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ABSTRACT

An ethnographic study was conducted of the school experience of 33 Samoan students at a nontracked urban college preparatory high school in Honolulu (Hawaii). Multiple sources of data were used, the most central being structured interviews with nine current students, their teachers, and their parents. Student friendships were of special interest as a means of examining student engagement. Samoan students in Hawaii are a definite minority, and they are frequently among the educationally and economically disadvantaged. Friendships and activities with friends were central to the school experience of these students, and many had an ethnically diverse group of friends. The central role of the school in these students' lives was apparent. Friends were usually in the same class and were frequently involved in the same extracurricular activities. Helping, modeling, and networking were evident in reports of friendships. Two tables summarize survey findings. (Contains 19 references.) (SLD)

Transformed Contexts: Friendships of Samoan Students in a Non-tracked High School in Honolulu

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Research on the social context of schooling has shown how school experience is influenced by the societal context in which it occurs, and how the school experience influences later participation of students in society (Hollingshead, 1949; Coleman, 1966; Ogbu, 1982, 1981, 1977; Oakes, 1985; Oakes and Lipton, 1990). Research in the area tends to be heavily motivated by the ideals of investigators and the perceived potential for transformation associated with schooling in a Democratic society (Dewey, 1912). This translates, at least in part, as a search for schooling which is equitable and inclusive in the benefits and obligations bestowed on students--all students.

When Hollingshead (1949) examined the school experience to see how the democratic ideals of American society took form in the lives of students at school, he found a process of selective programming and differential treatment of students based on their socioeconomic background which fell ironically short of the explicitly stated goals of schooling in a Democratic society.

After the 1954 Brown Decision and a host of supporting federal legislation and court decisions, Coleman (1966) found that the American school experience still varied widely by family and ethnic background.

Ogbu (1977) has called attention to some of the unobtrusive features of the school and classroom experiences of Black children, and has demonstrated how powerfully decisions regarding student

program placement and the interactions of teachers, students, and parents reflect the inequalities of the society in which the schools exist.

Oakes (1985) has described the substantial drawbacks of school tracking, especially for minority students, who are frequently found in the 'low' tracks. She has emphasized that tracking does not increase the academic achievement of minority students; neither does it foster positive attitudes and behaviors.

Maxine Greene (1989, p. 152) has pointed to the need to expand the knowledge base of educators regarding the social context of education through continued research in the area. She has placed value on "...qualitative on-site research and imaginative works that open visions of possibility, of transformed contexts and purposes in schools devoted to thoughtfulness and to growth and, above all, to democracy."

Samoan Students at University High School

Arthur King Jr. (1986), Director of the Curriculum Research Development Group at the University of Hawai'i, describes the University High School experience as a non-tracked program of liberal studies for a diverse student population. He traces the UHS program, on the campus of the University of Hawai'i in Honolulu, to the early 70's, and indicates that Samoan students who have and who are attending the school are treated differently, more equitably, here than they are at public schools generally; they are included in all components of the curriculum.

This researcher conducted an ethnographic study (MacDonald, 1987) of the school experience of thirty-three Samoan students

(twelve girls and twenty-one boys) who had attended and/or were attending the UHS between the school years 1974-75 and 1984-85. Multiple sources of data were used, the most central being the structured interviews with the nine current students, their teachers, and their parents. Student friendships were of special interest as a means of examining the engagement, or contact (Ogbu, 1982), of Samoan students with their school program.

Samoan students in Hawai'i trace their origins directly or indirectly to American Samoa (and less frequently, Western Samoa) in the South Pacific. They make up a little over three percent of Hawai'i's public school enrollment (Hannahs, 1983, pp. 8, 11), and are visible as a student group for their lack of academic success and social adjustment in the school situation. Students in this population do not generally participate in the college preparatory track of the comprehensive high school which they attend. The largest proportion of Samoan students attend rural or urban schools with large numbers of immigrants and low SES students (State of Hawai'i, Department of Education, 1983).

It is UHS policy to maintain a student ethnic mix reflecting the diversity of public school students in the state. This allows for the transfer of programs and materials developed at UHS to other schools in the state. The student mix in a non-tracked program of liberal studies (college preparatory) makes the UHS experience essentially different from the common experience of Samoan students in the state.

