

An Investigation of Samoan Student Experiences in Two Homework Study Groups in Melbourne

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Abstract

This research examines Samoan student experiences in two Homework Study Groups (HSGs) in Melbourne using a researcher-practitioner approach. It highlights that school teachers need to acknowledge students' preferred learning methods, especially those of minority backgrounds like the Samoan participants in this investigation. A detailed exploration of the experiences of students in two HSGs finds that while students and their families place a high priority on learning, their cultural practices are not compatible with standard Western learning approaches. The HSGs provided a social space in which students could ask the teacher questions without fear of appearing foolish, in which they could apply themselves to study. It provided a physical study space away from the demands some Samoan families place on their young people, and it provided a cultural space in which the students could learn according to *fa'aSamoa* (traditional values and beliefs). This research makes a contribution to an understanding of the motivations of Melbourne-based Samoan students to learn, of what concerns them, and of impediments to their educational success. It also offers insight into the benefits that set up a specific space for students' offers, when its specific intent is influencing the merging of Samoan and Western ideas to further learning.

Keywords

Samoan student learning experiences, homework study groups, Pacific community engagement

This paper aims to contribute to knowledge by informing educators in secondary schools of the learning experiences and extra-curricular activities that Samoan participants have shared in Homework Study Groups (HSGs) established in the northern and western suburbs of Melbourne. It is an attempt to inform schools and stakeholders alike (including tertiary providers) that existing educational programs are deficient in catering to the needs of Samoan students as learners. This impacts on the opportunities for these students to continue their education and prevents access to higher education for many. It is important that their experiences are shared to enlighten educators that, not only in the secondary setting, but more importantly,

in tertiary sectors, there are certain barriers preventing Samoan students from accessing opportunities in higher education.

The main research in this field is conducted by New Zealanders (Anderson 2007; Atatoa cited in Strachan 2006; Cahill 2006; Mulitalo-Lauata 2000; Nakhid 2003; Wendt-Samu 2006) who report on low academic achievement for Samoan youth and the factors which contribute to this. Studies in Queensland,

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Australia also highlight educational and cultural barriers experienced by Samoan students attending schools with a high population of students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Dooley, Exley, and Singh 2000; Singh 2001; Singh and Sinclair 2001). Against this background of literature that highlights the failing of Samoan students, the author's research focused on the enabling educational experiences of a group of Samoan students. The question for educators in Victorian schools is: What is being done for *Pasifika* (Pacific) Samoan students to maximize their success in education? The broad aims of this project were to explore learning strategies and experiences of Samoan secondary school students, with an emphasis on highlighting the learning approaches and strategies that enable them to experience successful educational outcomes. The key questions are:

- (1) What learning strategies are associated with positive academic outcomes for this cohort?
- (2) What factors influence effective learning for Samoan young people generally?
- (3) What difference did the set-up of Homework Study Groups make to the learning of participants in this study?

The approach and findings discussed in the following pages have emerged out of research undertaken for a doctoral thesis, which aims to make a contribution to understanding of strategies supporting Samoan student learning in Australian schools. First, the education policy context and limitations are outlined, followed by an overview of the project approach, methodology, and findings. Drawing on participant responses, the discussion seeks to contribute new knowledge about the use of supplementary educational experiences through teaching and learning practices which keep students engaged whilst undertaking academic tasks.

EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA

A review of relevant literature exposes the extent to

which Samoan young peoples' positive achievement patterns and qualitative responses to learning and teaching encountered in Victorian schools, whether at primary, secondary, or tertiary level, have been overlooked (Mulitalo-Lauta 2000; Ofahengaue Vakalahi and Godinet 2008).

This dearth of attention to their learning needs is, in large part, due to the policy structures of education in Australian schools. Regulation and funding of government and non-government schools in Australia are partially provided by the various states and territory governments, with the intention that all students receive equitable access to education. The federal government has provided a national curriculum (The Australian Curriculum) as a guide for all schools to follow. In Victorian schools, a revised curriculum is currently being phased in. Though the Commonwealth of Australia has the power to fund the six states and two territory governments to assist with the implementation of funded programs, it does not have the power to control the implementation or delivery of these education policies (Barrett 2014).

