TRANSITION TO SCHOOL
from Pacific Early Childhood Centres

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There are growing numbers of young Pacific children participating in early childhood services. Between 1990 and 2000, the overall number of Pacific children enrolled in early childhood services increased by 80.9% (from 5,937 to 10,741). Between 1990 and 1994, there was an increase in the number of Pacific children enrolled in "Pacific Islands language groups". Following this, there was a marked increase in enrolment at "Pacific Islands childcare centres", reflecting a trend towards licensing and chartering of the language groups (see Table 1).

Clearly, there is a current need for early childhood and primary school teachers to understand the contexts of the experiences of children from Pacific groups. When these children start primary school, only a few find Pacific teachers in their classrooms (Sauvao, 2000; Sauvao, Mapa, and Podmore, 2000). As Dickie (2000) notes, "only 2% of primary teachers are of Pacific nations background" (p. 11). In primary and intermediate schools, 7.8% of the students are from Pacific groups, and this percentage is increasing.

Coxon and Mara (2000) have several suggestions to offer teachers who have Pacific students arriving in their classrooms:

[Educators] need to be aware of the diversity within and between Pacific nations in terms of language, values, and the cultural adaptations they have made as successive generations are New Zealand born. Educators of Pacific students must inform themselves about Pacific concepts associated with valued knowledge, teaching and learning (p. 179).

It is also important to develop culturally appropriate models that are useful for teachers in early childhood centres and schools, and for researchers who work with families from a range of Pacific groups. Sauvao (1999) found this when undertaking an earlier study of the transition experiences of children from the A’oga Amata (Samoan early childhood centres). Her work on culturally sensitive processes provided a basis for interviewing Samoan families in this study.

We carried out a small study including families from each of five Pacific groups (Cook Islands, Niue, Samoan, Tokelauan, and Tongan). The study describes the experiences of children, parents, and teachers. The emphasis is on language and children’s other experiences as they move from Pacific early childhood centres into English-language primary schools. There were five research questions on children’s transition from Pacific Islands early childhood centres to schools:

1. What are the similarities and differences between the contexts of home, school, and early childhood settings?
2. What are the aspirations, expectations, and views of parents, teachers, and children of these contexts?
3. How well do children make the transition between the contexts?
4. How can the information collected in this study assist teachers and parents to facilitate transition across the three contexts?
5. How do schools continue to assist and support the home languages and cultures of Pacific children starting primary school? What is the language policy of the school (as stated in the charter)?

### TABLE 1: Number of Pacific Children Enrolled in New Zealand Early Childhood Education by Service Type, 1990–2000

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Contacting and interacting with parents: cultural practices

The processes developed during this study offer possible models for working with children and families from five Pacific groups. The people who took part in the interviews were 27 children, their parents, and their early childhood and primary school teachers. The children, who were aged 5, had recently moved from a Pacific early childhood centre to a primary school. A representative from each of the Pacific groups carried out the interviews, and these interviewers provided links between the research and the five communities.

Interviewers talked with parents and children in culturally appropriate ways. Prior to delivering letters providing information and seeking consent, the interviewers spoke face-to-face with some of the native speakers of Tokelauan, Cook Islands Maori, Niue, Tongan, and Samoan.

Culturally appropriate practices: Samoan sample

Culturally appropriate practices included the observance of fa'a Samoa and fa'aaloalo (respect), together with the acknowledgment of intrusion, farewell, and appreciation speeches. The interviewer observed cultural values when conducting the interviews. The use of formal language (matangi) was appropriate for the Samoan grandparents and parents who were matali (titular chiefs). For example, the meetings would begin with the exchange of cultural greetings, including the fa'aaloalofa (cultural honorific) acknowledgment of the family and its chiefly titles. Face-to-face introduction of the researcher, casual discussion of the families' tupuaga (genealogy), and positive talk about the child and the family's role in early childhood education would then precede the actual interview, followed by a brief explanation of the purpose of the study. This process is vital when carrying out research in the Samoan community.

The interviewer asked questions in a conversational manner. On occasions, respect suggested that the interview be suspended for family events that arose during the scheduled time. On several occasions, the duration of the interview was extended because of interruptions by unexpected visitors, phone calls, meal times, environmental noise within the house, and disruptive behaviour of young children not involved in the interview.

The placement of people during the interview observed the cultural preference for using the mat. For example, in contact with one set of parents in one family, the grandparent (matatitiled father) greeted the researcher while sitting on the mat. This was one cultural way of respecting visitors. In return, the researcher also sat on the mat and interacted with both the parents and grandparents, although they insisted that she use the chair. Leave-taking observed the values of lauga faafetai/taamavae (thank you and farewell speeches) and fesoasanoa (help/obligation).

The parents were given the language choice of either English or Samoan, whichever they felt comfortable with. Two of the Samoan parents were interviewed using English, one set of parents chose to be interviewed in both English and Samoan, and the rest were interviewed using only Samoan.