Friendships Out of Transformed Contexts

> "It was a good experience in my life. These were the first Samoans at the school--the first for them and a first for us." The student remembered their first encounter, in the hall at school. He had approached to ask if they needed help. They just looked at him and walked on. He thought they did not know how to respond. At (a large public high school) someone approaching them like that would probably have been for a different reason. The student and his friends wondered at the time how they would fit in.
>
> His friends told him, "Hey, those guys look pretty angry."
>
> They became very close. "After you know them, they will do anything for you."
>
> Non-Samoan Student, UHS

Friendships and activities with friends appear to have been quite central to the school experience of Samoan students at UHS. For many students, associations and friendships came freely and plentifully. Students described themselves as part of a large, open, friendly school network. Parents reflected this image of the school with comments such as:

> "She knows everybody."
> (When they had out-of-school activities) "everybody came," or "the whole class was invited."
> "He has a lot of friends."
> "She's friendly with everybody."

Other students tended to rely heavily on a single, or a few, personal, intense friendships. These were either same-sex friendships, or boyfriend-girlfriend relationships. Two boys who had been described as loners both became involved in close personal relationships with girls.

Some Samoan students said that their transition to the school was difficult; non-Samoan students, teachers, and staff confirmed this. In an extreme case, a student estimated that it took him about two years (with some conflict and problems) to adjust and

really feel comfortable in a school setting which was so different from his previous experience. Most students had wanted to attend this school, and some exhibited exceptional initiative in making it happen. However, many were ambivalent initially, as they separated from old school friends and experiences.

Growing out of the transition to this common school experience, Samoan students formed multiple bonds and identities with individuals, groups, and the school generally. The associations, friendships, and networking were an integral part of the "academic" and other key experiences.

Friends by Ethnicity. The school describes the ethnic breakdown of its student body as part-Hawaiian, 22 percent; Japanese, 20 percent; Caucasian, 16 percent; Filipino, 11 percent; Black, 4 percent; Chinese, 3.5 percent; Korean, 3.5 percent; Samoan, 3 percent; and "Mixed," 16 percent (Krause, 1986).

Samoan students at UHS had an ethnically diverse group of friends. An ethnic breakdown of close school friends during the 1984-85 school year is presented in Table 1. The data suggest that most of their school friends were Caucasian and Japanese, followed by other ethnic groups, including their own. The ethnic pattern of friendships between Samoan and other students reflects proportionately the ethnic mix in the school population, and does not indicate that ethnicity, including their own, was the predominant consideration when choosing a friend during the 1984-85 school year.

Some friends were identified as close friends of more than one Samoan student. Boys and girls were generally equally represented in their friendships with students of other ethnicities.

Table 1

Friendships of Samoan Students at School--
by Ethnicity

University High School, 1984-85

Ethnicity*	No. of Students Who Were Close Friends of Samoan Students
Caucasian	17
Japanese	12
Samoan	6
Chinese	5
Filipino	4
Hawaiian	4**
Korean	1

Total Samoan Students: All 9 Current Students
Total Close Friends: 49

*Ethnicity was determined by surname in the absence of other information. Some students were actually of mixed ethnicity.

**Use of surname as criterion for ethnic identification probably most affected the Hawaiian group; thus, the number is probably an under-representation of the extent of friendships with Hawaiian and part-Hawaiian students.

Data suggest that identity of Samoans with other Samoans at the school was somewhat stronger, though never exclusive, during some of the previous years. In 1984-85 two-thirds of Samoan students gave the name of another Samoan student as a close or special friend, but "best" friends or tight relationships were not between two Samoan students. For instance, one student told how close she was to another student because they were the only two Samoan girls in their class, and how happy the other girl had been when the newer girl entered school in the ninth grade. Yet, in conversations with both girls and their teachers, and one of the

girls' parents, other people were more frequently mentioned as people with whom they did things--in school and out. Samoan students in this small school knew who the other Samoan students were, and some were friends; two sisters were also very close. It did not appear, however, that relationships with other Samoans, or Polynesians, dominated their choice of friends.

Friends by Gender. Members of the same sex predominated as close friends. Girls played together in girls' sports and boys in theirs. In activities such as class-work, the closest associations continued to be with members of the same sex--a group of boys or girls, or two boys and two girls. There were some exceptions such as a Samoan boy and girl who seemed to be good friends, very supportive of one another; they teased and seemed like "good buddies." Boys and girls interacted freely within the larger friendship cliques, especially those based on class (grade level) identity.

