

Innovation and Collaborative Research Development in an Early Childhood Centre

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Abstract

The ECE centres of innovation policy framework specifies that "Centre of Innovation-researcher partnerships" are valued. This paper summarises the development of an early childhood centre of innovation, and describes the aiga concept and the research involvement of a community/parent reference group. There is an overview of the philosophy of the centre, with specific reference to culture and language. Related background research literature is outlined, with a focus on children's transitions within and from Pacific early childhood centres.

Introduction

Early Childhood Centres of Innovation (COIs)

In May 2003, the New Zealand Minister of Education announced six early childhood Centres of Innovation (COIs). One of these was a Samoan language immersion centre.

Several special characteristics were deemed important in the selection of the six COIs in the first cycle. They included:

Competent practice in teaching and learning in: Kaupapa Maori services, Pasifika immersion and bilingual services, services that integrate IT and ICT into the curriculum, and 'Community of learning' approaches evident in the collaborative relationships with parents and whanau, and with other programmes, agencies and/or schools. (Ministry of Education, 2003, [http://www.minedu.govt.nz/early childhood education/strategic plan for early childhood education/six centres of innovation/summary](http://www.minedu.govt.nz/early_childhood_education/strategic_plan_for_early_childhood_education/six_centres_of_innovation/summary) p. 1 of 1).

Special characteristics of the A'oga Fa'a Samoa are both its Samoan immersion programme, and its "community of learners" collaborative approach.

Purposes of this Paper

This paper makes brief reference to background literature on the development of the Samoan-language immersion centres, and on children's transitions from Samoan early childhood centres. We summarise the history and development of the A'oga Fa'a Samoa prior to its selection as an early childhood centre of innovation. There is an overview of the philosophy of the centre, with specific reference to culture and language. We describe the aiga concept and the research involvement of a community/parent reference group.

Samoan language-immersion centres

Several writers have outlined aspects of the emergence, within New Zealand, of the a'oga 'amata (Samoan early childhood centres with language-immersion programmes) (Ete, 1993; Taouma, 1992). As noted by Fereni Ete (1993), Pacific early childhood centres were established initially to offer early educational benefits to children. The church has had a major role in the establishment of many of the ä'oga 'ämata.

Since the establishment of Pacific early childhood centres, there has been considerable interest in how children make transitions from the language immersion centres, and some related research (Podmore, Sauvao, & Mapa, 2001; Sauvao, 1999; Sauvao, Mapa, & Podmore, 2000). A study carried out by Sauvao (1999), of transition of a'oga 'amata children, showed that parents, teachers and principals viewed transition to school from different perspectives. Parents generally saw Samoan language development as an important part of their children's education and believed that the a'oga 'amata experience was the appropriate option for their children. In English-language schools, principals gave administrative reasons for being unable to provide language continuity in their programmes.

Overview of the History and Development of the Centre

The A'oga Fa'a Samoa is a Samoan immersion education and care centre located in Auckland. Infants, toddlers and young children attend for up to nine hours daily, up to five days per week, and learn in the Samoan language.

Early Childhood Application For Centres Of Innovation

Centre Statement

The A'oga Fa'a Samoa was the first established Pacific Island language centre in New Zealand, beginning operation in 1984. It was the first Licensed and Chartered Pacific Island centre (in 1990) and has since led the way as a role model to other centres by continually developing and changing as demanded by parents attending.

The A'oga has had a commitment to all of its staff achieving to their fullest potential as educators of the children attending the A'oga. Eight staff now have a Diploma of Teaching Early Childhood, with four staff now nearly finished their Higher Diplomas.

The ability of the centre to link into the primary school has enabled easy transition for children but also language continuity. This has resulted in confident learners proud of who they are as Samoan children. The establishment of a technology area with six computers all net worked has advantaged children in the area of technology so preparing them for school readiness in the area of technology.

The recent addition of a building for infants and toddlers aged under 2 years has enabled children to have a quality start to education and care. The philosophy of Magda Gerber has a strong influence, for example, her emphasis on respect when caring for infants (Gerber, 1984; May, 1991). The inclusion of heuristic play in the programme has been a big part of learning in this area. Samoan language has been able to be fostered from the beginning and to continue through to the primary school.

Benefits to family and community

Janet Gonzales-Mena (2001) pointed out that childcare can have major implications for the identity development of children from families whose culture is different from the dominant culture. Her questions and comments about important issues of equity and social justice underpin the reasons the A'oga Fa'a Samoa was established:

How do children become competent in their own culture if they are immersed in someone else's?
How do they develop an identity that keeps them rooted in their culture and firmly attached to their family? Only when professionals understand

culturally sensitive care and are in close communication with families can they understand how to work toward positive outcomes for children's identity, sense of belonging, and cultural competence. (Gonzales-Mena, 2001. p. 7).

The A'oga Fa'a Samoa was established so that families could feel secure in the knowledge that their culture was being valued, that children could speak the language of the home, and that families could belong and be part of the important stages of their children's learning and development in a way that empowered children and families to learn and grow.

Continuity of language learning is important if children are to sustain the language, thus the transition into the bi-lingual Samoan unit in the school is an important continuation and benefit of learning at the A'oga.