Culturally appropriate practices: Cook Islands sample

The interviewer observed akonoanga akangateitei (respect), as well as acknowledging intrusions, expressing appreciation, and making appropriate farewells. Cultural values were observed. The interviewer sat wherever the parents requested, so that they were comfortable — for example, in the kitchen, the dining room, or outside in the garden.

The interviewer planned to use the language appropriate to the parents, and where appropriate, to leaders in the community. In practice, parents of the Cook Islands children were interviewed using the English language only, as they were New Zealand born, and five of the six families were mixed (two with a Maori parent, and three with a pakeha parent). 

Culturally appropriate practices: Tongan sample

Malo e lelei (Tongan greeting)

Before interviewing the parents in the study, the researcher/interviewer made contact with key personnel of the Tongan community, who then notified the parents involved in the study, detailing the purpose of the interview. The researcher/interviewer then contacted the parent(s) to make an appointment for an appropriate time to undertake the interview.

When a seat or chair is offered to another Tongan, the visitor most often opts to sit on the floor in the living room where the interview is to take place. This symbolises humbleness in the interviewers' presence, as being seated on a chair can be seen as overpowered and disrespectful. The researcher sat on a chair for most of the interviews, as all those present were comfortable with this, but on the floor when appropriate.

On arrival at a Tongan house an exchange of salutations, either in Tongan or in English, was performed. It is always polite for the host to offer a cup of tea or a cold drink before the interview, an interaction that helps the rapport between the interviewer and interviewee. Providing a brief background about the interviewer is also useful. It is an advantage if the researcher/interviewer is a Tongan; for example, the interviewee(s) can give their views and opinions in their own language. In one family, the father said a prayer before starting the interview. This is a common practice in a Tongan household.

During interviews, it is respectful to allow for intrusions, for example, unexpected visitors, and children wanting attention. At the end of the interview most of the parents usually initiate more general conversation. Two of the Tongan parents were interviewed in English only, while the rest chose to use both Tongan and English.

Culturally appropriate practices: Niue sample

Depending on the individuals involved, in both formal and informal situations, an exchange of salutations is of first and foremost importance. This is expressed in Niue as: "Ko e mena lahi ke faaloa mua e lima ke fakalofa atu" (It is a big thing to offer your hand first in greetings). In a formal meeting, the appropriate practice would be to open and close with a liogi (prayer).

On some occasions, the interviewer may offer a gift of fruits, biscuits, or sweets to the family, especially when there are children in the household. This is a form of compensation for the time involved.

When conducting one of the interviews with a parent, the interviewer was asked to come into the kitchen and have a seat as the parent was in the middle of making a hot drink for her children. As the researcher had brought some cookies for the children, these were shared with everyone.

Culturally appropriate practices: Tokelauan sample

When interviewing parents, cultural values and fakaaloalo (respect) were observed, for example, greeting words such as "Talofa" and "Malo ni" were exchanged, followed by handshaking, hugs, and hogi (kiss). The form of greeting depends on the individual and how well the interviewer knows the interviewee.

The researcher is then asked to sit wherever she/he feels comfortable, for example, in the dining room, on the mat, or on chairs in the sitting room. The conversation takes place either
in Tokelauan or English, depending on the preference of the interviewee. Normally, casual conversations (similar to the Samoan culture of setting the scene) take place before the interview.

Sometimes the researcher takes some form of small gift, for example, chocolates, fruits, or even a small amount of money, for the family as compensation for their time. Food is given to the parents or children; a monetary gift is usually for an older grandparent or a sick family member in the home. However, in this study no payments or monetary gifts were made to participants.

During interviews, it is respectful to allow for intrusions, for example, phone calls, unexpected visitors, uncontrolled environmental noise, and so on. After the interviews, farewell speeches are exchanged and usually the parents offer a cup of tea and some food for the researcher to take home. This is a sign of respecting the researcher for her/his time and it is also respectful to accept it. “Tofa ni!” or “Tofa koutou” (farewell/goodbye) are said as the researcher leaves the interviewee’s home.

Experiences of transition to school from Pacific early childhood centres

The parents, children, and teachers we interviewed had some concerns and made useful suggestions about transition to school.

Children

Learning activities: likes and dislikes

In the early childhood centre context, cultural activities were important to the children. Children were more likely to identify outdoor play as a favourite activity at school than at home. Literacy-related activities were popular at home and at school.

Experiences of transition to school

Twenty (74%) of the children preferred to have a family member or other adult stay at the school with them. The children generally enjoyed school, especially meeting their friends and making new ones. They disliked being lonely or being bullied. Some children missed the use of their mother tongue.

Parents

Learning at home, early childhood centres and school

Most parents stated that early childhood centres, schools, and homes all provide education. For parents, the main difference across these contexts is the absence of Pacific languages and culture at school. Parents were also concerned about children hearing swearing at school. Twenty-three (85%) of the parents wanted the schools to offer intellectual challenges for their children, and to maintain and value their culture and language. Many parents wanted the schools to accept the children as they were, and to ensure that learning was taking place across all subjects.

