

A Samoan-Language Immersion Centre's Journey Into Action Research

Pasefika Early Childhood Centre of Innovation 2

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Abstract

This collaborative paper outlines the implementation of participant research within an "early childhood centre of innovation". The research is designed to examine the relationship between learning and language continuity as children and educators at a centre make transitions from the point of entry through to beginning school. Findings from the first phase of the research, and the development of the first spiral of an action research cycle, are outlined. This includes reference to critical incidents analyses. Research processes are discussed, including the implementation of the action research design. The research approaches chosen for the study are appraised for cultural appropriateness.

Introduction

This collaborative paper outlines the implementation of participant research within an "early childhood centre of innovation", the A'oga Fa'a Samoa. When we developed this project, we believed that the action research, now in progress, would not only enable us to reflect and develop our own practice and enhance our role as a professional development centre for other Pacific early childhood education (ECE) centres, but also enable us to make a meaningful contribution to Pacific education research. We were mindful of the need for further breadth and depth in Pacific research in the early childhood sector, as identified in the Ministry of Education's Pacific Education Literature Review (Coxon, Anae, Mara, Wendt-Samu, & Finau, 2002).

We intended that, through this research, the centre would continue to show leadership as a professional development centre (Rodd, 1994), and we are working within Rodd's three dimensions of educational leadership. These dimensions are:

- technical (planning and delivering an authentic curriculum *Te Wh_riki*, using Samoan language immersion);

- conceptual (action research plan, and development of reflective research, documentation, and practice),
- interpersonal (with a strong emphasis on communication and dissemination).

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

Research Questions

This 3-year project (2003-2006) addresses two major research questions.

The questions are:

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?

Research Design

The research is designed to address the above research questions, within the context of the A'oga Fa'a Samoa and its community, and for the benefit of its community. The sampling design 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-2s 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 20 February 2003 to consult and finalise this research proposal) continues to provide guidance and advice for the research project (see Taouma et al., 2003).

Methods

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 are being developed and appraised for cultural appropriateness, with regard for Pacific methodologies.

Sensitivity to the centre philosophy is needed to maintain the children's experience of Samoan language. Given that there are extra visitors to the centre, it is necessary for adults to meet to discuss the project in an area that is separated from the children (this was recommended in the centre proposal for capital expenditure, and the related building project is currently in progress). Sensitivity to the child participants, and to the needs of infants/young children being observed is important and we realise this

sensitivity will continue to be 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; and from the primary school principal, primary school teacher in the bilingual Samoan unit, and parents of the school children in that class.

Focus Group Interviews with Staff, Parents, and Management

In-depth focus group interviews were organised for the A'oga Fa'a Samoa participants and other key informants. The advisory group serves as a focus group. The advisory/focus group includes a facilitator, 2 researchers, 2-3 staff members, 1 representative from centre management, 2-3 parents, the centre manager, and a centre support person.

A facilitator (Samoan), together with the researcher/s, "moderates" the focus group, drawing on the experiences and views of the informants. The duration of the focus group discussions is from two to three 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, with Mara, 1998).

Action Research Cycles

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

Spiral 1

- *Planning* identify areas to act and observe (also applying findings from critical incidents analyses)

Acting and observing

- *Reflection*

On communication with infants and with young children about to move to school. We suggest that appraisal will lead to action.

Spiral 2

- *Planning*

To enhance continuity of language and responsive communication.

- *Acting and observing*

Centre participants will carry out further observations focused on the changes implemented. Changes will be documented.

- *Reflection*

Final reflection on and analysis of changes (to the language environment and to adults' reciprocal, responsive communication).

Practitioner participation and collaboration are key features of this action research. Types of data collection methods include observations, daily diaries (already in use in the centre prior to the commencement of the research), and survey/self-report techniques

We view the participatory action research in progress as collaborative, and also potentially emancipating (in line with the views of other action researchers and writers, for example — Atweh, Kemmis, & Weeks, 1998). To date, the action research has also been demanding of teachers' time and of the centre's organisation of staffing, and it offers all participants particular (potentially exciting) challenges associated with record keeping in English and Samoan.

Progress to Date and Preliminary Findings

Teachers and the advisory/focus group, which includes the researchers, are currently engaged in spiral one of the action research.

Focus Group Discussions

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 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 was centred on these questions:

1. How do we assist Samoan language communication in the centre?
Probe: Links to Te Wh_riki (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-2s area?
From the over 2s 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).*

Assisting Samoan language communication in the centre

During the group discussion focused on 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 now under construction 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 (using an “*ad hoc* approach rather than strategic language communication”).

Strategies or practices used to facilitate children’s transition

The discussion of transition centred on how strategies must have a holistic focus – which is important for bi-lingual education. There were comments about the need to educate parents about transitional points in the children’s education. It was noted that the A’oga system of groupings of children around one teacher works in very interesting ways. This was evident, for example, in a pilot action research project on children’s friendships. Group members also emphasised, in regard to the transition and grouping processes at the A’oga, 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 respect for others.

Expectations for children at the centre

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 A’oga should “raise the child” rather than just “look after the child”, and that there was a need for understanding of Samoan learning ethics, and the ability to use Samoan language actively to convey ideas.

Aspirations for children

Group members collectively listed their aspirations for children moving on from the A’oga as: 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 bi-lingual programmes to support the children moving on from Pasifika early childhood centres.

