

## **Literacy begins in the fale**

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### **Abstract**

The problem of illiteracy is of growing international concern in Samoa as elsewhere. This article demonstrates that selected family members of a *fale* (traditional Samoan family residence), can be trained to begin the learning process in oral and writing skills with young children, both in English and Samoan. In addition, the *matai* (chiefs) who are responsible for family and village affairs, can be the facilitators of this sustainable project in their own families first, then their designated districts, where young and old alike can learn from each other in familiar settings.

### **Introduction**

In Samoa, almost every family owns a *fale* (a traditional house). Its usual shape is oval, but some are rectangular. There are many posts representing the many branches of the extended family. Samoan protocol demands that one knows where to sit. The *fale* is open, with no windows or doors: no secrets are kept there. One is free to enter or leave as one pleases. It is the meeting place for residents and guests alike; living room; dining area; banquet hall; family entertainment or recreational arena; or, when the stars dot the heavens, the sleeping quarters of those who dwell within. Now I add another function: a literacy centre of excellence.

My interest in literacy issues began more than thirty years ago in my home country of Trinidad and Tobago when I discovered that one of my surrogate grandmothers could neither read nor write. What I found most humiliating was the fact that some of my peers were laughing hysterically at this matriarch of the family who was reading a copy of our daily newspaper upside down. Mummy K always spoke to us in perfect English, so I was utterly devastated when I discovered that dark secret. To add insult to injury, some of her children were teachers. I often wonder what alternative choices she would have made had she been able to read and write.

My late father told another interesting but sad story about illiteracy. During a discussion on banking services, he mentioned that he left a particular bank because, while waiting in the queue one day, he overheard a teller abusing an older client because he could not sign his name; all he was able to do was mark an 'X.' When he reached the teller, my father told him that he wanted to close his account and take the funds to the bank next door. The alarmed teller referred the matter to the manager. This happened in the 1940s and in those days, such actions were seen as slightly radical. When the

manager asked my father the reasons for his sudden decision, he replied “It is not these poor people’s fault that they cannot read and write. If you explain the transactions to them, they would understand. Some of them did not choose to be illiterate.” While the two individuals I have written about were able to survive, I am sure that something was missing in their lives, but at that time, their survival did not depend on literacy as we know it now. However, today’s world paints a totally different picture.

In December 2003, I visited my homeland of Trinidad and Tobago after an absence of thirteen and a half years, and I was impressed with the television advertisement showing a woman in her late thirties who was telling her audience that her life had been at a standstill because she could not read and write. She sought the assistance of the friendly literacy centre in her area, had just completed her Caribbean Examinations Council Examinations (CXC, formerly called “O” Levels from the University of Cambridge), and was now on her way to begin formal classes in nursing: a career that was going to change her life forever. She was also advising the young and the old to visit their literacy centres if they felt that they had problems. In an informal discussion with Mrs Jessie Kesraj, a retired primary school principal who tutors at a centre, she confirmed that the centres were really making a difference in the lives of those who wanted to pursue lifelong ambitions. She added that centres were set up so that they were within the reach of the local residents, though some chose to go to a nearby village if they felt slightly embarrassed by learning to read at a later age. It is my view that establishing literacy centres can be established here in Samoa but in a slightly different way.

The focus of this article is to show that in Samoa the literacy centre can be the family *fale*, and that supplementary work can be done there to improve literacy skills in English and Samoan, thereby improving the quality of life and choices for many in this country. In this way, the extended family unit can provide a strong foundation for developing literacy.

In order to appreciate this article, it is necessary to look at the history of the islands, the socio-economic status, the political makeup, and the educational sector as well as the major cultural changes that are affecting the country and which could have an adverse impact on the nation as a whole, if left unattended. I will use some of my teaching experiences here in Samoa to elaborate on various points. This article is intended for anyone who is interested in literacy issues, and I hope that the ideas discussed here spark discussion about ways to move forward.

The *Samoa National Human Development Report* (So’o, Va’a, & Lafotanoa, 2006) describes Samoa as “a group of volcanic islands which extend for 362 kilometres on an east-west line in the central Pacific in an area bounded by latitudes 13 and 15 degrees south and longitudes 168 and 173 degrees west” (p. 23). Samoa is made up of two large islands, Upolu and Savaii. Upolu is 1,114 square kilometres, while Savaii, also called the “Big Island”, is 1,820 square kilometres. In addition are two smaller islands, Apolima and Manono (Meleisea, 1987a cited in Faoagali, 2005, p.16).

