

Research Proposal

Tongan Youth Education in Salt Lake City

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Introduction

The Tongan-American community in Utah is second only to California in the United States. The 2000 U.S. Census listed the Tongan population in Utah at 6587. It is the largest Pacific Islander group in Utah.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) was pivotal in creating the Tongan gathering in Salt Lake City. The church has its highest member percentage in Tonga. Forty percent belong to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Tonga but even more residents are practicing Methodists. Migration to Utah and Hawaii are attributed to the church by Cathy A. Small and David L. Dixon (2004).

Utah was first settled by early converts to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who established church headquarters in Salt Lake City. Today the Tongan community in Utah is not limited to just members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. There is a strong Tongan Methodist following with a church just outside downtown Salt Lake City (Thiel, 2002). Salt Lake City also houses The National Tongan-American Society, a handful of Tongan restaurants, and about 15 local Tongan-language LDS congregations. Another five can be found in Utah Valley in Southern Utah.

Migration to the United States and consequently Utah occurred to increase the opportunities enjoyed by children and families. Despite vigorously chasing an American dream of wealth and prosperity, Tongans who migrate are hindered by a lack of transferable working skills. Tongan families typically experience very low SES (Socio-

Economic Status). To compensate Tongan parents often both work to provide for their children but low wages still keep them at or near poverty level.

Education can counter many of the problems Tongan youth face in Utah. Overall education is excellent in Tonga. The country boasts a 98.4 percent literacy rate for the entire population (Tongan Census, 1996). This achievement however is not reflected in Utah.

About 127 Pacific Islander students drop out of public Utah schools each year (Pacific, 2003). From 1996 to 2001, 24.1 percent of Pacific Islander high school seniors failed to graduate (Pacific, 2003). Utah's Director of Pacific Islander Affairs is Tongan Bill Afeaki. He worked first as a school teacher in Tonga then turned to politics when he was elected to Tongan Parliament before he moved to Utah with his family.

He includes a message in the Pacific Horizon newsletter produced by the Office of Pacific Islander Affairs each quarter. His winter 2003 message concerned troubling youth academic performance and an ever-increasing Pacific Islander gang problem. He ended his message with "to fully enjoy the great opportunities of this...land, we must first be successful in education, work hard and be diligent, and be law-abiding citizens – only then...the sky becomes the limit (Afeaki, 2004)."

Improving Tongan youth academic achievement requires isolating probable causes. Education can decrease and someday end the low SES experienced by the Tongan population. Little research has been done on any Tongan-American population. Instead many studies focus on American Asian and Pacific Islanders (AAPI). The U.S. government merges the ethnic groups in census counts and research. This is problematic because each is very distinct.

Ching Leou Liu recognized this problem when he noted though education is highly valued in Asian homes, less than six percent of Tongans complete college. “Part of the Problem,” he said, “lies in our reliance on the monolithic term ‘Asians and Pacific Islanders,’ a category that bundles together individuals from many ethnic and racial subgroups. (Liu, 4).”

The purpose of this research is to identify poor academic performance factors among Tongan youth in Salt Lake City. It is only through such research that these barriers to Tongan youth success can be addressed by people who want to facilitate change. Programs are run with money and securing grants requires statistics and sound research to convince foundations and the government that the specific problem or need exists.

Literature Review

Socio-Economic Status (SES)

Socio-Economic Status (SES) is directly related to performance. Carol Schmid compared Asian and Latino immigrants. She determined different factors affected the academic achievement of minority children differently. The factors she considered included:

1. socioeconomic class
 2. cultural characteristics
 3. social reception
 4. language proficiency
 5. gender
- (Schmid, 2001)

Schmid said these factors do not interact in the same way for different immigrant groups. Tongan immigrants paralleled Hispanic immigrants in her study with a very low SES. Asian immigrants by contrast enjoy a relatively high SES. SES influences so many different variables and can include just as many. An example of this is parents' education level which can actually be defined as a part of SES.

A Tongan immigrant wrote about the Australian Tongan population and its low SES and accompanying problems which mirror those problems faced by Tongans in Salt Lake City. He wrote specifically about Tongan youth that, "many struggle through education and face limited job opportunities (Fifita, 2004)." Tongan immigrants face similar challenges even in different host cities.