As a general approach, the current curriculum does not provide adequate opportunities for engaging a diversity of learners. Significant reports have been published over the years outlining the need for schools to ensure that student learning is maximized and barriers to it are removed so that all students are successful learners. For example, Barrett (2014) highlighted two major reports: "*Schools in Australia* (Australian Schools Commission and Karmel 1973) and *Review of Funding for Schooling—Final Report* (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations and Gonski et al. 2011) which reveal the need for obstacles to learning that are wrought by difference, disability, and disadvantage" (Barrett 2014: 28) to be removed.

EDUCATION IN VICTORIA

All schools in Victoria are guided by The Australian

Curriculum but still incorporate aspects of the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS). These standards outline what students will learn and the educational development level they should be achieving at each year level.

The standards are focused on learning for understanding and developing students who can apply their knowledge beyond the classroom to new and different situations. The assessment principles that will accompany the standards are also designed to reflect how students actually learn and to support teachers to measure student progress against the standards (The Department of Education & Training 2005: 3).

These standards demand that curriculum will be designed to incorporate both the prior knowledge students bring to educational settings and new knowledge, according to The Australian Curriculum and VELS, otherwise known in Victorian schools as AusVELS. Teachers currently design curriculum, selected from The Australian Curriculum and VELS, in collaboration with their school's leadership team which consists of Principal, Assistant Principals, and Leading Teachers. It is a collective effort to ensure that all expectations are met according to AusVELS, Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL-teaching standards), and department guidelines. They are expected to select resources that will maximize the engagement of learners so that students are equipped to transfer those skills to other subjects (cross curriculum).

Students in Victorian schools have the option of either pursuing high school education through the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) pathway, with the option of pursuing university studies once completed, or completing high school through the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) pathway. The latter program enables students to select units or subjects covering foundational studies in specific industries or trades.

PEDAGOGY—INCORPORATING STUDENT BACKGROUNDS

The learning styles and educational outcomes of Samoan (and *Pasifika*) young people have become a focus because of their legacy of poor academic outcomes and the struggles of many living between traditional Samoan values and beliefs and Western educational practices and ideologies (Penn 2010; Wendt-Samu 2006). Despite the high value that Samoan families place on educational achievement, many Samoan students experience low levels of academic success in Australian schools (Singh and Sinclair 2001; Kearney, Fletcher, and Dobrenov-Major 2008). As reported in the findings of Kearney et al. (2008: 5), “a significant cohort of Samoan students is at risk of not meeting nationally agreed benchmarks for literacy as these students progress through school”.

There is emerging support in the literature for educational research that is designed to contribute to an understanding of the practices that assist Samoan students to achieve better educational outcomes, and acknowledges where young Samoans are at (Wendt-Samu 2006; Kearney et al. 2008; Singh and Sinclair 2001). This paper is written in response to approaches that attribute blame to students because of assumed lack of interest or enthusiasm at school. It seeks to raise awareness of the point that unless educators understand where students are coming from (their lived experiences and cultural practices), effective learning is unlikely to take place (Allen, Taleni, and Robertson 2008). This is particularly the case with regard to *Pasifika* and Māori students who report that they appreciate the importance of teachers relating to them and understanding their perspectives and backgrounds.

This research is significant because it acknowledges that in order for teachers to be effective in making a difference to the education of Māori and *Pasifika* students, they need to be aware of their

preconceived ideas about these students. Rather than focussing on notions of deficit, which views these students as “at risk” and sets low expectations and poor learning outcomes for them, a strengths-based approach is more productive. As Allen et al. (2008) found, the adoption of a “critical awareness and understanding of their own culture as well as that of their students by teachers made a difference” (Allen et al. 2008: 3). Immersing teachers in a cultural setting from which the majority of their Pacific Island students came (in this case, Samoa), enabled teachers to empathize with their students and to utilize their experiences of that other culture to create relevant curricula to which students could relate. Not only would teachers build rapport with students as a result of their understanding of the cultural context in which their students are socialized, but teachers would also be able to utilize student prior knowledge and experiences to engage them in the classroom, demonstrating “a high level of sensitivity to the needs of their children” (Allen et al. 2008: 7). Students were empowered as teachers made more effort to ensure lessons included topics that Samoan students could discuss in front of their peers. This is not to say that all schools should pay for staff to attend field trips to gather data or become experts in Pacific Island values and beliefs; there are communities within Australia where such information or experiences can be sought or observed.