The population of the country is 176,710, with 52% males and 48% females. The per capita income was USD\$2,200 in 2004. Twenty-two percent of the total population live in the Apia Urban Area, while 29.8% reside in the North West of Upolu. Those living in

the rest of Upolu make up 23.7%, while 24% make Savaii their domain. The age groups are as follows: 54.7% are aged between 15–64 years, while 40.7% are between the ages of 0–14 years. The group 65 years and over makes up 4.5% (So’o et al., 2006).

The people of these islands have a homogenous language and culture and any variations in such are hardly recognizable to be of any significance. Of the total population in 2001, 99 percent identified themselves as Samoans, the other 1 percent were non-Samoans. (So’o et al., 2006, p. 23)

Samoa gained independence from New Zealand in 1962, after being ruled first by the Germans from 1900–1914 and then by New Zealand from 1914–1962 (Ioka, 1995). A visitor travelling to Samoa can still see the remnants of German rule in the architectural style of some of the prominent buildings in town or residential dwellings on the outskirts. The profound influence of New Zealand can be also seen in the education sector, as during the 1960s to the 1990s, great strides were made in education to cater for the needs of a growing population (Ioka, 1995). New Zealand has had a dominant input and impact on the educational curriculum of the country, and continues to do so up to the present time. Between 2001-2004, for example, the New Zealand Government, through NZAid, provided NZ\$6 million for secondary curriculum revision, materials production, and teacher training.

Samoa has two official languages: Samoan and English. English is used mainly in tourism, trade, business, and in education, while Samoan is used for communication, cultural and traditional ceremonies. It must be emphasised that as a country, Samoa does many things using its own set of norms, values, and traditions. Traditional Samoan society is made up of family groups who live in villages, and these villages make up districts. Each district has a group of *matai*, who are the key decision makers for all village affairs: “village health, education and development programs” (Ioka, 1995, p. 10). The lifestyle is communal, where group decisions are made. In addition, there is also an oral tradition where information, including extended family genealogies, is disseminated by word of mouth. Wendt (1989) explains “the individual ... was inseparable from the (family) *aiga*/village/tribe, which were inseparable from ... the universe” (cited in Ioka, 1995, p. 14).

Samoa has a Westminster system of government. In 1991, universal suffrage allowed anyone over 21 to vote. However, only the *matai* can stand as prospective Members of Parliament. There are 49 seats in the legislative assembly, with two for individual voters who represent the interest of the descendants of non-Samoans. There is a Criminal court and a Lands and Titles court, the latter catering for disputes involving customary lands and family titles. “The Constitution ... blends custom and tradition, and democratic institutions and practices” (So’o et al., 2006, p. 27). Conflicts may arise when village rules clash with the established laws of the country.

The United Nations has classified Samoa as a developing country. The nation depends heavily on remittances from its people residing abroad, overseas government loans and foreign aid. “Unemployment is on the rise, especially for young people ... [It is] difficult to measure unemployment in Samoa because a lot of excess labour is absorbed by the subsistence sector” (So’o et al., 2006, p. 29).

Children begin primary school at age five before moving on to secondary school at

about twelve years of age. Parents choose from government, denominational, or private schools, with the choice depending on location, religion, family tradition, examination results, and the quality of teaching or financial resources available. Many students attend the foundation year at the National University of Samoa if they are successful at the Pacific Secondary School Certificate (PSSC) examination. At the end of their foundation year, some students may go on to attend universities in New Zealand, Australia, Fiji, or in a few cases, the United States of America, China, or Japan. This is part of the aid packages by way of scholarships given to the country by donors for the improvement of Samoa's human resources in the hope that the successful graduates will make a positive contribution to their country.

There are problems, however, in academic achievement. The four types of assessment used are the Samoa Primary Educational Literacy Level (SPELL) tests at Years 4 and 6, the National Examinations at the end of Year 8, the Samoa School Certificate at the end of Year 12, and the regional Pacific Senior Secondary Certificate (PSSC) examination in Year 13 (So'o et al., 2006). The PSSC is administered by the South Pacific Board of Educational Assessment, located in Fiji. The results of these examinations have been reviewed in the Samoa National Human Development Report (So'o et al., 2006). In the last five years, examination results in the SPELL tests as well as the Year 8 and Year 12 exams have declined. The quality of teaching, inadequate teaching resources and minimal support for teachers are related and may be causal factors. The quality of assessment in terms of validity and reliability may be other important factors. There is clearly a need to obtain the best answers to these questions through research and policy. (p. 83)

The following tables shows statistics relate to these declining results. The figures indicate the percentages of students who are considered to be at risk.

