

# Sociocultural Perspectives on Transition to School from Pacific Islands Early Childhood Centres

Perspectives socioculturelles sur la transition à l'école des centres d'éducation de la petite enfance d'îles Pacifiques

Perspectivas socioculturales sobre la transición a la escuela de centros de primera infancia de las Islas del Pacífico

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**ABSTRACT** *Sociocultural theories of learning and development underpin a number of studies of young children's experiences as they move from early childhood education centres to school settings. This paper summarises research designed to investigate children's transition to primary school from Pacific early childhood centres in New Zealand. The study records experiences of transition to school of families from each of five Pacific groups (Cook Islands, Niue, Samoa, Tokelau, and Tonga). The emphasis is on language and children's other experiences as they move from Pacific Islands early childhood centres into English-language primary schools. Findings from in-depth interviews with children, parents, early childhood teachers, and school teachers are summarised, and brief reference is also made to analyses of the content of the 19 participating schools' charters. The paper draws on sociocultural perspectives to comment on aspects of facilitating transition.*

**RÉSUMÉ** *Les théories socioculturelles d'apprentissage et de développement soutiennent un certain nombre d'études sur les expériences des petits enfants pendant qu'ils se déplacent des centres d'éducation de la petite enfance à un cadre d'école. Cet article résume la recherche*

*conçue pour étudier la transition des enfants à l'école primaire des centres d'éducation de la petite enfance d'îles Pacifiques en Nouvelle-Zélande. Cette étude enregistre des expériences de transition à l'école des familles de chacun de cinq groupes Pacifiques (îles Cook, Nioué, Samoa, Tokélaï, et Tonga). L'emphase est sur la langue et les autres expériences des enfants pendant qu'ils se déplacent des centres d'éducation de la petite enfance d'îles Pacifiques dans les écoles primaires de langue anglaise. Des résultats des entrevues détaillées avec des enfants, avec des parents, avec des enseignants spécialisés dans l'étude la petite enfance, et des enseignants d'école sont résumés, et on fait une référence brève aux analyses du contenu des chartes des 19 écoles qui participent. L'article tire sur des perspectives socioculturelles pour faire des observations sur des aspects de la facilitation de la transition.*

**RESUMEN** *Las teorías socio-culturales del aprendizaje y el desarrollo apuntalan un número de estudios sobre las experiencias de niños pequeños cuando pasan de los centros de educación para la primera infancia al medio de la escuela. Este ensayo resume la investigación diseñada para investigar la transición de los niños a la escuela primaria de centros preescolares del Pacífico en Nueva Zelanda. El estudio registra experiencias de la transición a la escuela de familias de cada uno de cinco grupos del Pacífico (islas Cook, Niue, Samoa, Tokelau, y Tonga). El énfasis está en el lenguaje y las otras experiencias por las que pasan los niños al desplazarse de los centros pre-escolares de las Islas del Pacífico a las escuelas primarias de lengua inglesa. Se resumen aquí los resultados de entrevistas detalladas con los niños, los padres, los maestros de la primera infancia, los enseñantes de escuela y se hace breve referencia a los análisis del contenido de los estatutos de las 19 escuelas que participan. El ensayo utiliza las perspectivas socioculturales para comentar sobre los aspectos de la facilitación de esta transición.*

## **Introduction**

This paper aims to reflect on children's transition to school from Pacific early childhood centre contexts. It draws on sociocultural perspectives to comment on findings from a recent New Zealand study of transition to primary school. Sociocultural theory, pioneered by Lev Vygotsky's (1978) work on the cultural and historical contexts of learning, contributes to understanding how children see the world and their own experiences. From a sociocultural perspective, understanding their culture/s is an integral part of young children's learning. For teachers, in turn, having an understanding of children's cultural and language experiences is part of fostering an effective learning relationship.

From Vygotsky's perspective, understanding culture is integral to children's learning, but other sociocultural perspectives have emphasised that learning culture is also about participating in it with others. Vygotsky (1978) emphasised the contexts of learning, social interaction, and children's learning being influenced by understanding the culture(s) which surround them. He saw children's learning as being guided, modelled, and structured by adults.

