TRANSITIONS WITHIN THE CENTRE & TO SCHOOL
Research at a **Samoan-language** immersion centre

Valerie N. Podmore with Jan Taouma and the A'oga Fa'a Samoa

In May 2003 the Minister of Education announced six selected early-childhood-education Centres of Innovation (COIs). These COIs include a childcare centre, a kōhanga reo, a Pasifika (Samoan-language) immersion centre, a playcentre, and two kindergartens.

Our research project at one of these COIs, the Samoan-language immersion centre, is designed to investigate the relationship between learning and language continuity as children and educators make transitions from the point of entry to the centre through to beginning school. A related intention is to document aspects of the identity, strength, and confidence of the children.

Research questions

There is evidence that children who move from Pasifika language-immersion early childhood centres to school may experience considerable discontinuity in language and cultural experiences (Sauvao, 1999; Sauvao, Mapa, & Podmore, 2000). The present 3-year project (2003–2006) addresses two major research questions, within the context of the Samoan-language immersion early-childhood COI and its community and for the benefit of this community. The questions are:

- What helps learning and language continuity as children make transitions within and from the A'oga Fa'a Samoa?
- How can the key approaches that help learning and language continuity be implemented in practice?

The sampling includes children at two transition points and the staff at the centre. The transition points are (1) the move at around 2 years 6 months from the infants' and toddlers' area to the over-2's area and (2) the transition from the A'oga Fa'a Samoa to the primary school on the adjacent site. An initial advisory group (convened on 20 February 2003 to consult and finalise this research proposal) continues to provide guidance and advice for the research project (Taouma, Wendt-Samu, Podmore, et al., 2003).

Ethical considerations

The research is being carried out in accordance with the *Ethical Guidelines* of the New Zealand Association for Research in Education (1999). Specific attention is being paid to general principles, cultural appropriateness, consent, confidentiality, and responsive feedback. Procedures have been developed and appraised for cultural appropriateness, with regard for Pasifika methodologies.

Sensitivity to the centre philosophy is important to maintain the children's experience of Samoan language. Given that there are extra visitors to the centre, adults now meet to discuss the project in an area that is separated from the children, and an additional room was built for this purpose. Sensitivity to the child participants and to the needs of infants and young children being observed is important throughout all phases of the research (Hedges, 2002).

Prior to the commencement of the research, the proposal was approved by the Victoria University Human Ethics Committee. Informed consent for the research was then sought from the staff and centre parents, from the primary school principal and primary school teacher in the bilingual Samoan unit, and from the parents of the school children in that class.

Research participants and processes

Practitioner involvement and collaboration are key features of the action research being undertaken. Types of data collected include observations, daily diaries, surveys, and self-reports.

The advisory group serves as a focus group, and in-depth focus-group interviews were organised for the key informants. The group includes a facilitator, three teachers (including one from the primary school on site), two researchers, one representative from centre management, one to two parents, the centre manager, and a centre support person. The focus-group facilitator and the researcher(s) "moderate" the focus group, drawing on the experiences and views of the informants. The duration of the focus-group discussions is from 2 to 3 hours. Recording methods include:

- recording the interview on a laptop computer;
- note-taking; and
- audio-taping sections for further analysis.

The recorded information is checked by participants to record collective views accurately and to ensure prompt feedback on the accuracy of the records (as in Podmore, May, & Mara, 1998).

The project draws on the action research approaches used previously in New Zealand studies to implement an action research spiral approach (Cardno, 2003; Carr, May, Podmore, et al., 2000). The spiral approach includes observing, planning, acting, and reflecting (following a model derived from Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988).

We view the participatory action research as collaborative and also potentially emancipating (in line with the views of other action researchers and writers, such as Atweh, Kemmis, & Weeks, 1998). The action research is demanding of teachers' time and of the centre's organisation of staffing, and it offers the research team particular (potentially exciting) challenges associated with record keeping in English and Samoan.

Language continuity and transition
Findings from the focus group

We structured the focus-group topics and questions to provide background information about research question 1: What helps learning and language continuity as children make transitions within and from the A'oga Fa'a Samoa? Meetings of the focus group opened with

> Participants highlighted the importance of respect for the children, especially those aged under 2 years. It was noted that the centre should "raise the child" rather than just "look after the child" and that within the centre it is crucial to have an understanding of Samoan learning ethics and the ability to use Samoan language actively to convey ideas.

prayer and concluded with thanks to participants and a prayer.

