The Cohort Program in American Sāmoa: A Teacher's Perspective

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Introduction

A paradigm shift is occurring in the approach to teaching in the education system of American Sāmoa. This shift can be characterized as the movement from a traditional, teacher-centered approach to a constructivist, student-centered approach. One factor that has contributed to this shift arises from the training of teachers through the University of Hawai'i cohort program. Peggy Haleck describes this field-based teacher education program in some detail in her article on Pacific partnerships. My article will focus on the impact that the cohort program has had in American Sāmoa's elementary schools. While discussing the impact of the program I draw upon the discussions that I have had with teachers, administrators, and others who are most closely connected with the program.

The University of Hawai'i cohort program in American Sāmoa is a preparation program for the training of elementary school teachers. The program offers a bachelor's degree (BEd) in elementary education as well as dual certificates in either early childhood education or special education. The program provides the coursework necessary for in-service teachers who have completed their first two years of undergraduate coursework to complete the bachelor of education degree and obtain initial teacher certification. The College of Education at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa has been offering this degree route to American Sāmoa's teachers since 1979. It is the only program that currently offers the BEd degree locally. In the past, students took courses in a more piecemeal fashion. However the cohort program, as the name suggests, represents a rethinking of the BEd degree—one that has adopted a more field-based and collaborative approach in which students are organized into groups.

The first cohort started in 1997. Each year new cohorts are added so that there are now five cohorts of students enrolled in the program. A cohort is a group of approximately twenty teachers who take all their core coursework together. Their class schedules are predetermined and are taken mostly on the local campus of the American Sāmoa Community College. Classes run in the evenings to accommodate the work schedules of in-service teachers who are all employed by various local and private schools on the island. A new cohort is launched every semester.

In this article, I propose to discuss the impact that the University of Hawai'i cohort program has on teachers and their practice. I will also look at the contributions that the program and its graduates have made to their schools and

to their communities. My aim is to explain the important impact that the cohort program has had in improving the quality of education for the children of American Sāmoa.

During the 2005 annual summer laboratory school session, held locally in American Sāmoa, American Sāmoa cohort students meet for class sessions and fieldwork. During this time I conducted several interviews with cohort teachers, cohort instructors, school administrators, parents, and community leaders. These interviews provided me with insights into the different perspectives of each type of participant. Thus, this article offers a description drawn from several perspectives on the impact of the University of Hawai'i cohort program on classroom instruction, on the schools, and on the community in American Sāmoa.

The Impact on Classroom Instruction

Classroom Environment

I propose to begin my discussion in this section with a consideration of changes in classroom arrangement. The program has promoted a noticeable shift in teachers' views about how classrooms can be arranged. It has encouraged cohort teachers to take a fresh look at the classroom as a vivid and colorful gateway to student learning. Rooms are no longer arranged in straight rows of desks aimed at keeping students sitting in orderly columns facing the teacher. Traditional classrooms have now given way to more flexible groupings that make a wide range of cooperative and group activities possible. The rearrangement of desks has also left room for enrichment areas such as library centers, game centers, learning centers, listening centers, technology centers, and research centers. This new approach has also given cohort teachers opportunities to create a more robust learning environment that provides richer student learning experiences and encourages student engagement in multimodal tasks. Many cohort teachers commented on how much this has impacted their teaching. Their rooms are more colorful and inviting, and they have noticed a change in students' attitudes. Bulletin boards have had a face-lift.

Traditional bulletin boards were divided by content area and were used primarily to display key terms and a few illustrations that pertained, for example, to a chapter of study. Items in content areas sections had little to do with each other and usually had been created by the teacher without any student input. Recently there has been a shift to create integrated bulletin boards that help teachers make connections across the curriculum. Teachers are now beginning to create larger-than-life bulletin boards that make use of integrated curriculum themes that help interweave essential understandings of a unit of study. These boards are also used interactively within lessons to help give children some input into the content and manner of each display. Cohort teachers are beginning to appreciate how the design of bulletin boards helps them organize information for learning and enables students to make connections between content areas.

