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# WAIKATO JOURNAL OF EDUCATION

TE HAUTAKA MĀTAURANGA O WAIKATO

VOLUME 12, 2006

<b>Editorial: Pacific Education: Research and Practice</b> JANE STRACHAN	3
<b>Sharing, Listening, Learning and Developing Understandings of Kaupapa Māori Research by Engaging With Two Māori Communities in Education</b> FRED KANA AND KARAITIANA TAMATEA	9
<b>Talanoa Research Methodology: A Developing Position on Pacific Research</b> TIMOTE M. VAIOLETI	21
<b>The ‘Pasifika Umbrella’ and Quality Teaching: Understanding and Responding to the Diverse Realities Within</b> TANYA WENDT SAMU	35
<b>‘FetuiakiMālie, Talking Together’: Pasifika in Mainstream Education</b> MERE KĒPA AND LINITĀ MANU’ATU	51
<b>Crossing the Road From Home to Secondary School: A Conversation With Samoan Parents</b> FRAN CAHILL	57
<b>Samoan Language and Cultural Continuity at an Early Childhood Centre of Innovation</b> VAL PODMORE, ENE TAPUSOA AND JAN TAOUMA	73
<b>How do Pasifika Students Reason About Probability? Some Findings From Fiji</b> SASHI SHARMA	87
<b>Enhancing the Mathematics Achievement of Pasifika Students: Performance and Progress on the Numeracy Development Project</b> JENNY YOUNG-LOVERIDGE	101
<b>Education Journey: Tere Api’i Ki Aotearoa</b> ROBBIE ATATOA	117

**Life, The Crocodile, the Pisikoa and the Wind: Representations of Teaching  
in The Writings of Three Pacific Authors**

NESTA DEVINE 123

**Epilogue**

TIMOTE M. VAIOLETI 135

# **SAMOAN LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL CONTINUITY AT AN EARLY CHILDHOOD CENTRE OF INNOVATION<sup>1</sup>**

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*Victoria University of Wellington*

**ENE TAPUSOA AND JAN TAOUMA**

*A'oga Fa'a Samoa*

**ABSTRACT** *This paper summarises research literature on language immersion education in the early years, with a particular focus on Pasifika educational and language contexts. It outlines innovative practices related to Samoan language immersion at an early childhood Centre of Innovation, and describes the centre's action research process, including the observational approaches and interviews used to generate data. There is a discussion of key findings on language and cultural continuity. During the three-year research project, learning increasingly took place in Samoan, teachers took on more study in immersion and bilingual education, and interactions between teachers and children challenged the children to communicate confidently and competently in Samoan.*

## **KEYWORDS**

Samoan language immersion, Early childhood education, Centres of Innovation, Pasifika education, Bilingual education.

## **INTRODUCTION**

A large collection of research literature is available on the effectiveness of bilingual and immersion education (e.g., Baker, 2001; Cummins, 1993, 1996; May, Hill & Tiakiwai, 2004; McCaffery & Tuafuti, 1998, 2003; Tuafuti & McCaffery, 2005). Cummins (1993) reports that early childhood education experience in the mother tongue lays a foundation for later academic and linguistic success. Recent research on bilingual and immersion learning shows that "Maintenance and enrichment programmes, which are additive programmes that aim to foster bilingualism and biliteracy, are the most effective" (May et al., 2004, p. 2).

In Pasifika early years contexts, McCaffery and Tuafuti (2001) support the importance of 100% immersion education so that before they start school, children have a strong foundation of understanding, speaking and literacy knowledge. School-based research by Tuafuti and McCaffery (2005) affirms the importance of

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<sup>1</sup> For this article: The views expressed in this report do not represent the views of the Crown. Sections of this article are from a final research report to the Ministry of Education, June 2006.

immersion and bilingual Pasifika languages programmes for children's self-esteem and identity, and for effective learning in their first language (L1) and then in their second language (L2).

Summary principles about immersion and bilingual education are listed below. Ene Tapusoa prepared this summary as part of an information pack on bilingualism for staff members in a Samoan full-immersion early childhood centre.

**Summary prepared by Ene Tapusoa at the A'oga Fa'a Samoa, 2006**

**What is bilingualism?**

"Bilingualism is the ability to listen, speak, read and write in two languages. The first language (L1) is the language that you learn from your mother in infancy, and the second language (L2) is the language that a learner seeks to add or has added to his/her L1" (Baker, 2001 p. 5) .