At the first meeting of the focus group, convened to progress the project and collect preliminary data (on 2 September 2003), the discussion centred on these questions:

1. How do we assist Samoan-language communication in the centre?
   Probe—Links to *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996).
2. What strategies or practices do we use to facilitate children's transition:
   - from the infants' and toddlers' area to the over-2's area?
   - from the over-2's area to the primary school?
   Probes—Focus on "critical incidents" (Airini & Brooker, 1999).
3. What are our main expectations/aspirations for children at the centre? (centre participants).
4. What are our main expectations/aspirations for children moving from this centre to the school? (school participants).

During the group discussion about how the centre assists Samoan-language communication, teachers identified two areas where English is to be spoken on the site, and they referred to the new room constructed for this purpose. Teachers also commented on the importance of having broader community language support for the children and suggested that it is important for children (in their homes) to understand the meaning of more complex concepts through the stronger language.

The discussion of transition centred on how strategies must have a holistic focus, which is important for bilingual education (and is also consistent with the principles of *Te Whāriki*, the early childhood curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1996). There were comments about the need to educate parents about transitional points in the children's education. It was noted that this early childhood COI's system of grouping children around one teacher works in very interesting ways. This was evident, for example, in a pilot action research project on children's friendships. In relation to the transition and grouping processes at the centre, the focus-group members also emphasised a number of points including:

- the importance of contextualising learning and of the continuity provided by one teacher moving with a group of children;
- the importance to learning of group routines;
- the need for parents "to understand what transitions mean"; and

- the importance of nurturing children's individuality and their respect for others.

Parents stated that their expectations for children at the centre included:
- safety;
- being loved;
- learning and having knowledge of *fa'asamoa*;
- wellbeing;
- being responded to and having their feelings nurtured;
- comfort; and
- feelings of familiarity, "culturally".

Participants highlighted the importance of respect for the children, especially those aged under 2 years. It was noted that the centre should "raise the child" rather than just "look after the child" and that within the centre it is crucial to have an understanding of Samoan learning ethics and the ability to use Samoan language actively to convey ideas.

Group members collectively listed their aspirations for children moving on from the centre to school. Parents and early childhood teachers' aspirations for children in transition included:
- having strong sense of self ("who they are; where they come from");
- experiencing language continuity;
- developing general literacy in other subjects grounded in Samoan learning ethics; and
- developing the ability to open their minds up to other forms of language and learning.

It was noted that mainstream schools should develop strong bilingual programmes to support the children moving on from Pasifika early childhood centres.

The focus group has reconvened for continued in-depth discussions. (This is in keeping with the text by Bloor et al. (2001) on focus groups in social research, which finds that in certain study designs, reconvening a group may be useful to follow up on information.) The discussion at the second meeting of the focus group centred on the question "What strategies or practices do we use to facilitate children's transition?" There was an emphasis on successful aspects and experiences of children's transition and their language learning, from the perspectives of teachers and of parents. We drew on the "critical incidents technique" (Flanagan, 1954), used previously by Airini and Brooker (1999) in teacher education research. This yielded some rich narrative examples of successful experiences. The critical-incidents analyses identify categories and related competencies for professional development associated with language learning (and connected to the principles and strands of *Te Whāriki*) during transitions (from the infants'

and toddlers' area to the over-2's area and from the centre to the primary school) (Airini, 2004).

Preliminary findings from observations, teacher diaries, and interviews

Prior to the commencement of this research, the staff were already familiar with observing infants and children and compiling "learning stories" for individual children (Carr, 2001), as part of Margaret Carr's learning and assessment "exemplars" project. Staff are continuing to observe individual children and to prepare learning stories.

In addition, key staff members are tracking small groups of children as they make these transitions:

- the move at around 2 years 6 months from the infants' and toddlers' area to the over-2's area; and

- the transition from the A'oga Fa'a Samoa to the primary school on the adjacent site.

Staff members are also observing individual children and small groups of children, as toddlers make the transition to the over-2's area and children move to school. Alongside their observations, they are making diary records across the five strands of *Te Whāriki*, the New Zealand early childhood curriculum: belonging, well-being, communication, exploration, and contribution.

The intention is to reflect both on children's experiences of transition and on teachers' practices holistically across the strands of *Te Whāriki*. The information recorded to date includes useful examples of teachers fostering children's sense of belonging in the new space and of teachers encouraging communication in Samoan. We are also looking for examples of contribution during transition (children's looking after others arriving).

