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Volunteer Teachers in American Samoa:

A Qualitative Study of Their Educational and Cultural Preparation for Teaching Abroad

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For nearly 20 years, the Diocese of American Samoa-Pago Pago has had a program that placed volunteer teachers in primary and secondary schools in American Samoa. The purpose of this paper is to qualitatively investigate the educational and cultural preparation that these volunteer teachers have been given before teaching abroad and evaluate whether that preparation, (if any) was sufficient given the experiences reported by the volunteer teachers. It is the intent of the researcher (an educator with more than a decade of teaching experience) to scrutinize and draw conclusions, perhaps making recommendations for future preparation of volunteer teachers in American Samoa.

Because of the distance between American Samoa and the researcher's home university, two methods of qualitative data collection will be employed. Firstly, participants will be asked to keep an electronic journal in the form of a secure site blog where they will respond to questions put forth by the researcher over the final six months of their tenure in American Samoa. This will allow the researcher to pose questions about cultural and educational/teaching preparation that will be uniform for each of the participants and it will allow for more detailed responses than a simple, Likert-scale survey. The blog environment will also allow participants to work and craft their responses on a popular platform as volunteer teachers working on American Samoa now have wireless access furnished by Samoanet. The second way that data will be accumulated will be through a one-on-one interview between the participant and the researcher upon the volunteer teacher's return to the United States following the conclusion of their teaching placement in American Samoa.

The aim of this study is to highlight the perceptions of the volunteer teachers in terms of their educational and cultural preparation for teaching abroad both while they are abroad and after they have completed their teaching assignment.

Method

Participants

The study will target volunteer teachers who have either one- or two-year placements and were hired by the Diocese of Samoa-Pago Pago. As the study will ask participants to keep a blog for the final six months of their placement, the participants who are nearing the end of their teaching placement, whether in American Samoa for one or two years total, will be targeted for possible participation. Many of the volunteer teachers come from Catholic universities as the Diocese had recruited at these institutions including the University of Notre Dame, the Catholic University of America, and LaSalle University. Other volunteer teachers responded to advertisements placed in college student newspapers. Volunteers are paid but receive free housing and a car. The salary is modest, approximately \$250-\$300 per month and must be used to pay for food, gas and incidentals. All of the volunteer teachers in the Diocesan program are over 18 years of age and most likely would be from 21 to 26, another good population for a blog format as this age group grew up with email, video games, online chat rooms, the Internet, and social networking sites.

Setting

Depending on access to the Internet, the first part of the study can be completed at either the participant's school, a library, or in a residence via a laptop. Wherever there is access to the Internet, the participant should be able to get to the secure blog site. Upon logging in using an individual username and password, each participant should be able to create and edit entries as requested by the researcher. In some larger Samoan schools, such as Samoana High School in Pago Pago, volunteers should be able to gain access to a computer lab. Samoana has more than

1,000 students in grades 9-12 with a student-teacher ratio of 20:1 although some other schools, such as Manu' A High School, have only 87 students with a student-teacher ratio of 8:1. In the smaller schools, computers and wireless access may not be as available and teachers may need to look for other options such as libraries or cybercafés. Since 1998, several cybercafés have sprung up in American Samoa although there is only one Internet provider (Samoanet) as noted above.

The second part of the study will be completed at George Mason University or at a mutually agreeable location near the participant's home, with the researcher travelling to the interview location in order to complete the post-placement interview.

Sampling Procedure

Potential participants will be identified using placement lists provided by the Diocese of Samoa-Pago Pago. Because of the infeasibility of personally traveling to American Samoa, an email and mail request for participation will be sent to those teachers nearing the end of their placement detailing the study and the aims. In order to have ample time and to provide for delays with mail service to American Samoa, the researcher will begin soliciting for participants eight months before the first participant on the Diocesan list finishes their teaching assignment. Volunteers with six months or less to go on their teaching assignments will automatically be excluded from participation because they do not fit the time parameters of the proposed study. The researcher is aware and accepts that this study may take a substantial period of time to get an acceptable number of responses given that volunteer teachers are regularly being placed in the program in American Samoa and new volunteers arrive and leave each year.

For those who agree to participate, a consent document will be provided via email because of the face-to-face contact issues already described. Once the consent document is

received, the secure site will be set up and the username and password information will be provided to the participants. To ensure anonymity, only the researcher will know the names of the participants and the usernames will not have any distinguishing information. The study is being conducted with the full support of the Diocese as they are eager to learn about the participants in their program over time and the researcher has agreed to share final results.

Survey Instrument

Although the researcher accepts that this study may take substantial time to complete, the first stage of the study may be completed simultaneously with the second as some participants may be completing blogs in American Samoa while others are being interviewed by the researcher in the United States. However, despite this odd situation, six blog questions have been developed to solicit responses from participants. Each month, participants will be asked to comment (blog) about different topics concerning educational and cultural preparation leading them to reflect on their experience in American Samoa and their teaching placement. The blog questions have been designed so that participants move from thinking about what they may have lacked in educational and cultural preparation to reflecting on what would have helped them do their jobs better and how they might be better prepared next time. The blog questions are attached to this methods section as an appendix.

