

Transition to School from Pacific Islands Early Childhood Services: Research Processes and Main Findings

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Abstract

This project was designed to document experiences of transition to school of families from each of five Pacific Islands groups (Cook Islands, Niue, Samoan, Tokelauan, and Tongan). The emphasis is on language and children's other experiences as they move from Pacific Islands early childhood centres into English-language primary schools.

This paper discusses culturally appropriate methodologies, drawing mainly on the interviews with Samoan and Tongan families. Findings from the interviews with children, parents, and teachers are summarised. Parents expressed concerns about the maintenance of their children's Pacific Islands language and culture. Other themes and issues include: home-school relationships and partnerships, expectations of teachers and parents, the hidden curriculum and bullying, curriculum continuity, literacy, teacher education, and Pacific Islands representation.

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Members of all five Pacific groups represented in the study carried out interviews with the participating families and early childhood centres. The project team included:

- Lia Mapa (Tongan sample, writing assistance);
- Val Podmore (leader—training and writing);
- Le'autuli'ilagi Sauvao (fieldwork co-ordinator, Samoan sample, writing assistance);
- Tapaeru Tereora (Cook Islands sample);
- Suria Timoteo (Tokelauan sample);
- Ina Mora (Niue sample);
- Taniela Vao (translation, Tongan group);
- with 1998 researcher—Diane Mara.

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Introduction

This small study includes families from each of 5 Pacific Islands groups (Cook Islands, Niue, Samoan, Tokelauan, and Tongan). The project was designed to document experiences of children, parents, and teachers. The emphasis is on language and children's other experiences as they move from Pacific Islands early childhood centres into English-language primary schools.

Theoretical and Research Context

Several studies pertaining to transition have drawn on Bronfenbrenner's ecological approach (1979). Bronfenbrenner described contexts for development, and his ecological model draws attention to the importance of home, school, and community as contexts for learning and development. This approach is of particular relevance to the present research. It also underpins a range of studies which focus on continuities and discontinuities across contexts.

Theories of children's learning and development also underpin a number of studies focused on the learning experiences of children moving from early childhood to school settings. Vygotsky's (1978) theory is prominent in more recent work in New Zealand and Australia. There is an emphasis on the contexts of learning, and on children's learning being influenced by understanding the culture(s) which surround them.

Transition to school studies take on different perspectives including a "parent's" perspective, a "teacher's" perspective, and/or a "child's" perspective (Mapa, Podmore, & Mara, 1998). Numerous studies provide suggestions for successful transition from home and early childhood settings to primary school. However, at the time this research commenced the only completed study of children's transition from Pacific Islands early childhood services to school was Wolfgramm's (1992) report on the Anau Ako Pasifika project.

Further work has been completed since then. The Strengthening Education project in Mangere and Otara is providing information on the early literacy experiences of Pacific Islands children as they move from early childhood settings (e.g., MacDonald, McNaughton, Tamarua Turoa, & Phillips, 1999). In 1999, Sauvao completed a thesis on the transition of a'oga 'amata children, but there remained a scarcity of research across the Pacific groups.

The study carried out by Sauvao (1999) in the Wellington showed that parents, teachers, and principals viewed the transition from different perspectives. Parents generally saw Samoan language development as an important part of their children's education and firmly believed that the a'oga 'amata experience was a better option for their children than attendance at other kinds of early childhood centres. Teachers in English-only programmes, however, saw little difference between a'oga 'amata children and kindergarten children, showing that curriculum continuity was uppermost in their minds. In such schools, principals would usually advance administrative reasons as to why language continuity could not be fully achieved in their programmes. In only 1 school was there convergence of views on the importance of language continuity, and active support for language maintenance. Sauvao proposed that lack of an agreed understanding of what is necessary for successful transition

was the main issue encountered in her study. She made several suggestions for future research.

Enrolment Patterns and Trends

The number of Pacific Islands children enrolled in early childhood services increased by 71.5 percent between 1990 and 1998, and there was an increase in the number of Pacific Islands children enrolled in “Pacific Islands language groups” between 1990 and 1994. From 1994 to 1998, there was a marked increase in enrolment at “Pacific Islands childcare centres”, reflecting a trend towards licensing and chartering of the groups (see Table 1).

Given these numbers, and the scarcity of research on these children’s experiences, there was scope to investigate the transition to school of children from different language-immersion Pacific Islands early childhood centres. From an ecological perspective, it was important that such a study should include the child, the family, the school, and the community context.

