

Chapter 1

Introduction

E poto le Tautai ae se lana atu i ama

The navigator is wise but can also be wrong. Knowledge is never complete; there is always something more to learn.¹

Overview

This chapter introduces the A’oga Fa’a Samoa, an early childhood Centre of Innovation (2003-2006). It outlines the aims and rationale of our research. Special characteristics of the A’oga Fa’a Samoa include its Samoan language and cultural immersion philosophy and programme, its transition processes, and its functioning as a “community of learners”. The research addresses two key research questions concerned with children’s learning and language continuity as they make transitions within and from the A’oga Fa’a Samoa.

The A’oga Fa’a Samoa



Photo 1: The A’oga Fa’a Samoa (2003) located on the site of the Richmond Road Primary school grounds.

¹ The proverbs at the beginning of the chapters were translated by Albert Refiti specifically for this report. Their original published source in Samoan was: Leaupepe Pita Leaupepe (1995). *Samoa i lona soifuaga i ana Aganuu*. Onehunga: Pacific Books Producers.

In 1984 in Auckland a group of grandparents and interested parents set up an incorporated society “A’oga Fa’a Samoa”, found premises, and started the first Samoan early childhood education centre in Aotearoa. The centre focused on Samoan-language immersion (Taouma, 1992). From the beginning the management committee, made up of the parents and grandparents of the children attending, had a vision of where they wanted the A’oga Fa’a Samoa to go. During its early years of operation, the centre was located at the Pacific Island Resource Centre in Herne Bay, Auckland. In 1989 the A’oga Fa’a Samoa was relocated on to a site in the grounds of Richmond Road School, where a bilingual Samoan unit operates at primary-school level. In 1990, this same centre became New Zealand’s first licensed and chartered Pacific early childhood centre.



Photo 2: The A’oga Fa’a Samoa, showing the covered way linking the under-2½ building to the over-2 building, with the sandpit as the focal play and meeting area.

Jan Taouma

The A'oga Fa'a Samoa was originally established in the Pacific Island Resource centre in Herne Bay Auckland. About the same time a Samoan bilingual class was established at Richmond Road Primary School in Ponsonby and approaches were made to the school for the A'oga Fa'a Samoa move onto the school site. Visits by the children in the Samoan unit of the Primary school to the A'oga had already been happening and children from the A'oga were transitioning to this class room when they turned 5 years of age

In 1987 the A'oga Fa'a Samoa moved onto the school site and was given the use of a school prefab and in 1988 a move was made to another prefab which had been renovated to meet the needs of early childhood children. This classroom included a small kitchenette with a deck the shape of a *fale* and a bathroom, laundry area. The *fale*-shaped deck was important as it gave children the added Samoan cultural value of being in a *fale*. This has been a focal point for children and parents over the years for dancing, mat times for morning *lotu* (prayers) and is where food is served to children who sit cross legged on Samoan *fala* (mats).

As the centre evolved and hours of operation extended the need to increase the size of the building was crucial. A grant was obtained and the main room of the building was built out over the bank making a much larger open space for children to operate in. A room was added for under-2 children to use and sleep in. An office and storeroom was added to the back of the room and a new kitchen toilet area was built. The centre was licensed for 34 children at this time.

One of the many advantages of being on the school site was the use of the school grounds during the time the Primary school was not using them. Children from the A'oga Fa'a Samoa can go with their teachers out side and run on the large field area, play games, explore the tree area and play on the fixed apparatus.

In 1998 consideration was given to the need to expand the centre once again. This was due to the huge demand for infants and toddlers to come to the centre. For Samoan language to develop strongly children need to be immersed in it as soon as possible. Staff at the A'oga Fa'a Samoa were studying theories of working with infants and toddlers and also the importance of bilingual education. Through their studies they knew it was important for young children to be exposed to Samoan language from an early age.

“Research has shown that newborns differentiate between speech sounds and other sounds, and up to the age of about nine months are able to respond with equal sensitivity to any set of phonetic distinctions they are exposed to (de Boyosson–Bardies 1999). After that time, they become increasingly locked into the sound system if the languages they are exposed to.” (Meade, Puhipuhi, & Foster-Cohen, 2003).