Vygotsky proposed that children's learning is most appropriately achieved in the 'zone of proximal development'. This is the area slightly beyond the level of the child's independent competence; where learning may take place by the child being guided in the presence of more competent others (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky's theory is connected closely to the history and culture of groups, including minority groups (Cullen, 2001).

More recent research studies emphasise the concepts of shared understanding, joint problem solving, and active co-construction of learning (Rogoff, 1990; Van Der Veer & Valsiner, 1994; Smith, 1996). Barbara Rogoff argues that development is 'a process of transformation through people's participation rather than of acquisition' (Rogoff *et al.*, 1995, p. 46).

Sociocultural perspectives are becoming influential in studies of transition to school. This is evident in recent New Zealand research on children's transition from early childhood centres to primary school (MacDonald *et al.*, 1999; Peters, 2000; Sauvao *et al.*, 2000). When young children move from one educational setting to another it is important to understand the cultural context of their prior experiences, given that children's culture-specific experiences, and their development of language and literacy skills, are interconnected.

### **Transition to School: a Pacific study**

Pacific early childhood centres are language-immersion centres where care and education may be offered in the 'mother tongue'. During the last 10 years in New Zealand, the numbers of Pacific children participating in early childhood services has increased by over 80%, and enrolments at Pacific Islands early childhood centres has risen markedly.

Our study of transition to school from Pacific Islands early childhood centres developed some culturally appropriate ways of interacting with families from five different Pacific groups, and it outlines key issues and concerns about transition to school from Pacific early childhood centres. The emphasis is on children's experiences, including language and culture-specific experiences that support the development of language and literacy skills, as they move from Pacific Islands early childhood centres into English-language primary schools. There were five research questions on children's transition from Pacific 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)?

Transition to school studies take on different perspectives, including a 'parent's' perspective, a 'teacher's' perspective, and/or a 'child's' perspective (Mapa *et al.*, 1998, cited by Sauvao *et al.*, 2000). Our small-scale study describes the views and experiences of children, parents, and teachers. It includes families from each of five Pacific groups (Cook Islands, Niue, Samoa, Tokelau, and Tonga).

A representative from each of the Pacific groups interviewed the parents, children, and early childhood teachers, and these interviewers provided links between the research and the five ethnic communities. The participants were 27 children, their parents, and their early childhood and primary school teachers.

The children, who were all aged between 5 years 0 months and 5 years 8 months, had recently moved from a Pacific early childhood centre to a primary school. The sampling design was planned to include six children, if available, who had graduated from Pacific early childhood centres representing each of the five different Pacific language groups. The participating 16 girls and 11 boys identified as being from these Pacific groups: Cook Islands (six children), Samoa (six children), Tonga (six children), Tokelau (six children), and Niue (three children). Almost all of the children were New Zealand born. Eleven of the children

were first-born in their families, six were second-born, five third-born, one fourth-born, and four fifth-born. The relatively large family sizes are consistent with birth trends for Pacific women in New Zealand.

At least one parent of each of the 27 children participated in an interview. Participating parents included 15 mothers who were interviewed alone, four fathers interviewed alone, and eight mothers and fathers interviewed together. The parents were aged between 21 and 50 years, with the most common age bracket from 31 to 40 years (50% of parents), followed by 21–30 years (30%) and 41–50 years (22%).

Early childhood teachers from each of the five Pacific groups participated. The 11 early childhood teachers all taught at the Pacific Islands early childhood centres the children had attended prior to starting school. All of the early childhood teachers were women. The ages of the majority of early childhood teachers fell in the 41–50 bracket. Six of the 11 early childhood teachers spoke Samoan, two spoke Tongan, two Cook Islands Māori, and two Niuean. All spoke some English, with 10 of the 11 describing themselves as speakers of English.

The children's current teachers at primary school were also interviewed. In total, 19 schools took part in the study. Twenty-two school teachers participated in interviews; and all of them were women. Nineteen of the teachers (86%) identified as Pākehā/European, and three as Māori. The majority of teachers were aged 21–40 years. All of the school teachers spoke English fluently. In addition, two spoke both English and Māori, and one spoke Samoan and English.

