Inquiry into Pacific Languages in Early Childhood Education

Submission to the Education and Science Committee

A leai se gagana, ona leai lea o sa ta aganu’u, a leai la ta aganu’u/agaifanua, ona po lea o le nuu

If there is no language, then there is no culture,

if there is no culture, then all the village will be in darkness

Te Tari Puna Ora o Aotearoa/New Zealand Childcare Association

Te Tari Puna Ora o Aotearoa/New Zealand Childcare Association (NZCA) is a national organisation that promotes high quality early childhood education (ECE) through initial teacher education, professional development, advocacy and membership services. The Association’s vision is that all children access high quality ECE which complements and affirms their family life and promotes the dual cultural heritage of Aotearoa.

Established in 1963, NZCA has a long history of improving standards of practice in New Zealand’s early childhood education sector and delivers Ministry of Education (MoE) funded professional development to hundreds of ECE services. Registered by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) as a Private Tertiary Education (PTE) provider, NZCA is today one of New Zealand’s largest providers of early childhood initial teacher education (ITE), with over 80 academic staff based at 15 sites throughout the country.

NZCA represents around 600 early childhood education (ECE) services, providing education and care to thousands of infants, toddlers and young children. Of these member services, 30 identify as Pasifika bilingual or immersion services. NZCA has long established relationships with Pasifika communities which support the education and qualification of Pasifika ECE teachers. Within our student population, 15% identify as Pacific peoples.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the “Inquiry into Pacific Languages” in early childhood education. This response has been developed in consultation with NZCA’s Council, staff and member centres.
Introduction

Language is the primary expression of cultural identity. Language sets us apart in a multicultural society like New Zealand. Sadly throughout the world the survival of minor languages has become a challenge for families and communities. The languages of Pacific countries, that is: Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, Tuvalu, Niue, Cook Islands and Tokelau, are struggling for their existence in the western world, even in New Zealand. These languages are threatened by the dominant position of the English language.

Decades of research\(^1\) \(^2\) \(^3\) have shown convincingly that when low status minority languages are under threat of loss by dominant majority languages, it is important to begin education (especially ECE) in the first language of the child. In these settings the first language development is fragile, still forming and, if interrupted, likely to be easily undermined and replaced by English. This language loss by language minority children is extensively documented internationally and nationally \(^4\) \(^5\) \(^6\) \(^7\) \(^8\) \(^9\).

New Zealand is part of the Pacific and has shared trade benefits, skills and sports with other Pacific people for a very long time. This has opened doors for the people from the small island states to work and settle in New Zealand, contributing to our economy and national identity. This migration trend of Pacific people to New Zealand has implications for the country’s early childhood centres and schools and creates a specific obligation and challenge for government in regard to the maintenance of Pasifika community languages and cultural heritages.

This current situation also provides an opportunity for government. There is strong evidence that bilingualism in the early years contributes positively to literacy and later academic achievement especially when followed by bilingual education in primary school. Investing in bilingual education is likely to be beneficial for our nation as a whole because our future depends on relationships with the wider world where bilingualism and multilingualism are the norms rather than the exceptions.

**Transitional effects of non-compulsory to compulsory sector education, implications on academic achievement and links with the Pacific education plan**

There are several points we wish to make in relation to this topic.

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\(^{1,2,3}\) Cummins, J. (nd). *Bilingual children’s mother tongue: Why is it important for education?* Available from: [http://www.iteachilearn.com/cummins/mother.htm](http://www.iteachilearn.com/cummins/mother.htm)


1. Pasifika children are underrepresented in ECE

Firstly we note that that only 85.9% of Pasifika NZ school entrants have attended an ECE service compared with 95% of the total school entrant population. This means that many Pasifika children are entering school less well prepared than their non-Pasifika peers, beginning a trajectory of educational disadvantage. The barriers to Pasifika enrolment are various and include access to places in ECE services, transport, cost and an absence of cultural fit. Cultural fit is likely to be strongest where the ECE service is delivered in the child’s community language and reinforces the culture and values of that community.

Just over one third of Pasifika children enrolled in ECE attend a bilingual or immersion service however most of these (132) services have long waiting lists. More teacher led Pasifika ECE services are required but these must be of high quality if they are to be beneficial\textsuperscript{10}. High quality ECE programmes are critical in maximising children’s language ability prior to starting school as well as shaping a positive learner identity.