The current building was not adequate for many under-2 children and after much research on working with children of this age a discretionary grant was obtained to build another building for these children. This was exciting to be able to design something for the purposes of care and education for children of this age so that they could come too an environment that was created specifically for their needs. Staff

needs to have a space away from the children and for a proper office was also part of the plan. This staff area was created upstairs from the children and has a wonderful view over the primary school grounds.

The under-2 building was created to take into account the large liquid amber tree which covered the outside sandpit area which is the central play area between the two buildings where children meet and play together. However, two years after the opening of the new building it had to be removed due to dying branches. A large cover-way has since been erected which links the two buildings and enables children to be outside all year round.

More recent developments to the site have been the wonderful meeting and work room built when the A'oga Fa'a Samoa became a centre of innovation. The entrance way and new foyer in the over-2 area has been changed, with plans to renovate the toilet laundry area now underway.



Photo 3: The A'oga Fa'a Samoa 2006, showing the meeting room (upstairs at right) and the new foyer area.

A statement of philosophy was developed by and for the centre. The philosophy states that the A'oga Fa'a Samoa will:

- Promote Samoan language and culture, so nurturing the positive identity of the children.
- Employ trained educators and encourage further training so that quality care and education is provided.

- Encourage a family atmosphere for parents and children so children feel secure and loved.
- Emphasise enjoyment of learning through the medium of Samoan language.

In 2003, the A’oga Fa’a Samoa was selected as one of the 6 initial early childhood education centres of innovation (Taouma, Tapusoa, & Wendt Samu, 2005; Taouma, Wendt Samu, Podmore, Tapusoa, & Moananu, 2003).

New Zealand Centres of Innovation Programme

In 2002, the early childhood Centres of Innovation (COI) programme was announced as part of the New Zealand Government’s 10-year plan for early childhood education policy: *Pathways to the Future/Ngā Huarahi Arataki* (Ministry of Education, 2002).

Centres of Innovation are expected to:

- Build the use of innovative approaches that result in improved early childhood learning and teaching based on Te Whāriki: Early Childhood Curriculum;
- Facilitate action research, with the help of researchers, to show the results the innovative approaches have on learning and teaching;
- Share the knowledge, understanding and models of practice with others in the early childhood education sector and parents/whanau.

In 2003 the first 6 COIs were selected. After a similar selection process, the number increased to 10 from 2005. Selection of a third round of 6 more new COIs centres was finalized early in 2006. To date, the A’oga Fa’a Samoa is the only COI that is a Samoan-language immersion centre. Special characteristics of the A’oga Fa’a Samoa are its Samoan language-immersion programme, and its “community of learners” collaborative approach.

Our key innovations as a COI are:

- Small groups of children stay with the same teacher from the point of entry through different groups and spaces in the centre and into school.
- This innovation, with the educator able to move through each developmental stage from babies to 5-year-olds, was introduced to benefit children, families and educators.

(These innovations are described further in Meade, 2005).

Like all COIs, the A'oga Fa'a Samoa has been engaged in a 3-year action research project to show how the centre's innovative practices influence learning and teaching.

Research Aims

Our action research was designed to investigate the relationship between learning and language continuity as children and educators make transitions within the centre and on to school. A related intention of the research is to document aspects of the identity, strength, and confidence of the children.

Research Questions

The two key research questions in this study are:

1. What helps learning and language continuity as children make transitions within and from the A'oga Fa'a Samoa?
2. How can the key approaches that help learning and language continuity be implemented in practice?

Our research was designed to address the above research questions, within the context of the A'oga Fa'a Samoa and its community, and for the benefit of its community. Collaborative, active involvement of key staff members is a key feature of the action research. The sampling design includes children at two transition points and the staff at the centre. The transition points are:

- (1) the move at around 2 years 6 months from the infants' and toddlers' area to the over-2s area, and
- (2) the transition from the A'oga Fa'a Samoa to the primary school on the adjacent site.