Factors Related to Choice of Friends. Some key factors in choice of friends were 1) the centrality of the school in students' lives, 2) class (grade level) identity, and 3) curricular and extra-curricular activities.

Centrality of the School in Students' Lives

The central role of school in the lives of these Samoan students is apparent; school friendships were formed, and maintained, even outside of school, and beyond the school years in many cases. Almost all students said their closest friends were at school. Half the students or their parents said that the students' friendships were solely with school friends.

The centrality of school in terms of student friendships is clearly present. Students have shared a common school experience--common interests, dilemmas, and aspirations. They have developed support systems, and modeled learning and coping strategies for one another. They have been together for nine-period school days, plus after-school sports and other activities. Students, and more frequently their parents, have pointed out that the students did not have time for friends outside of their school friends. Additionally, it was common for parents to discourage students from associating with neighborhood kids, who were sometimes considered a bad influence.

Some students appeared to be torn in their loyalties, having friends at church, in the neighborhood, or in siblings. One boy's parents said he had begun to ask them to change schools so he could spend more time with his neighborhood friends. Although he liked his school friends, they lived so far away that it was difficult to get together outside of school.

Class (Grade Level) Identity

Almost always friends were in the same class (grade level). Although friends were often in the same section for instruction (there are only two sections per grade level), they seemed to think that the section you were in did not matter much in terms of friends. "Everybody already knows everybody from being together before." Students often talked about their class and used it as frame of reference for many things. For instance, one student said his friends were all the boys in his class.

Class identity determines where students socialize on campus. Each class has its own place. Seniors have a special "senior room" inside the cafeteria, which is fixed up annually by the freshmen (the sophomores are the ones who make graduation a festive occasion). Juniors "hang out" by the benches near the cafeteria. Sophomores spend their time around the lockers.

Samoan students have participated in an assortment of projects and activities at and outside of school--formal (such as the prom), casual (sporting events and activities associated with them), and spontaneous (get-togethers at the beach)--in which class identification was said to be the common denominator.

Curricular and Extra-curricular Activities

The kinds of activities in which students have participated have been an important influence on friendships. Friendships have tended to form around shared academic interests, music and dance, and sports. It is important to note the variety of areas in which these friendships have been formed. The broad curricular and extra-curricular areas of strength of the friends of the nine current Samoan students are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Curricular and Extra-curricular Strengths
of Friends of Samoan Students

University High School, 1984-85

Curricular/Extra-Curricular Strength of Friends	No. of Students
Athletics*	29
Academics	16
Dance/Music	7

Total Close Friends of Nine Current Samoan Students: 49

*Includes cheerleading

Notes: A student can have more than one "strength."
Assignment to categories was determined by acknowledgement of the student for his/her performance in a sport, academic area, or in dance or music at the UHS Awards Banquet, 1985.

All areas of the school program were represented as fields of special interest and strength by close friends of the nine current Samoan students. The largest number of friendships centered on the after-school athletic program. Most friends were teammates, who often excelled in competitive sports; some were cheerleaders. Many of the friends had received academic awards. Two friends had a 4.0 GPA; six others were on the honor roll. Several friends were active in song and/or dance, two of them Samoan friends. The friendships are strengthened through mutual participation in sports, classroom activities, and special performances.

Shared curricular interests and extra-curricular activities were most frequently the basis for small group associations or cliques. Students might be associated with "cliques" such as the

"select choir people" or the "jocks." Samoan students are highly represented in groups which grow out of participation in Polynesian dance and the study of the Samoan or Hawaiian language.

Activities with Friends. School friendships centered around class membership and identity, and curricular and extra-curricular involvements. Activities with friends took on many forms before, during, and after school, as well as out of school.

Before, During, and After School

At school, Samoan students and their friends took part in a number of events in classrooms and in "special" places on the school grounds. They frequently reported that their favorite pastime with friends was to "talk story," and they would have liked more time for socializing with friends.