They commented that, when at home, it is important for children to learn literacy, respect, language, culture, mathematical concepts, hygiene, safety, and spiritual routines, and how to help each other.

Transition to school

Many parents found that their children had settled very well at school because they had siblings there. Three parents stated that their children did not settle well because of limited English-language ability. Parents appreciated communication from teachers about their child’s progress.

Early childhood teachers

Similarities and differences between home, early childhood centres and school

Eight of the 11 early childhood teachers reported “reading” as an activity practiced in all three settings. They identified the main areas of difference as: use of ethnic language, discipline, routines, structure, and physical environments.

Learning expected prior to school entry

Early childhood teachers expected children to have literacy skills and to be able to write their own names when they started school. Seven of the 11 early childhood teachers expressed concerns about the lack of ethnic language continuity when the Pacific children moved on to primary schools.

Transition to school

Almost all of the early childhood teachers said they had some contact with the parents when their children first started school. Half of them reported that it is better if the parents stay with the child, if only for the first day. Early childhood teachers also noted that Pacific resources were less available to the children when they started school.

Primary school teachers

Similarities and differences between home, early childhood centres and school

Like the parents and early childhood teachers, the primary teachers stated that all three contexts provide education. Most teachers mentioned routines, discipline, and rules as further similarities. They noted that the observation of religion and spiritual aspects was usually practised only in the home and in early childhood centres.

Learning expected prior to school entry

Most teachers expected children to arrive at school with social skills, language and culture, respect, and basic knowledge of English. When asked specifically about skills among Pacific children, they required social, mathematical, communication, and literacy skills (love of books, reading, and having experience of books). Half of the teachers expected discipline and routines.

The main concerns of teachers regarding their expectations were that children spoke limited English, were shy, and had “limited listening skills”. Two teachers mentioned their own inability to help Pacific children. When asked about how they coped with these concerns, seven teachers said they had special programmes, six said they had peer support and a buddy system for children, and five teachers mentioned parents’ involvement in children’s activities.

Transition to school

Ten teachers (45%) said they preferred not to have the parents stay in the classroom when children started school, as children tend to be clingy and unable to concentrate on class activities or explore the classroom environment. However, 21 (95%) of the teachers said that they had an open-door policy and parents were most welcome to come to school at any time. Not many parents attended during class sessions, whereas in Pacific early childhood centres and groups, grandparents, and parents often stayed all day. Teachers highlighted the importance of communication between early childhood centres and schools.

Conclusions

Several key issues for teachers, early childhood centres, and schools emerged from this study.

• Continuity of Pacific languages and culture

Almost half of the primary teachers wanted parents to support Pacific language and cultural activities at school, and the schools to employ Pacific teachers and community people to teach their languages and cultures. When we examined the charts from the 19 schools the children attended, 17 of them included a statement about respecting Pacific languages and
cultures, but only two schools in the study had actually established Pacific language and culture classes. A few schools had Polynesian clubs which operated for 20 minutes a week, or sometimes for 1 hour a month. The question is whether this provides sufficient and appropriate acknowledgment of Pacific cultures in schools.

- **Teacher education**

Early childhood and primary teachers noted that there is a need for teacher education and professional development in Pacific languages and culture.

- **Partnership between home and school**

Most parents expressed considerable interest in the schools’ supporting the children’s home language. The findings of this study support the need for continuing development and uptake of success models to enhance the connections among schools and early childhood services catering for Pacific children, families, and communities. One example of a success model is the Strengthening Education in Mangere and Otara (SEMO) project.

- **Expectations of teachers and parents**

There were a number of similarities between the expectations of early childhood teachers, primary teachers, and parents. Some primary teachers stated they would accept children as they were, and that children need to be confident about communicating with peers and teachers. Renwick’s (1997) findings also suggest that for teachers, “The main thing is the child’s attitude to new experiences” (p.44). This includes being curious and keen to learn.

- **Implications of the hidden curriculum**

Several parents expressed concern as to whether bullying and swearing are regularly monitored in schools.

- **Curriculum continuity**

Findings from this study suggest that it is advisable for early childhood centres and schools to liaise and consult about curricula and policy documents. Documents for joint consultation include *Te Whāriki* (the New Zealand early childhood curriculum), the DOE’s (Desirable Objectives and Practices), Ta’īla (Samoa Language Curriculum), and the New Zealand Curriculum Framework.

- **Literacy**

Many children expressed interest in literacy related activities. When asked what they would do if they were trying to read something hard, they most frequently responded that they would ask the teacher for help. There was a greater tendency among these Pacific children than among the children in the Competent Children study to adopt the relatively effective learning strategy of seeking assistance from teachers (Sauvao, Mapa, and Podmore, 2000; Wylie and Thompson, 1998).

- **Respectful communication**

This research offers a model for interviewing and interacting with children, parents, and others from Cook Islands, Niue, Samoan, Tokelauan, and Tongan communities.

**References**


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