Classroom Management

Local teachers have an especially difficult challenge in dealing with overcrowded classrooms that have to accommodate as many as forty students in each class. The average teacher-student ratio in the public schools is approximately 28 to 1 in highly populated areas. In addition to dealing with the challenges of overcrowding, teachers have been discouraged in the use of various negative forms of punishment and have been encouraged to adopt more positive interactions with students. This has brought about a steady decline in the use of corporal punishment and more focus on the use of positive reinforcement. As a result classroom management has become an important topic of conversation among Samoan teachers. Cohort students report that the use of more positive methods of classrooms management has brought about a real change in how they interact with their students. It makes a difference in how well students respond, and it adds to a more positive climate in the classroom. Teachers are more likely to involve the students by creating a positive classroom climate. As one teacher stated: "I used to put up all the rules in my classroom but now I plan and discuss my classroom rules and expectations with my students." *Lisa Sauafea-Liufau, Teacher in Aua Elementary*

Lesson Planning

Throughout their period of study in the cohort program, each cohort teacher is required to have written and implemented four or five thematic unit plans integrating different content areas. Each unit plan is designed to give the teachers opportunities to expand their own content knowledge and practice in planning from an integrated and thematic perspective. When cohort teachers implement these units they become special highlights of their cohort experience. They start with an introductory lesson that helps set the expectations of the learning outcomes. Throughout the unit there is typically a project that students begin to put together and each lesson connects important learning concepts and skills that are needed to complete the project. These projects often rely on using community resources such as guest speakers and fieldtrips. At the end of the unit, which normally spans ten days, the teacher plans a culminating event that allows the administrator, teacher, students, and parents to celebrate the students' accomplishments. During their 16-week student teaching, cohort teachers create a fully integrated unit for their 4-week solo teaching period.

Several different models of lesson planning are now in use by cohort teachers. These approaches provide flexibility in planning structures and designs. The Understanding by Design (Wiggins and McTighe, 2005) lesson plan and Orlich (2000) lesson plan are examples of some of the designs that are currently in use with cohort graduates. This variety allows teachers to take a broader perspective of the integral

parts of the lesson plan, and it allows them to make connections throughout the planning stage. Cohort teachers have commented that they have gained a better understanding of how to plan lessons that focus on the learner and that keep students engaged in meaningful tasks. They also report that the process of lesson planning helps them identify specific target concepts and skills that they want students to learn. One teacher wrote, "I have learned a lot of useful strategies that can be implemented in different content areas that I haven't used before, especially in helping with students writing composition." Another teacher wrote that the guided questions that they used in their lesson plans "helps students to build their prior knowledge, and I am able to make them think more critically."

Learning how to plan lessons and integrated units is an important part of any teacher education program. Lesson planning demands a sound base in content knowledge and skill, and in translating content knowledge into classroom actions—actions that are fitted to the ability levels of the students. One of the important areas of emphasis of the cohort program is that it teaches teachers to plan from a solid content base. It offers practice in developing lessons that play a critical role in creating richer discourse in the classroom.

Reflection

Reflection is now considered an important part of professional practice, not just in teaching but also in professional life in general. During their time in the cohort program teachers are asked to keep a reflection journal of their weekly teaching moments and their interactions with students. These reflections offer an excellent opportunity for them to record their professional growth and to evaluate their performance in the classroom. Cohort teachers frequently comment on how valuable it is for them to reflect on the new experiences and strategies that they are implementing in the classroom. They have found that it is a way to make critical decisions in their work and determine which strategies are effective in their local setting. Reflection, moreover, is an important tool in better understanding how students learn.

Instructional Practices

Traditional teaching as it is practiced in American Sāmoa views the role of the teacher as a giver of knowledge. Instruction is teacher-centered. It involves lectures from the teacher and demands little more than silent seatwork from students. The traditional classroom is often a quiet place of learning where students rarely interact with their peers and depend on the teacher or the textbook for information. Today's cohort classrooms are a contrast to this traditional way of teaching. Cohort teachers view their role in the classroom quite differently: " I have learned to be more patient in my teaching. I have always thought that I should do all the talking in the classroom but now I know that that is not always true." They are more likely to adopt the role of facilitator or coach; and, at times, as learners, students, and audience. Cohort teachers are encouraged to keep students actively engaged with hands-on learning tasks, group-oriented projects, lessons that utilize a variety of learning modalities, and activities that require students to use critical thinking skills. Many of the classrooms that I have visited are active learning places that are bustling with lively discussions and student interactions.

Changes in Affect

One of the most conspicuous affective changes of the cohort program has been on the attitudes of cohort teachers. Two important comments on the program from teachers allude to an increase in their level of confidence in their teaching and in their sense of commitment to the profession. Cohort teachers, when they start out in the program, often betray a lack of confidence as in-service teachers and as college students. In contrast, these same teachers take away from the program a greater sense of confidence and pride in knowing that the program has equipped them with the necessary skill and understanding of how to grow professionally as a teacher.