**Table 1: SPELL One Test, English language results**

| <b>Year</b> | <b>Boys at Risk</b> | <b>Girls at Risk</b> |
|-------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| 2000        | 29%                 | 17%                  |
| 2001        | 18%                 | 11%                  |
| 2002        | 55%                 | 41%                  |
| 2003        | 61%                 | 41%                  |
| 2004        | 19%                 | 8%                   |
| 2005        | 19%                 | 7%                   |

**Table 2: SPELL One Test, Samoan language results**

| <b>Year</b> | <b>Boys at Risk</b> | <b>Girls at Risk</b> |
|-------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| 2000        | 40%                 | 26%                  |
| 2001        | 26%                 | 15%                  |
| 2002        | 40%                 | 23%                  |
| 2003        | 39%                 | 20%                  |
| 2004        | 39%                 | 19%                  |
| 2005        | 33%                 | 13%                  |

The SPELL One test is administered to Year 4 students in all Government schools. The test is optional for non-Government schools, but many choose to participate (Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture, 2004a, Part 2, p. 3).

The next set of tables shows comparable results for the SPELL Two test administered in Year 6, and the SSC test administered in Year 12.

**Table 3: SPELL Two Test, English Language Results**

| Year | Boys at Risk | Girls at Risk |
|------|--------------|---------------|
| 2000 | 51%          | 35%           |
| 2001 | 60%          | 36%           |
| 2002 | 63%          | 38%           |
| 2003 | 68%          | 42%           |
| 2004 | 69%          | 44%           |
| 2005 | 69%          | 45%           |

**Table 4: SPELL Two Test, Samoan Language Results**

| Year | Boys at Risk | Girls at Risk |
|------|--------------|---------------|
| 2000 | 24%          | 11%           |
| 2001 | 23%          | 10%           |
| 2002 | 27%          | 11%           |
| 2003 | 24%          | 7%            |
| 2004 | 17%          | 12%           |
| 2005 | 18%          | 7%            |

**Table 5: Year 12 SSC Test, English Language Results**

| Year | Students at Risk |
|------|------------------|
| 2000 | 31%              |
| 2001 | 35%              |
| 2002 | 31%              |
| 2003 | 33%              |
| 2004 | 35%              |
| 2005 | 37%              |

(Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture, Education Statistical Digest, 2004a, Part 2, p. 4).

It is clear from these statistics that there are problems requiring urgent attention with literacy in school children. Afamasaga (So'o et al., 2006) suggests that while teachers and teaching are central to the quality of any education system, there has been a gross shortage of teachers in school. This could be one of the reasons why students are not getting the attention that they require.

One of the courses offered at the National University of Samoa, is a course entitled *Children's and Young Adults' Literature*. The main purpose of this course is to introduce students to books designed for children and young adults to encourage them to begin reading at an early age and to continue reading throughout their lives.

Approximately 90% of my students are teachers. They range in age and study either full-time or part-time. During discussions regarding problems with reading, they stated that there are many problems, not least of which is that there is a lack of reading material, especially in government schools; some teachers still write on large sheets of paper from which the class reads. In addition, owing to class size, it is impossible to facilitate individual daily reading.

Parents, families, and communities are very proud of their students when they achieve academically, but the students do not have enough support when they go home, in the form of time for additional reading or studying, for example. Additionally, financial constraints and parental attitudes factor prominently in reading skills acquisition. For example, parents do not read to children, as there are no books in the home due to lack of financial resources; cultural obligations often take priority over books. Furthermore, parents feel that it is the responsibility of the teacher to teach reading. Parents do not read because their parents did not read to them, and parents do not see reading as necessary for future employment.

Other contributing factors to the reading problem are that some students do not acquire necessary reading skills because of poor attendance, and pastors' schools do not offer additional reading as done in the past. During other research I conducted recently (Alexander-Pouono, 2005), some of the significant findings were there are few fluent English speakers in the household to assist with reading homework; girls are better readers than boys; there is little time to complete academic assignments due to the number of chores children have to do, those students found reading are often sent to perform extra chores (if you have time to read, you have time to work).