Importantly, The Australian Curriculum has a unit of study called “Polynesia” which schools, if they choose to, can incorporate in their curriculum as part of Humanities study (Year 8). In Victorian schools, as both the AusVELS are followed, teachers are guided by the Progression Points and descriptors for units of work. In assessing students in the Polynesia unit, teachers use their professional judgment to determine whether students have shown evidence of reaching the required level of achievement. Appendix A is an example of descriptors used by teachers to plan curriculum and assess students according to whether

outcomes have been met for the History unit of study at Level 8. What this outlines is the type of skills students are taught when learning different history topics (whether it is about the spread of Christianity, the spread of Islam, or the migration experiences of Polynesians, for example).

As mentioned earlier, unless schools specifically choose to incorporate the study of Polynesia in their Humanities curriculum, it is not taught. What needs to be investigated is whether teachers feel adequately equipped to teach this as a unit to students, as well as how the *Pasifika* community can work with schools to utilize the expert knowledge that many have, especially regarding language, customs, protocols, and performances, for instance. The unit of study described in Appendix A provides a perfect opportunity for teachers to incorporate student cultures into the learning environment, especially considering the need for Samoan students to feel as though they belong and can contribute to the classroom.

QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY

The methodology selected for this study is qualitative in order to provide the depth and detail of data that enables analysis of the complex processes that contribute to improved school performance. When considering how answers to the research question were to be collected, the interview process was selected due to the fact that it was a personalized approach. The author was aware of cultural protocols and knew which community groups to approach during the recruitment process. The author also took into consideration the research findings of other academics with similar participants. Mila-Schaaf (2010) wrote of the benefits in collaborating with participants and being guided by their responses, rather than following a researcher-driven agenda.

This approach was “participative” in the sense that the themes and focus of further data exploration and follow-up qualitative work were investigated by

participants, as opposed to being generated from the literature or being investigator driven (Onwuegbuzie and Teddlie 2003: 351). The decision to take this “participative” approach to the research was driven in part by the author’s own awareness as an insider researcher, cognisant of very high stakes, that there was a danger and risk in an entirely investigator-driven agenda (Mila-Schaaf 2010: 49).

Awareness of cultural sensitivities, and knowledge of research findings related to Samoan students in educational settings, influenced the way the author’s recruitment process and data collection were designed. Topics for discussion and interviews were carefully selected so as to avoid creating an uncomfortable atmosphere in the study groups. These included avoiding conversations around participant family history. The focus was to elicit participant learning experiences and to see whether the space created for the HSGs made a difference to those learning experiences. The author knew potential participants in the research from networks already established in the Samoan community, but she was also aware of ethical expectations in university guidelines, so her plans to recruit would have to be shared with someone else before participants consented to take part. This involved the librarian for the northern suburb study group and a leading teacher from a college attended by participants in the western region. When participants initiated questions related to educational goals or career pathways during the study sessions, a relevant curriculum was delivered until participants were confident in pursuing their own independent search for answers. What will be explored is the occasional way in which participants would divert from educational topics when questions were posed, to topics like relationships and important life choices. Again, as insider researcher, the author was aware of the trust participants had shown in her in initiating such conversations, as they were topics not necessarily addressed or shared in their own homes.

SETTING UP THE HOMEWORK STUDY GROUPS

The participants in this study were involved in two HSGs, both in outer suburbs of Melbourne. Both study groups met on a weekly basis at a local library where a meeting room was booked so participants had a quiet and more private space to study. Table 1 summarizes their ages and background with respect to the year levels participants are in and their country of birth.

The students who participated in the study were from HSGs that the lead researcher initiated. Ethics approval was given by the University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. The college principal was approached to seeking permission to recruit more Samoan students for this study. Of the four campuses in the college, 14 students attended the weekly study sessions at first. This number declined over the weeks. A local library was contacted to book meeting rooms for participants to meet each week. Though this study group started much later than the first, the experience of doing what works from the mishaps learnt from the set-up of the first group, made things run smoothly. There were nine students who expressed interest in participating in the research about the study sessions by signing consent forms, but only five students could be interviewed due to parental consent forms not being signed as yet from other students. As outlined in Table 1, participants were recruited from high schools in the northern and western suburbs of Melbourne. Each participant approved the use of their real names in this study, which is included in the table below.