In addition to the blog questions, the questions for the second part of the study are also attached as an appendix. These questions, however, should be considered less formal, and are to be considered a guide for the researcher to use in conducting the post-placement interviews with volunteer teachers. The questions have been modeled from existing exit interview questions commonly used with teachers leaving school districts.

Data Analysis

As data is received, coding will take place and data will be separated into possible themes. When the researcher is satisfied that there is enough data to draw conclusions or see patterns emerge, the sampling will stop. Possible themes that might emerge would be levels of educational and cultural preparation, similarities and differences between American and Samoan schools, relationships with colleagues, working conditions, rewarding experiences, frustrations, suggestions for improvement, and advice for future volunteers.

Appendix 1 – Blog Questions

These six questions would be given to all participants, once a month, at the same time each month, over the secure blog site. They are intended to have the participants at first think and write about their experiences, then reflect on their preparation, then consider how those experiences would have been different if their educational and/or cultural preparation might have been something other than what it was.

1. In what ways were you prepared as a teacher to teach in American Samoa? Did you receive any educational training? Did you receive any specific cultural knowledge of your soon-to-be students? What did you know about American Samoa before you arrived?
2. How did you become a part of or adapt to Samoan culture? In what ways have you tried to make American Samoa your ‘home’ for either one- or two- years? In what ways is their educational system similar to your experiences as a student? In what ways is it different?
3. What relationships have you developed while working in American Samoa? What cultural norms and rules govern relationships on the island? Do you have a good working relationship with your colleagues? How have they supported you or not supported you while you have been working in American Samoa?
4. Are there outside influences that impact your ability to do your job? Are there things that you wish you would have known that might have helped you? What cultural and/or educational preparation barriers are there for volunteer teachers working in American Samoa?
5. What has been the most rewarding part of your experience in American Samoa in regards to your job? What has been the most frustrating thing about teaching in American Samoa? What would you improve to make this a better teaching placement?
6. What advice can you give to volunteer teachers just starting their assignments on American Samoa? What cultural norms must they know? What knowledge would make them not only visitors to the island or someone from the mainland that works on A.S. but accepted as part of the fabric of Samoan society?

Appendix 2 – Post-Placement Interview Questions

Please Note: These questions are simply a guide for the researcher to use in the post-placement interview. The researcher may use all or none of these but may also ask the volunteer teacher to elaborate on previous blog responses to elicit more information.

1. Did you get an accurate sense of the school in American Samoa and what it would be like to work there before you took the job?
2. Would anything have kept you in American Samoa longer?
3. Was the interaction with other teachers at your school helpful to you as a teacher?
4. What support did you get from the administration? From parents?
5. What was the most satisfying about your job?
6. What was the least satisfying about your job?
7. Did you feel prepared to do your job effectively? Why or why not?
8. What can be done to help the person who took your place?
9. What would you do to improve the cultural preparation of teachers that come after you?
10. What recommendations would you make for minimum standards for educational preparation for a program like the one you just completed?
11. Are you going to stay in the teaching profession? If not, what will you do?
12. Do you have any advice for the Diocese?

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INFORMED CONSENT FORM

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

This research is being conducted to investigate the educational and cultural experiences of volunteer teachers working in American Samoa. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to provide information about teacher preparation, conditions of employment and cultural experiences while working in American Samoa. Participation involves completing a secure site blog while in American Samoa and sitting down for an interview upon return to the United States.

RISKS

There are no foreseeable risks for participating in this research.

BENEFITS

There are no benefits to you as a participant other than to further research in an assessment of professional and cultural development training that future volunteers need to be successful in American Samoan teaching placements.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The data in this study will be confidential. You will receive a username and password that will be unlike your own name and your blog will be on a secure site with access available to only you and the researcher through the username and password. Any last names used in the blog will be taken out of transcribed data before coding by the researcher. Your name will not be included on collected data. Through the use of an identification key, the researcher will be able to link your interview to your identity and only the researcher will have access to the identification key.

While it is understood that no computer transmission can be perfectly secure, reasonable efforts will be made to protect the confidentiality of your transmissions.

PARTICIPATION

Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate or if you withdraw from the study, there is no penalty. There are no costs to you or any other party.

CONTACT

This research is being conducted by Rick Brigham, College of Education and Human Development, at George Mason University. He may be reached at 703-993-1667 for questions or to report a research-related problem. You may contact the George Mason University Office of Research Subject Protections at 703-993-4121 if you have questions or comments regarding your rights as a participant in the research.

This research has been reviewed according to George Mason University procedures governing your participation in this research.

CONSENT

I have read this form and agree to participate in this study.

Name

Date of Signature

Version date: 12/2/08

The George Mason University Human Subjects Review Board has waived the requirement for signing the consent form. However, if you would like to sign a consent form prior to beginning the research, please contact Kimberley Daly at kdaly1@gmu.edu.