

Chapter 6

FINDINGS: Innovative Transitions

O alofa na o alofa nei, o alofa lava ma te momoe nei.

Your love for one person will be felt by everyone.

(This proverb relates to the primary caregiver's long-term relationship with her group of children).

Overview

This chapter presents and discusses findings on innovative transitions, both within the centre and from the centre to school. Innovative practices at the centre include having small groups of infants assigned a “primary caregiver” who makes the transitions within the centre with “her” group of children. Findings are also presented on small groups of children's transition to the primary school located on the same block of land as the centre. Two key themes are discussed: continuity of teachers; and continuity of the group.

Transition to the Over-2s Area

Applying Attachment Theory

Jan Taouma

In considering the addition of the building for children aged under 2 years, staff had been researching how best to incorporate these very young children into the centre. It was decided that the area would be designed from the level of an infant, dropped windows to see the road, low furniture, feeding chairs would be at ground level and the bench top low enough for children to access and interact with staff. A swinging basket from Kenya was installed above the safe crawl area for young babies to sleep in. Barriers around the safe crawl area were designed so that they can be removed to make one big room if so needed. From research on primary caregiving and the importance of attachment for very young children, we decided that children would start in groups and stay in that group with the same “primary caregiver” for their whole time spent at the A’oga Fa’a Samoa. This would mean that the primary caregiver would move with the children when they reached the age of 2½ years to the

other building, staying with them until they transitioned in to the Samoan class in the primary school.

Not only was this going to create strong bonds it would allow staff to plan for children knowing their interests and development and to be able to extend their thinking, learning and language development. Parents were also able to build up a long term relationship with the primary caregiver and other parents in the group.

Children would settle in to the centre during primary holidays when attendance was low and the centre was quieter so allowing children to have a calm time to acquaint themselves with the staff and the centre.

Innovative Practices

The current transition processes for the children at enrolment, and when they are aged over 2 years 6 months, is summarised in the box below.

Transition processes for infants and toddlers: The Primary Caregiver

Children are enrolled with a “primary caregiver” according to their age, birth-date, making sure that small ratios are kept at all times. This primary caregiver moves with the children through each area—*babies/infants - toddlers - young children*. In this way, children, families, and staff are able to build up strong relationships, develop strengths and interests, and extend learning and language.

When children move from the building of the under-2½-year-old children to the building for older children the staff member moves with them. At this stage of transition, the research was documented through observation, diary recordings, individual portfolios, and parent feed back.

Belonging, Learning, and Teaching during Transition

Throughout the research, observations showed that understanding where to put their shoes when making a transition within the centre is important to children’s sense of belonging in the new environment. This was evident across the action research cycles.

The groups of young children in transition were also concerned about where to place their bags and belongings.

Example: Belonging (22.9.2003)

The first day at the over 2s side, a staff member shows Lilly (a child in the transition group) and her mum where to put her bag, and the changing room, and where to put her nappies.

Mum leaves and Lilly plays with (her two friends) inside. They play in the family corner, sort colours, draw pictures and use scissors to cut papers. She decides to walk outside; her friends follow her and they all go and sit outside on the couch and take their shoes off. They line their shoes up at the back of the couch then she (the child) leads them to the sand pit. The teacher brings them back to show them where their shoes should go.

Reflecting on her observations of the “transition children”, a teacher recorded in her diary:

The children linked what they knew (in this instance, where their shoes belonged), i.e. they tried to find a similar place in the over-2s area. They were building up knowledge about where their things belonged—developing a sense of identity. They did this twice before they remembered. On the 3rd day, two children remembered—the third child needed reminding. Within a week they had all remembered (where to put their shoes in the new environment).

Regarding the teacher’s interactions, she noted:

When (the “primary caregiver”) realised that our three new children had put their shoes in a place like they used to use, she got them together and explained where their shoes belonged in the new setting (over 2s area). This was repeated during the week.

Clearly, understanding where to put their shoes when making a transition within the centre was important to these children’s sense of belonging in the new environment. The importance of removing shoes inside, and placing them in appropriate places, is consistent with cultural practices in Pasifika contexts. Understanding where to sleep in the new environment was also important, as evident in observations from both groups of young children who were tracked during their transition to the over-2s area.