In total, nine students participated in group discussions and observations. It was mutually agreed that participants would meet at the public library; one in the northern suburbs and one outside the main college participants attended in the western suburbs. It was the ideal meeting place each week as Letofu (Tofu) later stated, it “forced them to do work” due to being in

Table 1. Student Participants

Students	Male/female	Age (yrs)	Birthplace	Year level in school
S1	Ane F (N)	17	Australia	Year 12
S2	Eloise F (N)	17	Australia	Year 12
S3	Penina F (N)	16	NZ	Year 11
S4	Letofu F (N)	14	Australia	Year 9
S5	Penelope F(N)	14	NZ	Year 9
S6	Tamara F (N)	14	Australia	Year 9
S7	Chas M (W)	17	Australia	Year 11
S8	Christen F(W)	16	Australia	Year 10
S9	Mose (W)	16	NZ	Year 11

Note: (N)—Students in the Northern Homework Study Group; (W)—Students in the Western Homework Study Group.

a study environment. Moreover, resources were available at their fingertips in the one location when participants required computers, books, or printing facilities once homework tasks commenced.

THE LITERATURE: SAMOAN STUDENT LEARNING EXPERIENCES

The literature provides valuable insights into the educational strategies that enable Samoan students to engage actively in learning and build confidence, as a first step towards addressing their academic performance. In the following discussion, the author draws on literature from New Zealand, Samoa, and the United States as well as current Australian research as a basis for understanding and comparing what has been investigated by researchers in efforts to improve Samoan student learning (Airini et al. 2010; Utumapu-McBride et al. 2008; Wendt-Samu 2006).

A critical review of the literature on Samoan student learning provides an understanding of their experiences and the strategies being utilized by teachers to assist academic improvement. At the time of writing the review of the literature, little research had been undertaken in Victoria (compared to

international research and practice) to identify strategies that could be used at a systemic level to improve academic outcomes for Samoan students. Studies have documented various factors causing the challenges experienced by Samoan students in education in New Zealand, the United States, and in Queensland, Australia. These include: feeling undervalued, being stereotyped, not fitting in, and struggling with being caught between two cultures.

Data that indicate achievement patterns of Samoan young people and that describe qualitative responses to learning and teaching encountered in Victorian schools, whether they are at primary, secondary, or tertiary level, are missing. Furthermore, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) does not distinguish the population of Samoan people Australia-wide. Finding out the precise number of Pacific Island people in Australia is difficult due to the way in which people identify themselves on the census database (Cuthill and Scull 2011). They are an under-represented migrant group who have undergone settlement challenges as reported by Cuthill and Scull (2011), including access to tertiary institutions and inadequate support in achieving educational outcomes. The details about where they live, their employment status, or their educational achievement are obscured by their being

categorized broadly as “ethnic” or “other” (Takeuchi and Hune 2008).

A STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACH

The strategies undertaken by *Pasifika* families include the use of what Mila-Schaaf coined “polycultural capital”, that is, recognizing the “ability to accumulate culturally diverse symbolic resources, negotiate between them and strategically deploy different cultural resources in contextually specific and advantageous ways” (Mila-Schaaf 2010: 2). The author’s use of these ideas is expanded on in more detail where she explores stories about “Samoanness” from the parents of the students in the HSG. These stories acknowledged the role of church and extended family support networks in maintaining cultural identity, as well as being a crucial support network, not only for Samoan migrants new to Australia, but also for families who sought comfort and familiarity in such spaces and places. Moreover, it includes students’ views of various educational, social, and cultural experiences.

STRENGTHS-BASED PEDAGOGY

The teaching strategies applied during the homework study sessions catered to the participants’ preferred learning styles. Discussions and interviews with participants indicated that they needed further demonstration and assistance with understanding texts, essay writing, and language analysis. Similar to a previous study of Samoan student learning experiences in Samoa and New Zealand (Utumapu-McBride et al. 2008), participants from the Melbourne Homework Study Groups preferred practical activities and demonstrations of how to write for an audience.

In designing the approach to undertaking research with participants, Pacific methodology was used to formulate pedagogy that enhanced learning and understanding with participants. For academics

embarking on research with Pacific people for the benefit of Pacific communities or issues, what is paramount is the need for Pacific methodologies to be adopted as well as adapted, to improve communication and rapport with prospective participants. What is acknowledged is that when one thinks of embarking on research of a Pacific nature, it is not until existing Pacific methodologies are known, that one ponders on the type of methodology best suiting one’s research practice. Since Smith’s (1999) research on the importance for the decolonization process to be more at the fore regarding research undertaken about, for and with indigenous groups, there has been a growing shift away from Eurocentric frameworks (Naepi 2015). Not only is it acknowledged that the movement enables improved understanding and communication with Pacific people and issues, it also confirms the appropriateness of Pacific methodologies selected to enhance research in general.

