

14 August 2006

**Early Childhood Centres of Innovation (COI)  
Action Research at the A’oga Fa’a Samoa**

**“O le tama ma lana a’oga,  
O le tama ma lona fa’asinomaga”  
“Nurturing positive identity in children”**

Final Research Report  
from the A’oga Fa’a Samoa  
an Early Childhood Centre of Innovation

Valerie N. Podmore with Tanya Wendt Samu and  
the A’oga Fa’a Samoa

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## Executive Summary

### Background

In 1984 a group with vision, made up of grandparents and interested parents, set up an incorporated society “A’oga Fa’a Samoa”, found premises, and started a Samoan early childhood education centre in Auckland. When the A’oga Fa’a Samoa opened, it was the first Pasifika language and cultural immersion early childhood centre in New Zealand. In 1990, the A’oga Fa’a Samoa became New Zealand’s first licensed and chartered Pasifika early childhood centre. Then in 2003, the A’oga Fa’a Samoa was selected as one of the 6 initial early childhood education centres of innovation in New Zealand. The early childhood Centres of Innovation (COI) programme is 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).

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 (their “primary caregiver”) 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.

Like all COIs, the A’oga Fa’a Samoa was engaged in a 3-year action research project to show how the centre’s innovative practices influence learning and teaching. Our research was designed to collaboratively with the A’oga Fa’a Samoa and its community, and for the benefit of its community. The action research focused on two major research questions:

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?

### **Key Findings**

*“Key principles of the research included those which inform our actions within our different aiga (extended families): service and responsibility (tautua), love and commitment (alofa) and respect (faaaloalo). The “connections” that we made (in terms of new knowledge, understandings and perspectives, and relationships with others) were a consequence of the principles that informed our research practice.” (Tanya Wendt Samu, focus group facilitator)*

### **Benefits and Outcomes for Children**

- **Children’s Language and Cultural Continuity** Children’s heritage language (Samoan) was shown to be important for cognitive learning. The vision of the Samoan grandparents who had the idea of establishing the A’oga Fa’a Samoa centre, the language and cultural immersion policy at the centre, and international research findings on bilingualism, all support the importance of young children learning to communicate competently in their mother tongue or heritage language.
- As part of being a COI, the staff/teacher-researchers at the A’oga Fa’a Samoa carried out observations and reflected on them. This led to teachers and management at the centre and in the primary school making further changes that enhanced young children’s language continuity. Learning increasingly took place in Samoan, as the improved structural layout to the centre and our changed practices ensured that Samoan immersion really happened. For example, much more of the centre became designated as Samoan-speaking-only areas.
- Teachers took on more study in immersion and bilingual education, and there is evidence in the translated interview data that teachers were using techniques that support language-immersion education and bilingualism (Baker, 2000). These techniques included: indirect error correction and using repetition,

restatement to ensure that children understand, role modeling, and frequent use of praise.

- The teacher-researchers, reflecting on children's conversations with their teachers, found that children spoke confidently and competently in Samoan, they had meaningful conversations among themselves and with their teachers, and they were proud of their achievements.

*"Findings from each cycle of the research helped us plan to meet children's needs, and this helped transition and language learning run more smoothly."*  
(Ene Tapusoa, teacher-researcher)

- **Innovative transitions** The COI research, tracking the children's transition to school, shows that physical location (the A'oga Fa'a Samoa is situated in the grounds of Richmond Road primary school which has a bilingual unit) and transition practices, together with the language immersion policy at the centre, supported and strengthened the confidence and Samoan language competence of the children making transitions.
- Innovative transition practices (e.g., spending time in the new entrants' bilingual class in the primary school), and language immersion practices, supported children's competence and their confidence to express themselves in Samoan, and their identity.
- We found that that young children's sense of belonging is a very important aspect of learning during and after transitions. For children moving from the infants' and toddlers' area to the over-2s area of the centre, knowing where their shoes and bags belong, clothes are hung, and about sleeping places and patterns is important for their security and sense of belonging. Teachers introduced a new initiative, of using the child's own photograph to label the place where a child's bag and shoes belong. They found that this worked well for the children in transition and their teachers.
- Making transitions as members of a small peer group fostered a sense of belonging and contributing to the group. This is consistent with the *aiga*

principle, and was evident in observations of small groups of children, and parents' written comments on their young children's transition within the centre.

- **Aspirations for Children** The innovative transition practice of having a “primary caregiver” making transitions within the centre with “her” group of children clearly helped the children's sense of belonging, their security, and their competent communication in Samoan. In this way, our key findings for children are consistent with the aspirations for children as stated in the early childhood curriculum document *Te Whāriki*:

*“To grow up as competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body, and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society”.*

(Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 9).

**A Community of Learners** As part of the research, teachers reflected on their interactions with children, and introduced more teaching practices that support children as active learners and communicators. These practices included asking children meaningful questions and jointly constructing knowledge alongside them.

*“...We are all part of the community of learners, we all know that... working together at A’oga is like being in an aiga (family), it is not a family until the work is done together. This is all part of being Samoan; it’s part of our culture and traditions...It was interesting to find out...things that we had never seen or heard before about children who were being observed, which helped with understanding the children’s needs and interests and how would could extend their learning with the knowledge that we had learnt, to me its all about enhancing the children’s learning, what ways can we as teachers make learning for children interesting and exciting?” (Au Luatua—Teacher-researcher)*

- A focus group—that represented teachers, parents, researchers, centre management, and the primary school—served as an advisory group for the project. The focus group became a “community of learners”, and the research shows how a wide group became part of the research process and reflection.

*“The view from the COI focus group has been both enlightening and insightful for me as a parent, a management committee member, and as*

*a learner. It has increased my understanding and appreciation of the complexities surrounding language continuity, good transitional practice, and the importance of working together as aiga in a supportive and collaborative way to ensure that our children develop and learn in an early childhood educational environment enriched by language and cultural values.” (Riki Apa—focus group member)*

### **Benefits and Outcomes for Teachers and Parents in a Pasifika Community**

- Parents and centre staff/teacher-researchers participated actively within the centre and the focus group. During the process of the research, the focus group became a “community of inquiry”. Focus group members reflected on data, findings, translations, and all of the A’oga Fa’a Samoa research reports.

*“Being part of this research has been a great learning curve... Reflecting on the data collected gave me a better understanding of the principles and strands of Te Whāriki, and also indicated the areas we need to improve. It showed theorists we learnt through studies being implemented through teachers interacting with children.” (Ene Tapusoa—Teacher-researcher)*

In summary, the findings of this research about language and cultural continuity are important for Pasifika children’s education. The innovative practices at the A’oga Fa’a Samoa, together with changes made during the research process, smooth infants’ and young children’s transitions as they move in small groups with their “primary caregiver” within the centre and on to school.

*“As the co-ordinator for of this 3-year research project it has been a wonderful learning experience and a reassurance that the philosophies, theories and practices at the A’oga Fa’a Samoa are sound.” (Jan Taouma)*

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Ene Tapusoa.