An emphasis on family, culture and identity is included in the centre's philosophy which states that:

The A'oga Fa'a Samoa will:

- Promote Samoan language and culture, so nurturing the positive identity of the children.
- Employ trained educators and encourage further training so that quality care and education is provided.
- Encourage a family atmosphere for parents and children so children feel secure and loved.
- Emphasise enjoyment of learning through the medium of Samoan language.

Innovative Teaching and Learning at A'oga Fa'a Samoa

Small groups of children stay with the same teacher from the point of entry through different groups and spaces in the centre and into school. It is proposed that this process, with educators and children able to move through the centre together, will help develop the trust, understanding, and extension of thinking that is vital to children in early childhood. This innovation, with the educator able to move through each developmental stage from babies to 5-year-olds, was introduced to benefit children, families and educators. The extension to children's thinking and development is able to be recorded, and planned for on a continual basis.

A'oga Fa'a Samoa uses a rich array of approaches to promote Samoan language and culture and the children's cultural identity. It has close links with the school communities on site, especially the bilingual Samoan class in the school for transition of children and to help maintain confident and competent bilingual speakers. It maintains relationships, with the school community as a whole, which includes Maori, Cook Island and French groups.

Collaboration within the Centre and its Community

The Aiga Concept

The community that we have via the A'oga Fa'a Samoa has many parallels to the fundamental traditional Samoan institution of the *aiga* – or the extended family.

The A'oga Fa'a Samoa, like the *aiga*, is a cultural and social institution that has key positions, each with important roles and responsibilities in relation to the others. The positions or groups that are a part of the A'oga Fa'a Samoa are: the teachers, the management committee; families and their children.

The values that underlie our interactions (as families, teachers, and children) are not unlike those which inform our actions within our different *aiga*. Values include, for example, service and responsibility (*tautua*), love and commitment (*alofa*) and respect (*faaaloalo*).

What do the *faiioga* (teachers) do for the *matua* (parents)? They serve our children. They teach, they care for, they love our children. They help us in our efforts to raise culturally and emotionally confident, well-educated Samoan children within a society dominated by other cultural norms and values. In addition, the *faiioga* provide informal parenting education and support. This is particularly important for those of us who cannot access (due to geography) traditional *aiga* networks – particularly the networks of older, female relatives (mothers, older sisters, aunts and grandmothers) who would have helped us in our roles as mothers (and fathers). The pedagogy used for parenting education? We see what the *faiioga* do – and we listen to their descriptions of their interactions with our children. We read our children's diaries and portfolios, A'oga newsletters and notices...and we (try!) to attend the parent meetings. And then we go home and “do”.

So what do the *matua* (parents) and their individual *aiga* do for the *faiioga*? We serve by paying our fees and donations. Through the management committee, we provide the *faiioga* with the resources that they need for their teaching and care programmes (as well as on-going professional development). And we help with fundraising.

Our roles as parents, and as teachers, and as management committee members, and as families is influenced in a significant way by our feelings of obligation and duty to one another that come as a result of *tautua*, *alofa* and *faaaloalo*. Now, another opportunity to for the different groups to serve our A'oga has presented itself through the research component of the Centre of Innovation initiative.

Centre Based Collaboration

The research that we as a community are collaborating on is an effort to capture and understand the practices, procedures and programmes that make our early childhood centre unique. We know it will be invaluable to the *faiioga* and their practice. We know it will be invaluable for teacher education in other

Pasifika centres. But it will also be invaluable for us as *matua*. We as parents have a chance to work with our teachers, adding our perspective and reflecting on our children's learning and development together. The process of doing so will help us (as parents) to

- (i) learn more about the formal curriculum and programmes of the A'oga
- (ii) identify and see / measure / sort out/ analyse our children's learning and relate this to the formal programmes / overall curriculum
- (iii) develop a more informed appreciation for the professional skills of our *faiagoa* and of our A'oga
- (iv) and go home and "do" – in a more informed manner.

As *matua*, our intentions are excellent. But sometimes the "holistic" approach that underlies the curriculum of the A'oga blurs and melds the complex and multi-faceted aspects of their learning into a gorgeous explosion of colours that we as *matua* may not be able to make much sense of. We actually may not go beyond enjoying the initial superficial effect because we do not know how to see the skills, the careful planning, the deliberate strokes that went into the artwork – in this case, the programmes of learning that our children are experiencing at the A'oga.

And this means we are limited in our ability to support the overall goal or aim of the A'oga - despite our good intentions as parents and as families. We are limited in our abilities to reinforce what is being done in terms of culture, language and identity development, because we may not have much knowledge of early childhood education. The benefits of the research for our community will be multi-faceted. We will take our collaborative learning community to an even higher level.

Research Development

It was envisaged that an initial advisory group, convened 20 February 2003 to consult and collectively finalise the research proposal, would continue to provide advice for the duration of the research project. We planned that a co-operative approach would be implemented between the focus/advisory group and the research associate/s.

A statement of collective philosophy forms an important part of the relationship agreement between the centre and research associates. The focus/advisory group represents the "aiga" philosophy of the centre, and has staff, parents, community, and management all involved.

Details of the design and intentions of the research project are discussed in paper 2 of our NZARE-AARE symposium (Podmore, Samu-Wendt & Taouma, 2003).

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