What is crucial in this process, is coming to an understanding of where these students are at (their world, which is in essence, intertwined with parental traditional expectations that are in conflict with Western ways). Many families and individuals (within Pacific communities) view the importance of incorporating spiritual, social, physical, economic, and cultural—*matai* (chiefly) systemic values as the sum of integrated values where one cannot exist without the other. Within these communities are structured domains that outline gendered roles and expectations; behaviours that people are encouraged to adhere to for the general good of the family or “family security” (Fairbairn-Dunlop, Nanai, and Ahio 2014: 83).

Fairbairn-Dunlop (2014: 875) reiterated the importance for educators in seeing Pacific knowledge as valid and valued, so much so as to utilize this knowledge in allowing young people to connect to other “social and educational spaces”. The author would extend this further to include the importance for researchers in seeing Pacific knowledge as valid in

and of itself, using Pacific knowledge to influence research methodology design to maximize positive outcomes. Over the last few years, Pacific academics have strived to produce valid Pacific methodologies; not only with imbedded cultural values and with beliefs in mind, but also creating designs co-authored with Pacific people to further Pacific causes within their own communities. There has been an increasing shift away from the Eurocentric ways of conducting research to a more Pacific-centred research methodology (Naepi 2015). As such, a myriad of strategies have been designed and implemented which include:

...*talanoa* (Farrelly and Nabobo-Baba 2014; Otunuku 2011; Prescott 2008; Suaalii-Sauni and Fulu-Aiolupotea 2014; Vaioleti 2006), *Ula* (Sauni 2011), *faafaletui* (Suaalii-Sauni and Fulu-Aiolupotea 2014), and the vanua framework (Nabobo-Baba 2008) in Naepi (2015: 78).

Moreover, the *teu-le-vā* paradigm (Airini et al. 2010) recognizes the special connections people have within Samoan (and Pacific) communities, whereby certain principles are adhered to in order to maintain genuine and respectful methods of communication.

FINDINGS

Observations and responses recorded during HSG sessions indicated that weekly gatherings at the library enabled participants to be themselves, to experience a sense of freedom, and thus to be empowered to express thoughts and ideas freely. As Penina mentioned:

“I think the location was very helpful. It had everything we needed. Also I liked that we had our own space to work in”.

The participants of the Northern Homework Study Group used the study sessions not only for academic purposes, but also as a time to share hopes and fears of what lay ahead. The discussions also included sharing of perceptions about what it was like for

participants to grow up in a Western country, raised with traditional Samoan values and beliefs. At times, participants would ask questions related to how certain career paths would benefit them in terms of making the right choices for their future. Letofu was able to express the benefits to her of attending the HSG which “helped me a lot to complete homework, organise myself and keep my grades up”. She took care in utilizing time effectively by reading novels and ensuring that writing tasks were completed according to the expectations of her teacher. She used the feedback the author gave her to improve the vocabulary in her essays. The work Tofu brought to homework study sessions each week demonstrated her development in writing, with the achievement of the goal she set herself—to employ a more sophisticated vocabulary—being evident.

During the focus group discussions with participants, the author asked about their intentions after they had completed high school. The two girls in Year 12 (final year of high school in Melbourne) responded that they were keen to learn about procedures and prerequisites for successfully achieving university entry. Both Eloise and Ane were enthusiastic in exploring specific courses like youth work as outlined in the observation notes below:

22 August, 2011:

Eloise and Ane researched university courses and police academy prerequisites.

22 August, 2011:

It became apparent to me that the HSG sessions were valuable in guiding participants in making lifelong choices about, for example, pursuing higher education to enter careers that would assist others. During parent interviews and discussions, I advised parents of their daughters’ desire to attend university. Though the mothers were concerned about paying university fees, I mentioned the option of deferring the payment of fees through the Higher Education Loan Program (HELP) or Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS). Parents of participants were not aware of these options for their children and had not considered university pathways because they thought it had to be fully paid for up front. Both relief and appreciation were

expressed by parents who said they would like to support their daughters in applying for university entry and that I had their approval to do all that was possible to ensure their success. Such was the benefit of the establishment of the HSG: providing guidance to participants and informing parents of options in supporting their children's future choices.