Interviews were planned and conducted in culturally appropriate ways. Culturally sensitive interview processes were developed for each of the five ethnic groups and documented in detail as possible models for future research (Sauvao *et al.*, 2000). As an initial recruitment strategy, prior to delivering letters providing information and seeking consent, the interviewers spoke face to face with some of the native speakers of Tokelauan, Cook Islands Māori, Niuean, Tongan, and Samoan. Participating families and early childhood teachers were offered the opportunity to be interviewed in their mother tongue, and full translations were made of the semi-structured interview questions. The primary school teachers were interviewed in English by the authors of this paper.

## **Findings**

Parents, children, and teachers had some major concerns and made useful suggestions about transition to school.

### *Children*

The children enjoyed a range of learning experiences at home, early childhood centres, and school. Fourteen (52%) of the children said that drawing was a favourite activity in the home, 16 (59%) specified drawing as a favourite activity at school, and 12 (44%) mentioned it as a favourite activity at the early childhood centre. The main difference in the children's preferred activity across the three contexts related to outdoor play. They were more likely to identify outdoor play as a favourite activity at school than at home.

In the early childhood centre context, cultural experiences were important to the children. Fifteen (56%) of the children said that they liked the culture-related activities provided at the center—music, singing and dancing, for example.

Literacy-related experiences were relatively popular both at home and at school. For 13 (48%) of the children, reading was something they liked doing at home, and for 16 (59%), reading was a favourite activity at school. In response to a question about what they would do

if they were trying to read something difficult, the children most frequently responded that they would ask their school teacher for help.

When asked about their experiences of transition to school, 20 (74%) of the 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 based mainly on having relatives and friends from their early childhood centres there. They liked the larger playgrounds and better facilities and play equipment in schools. Twelve children (44%) expressed specific dislikes about school. These included being lonely and being bullied:

Don't like others pushing me off the monkey bars. Don't like people playing rough games.

Don't like mean children.

When one of the girls took my lunch.

It was clear that among these 12 children were some who also missed the use of their mother tongue at school:

Not speaking Samoan and I miss my friends.

### *Parents*

Parents spoke about the similarities and differences between home, school, and early childhood centres. Twenty-two (81%) of the parents stated that both home and early childhood centres provided education, while 12 (44%) specified that home and school are the same in that they provide education. The main difference for the parents was the absence of Pacific languages and cultures at school:

Language at the punanga [Cook Islands early childhood centre] the focus [there is] on Cook Islands Māori and also the culture. The Cook Islands language and culture are not taught at school.

Samoan language is now not often used, but we emphasise it to the kids. The Samoan language was the only language [child's name] used when she started school. Now [child's name] is speaking more English.

At home it's easier for the child to express her feelings, using the same language. When at school it could be more difficult to express her feelings.

The rule at home is to speak Tongan—it is encouraged. A difference that [the child] has picked up from school is to the language spoken.

Tokelau language. Language environments are different, [the child] feels more comfortable at home.

They were also concerned about the use of inappropriate language. At home and early childhood centres, no swear words were allowed, whereas in schools children heard swearing in the school grounds and occasionally in the classroom.

Parents had specific expectations regarding their children's learning. They stated that at home it is important for children to learn literacy, respect, language, culture, mathematical concepts, and to help each other. They also mentioned hygiene, safety, and spiritual routines. Twenty-three (85%) of the parents wanted the schools to offer intellectual challenges to their children, and to maintain and value their culture and language.

The majority of parents thought that their children had settled well into school because they had siblings there. Three parents found 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. Parents appreciated communications from the school regarding their child's progress, and suggested that any concerns about the child should be addressed immediately.

### *Early Childhood Teachers*

Early childhood teachers also noted similarities and differences between the learning environments of home, school, and early childhood centres. The 11 early childhood teachers described the main areas of difference experienced across the three contexts as: use of ethnic language, discipline, routines, structure, physical environments, and relative absence of family members in the school setting. Use of the Pacific languages and involvement of family members appear to be interrelated. As one early childhood teacher noted:

In the [early childhood] centre, you have parents and grandparents helping.