Table 1
*Number of Pacific Islands Children Enrolled in
Early Childhood Education by Service Type, 1990–1998*

Type of Service	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998
Kindergarten	2100	2400	2503	2762	2701	2935	2928	3060	3211
Playcentres	402	296	306	356	329	326	275	314	318
Childcare centres	796	795	1035	1368	1281	1466	1640	1798	2025
P. I. childcare centres	-	-	-	-	510	694	813	858	937
Kohanga reo	-	-	-	-	-	100	67	38	-
ECD-funded playgroups	84	140	163	201	338	209	175	156	79
P. I. language groups	2553	3077	3591	3782	3900	3673	3654	3264	3490
Home-based services	-	41	92	127	132	141	145	143	121
Correspondence School	2	4	3	3	0	0	1	2	3
Total	5937	6753	7693	8599	9191	9544	9698	9637	10184

Source: Ministry of Education Data Management Division

Research Questions

In the present study, 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 Islands children starting primary school? What is the language policy of the school (as stated in the charter)?

Participants

The study was designed to include children moving from a Pacific Islands early childhood provision (with or without concurrent use of other services). Stratified sampling was used, with the aim of including 6 families from each of 5 ethnic groups. This approach was consistent with a directive from the project advisory committee that, wherever possible, all Pacific early childhood groups should be represented equally. The use of stratified sampling also ensured that groups where maintenance of the language is at risk, for example the Cook Islands and the Niue groups, participated.

The participants we interviewed included 27 children and their parents, 11 early childhood teachers, and teachers from 19 primary schools. (Six children were included for each group, with one unavoidable exception. Only 3 eligible children were found through the Niue early childhood language groups in the Wellington region).

Interview Processes

Samoa sample

Culturally appropriate practices included observance of fa'a Samoa and fa'aaloalo (respect) together with the acknowledgment of intrusion, farewell, and appreciation speeches.

In conducting the interview with parents, cultural values were observed. The use of formal language (matai language) was appropriate for the Samoan grandparents and parents who were matai (titular chiefs). For example, the meetings would begin with the exchange of cultural greetings including the fa'alupega (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. A brief explanation of the purpose of the interview is important. This process is vital when carrying out research in the Samoan community.

Tupuola (1993) in her study of adolescence, also emphasised the imperative, culturally sensitive approaches that ought to be addressed in carrying out research concerning ethnic groups. This issue was at times disregarded when some of the non-Pacific Islands researchers undertook research projects both overseas and in these communities within New Zealand.

The interview questions were asked in a conversational rather than inquisitorial 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 interview time was extended because of interruptions of 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 of using the mat. For example, in contacting 1 set of parents in 1 family, the grandparent (matai/titled father) greeted the researcher while sitting on the mat. This was the 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 fa'afetai/fa'amavae (thank you and farewell speeches) and fesoasoani (help/obligation).

The parents were given the language choice of either English or Samoan, whichever they felt comfortable with, in carrying out the interview processes. Two of the Samoan parents were interviewed using English, 1 set of parents chose to be interviewed in both English and Samoan, and the rest were interviewed using only Samoan language.

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 perform the interview.

It is very common that 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 be performed. This symbolises humbleness in the interviewees' presence, as seating on a chair can be seen as overpowering and disrespectful. The interviewer in this study sat on a chair for most of the interviews but on the floor when appropriate.

On arrival at a Tongan house an exchange of salutations, either in Tongan or 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 which helps with the rapport between the interviewer and interviewee. Providing brief background about the interviewer is also useful. It is an advantage if the researcher/interviewer is a Tongan; for example, the interviewees can give their views and opinions in their own language.

Before the interview, a brief explanation about the purpose of the study and of why and how the interview is to be conducted is given to the interviewee(s). This helps the parent(s) to feel at ease in the company of the researcher/interviewer and creates a comfortable atmosphere for interviewee(s) to speak freely on interview questions.

In one family, the father said a prayer before starting the interview. This too, is a common practice in a Tongan household.

During interviews, it is also respectful to allow for intrusions, for example, unexpected visitors, and children wanting attention.

The interviewer found that when parents are briefed well about the project, they tend to speak more freely and share their opinions openly. At the end of the interview most of the parents usually instigate a more general conversation.

Two of the Tongan parents were interviewed in English only, while the rest chose to use both Tongan and English.