Students sometimes talked with friends during class. Students and teachers recalled many examples of classmates helping one another, or the class generally. For instance, one of the students and her friend were lab assistants together in an art class. A teacher described an excellent student in science who helped some close friends who did not understand the assignments as well as he did. The teacher had noted how carefully the student explained and taught the material; he did not just tell answers. A boy and his friend were laboratory partners in science class; they and other friends in the class talked together to figure out experiments. In one class there was a group of Samoan and Hawaiian students sitting together at the back of the room. They generally talked about schoolwork and helped each other.

In a somewhat different vein, a girl who had a difficult time with her foreign language study was "helped" by a friend who did her assignments for her. Some talk between Samoan students and their friends in class was distracting--two friends talking, passing notes; but there appeared to be little talk of this type. If students talked too much, teachers would tell them to stop, and they usually did.

Students spent lunch, breaks between classes, and times before and after school with their friends. Some came to school early to have more time to socialize. They liked to chew gum, have a soda, and "squeeze every minute out of breaks that they possibly could." Many of the Samoan students in this group did homework with friends--before school, and at breaks, for their next class. Sometimes they picked up lunch at the lunch wagon and returned to their special place on campus. Some played basketball, or watched, with their friends as soon as they finished lunch together. Most students saw their friends daily in after-school sports. A few students also played on church or neighborhood teams outside of school, but their closest friendships were with their school friends.

All the Samoan students attended at least some after-school events--proms, dances, football and basketball games, concerts, plays, computer events, exchange programs, school camp-outs, and mainland trips. They attended many events as participants. For example, football players and band members went to all games; choir and band members performed in their concerts.

There were some problems associated with participation in these after-school activities--distance to be travelled, dangers, tiredness, the desire to watch week-end television, having no ride, and for at least one student, most of these reasons. Attendance at concerts in which students were expected to perform was sometimes a problem. Some students attended proms, usually in their junior and senior years. It was not unusual to take a date from another school.

Out of School

Although distance was a problem (some came into town from the Leeward or Windward Coasts), most students got together with their school friends outside of school. They got together with friends and classmates to go to the beach, the movies, and the malls. They would play games, go fishing, "talk story," "cruise around" (especially in black trucks with outsized tires when they could get one), "hang out," party (attend school dances or carnivals), and "stuff." For some students, getting together meant travelling the same long distances on "days off" school as they did on school days--taking a bus or getting Mom or Dad (usually a dad) or someone else (a brother or a friend) to take them or pick them up. The younger students were not old enough to drive; the older ones did not have access to cars, but some of their friends did. When they could not get together, they called each other on the telephone.

Samoan students and their friends usually knew each others' families. Most students said that they visited at their friends' homes, and that their friends came to their homes; sometimes they "slept over." Some commented on their closeness to each others'

parents. The father of one student who lived far from school and whose son did not bring school friends home, commented that family members heard the names of friends and knew of them, but never got to meet them.

Transformed Contexts Out of Friendships

This research emphasizes the centrality of the school for most Samoan students who have attended UHS and shows how that centrality is maintained. Talking and doing things with people associated with the school is integrally connected with academic and other school programs to form a total school experience. Friendships grow out of the common school experience, serve as organizers of student life, and assist students in interpreting and acting on the school experience. These friendships, in pivotal fashion, contribute to the transformation of the school experience of a group of students--Samoan and non-Samoan--into something different from what that experience might have been.

Talking Story and Doing Things Together. Amazed at the amount of time his daughter spent in school-related activities and associations, a father said, "She just loves that school!" The attachments to the school for these Samoan students are found in many areas. Involvement in activities revolves around interpersonal relationships. Seeing, talking with, and doing things with friends is often a top priority. What would make school better, according to some students, would be more time and a slower paced day, in which to develop the friendships further.

As one listens to Samoan students and others talk about what is happening in their school participation, the positive value of their friendships is especially striking--students playing together in sports, performing in dances, working on homework together, etc. There are negative behaviors within the school experience, but the peer experience, for the most part, does not reinforce those problems. Rather, school friendships and associations entail mutual helping, teaching, and modeling of behaviors, offsetting the negative and stressful rather than aggravating it. Another point that stands out from talks with Samoan graduates, their parents, former classmates, coaches, and others is the fondness they retain for these school friendships and their efforts to stay in touch.