In the second year of the project, the next group of children moving across to the over-2s building was helped by a new practice the teachers introduced after the first cycle of the research. Teachers implemented a labelling system, using the child's own photograph, to help identify the appropriate place for each child's shoes and belongings after their transition to the building for the children aged over 2½ years. Some examples of their subsequent observations of a child in the transition group follow:

20/9/04 Belonging

Aotea took the teacher's hand and said, "Look". She (the child) pointed her hand at her photo on her container and said, "Aotea" (her own name). Then she moved onto another child in the transition group's container and said "Tarita" (that child's name). She kept walking down pointing at her group's photos saying their names.

Teacher's reflection:

Aotea was excited about her photo on her container. It helped her to know where her bag went when she came in the morning and when the teacher wanted to know where her bag was. It helped her also to know when the other children's bags were by their photos. Knowing she has a place to call her own.)

On the basis of further extensive observations, the teachers observed that this new practice, of labeling using the child's photograph, is working well in terms of enhancing children's sense of belonging in the new space:

Great idea by the teacher to put photos there. The children love seeing their photos and this helps them to recognise their names. It also stimulates communication between children and staff.

Transition with the Teacher: Learning in the New Space

Observations illustrate that the children needed to know not only where to put their belongings, but also where to sleep and which adult would be with them throughout the day. The innovative practice having the teacher (their A'oga Fa'a Samoa "primary caregiver") making the transition with each small group of young children in transition, enhanced the children's sense of security in the new space, and also facilitated appropriate interpretation of their actions. The following observational

excerpts and diary entries show the effectiveness of this practice in terms of the young children's sense of belonging and their well-being.

Example: Belonging (19.1.2004)

Tiare, aged 2 years 2 months

Tiare: "I don't want to sleep down there". She points towards the sleep room. "I want to sleep up there", and points to the under-2s area. After changing I put her down and she walks straight over to the under-2s area.

I follow her and ask "Fea lou ofu?" (where's your dress?). She says "Where's my bag? It's over here", and walks towards the cubby holes. We go next door and she turns round teary-eyed. "What's wrong?" She says, "I don't want to go to that bed". (in the over-2s area).

"What bed do you want to go to?"

She points towards the door and says, "That one", pointing to the under-2s.

"You're a big girl now. That's your new bed now. All the babies sleep over in the cots now". Tiare nods her head. "Where's Tiare's bed?" She points to the door.

I bring the mattress down with a pillow and cuddle her.

After her bottle, she goes into the sleep room and cuddles for a few minutes then sleeps at 1.05p.m. When Tiare wakes up, she gets dressed and walks next door and "bonds with Teacher 03". She has afternoon tea there and stays with her until 4 o'clock.

The teacher reflected that "*Tiare is unsettled with the new sleeping environment*", after she moved to the over-2s area. At the beginning of her time in the over-2s area, "Tiare" would settle to sleep only with the teacher who moved with her (from the under-2s area). This teacher was the one who had first settled Tiare into the centre.

The above example, from the second spiral of the research, illustrates the importance to a child of where she sleeps at the time of transition to the over-2s area, and the relevance to her security of having a familiar teacher (her A'oga Fa'a Samoa "primary caregiver") with her.

This child, "Tiare" was observed for 5 months after making the transition, and she continued to show a bond with the familiar teacher. For example, 2 months after the above observation:

Example (10.3.2004)

“Tiare” is unsettled this morning and cried when she was dropped off. She wouldn’t stay with one teacher but she stayed with Teacher 03. She stopped crying (this was during Lotu/prayers in the morning). I was singing and doing actions to a song when looking across opposite from where I was sitting, saw that Tiare looks at my hands and tries to imitate what I am doing. We say the rhyme again and she still follows, keeping her eyes on my hands. When it comes to the end, I put up my thumb (thumbs up), she tries to do it – she finally manages to. She looks up and sees me smiling, then smiles too.

Reflection on “Tiare’s” “Wellbeing” and “Belonging”:

The teacher, realising that Tiare was trying to copy her, went slower for her and realising that this took her mind off her mum made sure that she would know that someone else was looking at her and smiling, praising her for trying, giving her a sense of belonging and independence.

The following observations were recorded when the primary caregiver of one group of transition children (Teacher S) was absent on sick leave for several days.