According to Baker (2001),

*literacy is regarded as a central foundation for personal and national development . . . to cultivate values, norms of behaviour and morals, . . . develop powers of thinking and reasoning, enculturate, emancipate and empower, . . . develop critical awareness, . . . be central to academic success . . . [and is] regarded as a major key to self-advancement as well as community group and individual empowerment. (pp. 319-320)*

Heath (1980, cited in Baker, 2001) believes that literacy is necessary for survival, learning, citizenship, personal relationships, personal pleasure and creativity, employment, community development and political empowerment. Wells and Chang-Wells (1992) suggest that "literacy is needed to empower the mind. . . . [R]educing illiteracy is regarded as a key priority in UNESCO's aims, irrespective of *country, continent, culture or caste*" (cited in Baker, 2001, p. 321).

Literacy means different things to different people. First, the functional skills definition of literacy as used by UNESCO defines a literate person as one who:

*has acquired the essential knowledge and skills which enable him to engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning in his group and community and whose attainments in reading, writing and arithmetic make it possible for him to continue*

*to use these skills toward his own and his community's developments.  
(Oxenham, 1980, p. 87 in Baker, 2001, p. 322)*

The second meaning concerns the construction of meaning itself. Hudelson (1994) defines reading as:

*a language process in which an individual constructs meaning through a transaction with written text that has been created by symbols that represent language. The transaction involves the reader's acting upon or interpreting the text, and the interpretation is influenced by the reader's past experiences, language background, and cultural framework, as well as the reader's purpose for reading.  
(p. 130, cited in Baker, 2001, p. 322)*

The third definition offered by Wells and Chang-Wells (1992, p.147) is that “to be literate is to have the disposition to engage appropriately with texts of different types in order to empower action, thinking, and feeling in the context of purposeful social activity” (cited in Baker, 2001, p. 322). Further to these definitions, each culture may have its own use or purpose for literacy. For example, some may use literacy for:

*promoting abstract thought, rationality, critical thinking, balanced and detached awareness, empathy and sensitivity; while for other cultures, literacy is about memorization, transmission of life stories revealing their heritage, values and morality... for the transmission of rules of religious and moral behaviour. (Baker, 2001, p. 322)*

This explanation is of particular relevance to Samoa because in traditional ceremonies a family's genealogy is always memorized and recited in classic oratory language. “The concept of literacy is therefore . . . relative to a culture and creed” (Baker, 2001, p. 322).

The skills approach to literacy is exemplified by UNESCO's definition of functional literacy that gives the impression that literacy is merely reading and writing. Reading is described as:

*the ability to decode symbols ... sounds ... meaning from those sounds. Reading is about saying words on a page. Writing is about being able to spell correctly and write in correct grammatical sentences. In both reading and writing, a literate person is able to understand and comprehend the printed word. (Baker, 2001, p. 323)*

Since literacy is classified as a technical skill, included in the skills are vocabulary, grammar and composition, as well as letters, phonics and standard English. Baker (2001) also believes that functional literacy is viewed as “accepting the status quo, understanding and maintaining one's place in society, and being a faithful, contented citizen” (p. 323). It involves being able to read labels and find numbers in a telephone directory. However, filling in forms and following written instructions will require much more than functional literacy (Baker, 2001).

In contrast with the skills approach, the whole language approach “emphasizes learning to read and write naturally, for a purpose, for meaningful communication and for inherent pleasure” (Whitmore and Crowell, 1994, cited in Baker, 2001, p. 324). Furthermore, the whole language approach supports a holistic and integrated learning of reading, writing, spelling and oracy. “The language used must have relevance and meaning” (Baker, 2001, p. 324). Baker stresses that stories should be relevant to a child’s experience. Events should be real and natural and instruction should be “intellectually stimulating, personally relevant and enjoyable for the learner” (p. 324).

From my experience in Samoa, this is of profound significance since many students may not use common terms as practised in other parts of the world. As an example, two years ago one of the class assignments for a Business English class was to write a paragraph on “How to make a pot of tea.” One student advised using 17 teabags and 7 large spoons of sugar, and “boiling the pot on the fire.” When corrections were being made and I expressed my surprise to the class, they explained that a “pot” was a large aluminium kettle and that preparing tea was for about 15 – 20 members of the extended family. I then understood the difference, but I also showed them a teapot for two and gave instructions using an electric kettle. That demonstrated that it was a learning experience for both tutor and students alike, and that an individual’s experience allowed them to see the same problem in a slightly different way.

