

Chapter 7

FINDINGS: Community of Learners, Community of Inquiry

E afua mai mauga le manuia o le nuu
The goodness and blessings of a village flow from the mountains
(We suggest that the mountains might symbolise the teachers
and the community of the centre).

Overview

This chapter draws on additional socio-cultural constructs to address further the issues of innovative teaching and learning and the “community of learners” approach of the centre. There is a discussion of findings, focusing on concepts including: scaffolding and co-construction; centre, home, and school linkages; and transformative participation.

Teachers’ Learning and Reflections in the Centre Community

The four principles of *Te Whāriki* (empowerment, families and community, relationships, holistic development) and its five strands (belonging, well-being, exploration, communication, and contribution) set expectations that there will be communities of learners. Our COI research has had close connections to *Te Whāriki*, and we certainly see the A’oga Fa’a Samoa as a “community of learners”.

The process of being involved in the action research led to staff development, and to increased reflection and action to enhance children’s thinking (Fleer, 1995). Teachers at the A’oga Fa’a Samoa were used to observing and documenting children’s learning. Teachers at the A’oga Fa’a Samoa had prior experience of the Exemplars project (learning stories):

Where there was lots of reflection from the child’s side. But in this new (COI) research we’ve got to do more reflection on ourselves, on the teacher.

This COI research, where they were reflecting more on what the teachers were doing, further challenged their own thinking and interactions with the children.

During the first month of the second spiral of the action research, after the “reflection and action” stage of the cycle, the research associate asked a staff member about her reflections on the process and on the data. The staff member, who has had a key role in the research, explained it this way:

Teacher-researcher: “We think about children’s background and the reasons why they are behaving like that and what we are doing to foster the children’s well-being, and what we can do as the next step. With this (research – i.e., the process of reflecting on observations both of the children and of the teachers) I have been able to tell whoever is observing that the part of the teacher is important too, because we will see what the teacher did and the method she is using to extend the children’s learning”.

Research Associate: “Extending the children’s learning of the Samoan language?”

Teacher-researcher: “Yes, Language and communication. And learning to do things for themselves, and be confident learners.”

When the research associate asked the staff member about her reflections on the second spiral, one additional suggestion arose:

Teacher-researcher: “Sometimes we (the teachers) could have said something more, to extend children’s thinking and learning.” “We need to say more than ‘That’s nice’. We need to extend them”.

The staff member reflected further on Marilyn Flear’s (1995) writing, which draws on Vygotsky’s work, and she concluded that:

Teacher-researcher: “We need to do more mentoring so that there are more responsive and reciprocal interactions”.

The research associate also reflected on this suggestion, that there needed to be “more mentoring” and more discussion among the staff. It became clear that this “mentoring” would involve more experienced staff working alongside less experienced staff and guiding them in practices that extend children’s thinking and conversations. It seemed likely that this type of “mentoring” and discussion would

lead to more teacher talk about children's learning, learning talk which would be both "analytic" and "challenging" (Annan, Lai, & Robinson, 2002).

Consequently, the project team agreed that another action research cycle (or a mini cycle) would concentrate on using the extensive observations and diary data already generated to include a wider group of all staff in reflection and action, in order to extend children's understanding (one example was of scientific concepts), their thinking, and their exploration. This collaborative decision was an example of how Borgia and Schuler's (1996) "five Cs" of action research—commitment, collaboration, concern, consideration, and change—proved applicable to the research and reflection at the A'oga Fa'a Samoa.

After that we held a meeting of the whole staff with the research associate. Teachers' observations and reflections before and after this meeting showed how they were reflecting on their practices, and scaffolding and co-constructing learning with children. A teacher-researcher also prepared transcripts of taped conversations in Samoan that demonstrate how to extend children's thinking in Samoan and to use strategies that are helpful for learning in an immersion or bilingual setting (Baker, 2000). (See Appendix F).

Later, staff took on an active leadership role with Pasifika centres, and/or started working on their own further professional development, through participation in the Ministry of Education's Exemplar project (March-December 2005).

Community of Learners; Community of Practice

The findings from our research are consistent with New Zealand's 10-year plan for early childhood education (Ministry of Education, 2002) which, through its goal of promoting collaborative relationships, endorses the expectation that there will be communities of learners (Podmore & Meade, 2005). The focus group discussions, and parental feedback throughout the research, show that participants experienced being part of a "community of learners". The focus group served as an advisory group, but members have also contributed many insights, as parents, about why they value the education provided for their children.

Parents and the extended *aiga* are an important part of the A'oga Fa'a Samoa. Through their involvement in the management committee, parents have a governance role at the centre. Some parents at the A'oga also have older children at the Samoan class in the school and this binds the two groups more closely. During the COI research process, the focus group “community of learners” extended to include representatives of the school and the school principal.

The action research that we have undertaken at the A'oga Fa'a Samoa has continued to have an impact on the primary school. For example, when the school staff, as well as the A'oga project team, were asked to present at the Ulimasao Conference in Samoa in September 2005, the Samoan teachers from the bilingual unit at the school worked closely with the A'oga team to prepare their presentation. A further development has been the primary school's engagement in research on bilingual education—a Teaching and Learning Research Initiative project (TRLI)—with staff from the A'oga Fa'a Samoa on their advisory committee.

The theoretical concept of “community of learners” is connected to international socio-cultural research and theoretical writing (Rogoff, 1998; Vygotsky, 1978). Wenger's (1998) writing on “communities of practice”, shows how individuals, communities, and organisations can all learn together through shared participation.

We experienced this at the A'oga Fa'a Samoa. Further innovations came through parent participation in the COI research and dissemination work. For example Riki Apa, a parent who was a member of the focus group, developed the centre website www.aogafaasamoa.school.nz. Two other parents from the focus group, Tanya Wendt Samu and Albert Refiti, took part in COI presentations and workshops. Parent evenings were held to share information about being a COI. Teachers have talked about their observations and documentation to parents, using Powerpoint shows at parent evenings. The inclusion of parents' voices is also evident in the children's portfolios. Parent surveys included a high rate of participation (80-90% return rates). By responding to the brief sets of questions in the surveys, most of the parents participated on issues of Samoan language continuity and understanding of bilingual education.

Community of Inquiry

The focus of this COI's action research process, on teachers'/educators' ongoing reflection and collaborative analyses of their observational data on teaching and learning, is linked to Wells' notion of "communities of inquirers" (Wells, 2001; Wells & Claxton, 2002).

The widely representative focus/advisory group of this COI team increasingly became a "community of inquiry" (Wells, 2001; Wells & Claxton, 2002). The participants reflected on, questioned, and reviewed the action research processes and findings. Over time, the involvement of the parents as key informants in the focus group, and of educators/faia'oga as "teacher-researchers", led to their experiencing "transformation of participation". The final chapter includes their accounts of this process.

Summary

What has the COI as a "community of learners" done for adults and children's learning?

- Teachers reflected on their interactions with children, and introduced more scaffolding and co-construction to support children as active learners and communicators.
- The focus group, as a "community of learners", extended to include representatives of the primary school. Our research at the A'oga Fa'a Samoa shows how a wide group became part of the research process and reflection, including parents, teachers, researchers, a parent who was a teacher at the primary school, and later more representatives of the school including the principal.
- 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, research reports, and translations.