

Lessons learned from the Amataga Lelei A'oga, a language immersion programme in an Australian early learning centre

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Logan Together

- 32% of Logan children commence school vulnerable in one or more key areas (Early Childhood Development Census 2015).
- 10-year plan to improve life chances and opportunities for young children in Logan City, Qld.
- Under LT auspices, Hosanna Logan City Church and Goodstart Early Learning established a Samoan-immersion program (a'oga amata) in 2018 to encourage Samoan parents to enrol children in ECE.



Amataga lelei a'oga amata (A good start to learning)

- 7-month study of lived experience of Samoan children, families and educators involved in a'oga amata.
- 'Funds of knowledge' approach validating perspectives of the families and community and recognizing the children as owners and creators of valuable knowledge.
- Methods reflected Pasifika ways of knowing – Talanoa (talking circles), observations, photos and video recordings.





We looked at –

1. How the a'oga amata supported heritage language and culture.
2. How the a'oga amata built a positive Samoan identity in a safe cultural space.
3. How the a'oga amata enhanced children's school readiness.

Heritage language



Heritage language speakers “are the children of immigrants born in the host country or immigrant children who arrived in the host country some time in childhood” (Montrul, 2012, p. 4)

Heritage language use in the a'oga amata

- Introduced at key points and in meaningful contexts, esp. morning tea and mat time.
- Authentic, natural language in meaningful contexts, **but mostly symbolic.**
- **Used for social communication, emotional support, managing transitions, scaffolding and socialization,**

e.g.:

greetings and goodbyes, calling in for morning tea, comforting, praising and thanking children; instructing them how to do things, directing them to activities, commenting on and correcting or censuring their behaviour, telling them about cultural events.

- Cultural activities, esp. songs and dances.



Language on display



Becoming familiar with heritage language

E allowed children to lead the reading of the alphabet and they got louder as they progressed. “Oka!” E exclaimed at Jenny who was running around and around the classroom. “*Fai fa’alelei, lae pu’e le ata*” (*Do it properly, they’re taking our picture*). Amosa sat at the back corner of the mat, tumbling around. While counting the numbers, E called out “*Amosa!*” to get his attention. Brandon and Alofa began playing with the bongo drums during the ‘*Tasi tasi tasi*’ song. Amosa sat down the whole time and covered his ears. When Jenny ran around the classroom for the umpteenth time, E called out to her, “*Aua le tamo’e!*” (*Don’t run*).

Fieldnote. Mat time 16th October 2018

E = Educator

Becoming familiar with heritage language

They got very excited about doing a sāsa [seated rhythm dance]. While E played the sāsa on her phone, the children watched and listened. They slapped their hands on their laps in time to the rhythm and, at the end of the song, called out “*Hei, hei, ho!*” The children then asked for the song again and it was repeated, along with a series of other Samoan songs.

Fieldnote Mat Time 6 November 2018



Heritage language use at home

- One outcome of the program was that **Samoan was being revived in the home** and, in some cases, children were teaching their parents.
- Were the children **playing an agentive role** in family language practices?

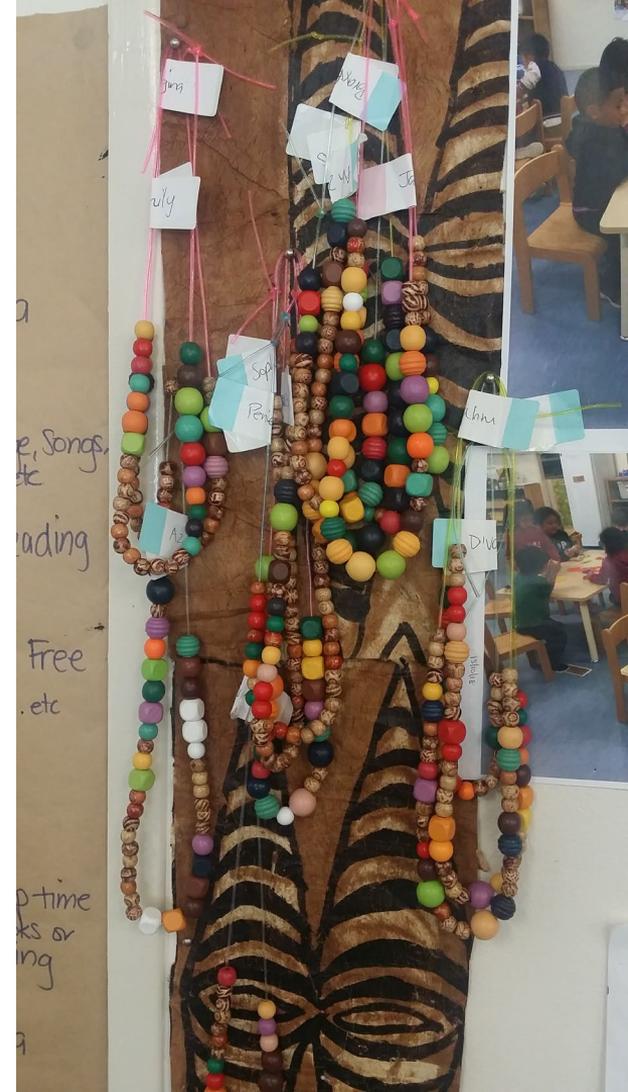
*“Our son has only just turned four and, when he first started, he wasn’t speaking well, like even English, but he’s come out of his shell now, and he’s teaching us a lot...like the Samoan prayers and stuff. We just have a giggle because **we think he’s not learning anything and then just out of the blue, he just, like, says it.**”*