Anthropology professor Dr. Helen Lee from La Trobe University in Australia published *Tongans Overseas: Between Two Shores* last year. In her book Lee writes Tongans typically face economic problems overseas because a lack of education confines them to menial low-paying jobs (2003). Australia and New Zealand are ahead of the United States in studying its Tongan population. More research has been conducted in these countries than in the United States.

Mother's Education Level

Parents who lack sufficient education contribute to low academic performance by Tongan youth in Salt Lake City. In addition to taking both parents away from the home and critical supervision of their children, parent education is directly linked to child performance. The mother rather than the father is what really makes the difference in a child's academic performance

The National Center for Family Literacy includes information about three studies on its website. The site includes the results of a recent report by the National Center for Education Statistics. The results conclude children's performance in reading, math and general knowledge increases with the level of their mother's education. The same institution or the National Center for Education Statistics found there is a reading decline for children ages 13 and 17. It discovered 64% of public elementary schools with a high poverty concentration felt low parent education levels is responsible for low parent involvement at schools.

Research by Katherine Magnuson and Sharon McGroder reveal a substantial difference in welfare mothers who participated in an education-first rather than a work-first program. The report concluded policymakers interested in improving academic performance among the poor should develop programs to improve the mother's education.

When both parents lack marketable skills they each must work to simply provide bare essentials to their families. Tongan families in Salt Lake City are afflicted by this significantly. The typical Tongan family in Salt Lake City is made up of parents who both work outside the home. This brings with it another set of challenges.

Mothers Working Outside the Home

Many studies have been done about mothers who work fulltime outside the home. Jane Waldfogel, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn and Wen-Jui Han conducted one study. Their findings showed significant detrimental cognitive effects in children whose mother did not stay home with them the first year. A similar study by Essex University found that for every year a mother works before her child begins school, there is a corresponding

nine percent performance decrease. Part-time employment showed a negative result that was not as pronounced.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation released a report that studied children born in the seventies. The report discovered children with mothers who worked full time for at least 18 months during their pre-school years had only a 64% chance of passing an A-level (UK education measuring standard). This dropped to 52% if the mother worked another year. The study also predicted these children would have a greater chance of unemployment and psychological stress in adulthood (BBC, 2001).

Latchkey kids are kids who come home from school to an empty house. Carma Haley wrote an article that connected latchkey kids with problems. Her article states although parents become more confident in the idea of leaving their children alone when they are between 12 and 17, it is then when they may have the greatest need for their presence. She writes, "Children who are going through the pressures of the preteen and teen years often times need parental guidance and sometimes, it can't wait." Older children become responsible for younger siblings at an early age. This is usually too much responsibility for an older child. An adult writer who helped in Haley's study said she hated coming home to an empty house when she was a latchkey high school teenager but she took advantage of the situation by doing what she wanted.

Tongan children left alone in Salt Lake City have also taken advantage and turned to criminal activity. All racial minority youth were just 9.5 percent of the entire 1997 Utah youth population, but Pacific Islander youth that year represented, "30 percent of all youth arrested for personal offenses (Davis, 2003)." While this number is for all Pacific Islanders in Utah, Tongans exceed the number of Samoans by 2000, represent more than

5000 Hawaiians and number more than 6000 more individuals than any other Utah Pacific Islander (U.S. Census).

Cultural Identity

Tongan youth need to develop a firm sense of their identity. Caught between two cultures, American Tongan youth are placed in a position where they are accepted fully by neither the American or Tongan culture. These youth according to Saville-Troike are described as “mistrusted by both and seen as spies.” Dr. Lee from La Trobe University writes in her book, “Young people often have the greatest difficulties, feeling they are not accepted by either the host nation or other Tongans who regard them as not being ‘real’ Tongans if they do not speak Tongan or know the ‘Tongan way’ (Lee, 2003).” As a full time missionary in Sacramento, California I had the chance to work with some Tongan LDS congregations for four months.

Many Tongan youth are raised by parents who speak English as a second language. The parents know their native tongue well but struggle with English in varying degrees. The children however, who are raised in the United States, know English better than Tongan but are proficient in neither. English is my native language but I lived in Tonga for 4 and a half years and I finished elementary school and junior high school there. I expected my English to be better than the American Tongan youth in Sacramento, but when I learned my Tongan was also better, I was very surprised.