20/9/04: On the first day of Teacher S and her group’s transition to the over-2s side, Tarita was the first to arrive. She was happy to see the teacher who was already there. The teacher said, “Talofa Tarita”. Tarita replied “Talofa (Teacher M) Teacher M then asked her how she was and Tarita said, “Manuia fa’afetai” (I’m well, thank you). She then went and sat down and ate her piece of bread. Another child came; the teacher greeted her and asked how she was. She replied, “Manuia fa’afetai” Then the child saw Tarita, she walked over and sat with her. When Vitolio came, they both stood up and said “Talofa” to him. Vitolio walked over to them. Aotea came, they clapped their hands and ran to her. They brought her back to where they sat before they all shared Tarita’s bread. Tarita saw another child come in; she stood up saying to them, “Va’ai Shiloh” (Look at Shiloh). They all went to meet that child, and then they came and sat down talking happily together.

Tarita asked the teacher, “Leai Teacher S?” (Is Teacher S not here yet?). The teacher replied “E lei sau Teacher S” (Teacher S is not here). Tarita then told her group saying “Leai Teacher S”. Later on Tarita asked Teacher M again, saying “Teacher M, sau Teacher S?” (Is Teacher S here?). Teacher M replied, “Leai, ua ma’i Teacher S”. (No, Teacher S is sick). Then she went and repeated it to the other children in her group, “Leai Teacher S, Leai Teacher S” (No Teacher S).

That day one of the children and Aotea went to the under-2s for a little while. Most of the day these children (the small group in transition) were seen playing together.

The teacher/researchers' diary records included these reflections about the children's sense of *belonging*, (and *well-being*, *exploration*, *communication*, and *contribution*) and what the teacher did to foster this:

Belonging: The children were excited to see each other and being in the new environment. Teacher M encouraged a sense of belonging in the new space—she greeted the children, welcoming them and making them feel comfortable in the new environment knowing that Teacher S (their primary caregiver) wouldn't be there.

Well-being: The children showed a growing capacity to identify their emotions and to be independent, knowing that familiar adults are around. The teacher responded to the children's attempts to communicate their feelings in a respectful way.

Exploration: (Thinking/ideas) Even though the children were happy to see each other, Tarita still noticed that Teacher S (their primary caregiver) was not there, and asked the teacher about her. The teacher explained to Tarita why teacher S was not there.

Given that these young children were concerned to know where their primary caregiver was during and after their transition with her, talking about her and her whereabouts became a topic of strong interest that seemed to stimulate conversations in the Samoan language. As well as being important to their belonging and sense of well-being, then, the quest to find out more about their primary caregiver also appeared to challenge these children to communicate in Samoan among themselves and with other teachers who were nearby. The teachers encouraged the children to use short sentences in Samoan.

The teacher/researcher made these reflective comments:

Communication: (Samoan language development) All the children were familiar with the greetings in the morning "talofa, manuia fa'afetai." The teacher helped them to respond. What she said helped Tarita to make short sentences to communicate with the teacher.

For months after their primary caregiver returned from sick leave, the children continued to show the same strong bond with her. Their primary caregiver recorded:

9/11/04 – Two children from the transition group and Teacher S:

It was lotu time. I sat down on the mat. Emma came sat on my lap. Tarita saw us and came over calling my name. She tried to push Emma off. Emma said to her, “My (Teacher S)”. Tarita, nearly crying, said “No my (Teacher S)”, holding onto my hand. I told Emma to sit on one side while Tarita sat on the other.

The teacher-researcher reflected in her diary, with reference to the strand of Belonging, that the two children both wanted to sit on their primary caregiver’s lap:

One child said to the other “My S”. This shows how close she was to Teacher S, not wanting to share her. Teacher S helped them to understand that they can both sit with her. By doing this, she was letting them know that she loved both of them.

This primary caregiver actually left the centre in January 2005, and departed overseas. The teacher-researcher noted that, before she left, the children had just spent 3 weeks without her (during the Christmas holiday period when the centre was closed). “It probably helped, their being away for 3 weeks.” Then, prior to leaving, she sat down with the children and explained that she was leaving, and the children seemed to accept this. Two weeks after she had left, no-one from “her” group of children had mentioned her. At this point, the teacher-researcher asked the children in Samoan “Where is (Teacher S)?” She noted that: “The children knew. One child (Tarita) said “Alu i Australia” (“In Australia”). The other two said “Va’alele” (“In an aeroplane”). Sensitive communication by their teacher had apparently helped them to adapt to her departure.