**What is bilingual education?**

Bilingual education is not about the teaching of languages in schools in separate language time slots. It is about the use of our home/community languages L1 and English as significant languages through which to teach other subjects of the curriculum (McCaffery & Tuafuti, 1998).

**What does bilingual have to do with A'oga, when we only use one language?**

Bilingual programmes at early childhood (language nests) aim to promote full bilingualism either by using a minority group language (immersion) or by using two languages (dual medium) as the means of instruction. In other words, all methods that aim to assist learners to become bilingual, including full immersion, are part of the professional field known as Bilingual Education.

Random code switching by the teacher between languages in the ECE setting is not recommended, as the child simply waits for the adult to translate for them, instead of having to learn the new language (Baker & Prys-Jones, 1998; McCaffery & Tuafuti, 2003).

**How do we deliver this programme?**

At the A'oga, most of the children come with English as their first language with varying degrees of understanding of Samoan. What we need to do is to speak Samoan 100% of the time so that the children will learn and understand the language and begin to use it for learning. This immersion approach in ECE is strongly supported by research showing that high levels of heritage language use in early immersion settings produces better academic achievement and more native-speaker-like proficiency. Hence children at the A'oga Fa'a Samoa are growing up with two first languages (Baker, 2001; Baker & Prys-Jones, 1998; Thomas & Collier, 1997, 2002).

The research discussed in the present article took place at the A'oga Fa'a Samoa, an early childhood Centre of Innovation operating a Samoan language

immersion programme. The A'oga Fa'a Samoa was selected as one of the first six 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). The A'oga Fa'a Samoa embarked on, and has completed, a 3-year action research project to show how the centre's innovative practices influence learning and teaching. The research was designed collaboratively with the A'oga Fa'a Samoa and its community, and for the benefit of its community. The action research addressed 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?

## **METHODS**

An action research spiral approach was implemented, similar to the approaches used in other recent New Zealand studies (Cardno, 2003; Carr, May & Podmore, 2002). It involved using cycles and spirals that included observing, planning, acting and reflecting. A small team of teacher-researchers, working alongside a research associate, completed three, full, action research cycles. This participatory action research was collaborative and potentially emancipating, in line with the views of other participatory action researchers and writers (e.g., Atweh, Kemmis & Weeks, 1998). The action research was also demanding of teachers' time and of the centre's organisation of staffing, and it offered the research team particular, exciting challenges associated with record keeping in both English and Samoan.

Key action research tools included: observations of children and adults, teachers' diary records, interviews with parents, parent surveys, and focus group interviews. As small groups of toddlers moved to the over-2s area, and as small groups of children made the transition to school, teacher-researchers observed the transitioning children. Teachers maintained observations and diary records and they coded their observations of both the children's and the teachers' interactions across the strands of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996). Alongside their observations, teachers who had a key role in the COI research also made diary records across the five strands of *Te Whāriki*:

Belonging	<i>So'otaga</i>
Well-being	<i>Soifua laulelei</i>
Exploration	<i>Ola Su'esu'e</i>
Communication	<i>Feso'otaiga</i>
Contribution	<i>Sao</i>

They reflected, both on children's experiences of language continuity and transition, and on teaching practices, holistically across the strands of *Te Whāriki*.

The teachers sorted and categorised the observations and their diary reflections by using felt-tipped pens and colour coding.

An advisory/focus group provided advice throughout the research project. Several key interviews/discussions of the focus group yielded useful data for the study. In-depth discussions around the first research question provided useful background information. Participants in the focus group interviews included a facilitator, 3-4 teachers (including 1 from the primary school on site), 2 researchers, 1 representative from centre management, 2 parents, the centre manager and a centre support person. The voices of more of the parents of participating children (i.e., the groups of children making transitions) were included after the team had reflected on the processes and findings of the first two spirals of the action research.

We planned and carried out the research with reference to the ethical guidelines of the New Zealand Association for Research in Education (1999). General principles, cultural appropriateness, consent, confidentiality and responsive feedback were all important. We also developed and appraised the research procedures for cultural appropriateness, with regard for Pacific methodologies (Anae, Coxon, Mara, Wendt Samu & Finau, 2001).

### CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL CONTINUITY

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).

