan culture, *fāgogo*, a Samoan ritual, as a pedagogical practice was highlighted. The *fāgogo* is specific and unique to Samoan people. Studies by Wajnryb (2003) and Grenbole & Whaley (2006), discussed the significance of stories in other cultures to the education of people, and both favoured *fāgogo*, stories told in the night, as significant to the Samoan context in relation to educating children in the *fa'aSamoa*.

The *poto fa'aneionapo* or success in the modern world was featured in the work of Wendt (cited in Mallon 2002: Sharrard 2003) and Figiel (1996) which stated that *fāgogo* of the elders positioned its listeners to better understand the conduct and meaning of life. They contended that *fāgogo* has a place even in the modern world. They also highlighted that *gagana muamua* or first language is vital in educating people about Samoa because the indigenous language expressed fundamental understanding of the relationship of people and their life and place in Samoa.

The significance of *fāgogo*, as underscored in the literature, emphasised that *fāgogo* offered pedagogical value that could extend and enhance the teaching of Samoan children in Samoa. As Freire (1987) and Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) emphasised in their work, every human being is capable of looking into the world in a dialogical encounter with others and in doing that people discover their potential as they name the world in their own words. Insights into the significance of *fāgogo* for people's language and culture provided a future for traditional ways of thinking and learning. It has been mentioned that while the literature pointed to the significance of

fāgogo to Samoan language and culture, the focus should be on how *fāgogo* act in the pedagogy of Samoan children. Smith (1999) articulated that Pacific people should implement research methodologies that are familiar in form. In Samoa, the *Talanoa* approach is a critical dialogue and appropriate (Manu'atu 2000; Vaai 2002; Vaioleti 2003; Halapua 2005) amongst others.

Learning Model - *Aga e A'oa'o mai ai*

'*Aga*' is a component of the Samoan concept *aganu'u* and refers to all the behaviour and movements of every member of the group, while *nu'u* refers to the group as a whole. *Aganu'u*, *o tu ma amioga a tagata o nu'u ta'itasi sa masani mai ai anamua e tutusa uma ai nu'u o Samoa* (Mailo 1992). In translation, it means "the customs and traditions that are common to all villages in Samoa."

Fāgogo is one such tradition that is common to all villages in Samoa, hence it is very much a part of the *Aganu'u*. *Fāgogo* is a *aga* that commonly serves both the entertainment and educational needs of Samoan children. This used the model of an elder storyteller who engaged the Samoan language in a powerful yet persuasive way to help the young obtain knowledge for survival in their time and place. *Fāgogo* employed both the strong Samoan oral literature and the well-practiced storytelling ability of the eldest family member. *Fāgogo* flowed from the oral literature reservoir and wellspring characterised by genealogies, oral traditions songs and stories. As a Samoan art form it explored the relationships of people to people and people to their life in Samoa, providing knowledge and hard-won wisdom.

The Foundation - *O le Fa'avae*

Culturally, people gained knowledge through various experiences and rituals that are unique to their own culture. Two cultures rarely have exactly the same words or expressions to define the unique rituals and cultural experiences that serve life in their particular place. Moreover, the rituals and traditions offer greater benefits and advantages to those who initiated and practiced them than anyone from a different place could fully appreciate.

Manu'atu (2000) defined pedagogy as the science of teaching and learning, drawn from Freire's philosophy (Freire 1970). In this definition, science is referenced as knowledge. The knowledge of teaching and learning which produced ways of how people made sense of the world they live in. Pedagogy gave human beings the opportunities to form relationships amongst themselves, be it in the family, the school, the community or even in a foreign place. According to Freire, 'Pedagogy is concerned with relationships between the 'words and the world' (Manu'atu 2000: 90). Understanding the conducts and traditions of how one learns in the culture provided an explanation on how people form the crucial bonds and connections among concepts, the words and the world.

When people no longer feel free to think their own thinking and cannot name the world in their own words, they are easily assimilated into new dominant cultures with new knowledge that would be totally foreign and meaningless to them (Freire 1970, 1987). As Freire (1970)

deliberated on his experiences that influenced the lives of landless people in Chile, Sao Tome, Brazil, Principe and Guinea-Bissau it was his aim to convince peasants and landless people to think and change their current situation by learning more about themselves, their identity and knowledge to empower them in their struggle in the Western world. Freire posited that the “anthropological concept of language and culture is central and indispensable to the education of the people in their coming to know the world” (Manu’atu 2000: 89). Freire asserted that teaching and learning one’s own home language and culture was crucial in understanding the significance and value of one’s self.

When people fully understand and appreciate their historical and traditional ways of learning, only then could they ground themselves in their heritage and culture. In that sense, neither foreign ideas nor change would be easily accepted or understood (Freire 1987). Freire stated that one’s own cultural strengths constructed through one’s own cultural pedagogies, was the foundation of the thinking and conceptualization that supported a critical view of the world. It reinforced the theory that strength and values of one’s identity came from knowing and understanding one’s own *fāgogo*, one’s own cultural stories expressed in one’s own home language. Freire realised that those with whom he worked with led difficult lives and that freeing themselves relied on recreating or re-expressing their own significant stories that defined their identity.

Samoan people learnt about their identity in ways that were specific to themselves, such as *fāgogo*. Even though the Samoan language and culture dominated everyday life under colonisation, the powerful influences of Western ideas proved too strong as people sought a different standard and way of living consistent with the material wealth of the colonisers. The attention and value given to the Samoan pedagogical culture of learning decreased to near non-existence and that situation has continued to greatly impact people’s thinking.

Over the years, however, the cultural environments have changed, for both the colonialists and the Samoans. Interestingly, both sets of people now search for knowledge and wisdom of the Samoan culture that was previously taken for granted and depreciated. The recognition of culture as an attribute of a person in a particular place and time, is more prevalent and now credited as a contributor to success psychologically, economically and ecologically.

Contributive pedagogies theoretically rely on relationships created and produced in valuable learning contexts which were not fixed, but created and recreated as students and teachers engaged in the process of coming to know (Freire, 1993). Relationship was important as a source of *fāgogo*. As a Samoan cultural pedagogy, *fāgogo* in the Samoan context, explored relationships and worthwhile learning contexts to support the learning process. Moreover, contributive pedagogies were created from language and cultural practices that were commonly used and familiar, which valued and used the behaviors that were common and understood within a community of learners.

Conclusion - *Fa'ai'u*

The significance of one's Gagana ma Aganu'u in the learning process is also revealed in the *fāgogo* or story telling ritual in Samoa's context particularly for children. The foundation of learning as revealed by the literature and the writer's experiences has roots in the home place before proceeding to the formal learning context. *Fāgogo* rituals in Samoa, served as entertainment for children but most importantly imparted ideas of good pedagogical practices that Samoan children could use to enhance future learning.

Overall the picture as supported by the literature, is that *fāgogo* in the Samoan context captured Samoan world views, valued the language, reinforced a sense of belonging and identity, and most importantly the nurturing of the young mind with pleasure, contentment, and love. It is explicit from the analysis of information sources that *fāgogo* is ideal in developing good pedagogical practice for Samoan children where all social, mental; emotion and spiritual elements are nurtured. Learning comes alive if it involves ones 'words and world'.

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