As illustrated above, observations during several action research cycles showed how small groups of young children making transitions within the centre were showed their concern on days when their primary caregiver was absent through illness, or when one primary caregiver left the centre. Talking about the primary caregiver and her whereabouts (on days when she was absent from the centre) became a topic of strong interest that seemed to stimulate conversations in the Samoan language. As

well as being important to their belonging and sense of well-being, the quest to find out more about their primary caregiver also appeared to challenge these children to communicate in Samoan among themselves and with other teachers who were nearby. The teachers encouraged the children to use short sentences in Samoan.

These observations and reflections provide further evidence that the innovative transition process, of having the primary caregiver move with a small group of children from under-2½-year-old children's area to the building for older children, fosters children's well-being, communication, contribution (in terms of aiga philosophy), and sense of belonging in the new space.

Learning Together as a Group

Learning together as a group was clearly important to the young children in transition. After the small groups of children moved to the over-2s area, the observations and teacher diaries showed numerous examples of co-operative and imaginative play in their same, small transition groups. The sense of bonding and security associated with being together in a transition group was found repeatedly throughout the research. Some examples of learning together as a group, recorded from observations and in teacher diaries during the first cycle of the research, are presented below.

A number of other observations show the same child interacting with two others who have recently made the transition to the over-2s area together:

Example (3/2/04) (Children: Miara, Keenen, and Kalden)

All three children are playing together in the sandpit – they walk behind each other on the edge of the sandpit. Kalden picks up a spade and pretends it is a guitar; he sings. Keenen joins in the singing. Miara starts digging. After a while the other two join in until Keenen sees a box then he walks over and jumps in. The other two follow. After a while child Miara walks over to the babies' side and Keenen and Kalden walk over to the rocket. They climb up inside and put their heads through the hole, growling, pretending to be lions. The teacher "growls" at them through the other hole and they both scream and move to the other hole. The teacher "growls" from the other side and they laugh and move back. When the teacher looks in, they are both sitting back looking through both holes to see which one she will growl from.

Reflecting on the observations of this small group of three of the transition children, the teacher wrote:

It seems to me that Kalden, Keenen and Miara are very comfortable playing together. The change to the new environment (the over-2s area) they are in now has not affected their relationship as friends. They're still together. (I guess what I'm saying is that transition in a group with the teacher is less stressful for the children according to the observations so far).

These observations and reflections provide preliminary evidence that the innovative transition processes at the centre are fostering the young children's well-being, and their sense of belonging in the new space.

The teacher-researcher also made these reflections on the role of the teacher:

“(The teacher was) being part of their play valuing their play by interaction.”

A few months later, this teacher-researcher reflected further that in some of the interactions, the teachers could also be placing more emphasis on encouraging children's exploration and thinking.

In the second action research cycle, as well as their attachment to the primary caregiver, one small group of transition children who moved up through the centre together also showed strong bonding as a group and looked after one another, consistent with the *aiga* philosophy. One of the children, Tarita, communicated to the other children the information about their teacher's absence. The teacher-researcher reflected later that day:

Contribution: (looking after others arriving/aiga philosophy) Even though Teacher S wasn't there, when the children found out they accepted that and looked after each other all day, playing together.

The teacher-researcher also noted that, even by March 2005, one child (Tarita) was still taking a lead role in looking after the others in the group. In late March, Tarita herself had left the centre to go overseas with her parents. By then, the other children were well used to being in the new space, and they were closely bonded as a group.

Parents' Perspectives

Parents contributed further information about their children's transitions. One parent provided a written commentary on her son's close friendship and attachment to Tarita, a child noted by the teacher-researchers as one who took a lead role in looking after other children in the group. The parent described her son's experience this way:

Our twin son and daughter have both attended A'oga Fa'a Samoa, since 21 months of age. They played separately from each other within a few months of starting at a'oga. This early success is probably due to the fact that they had the added security of both being in the same peer group with the same caregiver, but also had the freedom to make their own friends with children from younger and older age groups.