Note: Culturally appropriate processes for the Niue, Tokelau, and Cook Islands samples are also described in the full report (see Sauvao, Mapa, & Podmore, 2000).

Main Findings

The interviews with children, parents, early childhood teachers, and school teachers provide a large amount of information about young children's experiences of Pacific Islands early childhood centres, home, and school. Parents, children, and teachers had some major concerns and made useful suggestions about transition to school.

The following information summarises the main findings and issues for children, parents, early childhood teachers, and primary school teachers, and findings regarding the school charters.

Children

Learning Activities: Likes and Dislikes

The children enjoyed a range of learning activities at home, early childhood centres, and school. Fourteen children (52 percent) said that drawing was a favourite activity in the home, 16 (59 percent) specified drawing as a favourite activity at school, and 12 children (44 percent) mentioned it as a favourite activity at the early childhood centre.

The difference in the three contexts was that children were more likely to identify outdoor play as a favourite activity at school than at home. Nineteen (70 percent) of the children specified outdoor play as their favourite activity at school, whereas only 6 children mentioned it as a favourite activity at home.

In the early childhood centre context, cultural activities were important to the children. Fifteen (56 percent) children said that they liked culturally related activities, for example, music, singing and dancing, at the early childhood centre.

Literacy-related activities were relatively popular at home and school. For 13 (48 percent) children, reading was something they liked doing at home, and for 16 (59 percent) reading was a favourite activity at school. When asked what they would do if they were trying to read something hard, the children most frequently responded that they would ask the teacher for help.

Experiences of Transition to School

Twenty (74 percent) 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. In fact, their choice of primary schools was mainly based on having relatives and friends from their early childhood centres there. The children also liked the bigger playgrounds and better facilities and play equipment in schools.

Being lonely and bullied are some of the dislikes the children mentioned. Some children did not like "mean" teachers, and others missed the use of their mother tongue (first language).

Suggestions

When asked what the schools could do to make them happy, 11 children (41 percent) wanted more time devoted to play, while 9 wanted to have more drawing or colouring activities. Just a few children suggested that they needed computers, more books, and good happy teachers.

Parents

Similarities and Differences between Home, School, and Early Childhood Centres

Twenty-two parents (81 percent) stated that both home and early childhood centres provided education, while 12 (44 percent) parents specified that home and school are the same in that they provide education. The main difference for the parents was the absence of Pacific Islands language and culture at school. They were also concerned about the use of inappropriate language at school. At home and early childhood centres, no swear words were allowed, whereas in schools many children heard swearing in the school grounds and in some cases inside the classroom.

Learning Expected at Home and School

Parents stated that it is important that at home children learn literacy, respect, language, culture, mathematical concepts, and that they learn to help each other. They also mentioned hygiene, safety, and spiritual routines as other important areas of learning in the home.

Twenty-three (85 percent) parents wanted the schools to offer intellectual challenges for their children, and to maintain and value their culture and language. Fifteen (56 percent) parents wanted the schools to accept the children as they were and to ensure that learning was actually taking place across all subjects.

Transition to School

When the parents were asked about their perceptions of the transition, 19 (70 percent) of them responded positively and said that the children settled very well because having siblings at the school helped. Three parents replied that their children did not settle well because of limited English-language ability.

All 27 parents chose their children's primary schools based on locality. Twelve (44 percent) of the 27 parents also chose their children's primary school based on having siblings or friends at the school, and 11 (41 percent) said that the reputation of the school or its teaching methods influenced their decision.

Suggestions Regarding Transition

Communications regarding the child's progress are very much appreciated, and parents suggested that any concerns about the child should be addressed immediately. However, the majority of parents thought that their children had settled well into school.

Early Childhood Teachers

Similarities and Differences between Home, School, and Early Childhood Centres

Offering education is common to homes, early childhood centres, and schools. Use of ethnic language, discipline, routines, structure, and physical environments seemed to be the main areas of difference experienced across the three contexts.

Eight of the 11 early childhood teachers reported “reading” as an activity practised in all three settings. They also frequently specified Pacific Islands music, dancing, language and mathematics as activities found in all contexts.

It is worth noting that 15 of the children from the study came from unlicensed centres with limited opening hours. In these centres culturally related activities formed a large part of the programme.