The preference for youth-related university courses expressed by Ane and Eloise derived from the girls' experience of being given counselling at different times in their school years (whether for social welfare or career pathways advice). These girls saw the value of the services provided by their schools and appreciated them, so that they wanted to pursue appropriate degrees to enable them to empower others. The ease of sharing information openly in the safety of the HSG gave participants the space to make invaluable choices that would accrue benefits not only for themselves as individuals, but also for their families, Samoan families support, and model collective efficacy, and participants felt that parents were supportive of their desire to excel merely from the fact of their permitting attendance at weekly HSG sessions.

Several HSG sessions were then dedicated to sourcing schedules for university open days so that Eloise and Ane could attend to gather course information. Applications were filled in for the Bachelor of Social Science degree for Eloise and the Youth Work degree for Ane, both at RMIT (Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology). Eloise wrote about her desire to study various courses as follows:

Bachelor of Social Science

One of the main reasons why I'd like to undertake the Bachelor of Social Science degree at RMIT is due to the subjects offered being related to the career path I am aiming for. That is, working with young people and assisting them with their educational or life skills, is something that is expected in various jobs such as the Victorian Police Force or in government organizations (Schools, Counselling Services). Studying at RMIT gives me the knowledge and skills required to work as a social worker or counsellor

because the program includes valuable work experience in organizations.

Youth Work

I am aware that there is a growing need to assist youth in areas of unemployment, education and dealing with issues pertaining to mental health to name a few. During an Open Day visit, I was inspired by the lecturer Jennifer... whose enthusiasm was contagious and it influenced me to select this program. Not only are the subjects areas of study I am keen to learn more about, but again, these will prepare me for a career path I am passionate about. I currently participate in helping young people in a Samoan youth group, provide positive educative and sports sessions every weekend and during school holidays. This has been one of programs that have inspired me to assist others in all aspects of life as much as possible.

Criminal Justice

Attending the RMIT Open Day was beneficial because it made the study path I wanted to take a lot easier to plan. It made me realize the pathway this program had to offer was something I felt I could achieve over the 3 years. Learning about the legal system and how criminal profiling assists with understanding peoples' actions, definitely assists me in my pursuit of being a Social Worker.

What emerged in the group interview with four of the participants from the northern HSG were opinions about what it is like to be a Samoan young person living in Melbourne.

What was evident from the interviews undertaken with participants at the beginning of the research period, was that they learnt best when expectations were modelled by the teacher.

As stated by Tamara:

I learn more when people talk to me and show me pictures like visual communication. I'm better at that, yeah, more like doing it like practising it. Like, I don't know, when people talk to me I learn like that, but it gets a bit boring after a while, because like, they keep on talking and talking. It feels like they're talking at me, not to me anymore.

Similarly, Penina (Nina) stated that the style of teaching utilized by her Mathematics teacher made tasks difficult to understand.

Iva (researcher): Can you tell me how you think you'll go in each subject?

N: I know in Maths I'm not really doing well.

I: Why is that?

N: I don't know, I just struggle... I don't understand what he's teaching.

I: Is it the way the teacher teaches?

N: Yeah, it's the way the teacher teaches.

I: Can you explain a bit more about that?

N: Like he will explain it, but he doesn't like, get into depth. He just explains it then expects us to like just absorb what he said and we work it out.

Chas is one of the participants in the western HSG who is a Year 11 student and was recently interviewed regarding his preferred learning styles and experiences at school. Though he is sometimes distracted during study sessions, his interview revealed that he learns better by "watching and physical activities" (doing). Chas said in Physical Education (PE), "the teacher will explain how the skill works and then later on he'll show us so I get a clear image from what he wants us to do". Similarly, when Chas stated that his favourite subject was Maths, I asked him why he found Maths a likeable subject when not many students enjoyed this subject. Interestingly, having an older brother at home to help him with difficult formulas and being available when he experienced difficulties, attributed to his enjoyment of this subject. On the other hand, Chas' classroom experience did not help with learning anything in this topic due to the teacher "having no control over the students, so students didn't take her seriously and did whatever".

From the responses gathered during the interviews and discussions that took place during study sessions, the teaching strategies the author implemented purposely catered to these preferred learning styles. Participants who felt their grades or learning improved reported that it was a result of getting one on one instruction as well as being shown samples of writing on the whiteboard and working through the problems together until they understood how to go about the task independently (see Appendix B).