Whenever we talked about friends and who they were looking forward to seeing at the start of the new school week, they would name some common and some separate friends. Our son became particularly close to a girl, Tarita, in the over-2 years group.

At 33 months of age, a year after starting a'oga, we noticed a new unexpected change in our son's behaviour. He became distressed (on arrival) at a'oga, and his sleep behaviour changed...

It took a few weeks before I realised that we hadn't seen Tarita for a while, despite Tarita still being named as a friend our son was hoping to see. I asked the faia'oga (A'oga teacher) if she (i.e., Tarita) was sick, and was informed that she had shifted out of the country permanently. That afternoon, I told our son that I was sorry Tarita was no longer at school. Tears welled up in his eyes...

We talked about where Tarita was, why she was there, and why we couldn't go visit her. We talked about who we knew in that country... We also planned to write Tarita a letter. Our son's behaviour changed back to normal gradually.

This young boy was in the small group of children who were slightly younger than Tarita. After Tarita moved to the over 2½-year-olds' building, observations showed that she looked after others within the group, and on several occasions also crossed over to the under-2½s area to check on the small group of younger children there. The observations and parents' comments show clearly that young children formed close

friendships and attachments to other children, both within their own small group, and with children from the younger group.

Summary

The observations of the children, the teachers' diary reflections, and also the parents' comments support the finding that the innovative transition process, of having the primary caregiver move with a small group of children from under-2½-year-old children's area to the building for older children, fosters children's well-being, communication, contribution (in terms of *aiga* philosophy), and their sense of belonging not only in the new space, but also to their small groups of peers. There were clear examples of children as young as around 2 years forming close bonds with other children, and taking responsibility for caring for other children and members of the group, thereby making a contribution within and across the groups. This is evidence of the principles and strands of Te Whāriki, and of the *aiga* principle, in action in the centre.

Transition to School

Innovative Approaches to Transition to School

There is a close connection between the A'oga and the school, located on the same block of land. Their primary caregiver from the centre accompanies the children to the school classroom to observe and be part of their transition experiences. This also builds up a relationship between the classroom teacher and the children who will be moving to school. Details of the transition-to-school process are summarised below.

***Transition Process for Children into the Bilingual Samoan classroom of
Richmond Road Primary School***

The A'oga Fa'a Samoa is situated on the site of the primary school and is regarded as a part of the "*school family*"—a part of the community of learners attached to the school.

The A'oga joins with the school in all the school assemblies each Friday, performing on a regular basis with the bilingual Samoan classroom. The A'oga also joins in

powhiri and other whole school community events that regularly occur during the school year.

The oldest group of 4-year-old children begin a *transition process* with their primary caregiver, who takes them, for at least an hour once a week, to the bilingual classroom in the primary school. This enables the children to become confident in their knowledge of the school area, classroom, teachers and of course to meet up with their brothers, sisters and friends who have previously been apart of the A'oga Fa'a Samoa.

These 4-year-old children also have a time each week to go to the school library to read and take out books, which is part of the transition knowledge and also is encouraging literacy for them.

These innovative practices are enhancing understanding and interpretation of the actions of children who make the transition. Below is a conversation with a child (Izaiah) soon after he moved to the school classroom.

Faia'oga (A'oga teacher) – “O a mai le a'oga?” (How's school?)

Izaiah – “Manaia” (Nice).

Faia'oga – “O ai le igoa o lau faia'oga?” (What is your teacher's name?)

Izaiah – “O Miss Catherine”.

Faia'oga – “Ete fiafia i le a'oga?” (Are you happy at/with school?)

Izaiah – “Ioe”. (yes).

Faia'oga – “Aisea?” (Why?)

Izaiah – “Because I do my homework”.

Faia'oga – “O a mea a'oga e fai?” (What homework do you do?)

Izaiah – “O le art and do some names”.

Faia'oga – “E te iloa fa'asamoa?” (Can you speak Samoan?)

Izaiah – “Ioe”. (yes)

Faia'oga – “O le a le fa'asamoa o lau tala? (How do you say what you said in Samoan?)

Izaiah – “E fiafia e fai le galuega, e fiafia au i la'u faia'oga o Miss Catherine. E fai le lotu, e tautala Palagi ai i le a'oga”. (I'm happy to work. I like my teacher, I say prayers and I speak English at school).