Saville-Troike identifies this condition as semilingualism. She defines semilingualism as full competence in no language. Saville-Troike recommends children should be raised in their parents’ native language for optimal early cognitive

development. This is pivotal for children to expand their reasoning processes and learn to fully express and understand their own and others' thoughts (Saville-Troike, 1978).

While language is a significant cultural identifier, even without language, minority group students who maintain cultural ties are more likely to succeed academically (Saville-Troike, 1978). Minorities without a positive racial identity may equate academic achievement with "acting white" or "selling out" (Ford, 1997). Maintaining cultural identity is a protective factor (Davis, 2003). Detained delinquent Pacific Islander youth found as they participated in cultural dance groups and church functions their negative behavior decreased.

Cultural identity is important but so is SES, parent education level, and whether mothers work full time outside the home. Each of these issues negatively affects youth academic performance.

Hypothesis/Research Questions

Tongan youth academic performance is negatively influenced by low SES, poor parent education level, mothers who work outside the home and a poor cultural identity. Here are the questions I plan to direct to Tongan families:

Questions to parents, one questionnaire must be answered by each parent.

Do both parents work full time? Where?

What brought you to Salt Lake City?

What is your household income?

How much schooling do you have?

What are the GPAs of your children?

Questions for children

Do you speak Tongan?

What grade are you in and how old are you?

Are you male or female?

How well do you speak Tongan?

Do you consider yourself Tongan, American, or both?

Did you ever act as a translator for your parents? What were the circumstances?

What are your professional goals?

What are you doing today to work on these?

Do you dance any traditional Tongan dances?

Do you plan to go to college?

What are your grades like?

If both of your parents work, what are your responsibilities when you go home from school?

What things do you do when your parents are at work and you are at home after school?

Will you continue to uphold your traditional values and if so how will you continue your traditional values in your own home someday?

Delimitations and Limitations

The study could be limited by the parents and students, some of whom might feel the answers are too personal. It may also be constrained by the qualitative questions which are difficult to measure.

Method

Rationale for the Design of My Study

A mixed methods design is especially appropriate because previous studies have not been conducted on this specific population and further study is needed. With a qualitative component subjects can be identified that need further study. The quantitative component is important too so more precise measurements can be taken from gathered data.

Role of the Researcher

I worked as a mentor to Tongan youth in the specific geographical area I plan to study. I am familiar with the schools and some of the parents. As a mentor I gathered data for Project Youth Connect, a federally funded mentoring initiative secured by the Asian Association of Utah. When our funding ended I began working at a children's shelter.

I live in Salt Lake City and am the former president of the University of Utah's Pacific Islander Student Association. I also worked as a volunteer grant writer for the National Tongan American Society. I founded and was the Executive director of IKUNA, a non-profit organization developed to empower Tongan students to excellence.

I have a degree in English from BYU-Hawaii and I am working on an MLS from Emporia State University. I attend a Salt Lake City LDS Tongan congregation each Sunday where I teach 6-8 year-old children Sunday school. I am highly interested in discovering the results of my study but I am more committed to doing something with that knowledge to aid the Tongan Salt Lake City population

Participants

The study will be conducted with randomly selected Tongan students from East, West, and Highland High Schools. It will include 3 randomly selected junior high

schools and 6 randomly selected elementary schools from the schools eventually serviced by the High Schools listed previously in the Salt Lake City School District.

Once the randomly selected students have been identified, their parents will be contacted for further questioning and consent. 30 students from each high school and junior high school will be identified and 15 students from each elementary school will be chosen.

Instruments

Specific questions will be answered by participants with the help of volunteers who will gather the data with the researcher. The study will be done with the help of student volunteers from the selected high schools. Salt Lake School District has a program that allows students to receive credit for absences by performing service. As senior High School students prepare for graduation they often need to perform service to make up these hours. I will recruit Tongan high school students to help me perform the research and make arrangements with the school district for the students to receive credit for their work.

I want to stay with the participants when they answer the questions. I also want my volunteer students to stay with the participants when they answer questions to ensure there is understanding of the questions and to guarantee we can read their writing so we can enter responses into a computerized database for easy manipulation using Microsoft Access.

Design and Procedure

The project will be conducted during the summer when the volunteer student researchers have the time to invest in the project.

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