*“I used to be embarrassed when mum used to speak, Samoan to me and I used to always, like, oh no speak English mum, I’ve got my friends here. But with my daughter who is in the a’oga amata, **she’s learning a lot...and she’s teaching us...**and that’s something, um, that we encourage her to do, you know, encourage her to embrace her culture, embrace, um, her language and just to, you know, continue to learn ‘cos, yeah, she can, **I’m 31 years old and she’s only four and she knows more Samoan than me.**”*

Cultural values

- **Four important Samoan values:** *usitai*, *faaloalo*, *alofa* and *tautua* (obedience, respect, love and service) (Vaá, 2009).
- Continually emphasized in communication with the children and came through strongly in the talanoa.
- Parents happy that traditional Samoan values were being modelled by the educators and felt these values would help their children make the transition to school.

“I feel like the respect, what they learn within the a’oga amata, you know...these are transferable things that they can implement or take on while transitioning into Prep, you know...respecting the kids, respecting the school, respecting your belongings, and, you know, just in the culture respect is huge.”



Benefits of a bicultural approach

- All children benefitted from the bicultural approach of the a'oga amata.
- The Samoan children experienced strong positive support for their identity and the non-Samoan children learned what it means to be welcomed, unconditionally accepted and immersed in another language and culture.

*“It makes me proud to realise how much, you know, **even though they, um, don't have Samoan blood, they have that heart.** Also, talking to the parents, **they are just happy to know that their kids are also learning a different language...so that's the benefit of, you know, um, putting them in here..**”*



Meaningful or safe spaces

- Spaces where **participants feel that they can express themselves** through their own linguistic and cultural practices, knowing that those around them share **common language, culture and life experiences** (Jones Diaz, Morgan & Chodkiewicz, 2018).
- Sites where children and their families are at the centre. **Learners feel a sense of belonging** and positive home-school links continue into primary school (Conteh & Brock, 2011).
- **Places where all learning experiences** in the home, community and school **are valued** (Brooker, 2006).

How the a'oga amata constructed a safe space

The children –

- **felt safe and secure** in the learning environment;
- **experienced diversity** by developing friendships with other children from other cultural backgrounds;
- **learned to respond to diversity with respect;** and
- developed social skills, leadership and **ability to co-operate and collaborate.**



Successes

- Promoted values and aspects of Samoan culture and language that matter to children, families and their communities.
- Developed children's sense of belonging.
- Provided curriculum-aligned learning experiences and culturally responsive activities.
- Encouraged educators to deepen their professional knowledge around cultural competence.
- Revitalized culture in the community.
- Strong community-led initiative.



Challenges



- Not all the children were of Samoan heritage.
- **Asymmetries between English and the heritage language** – in teaching practices, resources and student proficiencies – resulted in the predominance of English.
- The children’s **exposure to Samoan was limited.**
- **Sustainability** of the program.
- **Lack of resources.**
- Translanguaging **instinctive but not always purposeful.**

Need for language conducive strategies

- Elicitation, verbal and non-verbal encouragement (gesture, key signs, pointing, demonstration etc.)
- Monitor quantity and quality of code-switching.
- Promote multilingual awareness and linguistic tolerance.
- Model or demonstrate own bilingual knowledge.
- Work closely with parents - language maps, dual language book reading, linguistic landscape walks and translanguaging (D'Warte, 2018).



and purposeful translanguaging

Some features, following Schwarz (2018) –

- Scaffolding during activities (planned and unplanned).
- Respecting the silent period.
- Using natural contexts to promote HL use, especially morning tea/snack time, free play (enables rapid memorization of formulaic language and initiation of labelling activities), but also outdoor activities (applies to HL and English).
- Set up a language learning resource area.
- Organize small group strategies based on children's different needs and levels.
- Conversational interaction (group and one-to-one).
- Bilingual books stress equal status of languages.

Translanguaging and heritage language maintenance

- Very little discussion about how translanguaging can advance the field of heritage language education.
- Translanguaging *sustains* home language practices. More than just maintenance.
- Translanguaging becomes part of a bilingual repertoire and is not simply assigned to the category of “heritage”. Instead, these practices are used in interaction with English throughout the child’s education.

(<https://ofeliagarciadotorg.files.wordpress.com/2011/02/ofelia-intro.docx>)

Fa'afetai Thank you



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