The above conversation shows how talking with the A'oga teacher about moving to primary school contributed to the child's communication in Samoan. The faia'oga

extended the child's speech in Samoan and his thinking. In this way, the COI research interviews helped children to keep talking in Samoan about their move from the Samoan-immersion environment of the A'oga to the bilingual classroom at the school.

This trend continued to be evident throughout the action research. Another teacher, observing a new group of children making the transition to school, recorded examples of communication and belonging, including the following brief excerpt:

Example: Communication (3.2.2004)

The teacher (from the A'oga Fa'a Samoa) asks the child who has moved to school:

Ua maua sau uo? (Have you found a friend?)

Child: – “No”. Then she says “Yes, (Her cousin)”. She walks inside and goes straight to where she hangs her bag under her name. After hanging her bag she walks to her mother holding her hand.

When school starts she says her goodbyes to her mother, sits on the mat and waits for the teacher.

The School Teacher calls out the roll. When it comes to (the child's) turn, she says “Talofa lava lau susuga a le faia'oga”. (Greetings to you Teacher).

Teacher– Fa'afetai lava. Teine lelei tele. (Thank you – child's name – Good girl).

This teacher reflected that the children she was observing “settled in very well because they saw a familiar face.” “I was there to be near them, to talk to them to make the transition work well. They need lots of cuddles and love”.

In the next example, recoded during mat time in the new entrant classroom 4 months after one small group of children made the transition to school, there is evidence both of communication in Samoan, and of belonging in terms of cultural identity:

The whole class sits on the floor during mat time. They are saying their A E I O U..... Samoan alphabet. The class will follow the stick— whichever letter the teacher points her stick at. They then add two letters together e.g. fa, fe, fi, fo, fu. (to remind them of their letters). The school teacher asks in Samoan “What's today's date, day and year?”.

Karl puts his hand up and says “Aso Lulu, Iuni, 04” (Wednesday, June 2004). He goes up to the board and writes the date, month and year...

He shares his news with (the A’oga Fa’a Samoa teacher who is observing) in Samoan, “Sa alu a’u i le lakapi; sa alu a’u ma lo’u tama Andrew i le Kalapu”. (“I went to the rugby with my father Andrew at the club”).

She replies: ‘Lelei tele le tautala fa’asamoa a oe.’ (Your Samoan is very good, (child’s name))”.

He (the child) replies “Because I’m a Samoan, I’m not a Palagi” (English-speaking European).

In this way, some of the observations and diary records also illustrate children’s sense of identity after they make the transition to school.

Important factors for Transition: Parents’ Voices

A wider group of parents became involved in the focus group meetings. At the focus groups, parents made some extensive comments in response to questions about transition practices (for the detailed questions, see Appendix A). As one parent said:

Retention of staff here is amazing. All my children have come here and faia’oga are like their aunties. I feel relaxed leaving them here. It feels normal, it stems from cultural – the aiga or family base – the idea of teachers moving with them (the children making transitions) makes it feel even more natural. The inclusion of the wider community and individuals feels natural as they move on further to school (Parent, at the focus group 11 August 2004).

Important factors for Transition

Factors that the parents of parents of a group of 6 transitioning children identified as important to make transition smoother included some policies and practices already in place, like location and visits:

“Having A’oga connected to a primary school bilingual unit”

“Having our children as 4-year-olds go up to bilingual unit once a week”

“Participating in school assembly with the primary school”.

“Weekly visits from the A’oga to the unit once he turned 4 made it a very familiar place. I also think the assembly performances are great for helping them feel part of the school at an early age.”

“Starting at the A’oga was a positive step, and helped her transition to school. Having her friends from the A’oga attend the same school was also a huge help.”

Familiarity of the older children in the school was a related factor:

“I think the transition was made smoother due to the fact that (the child) knew many of the older children as most of them have been through the A’oga, he already had an older brother in the unit...”

The teacher was also important:

“Having a warm, caring, friendly teacher like ___ who was previously with A’oga is a great help and relief for me as a parent.”

“I suppose the familiarity of the school and teachers”.

Parent commitment was a further factor:

“Having a group of parents who are committed and passionate about providing resources for bilingual unit (for e.g., trips)

“Knowing the parents already, made it comfortable for us to send ___ to the primary school. We felt the parents in general were very supportive and were enthusiastic in ensuring the primary school excelled.”