Observations of communication in Samoan, recorded throughout the project, illustrate how the children's use of the Samoan language was extended within the centre. Conversations with teachers, recorded as groups of children moved across to the over-2½s area, also showed extended communication in Samoan. In the excerpt below, recorded in the over-2½s area, the teacher (*faia'oga*) and the child are talking about a snail:

Faia'oga – *O le a le mea na tupu?* (What happened?)

Hinauri – I touch the shell.

Faia'oga – *Oi na e tago fo'i i le atigi?* (Oh did you touch the shell too [and the feelers]?)

Hinauri – *Ioe.* (Yes.)

Faia'oga – *O le a la le mea na tupu i le taliga ina ua e tago iai?* (So what happened when you touched the feelers?)

Hinauri – It went down and then it went up again.

Faia'oga – *Faasamoa mai lau tala?* (Can you say that in Samoan?)

Hinauri – *Ua alu i lalo ma* grow up.

Faia'oga – *Ua me'i i totonu?* (Did it shrink back inside?)

Hinauri – *Ioe, na me'i i lalo ma me'i i totonu.* (Yes, it shrank down and inside.)

Faia'oga – *I totonu i fea?* (Inside where?)

Hinauri – *I totonu ole atigi.* (Inside the shell.)

The example shows the teacher questioning the child, Hinauri,<sup>1</sup> and using role modelling to extend her thinking and her communication in Samoan.

Throughout the action research project, observations were consistently recorded that show teachers praising children and extending their communication in Samoan. Teacher-researchers also carried out interviews with the children to document and discuss their use of the Samoan language before, during and after their transition to school. Interviews with five children who made the transition to school between late 2004 and March 2005 showed that the children looked forward to going to school, and that they enjoyed communicating in Samoan with the A'oga teacher-researcher when she interviewed them. Another small group of children, who moved to school later during 2005, spoke with the teacher-researcher about their cultural identity and language use.

Some children showed strong identity with fa'asamoa. A teacher-researcher (*faia'oga*) and a child (Jared) who had turned 5 years old was moving to school held a long conversation together, in Samoan, about animals (crocodiles, fish and snakes):

Faia'oga – *O le a le igoa ole manu na e ai le gata?* (Which animal eats snakes?)

Jared – *Serafi.* (Giraffe.)

Faia'oga – *Ole a?* (Pardon?)

Jared – *Serafi.*

Faia'oga – *Serafi. E tago le serafi ai le gata pe ai e le gata le serafi?* (Giraffe. So the giraffe eats the snake or does the snake eat the giraffe?)

Jared – *Ai le gata le serafi.* (The snake eats the giraffe.)

Faia'oga – *E ai ele gata le serafi, a?* (The snake eats the giraffe, does it?)

Jared – *Ioe.* (Yes.)

Faia'oga – *Manaia. A'o a igoa o isi manu ia?* (Nice/Right. So what are the names of these other animals?)

Jared – *E ai e le Leona le elefane.* (The lion eats the elephant.)

Faia'oga – *E ai e le Leona le elefane?* (The lion eats the elephant?)

Jared – *Yes.*

As Jared showed considerable fluency and understanding, the teacher-researcher commented favourably, and the child explained that the Samoan language was used in the home environment too:

Faia'oga – *Sole, ese lou poto.* (Wow, you're very clever.)

Jared – *E fa'asamoa a'u i le fale. E fa'asamoa a'u i le fale.* (I speak Samoan at home. I speak Samoan at home.)

Faia'oga – *E fa'asamoa oe i le fale?* (You speak Samoan at home?)

Jared – *Ioe.* (Yes.)

Faia'oga – *To'aga e fa'asamoa.* (Keep your Samoan up.)

The teacher-researcher interviewed Peniamina, another child who was turning five years and was about to move across to the primary school. He was happy to come to the A'oga and about starting school:

Faia'oga – *Ia, o lea ua fai le ma talanoaga ma le tama o Peniamina. Ua sauni foi Peniamina e alu i le A'oga a tamaiti matutua. Ia, o lea o le a fai a'u fesili i le tama o Peniamina ae tali mai Peniamina.* (I'm going to talk with Peniamina who is getting ready to go to 'big school'. I will ask questions and Peniamina will respond.)

Faia'oga – *Talofa Peniamina.* (Hello Peniamina.)

Peniamina – *Talofa.* (Hello [Faia'oga].)

