

“

My Mother says I'm 'poto' so why don't you involve her when planning?"

Involving our aiga (parents and wider community) when planning and extending our children's learning in Early Childhood Education

Rose Penn & Dr Jens J. Hansen
MIT Early Childhood Research Symposium,
March 13th, 2010

What we argue...

1. Rather than applying a deficit theory (McNaughton, 2002) we reason that *indigenous languages and cultures are a major strength* which early childhood teachers should tap into;
2. It follows that if successfully inclusive learning environments are to be created, practices must embrace *all* participants;
3. The challenge for ECE, therefore, is to determine how centres can *best honour* children and their families, irrespective of their culture;
4. We reason that *professional development* activities should include a focus on how best to communicate with families.

How these propositions began

- The importance of personal experience must be acknowledged:
 - Rose as a Aotearoa New Zealand born Samoan;
 - Jens as a 1950s migrant from Denmark;
 - Others of you have had your own journeys...
- Of course, Aotearoa New Zealand is now very multi-cultural albeit operating from within a bicultural framework;
- Rose completed a thesis for her Med which focused on how one case (AUT) 'treated' ECE students.

Some specifics of Rose's thesis on Samoan Students at AUT...

- In a thesis about factors which aid and hinder successful completions for New Zealand born Samoans, it was discovered that *family is paramount in supporting educational success*;
- A further discovery was that New Zealand born Samoans retain cultural affiliations so their lifestyle shows deep regard for *Fa'a Samoa* identity;
- Fa'a Samoa refers to collective values, customs and relationships;
- It's about Samoan ways of living peacefully.
- The foundation of this is the Samoan language which offers a framework for direction.

Some more key findings...

- Another important principle related to Samoan culture is a conceptual framework (derived from Talanoa Malie) that is called *Talanoa Lalaga*;
- Using appropriate indigenous knowledge is crucial for acknowledging of Samoan strengths and is a main challenge for tertiary institutions;
- Equally, it is an important challenge for those in the ECE sector;
- The secret, as far as we can tell, is to involve matua/parents and wider family, i.e. aiga.

Put even more simply...

- To be true to Talanoa lalaga, educational frameworks must embrace relationships with aiga/family because aiga is to Samoan culture as whanau is to tikanga Maori;
- Transforming staff so they understand Pasifika peoples, therefore, is crucial to growing Pasifika educational success;
- And making sure they involve aiga is vital too!

The answer lies in ongoing CPD...

- Staff development must be carefully planned so meaningful understandings of Pasifika concepts and frameworks become a part of teachers' intellectual framework;
- Only when ECE staff gain such understandings will they be able to honour and fully involve Pasifika families of learners in culturally inclusive communities of practice.

More about a possible way forward...

- Relationships are connectors for aiga – they are the ‘glue’ which exemplifies, unites and maintains family and cultural values;
- Centres, therefore, need to communicate with cultural integrity when they liaise with families – it’s not just about sending out stuff for the sake of the ERO!
- Samoan communities have their own social networks (e.g. church, committees, sports) through which they discuss education and matters of importance;
- Wenger describes such processes as typifying *Communities of Practice*. We argue that there is a compelling case to be made for research into Pasifika communities of ECE practice and AKO Aotearoa should be funding such research.

Food for thought...

- Just as primary schools have parents on committees and boards, cannot Early Childhood Centres have parental involvement too?
- What benefits might accrue from involving aiga in ECE governance, even when a centre is privately owned?
- What do we need to do to get AKO Aotearoa to fund research into such matters?