Communication and relationships (across parents, children, teachers, and the community) were clearly key factors.

The importance of relationships is emphasised in *Te Whāriki*, the early childhood curriculum, where the overarching principles are:

- Empowerment (“The early childhood curriculum empowers children to learn and grow”);
- Relationships (“Children learn through responsive and reciprocal relationships with people, places, and things”);
- Family and Community (“The wider world of family and community is an integral part of the early childhood curriculum”)

- Holistic development (“The early childhood curriculum reflects the holistic way children learn and grow”).

(Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 14)

During the process of discussing language continuity and transition, parents in the focus groups spontaneously made positive comments about relationships with families and the community:

Relationships are culturally embedded, with language as a means to support transitions, making them sound, easy, and fluid – from the under 2s to the over 2s to primary (year 1). Relationships of faia’oga are critical and important to kids – building a very real sense of community from the child’s perspective (i.e., the child’s community).

It’s not just the relationship with the child and the faia’oga (teacher) etc., but also with me, the parent. I am the connecting point bobbing along with the family...As a result I am more relaxed. There is a lower level of anxiety associated, especially with transition. (Parent, at the focus group 11 August 2004).

Transitions become...are therefore not defined strictly in a single point of time, rather graduated over an extended period of time (Another parent, at the focus group 11 August 2004).

In this way, parents’ perspectives endorse our view that the principles of *Te Whāriki* can be seen in action in the innovative transition practices at the centre. Parents’ perspectives also support the importance of the *aiga* principle (see Chapter 4) to centre practices, including the transition practices.

The critical incidents analyses similarly show what helps successful transition. Responses from parents and educators participating in a focus group were sorted into categories of what helps in transition. The categories that emerged were: “time in new entrants’ class in the primary school”, “positive teacher characteristics”, “establishment of a ‘buddy system’”, and “educators are involved in observations of children”. (For a detailed report on the critical incidents analyses, see Appendix E).

Summary of Findings

What has the COI done, on innovative transition, to help children's and adults' learning?

The innovative transition practice of having a primary caregiver making transitions within the centre with “her” group of children clearly contributed to the children's sense of belonging, their security, and their communication in Samoan. This conclusion is supported by the observations and reflections analysed (across the strands of *Te Whāriki*) in this research, by information shared by parents in the focus group meetings, the critical incidents analyses (Appendix E) and by repeated surveys of parents. Specific findings on smoothing transitions for children were:

- Promoting a strong sense of belonging in the new space eases transition for children. For children moving from the infants' and toddlers' area to the over-2s area of the centre, knowing where shoes and bags belong, clothes are hung, and about sleeping places and patterns is important.⁴ Teachers reported that a new initiative, of using the child's own photograph to label the place where a child's bag and shoes belong, worked well for the children in transition and for their teacher.
- Having the A'oga Fa'a Samoa “primary caregiver” move with “her” group of children during their transitions contributed to the children's sense of belonging and their security.⁵
- Continuity of the group is a key factor in smoothing transitions. Making transitions as members of a small peer group fosters a sense of belonging to, and contributing to, the group. This is consistent with the *aiga* principle, and

⁴ There was evidence of this in the teachers' observations of three separate groups of young children during transition, and related teacher diary records.

⁵ This was evident in the observations over time of three different groups of children during transition, and related teacher diary records. Observations of the third group of children's conversations when their primary caregiver was absent through sickness, showed that they were concerned about her. Both the presence, and the absence, of the primary caregiver had an impact on children aged 2 to 3 years.

was evidence in the observations of small groups/s of children, and parents' written comments on their young children's transition within the centre. Establishment of a "buddy system" is also important during transition to school. This emerged as a key category in the critical incidents analyses.

- Transition practices at the A'oga Fa'a Samoa (e.g., spending time in the new entrants' bilingual class in the primary school), and language immersion practices, are innovative approaches. The effectiveness of spending time in the new entrants' classroom was supported by the critical incidents analyses. These innovations supported children's competence and their confidence to express themselves in Samoan, and their identity.⁶

⁶ The evidence included: observations of groups of children during transition, related teacher diary records, child interviews findings from critical incidents analyses (Podmore & Airini, with the A'oga Fa'a Samoa, 2004), and interviews with children before and after their transition to school.