Eight of the 11 early childhood teachers reported 'reading' as an activity practised in all three settings.

When early childhood teachers were asked about what they expected of children at school entry, 9 of the 11 teachers expected children to have literacy skills and to be able to write their own names. They also expected sharing and interpersonal skills with peers (mentioned by seven early childhood teachers), mathematical skills (mentioned by six early childhood teachers), and knowledge of their Pacific culture and language (mentioned by five early childhood teachers). Almost all of the early childhood teachers said they had some contact with the parents when children first started school. Half of them commented that it is better if parents stay with the child, if only for the first day.

Most of the early childhood teachers noted a lack of ethnic languages, or of Pacific resources, in schools. Seven of the eleven early childhood teachers expressed concerns about the lack of ethnic language continuity when the Pacific children moved on to primary schools. As one early childhood teacher commented, there were:

No teachers in primary school to carry on teaching them about language and culture.

Early childhood teachers suggested that Pacific resources would be less readily available to the children when they started school. The Pacific resources they named most often as being available in the early childhood centres were: books, visual materials (posters, charts, pictures), handcrafts (mats, clothing), and audio materials (music, songs, and audio cassette tapes).

### *Primary School Teachers*

The primary school teachers also stated that homes, early childhood centres and schools all provide education. They commented that all three settings are caring, and provide a secure environment featuring discipline, routines, and rules. Teachers noted that, unlike primary schools, homes and Pacific early childhood centres include spiritual aspects and religious practices. Several teachers described the curriculum as a major area of difference between early childhood centres and school:

Te Whāriki, the early childhood curriculum, looks at the child holistically, whereas school is broken up into curriculum areas.

When teachers were asked about their overall expectations of children at school entry, 15 (68%) of them mentioned social skills, language and culture, respect, and basic knowledge of English. Most teachers expected Pacific children to arrive at school with social, mathematical, communication skills, and literacy skills (love of book-related experiences). Half of the

teachers expected children to be disciplined and to understand routines. Half said that they would accept the children as they were.

Teachers' main concerns were that some children spoke limited English, were shy, and had 'limited listening skills'. Two teachers had concerns about children's literacy skills at school entry, and two teachers mentioned their own inability to help Pacific children. When asked about how they coped with their concerns, seven teachers said they had special programmes, six said they had peer support and a buddy system, five teachers mentioned Pacific parents' involvement in children's school activities, one teacher suggested better ratios (having smaller numbers of children in the school class), and one teacher suggested offering more challenges to children. Comments from the teachers about strategies to help Pacific children included:

I encourage the parents to listen to the child's reading at home and to let [the child] practice.

I do the best I can, depending on the circumstances. Make the parents comfortable.

Give [Pacific children] challenging reading materials ... and involve them with more advanced activities. Use them as a role model in class or as a class leader.

School teachers were also asked about their views of the transition process. Ten (45%) of the 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. However, 21 (95%) of the teachers said that they had an open-door policy and that parents were most welcome to come to school at any time.

Teachers noted that very few parents attended during class sessions at school, whereas grandparents and parents often stayed for the whole day at Pacific Islands early childhood centres. Most teachers commented that communication between early childhood centres and schools is very important. Their suggestions included:

[We need] a push from Pacific Islands centres for school teachers to come and visit their preschools and the other way round.

I need to know more about the culture. Possibly a visit for me to an early childhood centre.

If Pacific Islands teachers in early childhood knew the expectations of the school teachers, they may be able to incorporate the skills etc., into their programmes. There should be a two-way thing.

### **Schools' Support of Pacific Languages: experiences, policies, and issues**

The children spoke predominantly English at school, whereas they spoke a Pacific language at the early childhood centre and at home. Half of the school teachers wanted Pacific parents to be involved in the language and cultural activities at school, and half suggested the schools should employ Pacific teachers and community people to teach and deliver Pacific languages and cultures. Teachers' comments also suggested a need for teacher education on Pacific languages and cultures, and for teacher education courses to include experiences of different early childhood centres. Teachers tended to stress the importance of 'understanding where children are coming from'. Parents wanted school to support their children's home language.