The focus group was reconvened (on 10 November 2003) for continued in-depth discussion. (This was in keeping with Bloor, et al.’s 2001 text on focus groups in social research, which specifies 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 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.

Findings of the critical incidents are being analysed to identify categories and related competencies for professional development associated with language learning (and connected to the principles and strands of Te Whariki), during transitions (from the infants’ and toddlers’ area to the over-2s area; and from the A’oga Fa’a Samoa to the primary school).

Audio Recordings, Observations and Teacher Diaries

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). The centre had participated in 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:

- 1) the move at around 2 years 6 months from the infants’ and toddlers’ area to the over-2s area and
- 2) the transition from the A’oga Fa’a Samoa to the primary school on the adjacent site.

Audio Recordings

The project team are making audio and/or video records of children talking about transitions. Planned steps in the process are:

- The key staff member asks each child a question.
- A videotape/audio tape record is made of the question and the child’s responses (about 10-15 minutes in length)
- The staff member writes down the child’s name and the date, and then
- passes each tape (with date of recording) to (a team member) to transcribe in Samoan (and translate from Samoan to English so we have records in both languages).

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?”* or (before and after the child moves across to the over 2s area within the centre *“What do like best at A’oga?”*

Observations and Teacher Diaries

Staff members are also observing individual children and/or small groups of children, as 5 toddlers make the transition to the over-2s area, and another 5 children move to school. Alongside their observations, they are making diary records across the five strands of *Te Wh_riki*, 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 Wh_riki*. 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, during transition, of contribution (children's looking after others arriving/aiga philosophy).

Reflections on Cultural Appropriateness

In the planning and process of this research, we are making particular reference to the Pasifika Education Research Guidelines prepared by Melani Anae, Eve Coxon, Diane Mara, Tanya Wendt-Samu, and Christine Finau (2001). One of the authors, Tanya Wendt-Samu, is closely connected with the project and provides guidance as facilitator of the focus/advisory group/s. This connection is a consequence of her role as a parent member of A'oga Fa'a Samoa management committee.

It is possible, at this early stage of the research, to reflect on the cultural appropriateness, using the *Pasifika Education Research Guidelines* (2001) in three key areas.

These are:

- The Research Team
- Consultation Processes
- Research Methods

The Research Team – Its Composition

The *Pasifika Education Research Guidelines* identifies three types of research teams. The A'oga Fa'a Samoa team would fit into the category of "...those which are made up of Pacific and non-Pacific researchers" (Anae et al., 2001, p.16). This research team is made up of parents, teachers, academic researchers and an Early Childhood advisor. Some members of this team are Samoan, and some are palagi. Those who are Samoan, range in age or position in terms of life stage (i.e., younger, single and married with children and grandchildren). Some are New Zealand born and raised, and others were born and raised in Samoa. There are two male parents on the focus group. Another parent on the focus group is of papalagi heritage. On a superficial level, the research team reflects the diversity of the centre's community. While this was not the outcome of deliberated action, it does support the *Guidelines* assertion that "It must be acknowledged that Pacific people are made up of

both island-born and New Zealand born peoples and this should be reflected at all levels of the research project” (2001, p.16).

Consultation Processes – and Relationships

If consultation is, as the writers of the *Pasifika Education Research Guidelines* state, “...a two-way communication process for presenting and receiving information before final decisions are made, in order to influence those decisions” (p. 19), then the A’oga Fa’a Samoa research can demonstrate that this has indeed taken place at all stages to date. The *Guidelines* also state that consultation is “...the only means of arriving and sustaining a research partnership with Pacific researchers and / or communities” (Anae et al., 2001, p. 19). Here are reflections on how this relates to the A’oga Fa’a Samoa research.

The relationships within the research team are ones that have NOT been forged as a consequence of the research. The levels of trust and confidence in the current membership are a reflection of prior relationships and networks. The lead researcher for example, was held in high personal and professional regard by the Centre Manager and senior *faiaoga*. Parents were to meet her for the first time via the research but feelings of trust were already seeded because of the high regard expressed by others. Her ethnicity / cultural background and credibility was not disputed or challenged. This is the case for the ECE advisor as well. Non-Samoan members of the research team bring an appreciation and in-depth understanding of the Centre’s underlying philosophies, as well as practical experience of Centre and Pasifika language nests. The research team may not be homogenous, but this is not problematic in any way. The intra-team relationships are *developing* rapidly and securely, as the research progresses.

Research Methods – Tools Infused With a Unique “Flavour”

The *Guidelines* discuss the need to “... incorporate and appropriately weave Pacific epistemologies into the methodological fabric of the research process” (Anae et al., 2001, p.2). Constraints of time and space prevent a detailed discussion as to how and when this is done in the A’oga Fa’a Samoa research. What can be said however is: the tools and approaches that are being used (e.g., action research, the critical incidents approach) are being utilised in a unique culturally specific context, through the medium of Samoan and English. The researchers bring to bear their own unique perspectives, which are influenced by the way their cultures have become embodied within them, and are influenced by their ages, roles in the A’oga community, within the research team, and other factors. The results of the research, as well as its multi-layered benefits, in no way can be predictable. The tools will become “Samoan”, in the hands of a team committed and influenced by the shared cultural, Samoan, values.

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