Two other forms of literacy that appear to be relevant are the *Construction of Meaning Approach* and the *Sociocultural Literacy Approach*. The former is a constructivist approach where readers are allowed to bring their own definitions to the relevant text. “Reading and writing is essentially a construction and reconstruction of meaning (Baker, 2001, p. 326). This approach follows Vygotsky’s views where teachers can continue the learning process by assisting youngsters to construct meaning from a text, and by challenging and extending the individual’s present state of development (Vygotsky, 1962 cited in Baker, 2001).

The sociocultural aspect of literacy, termed enculturation, is the type of literacy which allows for the construction of correct cultural meaning while reading, as well as the discovery of one’s cultural heritage (Baker, 2001). In addition, “the social and cultural context of literacy raises the importance of literacy in the mother tongue” (Baker, 2001, p. 329).

How can all of this information help with the final and most important part of this task, which is to show how literacy can be improved in the *fale*? It will require an ongoing effort by all concerned. For planning and promoting literacy in the *fale* of excellence, I would first recommend that a national task force be appointed by the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture (MESC) comprising a ministry co-ordinator, National University of Samoa and University of the South Pacific reading specialists, media representatives, representatives of relevant non-governmental organizations, interest groups, service organizations (for example, Lions, Soroptimists, Rotary Clubs), librarians, church representatives, designated representatives of relevant government departments, denominational and private schools, curriculum experts (especially those with reading backgrounds), representatives of the various High Commissions here in Samoa, UNESCO and UNDP delegates, funding agencies, school inspectors, principals



of primary and secondary schools, teachers, parents and representative members of the various districts. The Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture should be the administrators. At the village level would be the chiefs, members of the women's committees, as well as the church leaders. However, the real players would be the ones who live in the *fale*, while the centre of instruction would be in the home itself using whatever is found there: books, newspapers, crayons and other items.

The initial plan should be short term, until a more sustainable one can be agreed upon. This means that action can begin now. For example, each family can introduce nightly story time sessions, where traditional tales, myths and legends can be told by the matriarchs/patriarchs of the respective families. Children may also want to give their own version of a story, especially if chants are involved. Another activity could be several weekly reading sessions at a time convenient to the family. This could be just before or after dinnertime, or even on weekends when a longer period of time can be utilized.

Writing activities could be introduced using stimulus material from the family's surroundings. The shape of a house, materials used for building, timber, leaves, cemented areas, stones, furniture, individual rooms, decorations, description of a kitchen using words in both English and Samoan. Descriptions of the family can also be discussed, drawn, and then written.

Additionally, children and adults alike should be encouraged to share problems in informal settings using role play and code switching. There can also be liaison sessions with the respective schools to ensure that the program is being followed. Any language spoken should be correct. Written work can be corrected later.

Newspaper companies can be encouraged to deliver newspapers daily to villages, or some business house or individuals can provide them as part of their service to the community. Adults can read the newspapers aloud to children and then discuss the relevant issues. This would encourage children to think, share ideas, and stimulate their imaginations. Theme weeks can be introduced where families engage in literacy activities based on significant events such as Christmas, Easter, Children's Sunday, Mothers' and Fathers' Days, Teuila Week, World Food Day, World AIDS Day, or other school-based activities.

Families can be encouraged to have learning/homework centers in their families and villages; extended family members who are suitably qualified can assist their relatives with their schoolwork. Families can build up their *fale* libraries, and exchange with their neighbors. I have not recommended computer centers as yet, because that is an additional cost - equipment, (hardware/software), electricity expenses, and maintenance, which some villages could ill afford. Every attempt should be made to assist members of the household, as some need basic survival skills, and peer reading should be encouraged at all levels. Further ideas for improving literacy are the introduction of village libraries; creative writing at all levels; careful attention to grammar – written and spoken; pastors' schools in villages; introduction of local theatre instead of hip hop competitions; spelling bees; word games and friendly early language programs either on radio or television for ages six to eight. All programs should be closely monitored by the respective lead tutors to ensure sustainability of the *fale* literacy program. Given these initiatives and

realistic goals and time frames for their implementation it is possible that the problem of declining literacy rates can be successfully addressed.

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