The total student population at 9 of the 19 schools included more than 30% who identified as 'Pacific Islanders' (this encompasses a range of Pacific languages and cultures). Seventeen of the nineteen school charters specifically stated that they respected Pacific languages and cultures, but interviews with the school teachers showed that only two schools in the study had actually established Pacific language and culture classes. A few schools established 'Polynesian clubs' which operated for less than 20 minutes a week. The question arising is whether this provides sufficient and appropriate acknowledgement of Pacific cultures in schools. Other

schools gave administrative reasons for not providing these cultural activities—lack of resources and funding, for example.

### Key Issues

Several key issues emerged from this study. They include: continuity of Pacific Islands languages and culture between home, early childhood centre, and school; partnership between home and school; expectations of teachers and parents regarding children's skills at school entry; implications of the 'hidden curriculum' (bullying and swearing); curriculum continuity; literacy; teacher education; and Pacific Islands representation in schools and education.

### Discussion

Numerous studies provide suggestions for successful transition from home and early childhood settings to primary school (Renwick, 1984, 1997; Margetts, 1997; Robinson *et al.*, 2001). From a sociocultural perspective, participation in culture-specific experiences is important to development (Rogoff *et al.*, 1995) and is related to children's language and literacy learning. This study suggests that there is a current need for early childhood and primary school teachers to understand the contexts of the experiences of children from Pacific groups. When these children start primary school, only a few find Pacific teachers in their classrooms (Sauvao, 1999; Sauvao *et al.*, 2000). As Dickie (2000) notes, 'only 2% of primary teachers are of Pacific nations background' (p. 11). However, in primary and intermediate schools, 7.8% of the students are from Pacific groups, and this percentage is increasing.

The views and experiences of the children and the adults in this study, together with the content of the school charters, show distinct discontinuity in the children's cultural experiences at the time of transition to primary school. Continuity–discontinuity is a complex continuum, and some discontinuity is inevitable at transition points in children's education. There appears some consensus among researchers that, during transition to school, maintaining complete continuity is not possible or essential (Peters, 1999, 2000; Podmore *et al.*, 2001; Robinson *et al.*, 2001).

Nevertheless, from a sociocultural perspective, fostering shared understanding among teachers and children is important to promote children's learning across settings (McNaughton, 1998; Podmore *et al.*, 2001). Many of the children participating in this study expressed an interest in literacy-related activities. When they were asked what they would do if they were trying to read something difficult, in primary school settings, children most frequently responded that they would ask the teacher for help. There was a greater tendency among these Pacific children, than among children in a larger-scale longitudinal study in progress in the greater Wellington region (the NZCER's 'Competent Children' study), to adopt the relatively effective learning strategy of seeking assistance from their school teachers (Wylie & Thompson, 1998; Sauvao *et al.*, 2000). This comparison suggests that, when learning to read during the first years at school, children from Pacific groups are more likely than other children to rely on their interactions with their teacher. This further highlights the importance of teachers having a sound understanding of the experiences of Pacific children who arrive in their classrooms.

The results of this study point to growing concerns about continuity of children's experiences in relation to Pacific languages and culture, and curriculum continuity. As explained by one of the school teachers quoted in this paper, *Te Whāriki* (the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, Ministry of Education, 1996) is a holistic curriculum, and it is also a socioculturally oriented curriculum framework (Carr *et al.*, 2002). As a holistic curriculum framework,



*Te Whāriki* allows space for continuity of children's culture-specific experiences. In view of the experiences of these parents and teachers, it appears advisable for early childhood centres and schools to liaise and consult about curricula and policy documents. Curriculum documents for joint consultation would include *Te Whāriki*, Ta'iala (Samoan Language Curriculum), and the New Zealand Curriculum Framework.

In regard to the issues arising from this study, the research team and our advisory committee further suggest that there should be continued participation of Pacific peoples in providing quality early childhood education in New Zealand. It is also recommended that there should be more involvement of Pacific communities in schools, and systematic representation of Pacific peoples in educational management, policy, and research.

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