The enduring nature of some of these friendships is set out in contrast to students' dubious, sometimes difficult and dramatic, beginnings at the school. The period of transition has been described by some students as quite troubled--a time of adapting to the new setting which, in most cases, entailed severing ties with peers in former schools and communities.

The bonding centers around doing things together and "talking story." In the school setting, things to do and places to talk center on shared status or participation, such as being a junior or senior, playing volleyball, or being in the same chemistry class. These are very tangible associations. They seem based less on ethnicity than on personal traits and circumstances, especially those which emanate most closely from the school experience itself.

Helping. An important feature of adjustment and attachment to the school was related to helping and getting help. Seeing others

as helpful was often brought up in interviews, and it seemed to be a source of comfort to know that others "helped you out." Being a helper was equally important, at least being able to demonstrate competence in some school setting where other students could see you in a favorable light. Samoan students who were lab assistants, who assisted others with their homework, who were leaders on their team, had an advantage over a few students who had no readily identifiable strengths. A few of the girls out of the total group, who were described as fussing and brooding a lot, seemed to be trying to establish themselves in a role of assisting or being of benefit to others. Sometimes it was appreciated, sometimes not.

Modeling. Modeling has been a powerful factor in peer relations and their contribution to the total school experience. There is evidence of a growing tradition, a history of Samoan students at the school with which at least some of the new students identified. This is exemplified by a large calendar in the home of one of the current students; the calendar featured a former Samoan UHS student, at the time, a professional athlete in Japan. Most students were probably only partially aware of the impact of a growing "tradition," but there is much to indicate the influence of this as well as other types of modeling by Samoan, and by non-Samoan, peers and predecessors.

Modeling among contemporaries at the school has been particularly effective in socializing Samoan students new to the school. Although often accomplished in subtle ways, sometimes the school network has been explicitly used. For instance, having

accepted a particular Samoan student at the school, the principal asked some other Samoan boys if they would help the new boy out by talking to him about matters of personal hygiene, grooming, and dress. The student came the next day clean, shaved, and with a new short haircut. The principal did not think peers at the school would have accepted the new boy the way he first came to school.

Sometimes within a group of Samoan students a hierarchy of respect was clearly seen as members of the group deferred usually to the eldest. The leader controlled possible conflict and confrontations among them and with others. The group demonstrated concern for how others in the school looked at Samoan students generally and took steps when necessary to see that members did not bring shame upon Samoans by acting badly. Some of the Samoan students took a similar leadership role in relations with non-Samoans at the school, for instance, on athletic teams.

In addition to the initiation of newcomers, Samoan students played a continuous role in just being there for other Samoan students, even though they had their own set of friends also. During an interview for this research a boy came along so that one of the girls did not have to do the interview alone. A girl talked about how good it was to have another Samoan girl in her class. The siblings in the school's population of Samoan students also helped each other out with advice, and sometimes defense.

There are examples of Samoan students "taking others under their wings." A group of Samoan students befriended a non-Samoan boy who was experiencing a lot of stress and insecurity; their friendship was reported to have given the boy more confidence, and

he was much happier than he had been. Other students, some of whom recalled initial reservations, described warm relationships with friends. They said the Samoans really went out of their way to help when needed and would do anything for their friends. It worked the other way as well. The one student who reportedly took things out of others' lockers was often shielded by non-Samoan friends, who put the things back before she got caught.

Networking. An extension of the interpersonal networking within the school worked its way into the wider community through school friendships, and getting together outside of school. Geographical distance from school friends was undoubtedly an obstacle to the further nurturance of these relationships, but the extent to which parents allowed for or supported students in their efforts to get together contributed to students--Samoans and non-Samoans--getting to know each other better than they would have otherwise. Students came to know each others' families and lifestyles in a way that would not have been possible if they only met at school.

Getting together outside of school deepened the Samoan students' association with other Samoan students attending the school, some of whom lived in the same or similar communities. It also enhanced their knowledge of and closeness to non-Samoan students and got them into situations and communities to which they might not otherwise have had easy access. The experience was, of course, reciprocal, allowing non-Samoans not only to get to know the Samoan students better, but often to experience the range of

diversity within that population--a diversity that people assume within their own "ethnic" group.

Samoan and non-Samoan students and their families came from a variety of communities and circumstances. They shared, valued, and took pride in the school experience as part of an extended network of friendships and associations.

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