

The Value of Culture and Language

The Aoga Fa'a Samoa was the first licensed Samoan Language Early Childhood Centre in New Zealand. It is the only licensed Samoan centre that is part of a Primary School that has a Samoan language programme. This unique situation has been written about in education papers and published books. (May 1990. Cazden 1989)

Research has shown, both here in New Zealand and overseas, that if children can learn in the language of their own home, they will feel secure and confident so enabling interactions to occur between teacher and child. Long term research studies have been conducted on the effects of the child being immersed in their home language during the pre-school years. Cognitive developmental gains of the children are shown in Mathematics, Science, Reading and Music (Savaille – Troike, 1982). This is also supported from research findings that have shown positive gains for Maori children who have progressed through Kohanga Reo and moved into Kura Kaupapa (Smith, 1986).

In Canada two researchers Peal and Lambert (1962) revolutionized thinking about bilingualism when they found developmental superiority in bi-lingual children. Subsequent research in Switzerland, Singapore, Israel, New York and Wales consolidated the findings that *bilingual children are likely to:*

- *Have greater cognitive flexibility*
- *Have the ability to be more flexible in their manipulation of linguistic codes*
- *Show precision in separating word meaning and sound*
- *Show a greater capacity for divergent thinking*
- *Show a greater facility for concept formation*

(Peal R & Lambert J, 1962)

An article “Fertile Minds” published by Time magazine states that “*the ability to learn a second language is highest between the birth and the age of six, then undergoes a steady and inexorable decline*” (Time Magazine, 1997)

In “Talking Past Each Other” Joan Metge and Patricia Kinlock state

“It is in Early Childhood that children are still developing mastery of their parental culture and are also open to other influences. Early Childhood educators can help them sort out their confusions – or compound them with potentially disastrous results”

(Metge, J & Kinlock, P. 1984)

For children from a different culture other than that of the dominant culture, observation is not enough. How much value is observation if what we see is misinterpreted, or not understood through misunderstanding? If this is to be avoided it is important for

educators to know something of other cultures – their ways of communication and their value systems. Why do children of minority groups so often come under the heading of ‘at risk or problem children’? When looking for the reasons for problem behaviour, we cannot put all the blame on somebody else. We must look at ourselves, the organization, the attitudes, and the hidden curriculum. Children need an environment where they can feel at ease and are confident of support. Where the whole context of what we do with children is meaningful to their environment, culture, interests and needs – both developmental and for the future.

If we value cultural diversity, it must be embedded in the total pre-school environment.

Whether we have children from other cultures in our pre-schools or not we are all members of a multicultural society, and *language learning* is relevant to *all* children. Children who do not speak English learn quickly and they will be fortunate in being bilingual – an advantage shared by few New Zealanders. Silence often makes us uncomfortable. We try to fill it with words. One of the hardest lessons is to accept the silence of other cultures, and to understand that a great deal of thought and decision making is going on. (Smith, M. 1981)

Summary

A’oga Fa’a Samoa has traditionally immersed the children who attend the centre in the Samoan language. Research has shown that children who are able to learn their first language well, who are steeped in their culture and valued for who they are, go on to prosper educationally. Here at A’oga Fa’a Samoa, consideration is given to empowering children to learn and grow through an holistic curriculum, within the context of their family and community, and nurtured by responsive, reciprocal relationships.

References

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