Faia'oga – *O a mai oe?* (How are you?)

Peniamina – *Manuia fa'afetai lava M* [teacher] (Very well thank you.) [They continue talking – about the sun and a smiley face.]

Faia'oga – *E fiafia oe e sau i le a'oga?* (Are you happy to come to the a'oga?)

Peniamina – *Ioe.* (Yes.)

Faia'oga – *O ai na lua o mai i le taeao?* (Who did you come to school with this morning?)

Peniamina – *O lo'u tama. E nofo lo'u tina i le fale.* (My father. – My mother stays at home.)

Faia'oga – *E nofo lou tina i le fale ae sau oe i le a'oga?* (Does your mother stay home while you come to school?)

Peniamina – *Ioe.* (Yes.)

Faia'oga – *Ia, lelei tele oe e fiafia e sau i le a'oga?* (Good, you're happy to come to A'oga?)

Peniamina (the child) sang a song and then, as the conversation with the teacher-researcher continued, he expressed some ambivalence about Samoan identity and speaking Samoan at home. It is important to note, though, that

throughout several interviews and taped conversations, Peniamina showed evidence of considerable fluency and enjoyment of speaking in Samoan.

There is evidence, in the examples of translated interview data above, in the observations of children in transition, and in extensive transcripts of conversations, that teachers were using the techniques Baker (2000) specifies as supportive in language education. These include: indirect error correction and the use of repetition, restatement to ensure that children understand, role modelling and frequent use of praise.

### **TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND REFLECTIONS**

During the COI research project, teachers at the A'oga Fa'a Samoa were encouraged to take on further study and to extend their professional development. Two of the staff were studying papers in bilingual education for a Graduate Diploma qualification. They introduced further innovative centre practices to help the children's language learning and to foster language continuity. These included building a new foyer where parents and staff could communicate in English without interrupting the children's Samoan language immersion.

Teacher reflection was an important part of the COI action research. The teacher-researchers noted that, upon reflection, the children's conversations with their teachers showed that the children were confident about speaking in Samoan and that they were proud of their achievements.

The teacher-researchers applied their knowledge of bilingual education research and theory to the findings on language continuity at the A'oga Fa'a Samoa; for example, the techniques advocated by Baker (2000). They also affirm that our findings are consistent with Genesee's (1987) points, that language learning aims not for grammatical perfection but, rather, for meaningful communication and that meaningful conversations among students and teachers enhance students' confidence and motivation to use their (second) language.

### **TOOLS AND ARTEFACTS**

The curriculum at the A'oga Fa'a Samoa is supported by a physical environment that reflects the country and cultural practices of Samoa (Podmore & Meade, 2005). A circular space is a central meeting and eating area, like a Samoan *fale*, and adjacent to it is a very large sandpit. The development of, and rationale for, the *fale* are explained in this way:

The school prefab that we started in has had a deck built onto it shaped in a circular shape with poles supporting to resemble that of a Samoan *fale*. This provides a uniquely physical space within which to create a strong sense of fa'aSamoa (Samoan culture) to our centre. It was important that the children and families attending the centre could have that special feeling of Samoa even though the centre was a renovated prefabricated classroom. (Taouma, Tapusoa & Wendt Samu, 2005, p. 6)



Photo 1: Tools and artefacts: A “Samoan corner” in the over-2s building at the A’oga Fa’a Samoa.



Photo 2: Tools and artefacts: The ramp into the over-2s building, showing shell patterns that reflect a traditional Samoan design.



*Photo 3: Tools and artefacts: Group work*

There is a wide range of natural materials and cultural artefacts from Samoa at the A'oga Fa'a Samoa and these are evident in a number of the observations recorded during the process of the action research. Two closely related socio-cultural constructs emerging from, and embedded in, the data on language and cultural continuity are *tools* and *artefacts*. Vygotsky (1978) saw language as a psychological tool (i.e., a psychological tool as contrasted with material tools). Recent research also demonstrates the importance of mediation of material tools and artefacts for learning and teaching, in studies of young children and of older students, across a range of cultural contexts (McDonald, Le, Higgins & Podmore, 2005).

These structural characteristics and artefacts, together with the Samoan language immersion environment, influenced children's sense of belonging and their identity. This was evident in both the observations and interviews with the children.