IMPORTANCE OF TIME AND ORGANIZATION

One of the last surveys distributed to participants in the northern study group asked them to comment on whether they thought the HSG had made a difference to their learning and completion of homework tasks. Four of the six participants were present during the study session and were able to complete the survey (see Appendix B). Their responses outline the value they experienced from regular attendance at the HSG sessions. Not only was the library considered a perfect location for studying, it provided access to resources required for completing homework tasks (assignments, essays) that otherwise would not be available at home. For example, when asked in a survey whether the study sessions were helpful with completion of their school work, Letofu (Tofu) stated "I've definitely found study sessions helpful because I get a lot of homework done. I have access to books/computers so it's easy for me and I can focus on assignments etc. properly". Moreover, another benefit highlighted by Penina was having assistance by a qualified teacher to edit work and demonstrate tasks. "Yes, I have found the study sessions helpful. I find it helpful when I need a teacher's point of view of my work. With this help, my marks have improved".

After transcribing the first interviews undertaken with participants, a common theme that was apparent from each individual was their desire to improve organization and time management skills. Each participant agreed that they could do more to increase the amount of time they could be working on homework tasks, but needed to get away from distractions; be it friends, family members or completing household chores. Hence, participants were encouraged to write down how many hours they spent on homework tasks outside of school and the HSG. A focus group interview and observations of participant's cultural and church commitments revealed that not a lot of time was actually available for studies at home. Either time had

to be made very late at night or quite early in the morning once a sample weekly timetable had been drawn on the whiteboard. When she experienced problems with tasks, Tofu would seek individual assistance, responding well to modelled writing methods during the study sessions. In response to a question regarding her thoughts about the location selected to run HSG sessions, Tofu replied:

“I think the location was very helpful. It had everything we needed. Also, I liked that we had our own space to work in”.

The HSG not only provided structure to an already busy schedule for individual participants, it was also an escape from the numerous demands placed on participants from the northern group as young Samoans living in Melbourne. It became evident that education and culture were in competition with each other despite the verbal support and praises parents gave of the importance of putting education first for these participants. These “disruptions” to developing educational goals are outlined in the examples provided below which was collected during the focus group interview.

CULTURAL EXPECTATIONS CLASHING WITH EDUCATIONAL GOALS

One way of learning and maintaining Samoan cultural knowledge in Western countries like Australia, has been for young people to be involved in youth organizations with a focus to teaching songs and dances in the Samoan language (Ofahengaue Vakalahi and Godinet 2008). The participants in the northern study group all belonged to such an organization and often had to leave the HSG earlier than anticipated each week to attend rehearsals for a fundraising concert. The author knew from her own experiences as a young Samoan growing up in Melbourne that, the demands to rehearse for specific events often took up valuable time not only during some week days, but also on weekends. Since time management was a common theme that was raised during individual interviews, the author asked

participants to reflect on how much time they had remaining during the week for homework or studying. For Tamara (Mala), having the HSG space gave her the chance to prioritize her time so that she was organized with completing study tasks.

“Organization would have to be one of my goals, and study sessions have definitely helped with that too. When I come, I finish off tasks here making my load lighter and helping me to see what I have done and also what I need to do”.

She became more responsible as a participant as she worked with guidance on tasks related to English and Humanities subjects.

During one of the study sessions, a weekly timetable was presented whereby participants were asked to tell the author how their times were allocated for the week. After crossing out the times they were at school, a clear picture emerged that there really was not enough time being allocated for studies for these students. Most days of the week, participants had to go to youth rehearsals for a fundraising concert held in September. Following the HSG session, the six participants would go to their minister’s house from the library at 6:30 pm and rehearsed until 9-10 pm at night. This would take place usually two times a week, which did not include Sunday for church/*toana’i* (lunch) at the minister’s house or Saturday for choir practice.

The realization of the lack of time allocated to completing or revising educational tasks, led to the suggestion that perhaps students present would need to consider waking up early in the morning to study or stay up late at night to complete set work. The expectations that schools have on students with regard to the number of hours they should be spending on school work, do not correlate with the cultural demands placed on young Samoan students living in Melbourne. The Samoan community values education but the majority of time allocated for young people to study is not conducive to producing the desired results needed to pass well in each year level or get into courses and universities students are hoping to get into.