In addition, the project team is making audio records of children talking about transitions. A set of suggested questions has been compiled for staff to ask the child (in the Samoan language). The questions at transition points, for example, are "What are you looking forward to (doing) at school?", "What do you like about school?", or (before and after the child moves across to the over-2's area within the centre) "What do like best at...(the centre)?"

From September to December 2003 teachers observed six individual children as they made the transition from the infants' and toddlers' area to the over-2's area. A further group of five children was observed as they made the transition from the a'oga to the primary school on the adjacent site. Three teachers tracked the groups of children and continued to make observations and diary records. They coded their observations of both the children's and the teachers' interactions across the strands of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996). The intention was to record and reflect on examples of practices that they found to be facilitating transition or encouraging children's Samoan language learning and development. During this period, other staff members also continued their regular practice of writing learning stories about the children, and these are a further rich source of data.

Transition to the over-2's area of the centre: Belonging

Recorded observations illustrate how, during transitions within the centre, having a staff member making the transition with a group of children facilitates the interpretation of the children's actions. This is evident in the following observational record:

> The first day at the over-2's side, a staff member shows [a child in the transition group] and her mum where to put her bag, and the changing room, and where to put her nappies.
> Mum leaves and [child] plays with [her two friends] inside. They play in the family corner, sort colours, draw pictures and use scissors to cut papers. She decides to walk outside; her friends follow her and they all go and sit outside on the couch and take their shoes off. They line their shoes up at the back of the couch then she [the child] leads them to the sand pit. The teacher brings them back to show them where their shoes should go.

The staff member who made the above observations recorded in her diary:

> The children linked what they knew (in this instance, where their shoes belonged), i.e., they tried to find a similar place in the over-2's area. They were building up knowledge about where their things belonged—developing a sense of identity. They did this twice before they remembered. On the third day, two children remembered—the third child needed reminding. Within a week they had all remembered [where to put their shoes in the new environment].

Regarding the teacher's interactions, she noted:

> When [early childhood teacher's name] realised that our three new children had put their shoes in a place like they used to use, she got them together and explained where their shoes belonged in the new

setting [over-2's area]. This was repeated during the week.

Clearly, understanding where to put their shoes when making a transition within the centre was important to these children's sense of belonging in the new environment. The importance of removing shoes inside and placing them in appropriate places is consistent with cultural practices in Pasifika contexts.

Transition to the over-2's area of the centre: Communication

Recorded observations illustrate how the children's use of the Samoan language was extended within the centre as they moved across to the over-2's area.

These observations were recorded and then coded as examples of communication:

> *Teacher*: Fa'afetai L… mole supo. (Thank you L… for the soup.)
> *Child* (looks at the potato): Talo.
> *Teacher*: Leai, e le se talo, ole pateta. (No, it's not a talo, it's a potato.)
> *Child*: Ole pateta. (It's a potato.)
> *Teacher*: Ole a lau mea ai na e ai? (What are you eating?)
> *Child*: Ole supo ma le kaloti, ma le moa male kapisi male pateta. (It's soup and carrots and chicken and cabbage and potato.)
> *Teacher*: Teine lelei, [child's name]. (Good girl, [child's name].)

The staff member then recorded in her diary that the child (as observed in the above excerpt) "knew what she was eating in Samoan, except the potato which she mistook for talo".

The staff member also made these reflections on the role of the teacher in children's Samoan-language development:

> The teacher was encouraging her [the child in transition] in the use of Samoan language, by questioning and helping her know the difference between some of the vegetables—talo and pateta [taro and potato].

Transition to school: Communication

There is a close connection between the Samoan-immersion early childhood COI and the school located on the adjacent site. A staff member from the centre accompanies the children to the school classroom to observe their transition experiences. This appears to enhance understanding and interpretation of the actions of children who are making the transition. Below is an excerpt from an interview with a child soon after making the

transition to the school classroom.

Faia'oga (teacher): O a mai le a'oga? (How's school?)

Child: Manaia. (Nice.)

Faia'oga: O ai le igoa o lau faia'oga? (What is your teacher's name?)

Child: O [school teacher's name].

Faia'oga: Ete fiafia ile a'oga? (Are you happy at/with school?)

Child: Ioe. (Yes.)

Faia'oga: Aisea? (Why?)

Child: Because I do my homework.

Faia'oga: O a mea a'oga e fai? (What homework do you do?)

Child: Ole art and do some names.