### **PARENTS' VOICES ON LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL CONTINUITY**

Parents clearly valued having their children experience Samoan language and culture at the centre. This was shown in their responses to several surveys, including one carried out in February 2004. Parents' replies to that parental survey indicate that Samoan was spoken regularly in about half of the homes (17 of 36 replies) and that the Samoan language was very important to most parents. Thirty-

two of the 36 families replied that Samoan language was really important to them, or a high priority.

Parents' vision for their children also showed a strong focus on language. When asked, "What is your vision for your child in A'oga?", 26 of the 35 parents responding to this question replied that "to speak Samoan" was their main vision, and another five families said "Samoan language as well as social skills". In response to the question, "Has the A'oga increased your child's Samoan language vocabulary and understanding?", 34 of the families replied "yes" and the remaining two families wrote that, as their babies were very young, it was too early to know.

It was also clear from the information provided in response to the survey that parents were very satisfied with the teaching staff at the A'oga. All 36 responding families replied "yes" to the question, "Are you satisfied with the teaching staff at the A'oga?", and many added very favourable comments about the staff.

As the research cycles progressed, on several occasions an expanding group of parents became actively involved in the focus group meetings. During the second cycle of the action research, the facilitator of the focus group prepared a set of short questions for parents of children who made the transition to primary school (on the same block of land). The open-ended questions were designed to hear about parents' perspectives about both transition to school and language and cultural continuity. Parents' voices were also recorded as part of the focus group meeting notes.

From the parents' perspective, language continuity was certainly important. Several talked about the continuity of language across home, early childhood centre and school. Their comments are presented below:

We continue fa'asamoa at home. However, we are concerned that some of the Samoan language may be lost in the bilingual unit (depending on future staffing there). It's still too early at this stage to note the impact on our child [who has just started school].

How is the Samoan/English structured at the school?

[The transition is] just a continuation of [our child's] Samoan language. The support from the teachers was great. [Our child] has made steady improvement, and we are generally happy with her development!

I felt the transition impacted negatively on [our child's] language as the English component (60:40) is too high for children coming from an immersion environment. [Our child] speaks much less Samoan at home now and it is quite hard to encourage him to speak more. Language continuity is helped by being in an environment where they can continually hear and practice speaking it, as well as expressing thoughts and ideas.

Through the use of the questionnaire, and the recording of parents' perceptions at the focus group meetings, the research yielded more in-depth information on parents' views, experiences and aspirations regarding transition to school and their children's Samoan language continuity.

During the process of the action research, changes were made in the primary school to enhance the practices that promote children's Samoan language continuity. This happened partly because representatives from the school heard the parents' views on language continuity expressed at the focus group meetings. After the data presented above were collected in October and November 2004, a new teacher/team leader was appointed to the primary school, to work with the older children. From that point, the teachers in the new entrant class all had (or had had) children attending the A'oga Fa'a Samoa. The centre manager made the following comments, that were verified by the school principal at a focus group meeting on 17 March 2005. These comments referred to the class that the children move on to from the A'oga: "They are very keen to initiate 80%:20% Samoan:English, and so teachers are using Samoan every day with the children in the school classroom". During 2005, the bilingual class at the school did change to 80%:20% Samoan: English.

Then in 2006, a past pupil of the A'oga Fa'a Samoa was appointed to the bilingual class at the school. This teacher was also the daughter of a senior *faia'oga* (educator) at the A'oga Fa'a Samoa. Her appointment provides an example of the changes made in the school to promote greater language continuity. Furthermore, it is an example of one Pasifika child's success in education and life, illustrating how one of the first children to attend the A'oga Fa'a Samoa subsequently succeeded in education (by successfully completing secondary school, then graduating with a teaching degree and being appointed to a teaching position in the school). Her continued service to immersion/bilingual education in the community also shows the *aiga* principle and the values of the A'oga Fa'a Samoa in action: love, respect and service.

## **CONCLUDING SUMMARY**

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 local and international research findings on bilingualism, all support the importance of young children learning to communicate competently in their mother tongue or heritage language (Cummins, 1993; McCaffery & Tuafuti, 2001; Tuafuti & McCaffery, 2005).

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, 2001). 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. As one teacher-researcher commented:

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)

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<sup>1</sup> The participating children's names are reported as requested by their parents on the consent forms they signed. The names selected by the parent are either a pseudonym of their own choice or the child's own name.