APPENDIXES

Appendix A: AusVELS: Standards and Progression Point Examples

(History-Progressing towards Level 8)

(Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority)

<p>History—Level 7 achievement standard</p> <p>By the end of Level 7, students suggest reasons for change and continuity over time. They describe the effects of change on societies, individuals, and groups. They describe event and developments from the perspective of different people who lived at the time. Students explain the role of groups and the significance of particular individuals in society. They identify past events and developments that have been interpreted in different ways.</p>	<p>Progression Point 7.5</p> <p>At 7.5, a student progressing towards the standard at Level 8 may, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify patterns of change over periods of time, for example the spread of Christianity after the Roman Empire or the spread of Islam at the end of the seventh century. • Explain causes and effects of events and the motives of people, for example, reasons for the Crusades; the effects of the Crusades such as trade, the rise of the merchant class, new ideas in medicine, mathematics and astronomy and changing relationships between Islam and Europe. • Describe events that have been interpreted differently, for example; origins of Polynesians and their migration across the Pacific. 	<p>History—Level 8 achievement standard</p> <p>By the end of Level 8, students recognize and explain patterns of change and continuity over time. They explain the causes and effects of events and developments. They identify the motives and actions of people at the time. Students explain the significance of individuals and groups and how they were influenced by the beliefs and values of their society. They describe different interpretations of the past. Students sequence events and developments within a chronological framework with reference to periods of time. When researching, students develop questions to frame an historical inquiry. They analyze, select, and organize information from primary and secondary sources and use it as evidence to answer inquiry questions. Students identify and explain different points of view in sources. When interpreting sources, they identify their origin and purpose, and distinguish between fact and opinion. Students develop texts, particularly descriptions and explanations, incorporating analysis. In developing these texts, and organizing and presenting their findings, they use historical terms and concepts, evidence identified in sources, and acknowledge their sources of information.</p>
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Appendix B

Questions in the survey	Have you found the study sessions helpful with your school work?	What are some learning goals you have achieved?	What did you think of the location of where we had the HSG?	Other comments?
Participant responses Tamara	Yes, I found this study session very helpful indeed. For example, at home when it's hard to find the time or assistance, I feel alright because at homework study, I know there's assistance.	Organization would have to be one of my goals, and study sessions have definitely helped with that too. When I come, I finish off tasks here making my load lighter and helping me to see what I have done and also what I need to do.	The location for study group has been awesome and suitable. It's nice and quiet, cool easy access to everything such as computers, books, etc.	Just thank you for making time for us and running this program. It's definitely been a great help.
Letofu	I've definitely found study sessions helpful because I get a lot of homework done. I have access to books/computers so it's easy for me and I can focus on assignments etc. properly.	I've improved in time management because I'm now always up to date with my homework and definitely well organized. I've improved a lot in English because I can focus on my work and put a lot of detail in it as well.	I think the location was very helpful. It had everything we needed. Also I liked that we had our own space to work in.	Homework Study Group has helped me a lot to complete homework, organize myself and keep my grades up.

Penina	Yes, I have found the study sessions helpful. I find it helpful when I need a teacher's point of view of my work. With this help, my marks have improved.	I find the most important learning goal is staying organized. I find that at the start of the year, I am well prepared, but as the year progresses, I tend to become slack at keeping all my notes together.	The location helps a lot. Nice and quiet, a lot of resources to turn to when needed like books, dvds, and computers.	This programme is a great resource and has helped me in so many ways. I look forward to another year of this programme. Improvements: The only thing a bit more time or more lessons throughout the week if possible.
Eloise	Yes, it definitely helps, especially with studying it helps.	It has helped me with my time management and completing my homework.	With the location, it definitely helped, being in a working environment, you don't have a choice but to work. It's motivating.	It's a great system for help and doing work a great way to motivate islander youths who want to do better.

CONCLUSIONS

Participants in this study have provided detailed responses as to what impacts on their learning, providing insight into the kinds of learning strategies that work to produce improved academic outcomes as Samoan students in Melbourne high schools. Two HSGs were established to provide a structured program to assist participants with undertaking learning strategies until completion, as well as maintain engagement and understanding during the study session times. Though most participants lead differently structured lives to mainstream, with respect to attending varied cultural rehearsals during some school nights and weekends which took up the bulk of their time, the provision of a structured educational program did improve their desire to complete educative tasks and improved academic outcomes. The findings of this research reveal the importance of providing set times and suitable study locations for Samoan students in Melbourne to complete homework tasks. The two locations of public libraries that were selected as weekly meeting places were deemed a necessity for these participants as it minimized unwanted distractions. It is the author's desire as the researcher/teacher to see more HSGs formed, to assist Samoan students to improve their academic outcomes, undertaken by qualified staff who understand the demands these young people face whilst living in Melbourne.

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