Faia'oga: E te iloa fa'asamoa? (Can you speak Samoan?)

Child: Ioe. (Yes.)

Faia'oga: O le a le fa'asamoa o lau tala? (How do you say what you said in Samoan?)

Child: E fiafia e fai le galuega, e fiafia au i la'u faia'oga o [school teacher's name]. E fai le lotu, e tautala Palagi ai ile a'oga. (I'm happy to work. I like my teacher, I say prayers and I speak English at school.)

In this way, the process of the research itself also contributes to children's communication in Samoan, as they communicate with the early childhood teacher about their move from the Samoan-immersion environment of the early childhood COI to the bilingual classroom at the school.

Concluding comment: Teacher reflections

During the "reflection and action" stages of the first spiral of the action research, the research associate asked a staff member about her reflections on the research processes and on the data generated by the study. This staff member, who has a key role in the research, explained:

Staff member: 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 wellbeing,

and what we can do as the next step. With this [research—that is, 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?

Staff member: Yes. Language and communication. And learning to do things for themselves, and be confident learners.

Clearly, this research highlights the importance of teachers reflecting on both children and adults and on the processes of their communication with infants and with young children as they move to school. The close co-operation between the early childhood centre and the school contributes to understanding each of the children as they make the transition to school in small groups.

References

Airini. (2004). What helps effective transition in early childhood education: Perceptions of good practice in Samoan ECE. In V. N. Podmore (Ed.), *Progress and Milestone Report to the Ministry of Education* (pp. 1–17). Wellington: Ministry of Education.

Airini, & Brooker, B. (1999). *Quality teacher education: What helps or hinders learning in teacher education*. Paper presented at the Pacific Circle Consortium Conference, University of Hawai'i at Manoa, USA.

Atweh, B., Kemmis, S., & Weeks, P. (1998). *Action research in practice: Partnerships for social justice*. London: Routledge.

Bloor, M., Frankland, J., Thomas, M., & Robson, K. (2001). *Focus groups in social research*. London: Sage Publications.

Cardno, C. E. M. (2003). *Action research: A developmental approach*. Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research.

Carr, M. (2001) *Assessment in early childhood settings: Learning stories*. London: Paul Chapman.

Carr, M., May, H., Podmore, V. N., Cubey, P., Hatherly, A., & Macartney, B. (2000). *Learning and teaching stories: Action research on evaluation in early childhood. Final report to the Ministry of Education*. Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research.

Flanagan, J. (1954). The critical incident technique. *Psychological Bulletin, 51*(4), 327–358.

Hedges, H. (2002). Beliefs and principles in practice: Ethical research with child participants. *New Zealand Research in Early Childhood Education, 5*, 31–48.

Kemmis, S., & McTaggart, R. (1988). *The action research planner* (3rd ed.). Geelong: Deakin University.

Ministry of Education. (1996). *Te whāriki: He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early childhood curriculum*. Wellington: Learning Media.

New Zealand Association for Research in Education. (1999). *New Zealand Association for Research in Education ethical guidelines* [electronic version]. Retrieved 14 July, 2004, from www.nzare.org.nz/pdfs/NZARE-Ethical-Guidelines.pdf

Podmore, V. N., May, H., & Mara, D. (1998). *Evaluating early childhood programmes using the strands and goals of Te Whāriki, the national early childhood curriculum*. Final Report on phases 1 and 2 to the Ministry of Education. Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research.

Sauvao, L. (1999). *Transition from a'oga amata to school: Case studies in the Wellington region*. Unpublished MEd thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand.

Sauvao, L., Mapa, L., & Podmore, V. N. (2000). *Transition to school from Pacific Islands early childhood centres*. Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research.

Taouma, J., Wendt-Samu, T., Podmore, V. N., Moananu, M., & Tapusoa, E. (2003). *Innovation and collaborative research development in an early childhood centre* [CD ROM]. Paper presented at the joint conference of the New Zealand Association for Research in Education and the Australian Association for Research in Education, Auckland.

Acknowledgements

Dr Val Podmore is a senior lecturer at the Institute for Early Childhood Studies and the research convenor for the School of Education at Victoria University of Wellington. She is currently a lead research associate working alongside an early childhood Centre of Innovation in Auckland (2003–2006) on contact to the Ministry of Education (through Victoria Link Ltd).
Email: Val.Podmore@vuw.ac.nz

Jan Taouma is project manager of the A'oga Fa'a Samoa early childhood Centre of Innovation.