The Impact on the Community

Parental Involvement

One of the major goals of the cohort teachers is to get parents involved in their child's education. Parental involvement projects take many forms. They require a special effort from each teacher. The projects range from sending out weekly newsletters to informing parents of their child's progress. Cohort teachers also create joint venture projects, which they organize with parents and their children. Facilitating parental involvement can be one of the most rewarding experiences that cohort teachers undertake. It allows them to establish meaningful relationships with students and parents. Parents often comment on how much they value the time and effort that teachers put into these projects. They also comment positively on how the cohort program has made them appreciate the value of their child's education. One parent made the following observation at an open house at a cohort summer laboratory school:

> I really see a difference in my child's enthusiasm to come to school. Even though this is summer school, I have found that he talks about all that he has learned and the school activities more with me, and he was so proud to share his creations with me. I am really thankful for the cohort program. It really helps raise the quality of our local teachers.

Community Projects

Community projects are an important means of teaching children the value of community service. Community service projects that children and their cohort teachers conduct are often connected directly to the curriculum. Cohort teachers

are encouraged to integrate community service into their projects. They provide opportunities for using community resources for educational ends and are viewed as a way of giving back to the community. For example, in the spring of 2005 a cohort student arranged for his students to visit the local nursing home for children with disabilities. His students brought the children baskets of gifts. They also spent hours reading and visiting with them. The teacher later commented:

> The kids really enjoyed making a difference and visiting with the children in the home. One of my students told me that she never understood how hard it was to live with a disability, and she is grateful for the opportunity she had to read to them and enjoy their company.

Grant Writing

Cohort students have also been involved in writing grant applications for federal and local funding. The grant writing began as part of an assignment during their last semester of student teaching. As a result of their success in this work, several students have received funding and carried out their projects in the schools. Two graduates of the cohort program recently arranged a summer digital arts program for local students interested in technology. This program was a great success. It taught students how to create I-Movies that helped disseminate useful information on community issues. During the culminating presentation of their videos, students invited parents and community leaders to a viewing in which they were able to participate in a celebration of the students' accomplishments. As a result of the success of this project, the cohort students plan to continue it on an annual basis.

The Impact on Schools

Collaboration

The cohort program's success at the school level depends to an important degree on collaboration among university faculty, school administrators, and cohort students. For this reason special attention is given to the cohort teachers' role in developing a special relationship with schools—one that emphasizes participation in school-wide activities and functions. Thus, cohort teachers are expected to exhibit a high degree of professionalism in their teaching duties and act as teacher leaders in working with the community.

These relationships often mature and provide an opening for cohort students and graduates to develop special responsibilities in their school—for example, to act as mentors of new teachers, presenters in staff development workshops, and potential school administrators.

Mentoring

The role of mentor in working with novice teachers in the local schools is critical in helping new teachers cope with the struggles of lesson planning, classroom management, and curriculum. The relationship offers enriched opportunities for learning and practicing new teaching ideas and pedagogy. Mentors also serve as role models for other teachers. They make a direct impact when they serve on school committees and work as cooperating teachers.

Mentors take responsibility for helping the administration with day-to-day tasks such as providing instructional support to groups of teachers—usually in the same grade level. These groups depend on the mentors to offer guidance in the pacing of the curriculum, planning special highlights in a unit of study, and co-planning lessons. Mentors meet with teachers on a regular basis to discuss instructional activities.

Staff Development

All of the public schools in American Sāmoa require veteran teachers to help facilitate staff development. Staff developers are consulted early in the year to decide on topics and content areas in which to concentrate their developmental efforts. Each content area committee is then given a specific month in the year to plan activities that support a chosen theme. Cohort students and graduates of the program are increasingly filling these roles and helping to facilitate workshops, presentations, and seminars at the school level. At the island-wide level they have been involved in leading teacher orientation workshops, pre-service teacher training, content area seminars, curriculum development workshops, and many more activities. Cohort teachers report that the cohort program has given them experience in presenting in front of their peers. In addition, they feel that they have learned many useful ideas and strategies that they are eager to share with other teachers.

Conclusion

The impact of the University of Hawai'i cohort program on the teachers, schools, and American Samoan community is evident in the testimony of cohort graduates and other professionals who work with them. The program's aim of producing quality teachers who can act as role models—teachers who are reflective practitioners committed to making a difference in the lives of their students and contributing to the American Samoan community—is evident in their responses to my questions. The cohort program, now in its 7th year of operation, looks to build on its partnership with the American Sāmoa Department of Education to help meet the demand for qualified teachers for American Sāmoa's schools.

References

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