Learning Expected Prior to School Entry

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

Transition to School

Ten (91 percent) of the early childhood teachers said they had some contact with the parents when children first started school and 5 reported that it is better if the parents stay with the child, if only for the first day. When they discussed the Pacific Islands resources available in the centres, the early childhood teachers suggested that Pacific Islands resources would be less available to the children when they started school.

Primary School Teachers

Similarities and Differences between Home, School, and Early Childhood Centres

The teachers’ views showed some similarities with parents’ views with regards to the provision of education in the three contexts, and 14 (64 percent) teachers stated that caring and a secure environment were other similarities in the three settings.

Routines, discipline, and rules were some of the similarities mentioned by 11 teachers with a specific observation of religion and spiritual aspects as experienced and practised in both the home and early childhood centres.

Learning Expected Prior to School Entry

When teachers were asked about their expectations of the children when they started school, 15 (68 percent) teachers mentioned social skills, language and culture, respect, and basic knowledge of English. When asked about the skills they expected from Pacific Islands children, 14 (64 percent) teachers required social, mathematical, and communication skills. Thirteen (59 percent) teachers expected literacy skills, for example, love of books, reading, and having experience of books. Twelve (55 percent) teachers said that discipline and routines were other skills expected. Twelve (55 percent) teachers said that they would accept the children as they were and expected them to have confidence when communicating with peers and teachers.

Concerns about Expectations

When the teachers were asked if they had concerns about their expectations, 18 (82 percent) teachers reported that the children spoke limited English, were shy, and had limited listening skills. Two teachers had concerns about the children’s limited literacy skills and 2 teachers

mentioned their own inability to help Pacific Islands' children. Ten (56 percent) teachers had other concerns, including modern technology taking over imaginative play, children lacking comprehension, and being moody. It is important for teachers to have appropriate expectations of these children.

When asked about how they coped with these concerns, 7 teachers said they had special programmes, 6 said they had peer support and a buddy system, 5 teachers mentioned parents' involvement in children's activities, and 1 teacher suggested offering challenges to children.

Transition to School

The school teachers were asked about their views of the transition process, and 10 (45 percent) teachers 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. Seven teachers wanted the parents to stay with the child at the early stage. However, 21 (95 percent) teachers said that they had an open-door policy and that parents were most welcome to come to school at any time.

The teachers stated that the children with parents from more than one ethnic group (for example, one Pakeha or Maori parent) spoke only English throughout the transition across the three contexts. This helped them to settle and communicate well when starting school.

Lower adult-child ratios were noticed in schools. Not many parents attended during class sessions, while in Pacific Islands early childhood centres or groups (PILGs), grandparents and parents often stayed until the end of the day.

Eighteen (82 percent) teachers commented that communication between early childhood centres and schools was very important. Thirteen (59 percent) teachers said the information about this study would help early childhood teachers to prepare for transition.

Language Experiences and Issues

In general, children appeared to speak predominantly English at school. They spoke a Pacific Islands language at the early childhood centre, and at home. Twelve (45 percent) teachers wanted to have parents support the language and cultural activities at school, while 10 (45 percent) teachers wanted the schools to employ Pacific Islands teachers and community people to teach and deliver Pacific Islands languages and cultures.

The need for teacher education on these languages and cultures was expressed. It was also noted that there is a need to ensure that participants in pre-service primary teacher education courses experience different early childhood centres, so they understand from where children are coming. Most parents expressed considerable interest in the schools' supporting the children's home language. However, the parents noticed with alarm the use of foul language and bullying among children at schools.

Charters

Seventeen of the 19 school charters specifically stated that they respected Pacific Islands languages and cultures, but only 2 schools in the study had actually established Pacific Islands language and culture classes.

Key Issues

This research offers a model for interviews with participants from Pacific Islands communities. Ethical considerations, research instruments, and procedures were all scrutinised for cultural appropriateness. Each interviewer endeavoured to adopt and document culturally sensitive approaches to interviewing family members.

Several key issues emerged from a synthesis of the literature reviewed, the demographic data, and findings from the interviews and charter analyses. Key issues are concerned with:

- continuity of Pacific Islands languages and culture;
- partnership between home and school;
- expectations of teachers and parents;
- implications of the hidden curriculum;
- curriculum continuity;
- literacy;
- teacher education;
- Pacific Islands representation in schools and education;
- the scope for further research, including a longitudinal study of children's language-literacy experiences as they progress from Pacific Islands early childhood centres through school (Sauvao, 1999; Sauvao, Mapa, & Podmore, 2000).

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