We note that there is currently a Ministry of Education working group providing advice to the Minister of Education on a new funding system. We strongly recommend that a free entitlement (‘20 hours ECE’) be preserved so that there are no additional barriers to Pasifika participation.

2. There are concerns about the overall quality of Pasifika ECE services

The recent government ECE Taskforce, 2011\textsuperscript{11} identified that many Pasifika services are struggling to achieve high quality, evidenced by poor ERO reviews or provisional licences. This situation is partly due to the difficulties in recruiting and retaining qualified bilingual teachers. It is exacerbated by a lack of governance and management experience amongst cultural communities running what have effectively become small businesses.

The literature is clear; for ECE to be of benefit it must be of high quality. High quality is more likely where there is strong professional leadership, a high proportion of qualified teachers, responsiveness to culture and identity and strong relationships with families focused on the child as a capable and competent learner.

Lifting the regulated standards for all services (e.g. requiring 80% of teachers to be qualified instead of the current 50%) would be a good first step towards improving the quality of Pasifika services. However there will also need to be tailored interventions, funded by government, which recognise the complexities of ECE delivery in Pasifika contexts (e.g. access to qualified teachers who are bilingual, community experience in governance and management).

Investment in quality ECE services is paramount for strengthening services that cater for language and cultural identity.\textsuperscript{12} Pasifika language immersion services should be well-resourced, with qualified and registered teachers fluent in the language of instruction. Teachers also need to be members of their own cultures and communities, able to ‘walk the talk’ and create learning and teaching environments where being a member of the culture/s is valued and modelled in all aspects of learning and life.

3. Many children experience discontinuity at entry to school

In 2010 there were 132 Pasifika services, more than half of which were located in the Auckland Region; 51 were immersion (81-100% of teaching contact time) involving 1,720 children learning in Samoan, Tongan, Cook Island Māori, and Niue languages; 81 services were bilingual (12-80% of teaching contact time) involving 2,800 children, learning in Samoan, Cook Island Māori, Tongan, Niuean, Tokelau, and Tuvaluan languages.

A key concern is the extent to which Pasifika children in immersion or bilingual programmes will retain their community languages and cultural practices as they progress from ECE to school. Retention of language is ensured when it is the continuous language of instruction until the child is at least eight years of age. Relevant New Zealand early childhood research (see Aoga Fa’a Samoa’s Centre of Innovation research study\(^\text{13}\)) identifies language continuity, easy transition and reciprocal relationships as the key factors for successfully transitioning from ECE to a primary school bilingual unit.

Nevertheless, a significant number of children ‘graduating’ from Pasifika ECE services have no choice but to enter English medium primary schools. Discontinuity in language of tuition impacts negatively on language retention, cultural identity and intergenerational relationships. It can also undermine individual learners’ educational achievement. We note here the underperformance of the current education system for Pasifika learners (49% of Pasifika students gain an NCEA qualification compared to 69% of non-Pasifika) and the long term economic and social impacts of low qualification levels.\(^\text{14}\)

4. A national Language policy is required

Currently, New Zealand has no language policy. A policy with a focus on languages in ECE (that includes professional support and language resources) would impact positively on the availability and quality of Pasifika language immersion in ECE.

5. The Pacific Education Plan is a first step

The Ministry of Education’s current Pasifika Education Plan (2009-12) makes no mention of teaching in Pacific languages or the resourcing implications of immersion or bilingual programmes. The draft 2013-2015 Pasifika Education Plan has partly addressed this issue by recommending an inter-agency Action Plan which includes the following key actions:

- Improve quality bilingual teaching and language instruction;
- Identify mechanisms to make language programmes more easily available to schools and communities; and
- Identify funding avenues to support Pacific language resource development.\(^\text{15}\)

NZCA supports these recommendations.


\(^{15}\) MPA, 2011, Draft Pacific Languages Framework Consultation
Overall framework for resourcing Pacific languages in ECE including local and international evidence of best practice

The importance of immersion and bilingual programmes in community languages cannot be overemphasised; however, there are challenges in providing and resourcing language immersion services, especially outside of Auckland where there are many smaller ethnic community groups. In this space some multi-ethnic models have emerged (e.g. Toru Whetu in Porirua, Wellington). These programmes are highly regarded with long waiting lists and hence it would be useful to research them to determine their effectiveness and whether these can be more widely applied.

We note the critical importance of qualified and registered bilingual ECE teachers. However the NZ Teachers Council’s current policy requiring IELTs testing of overseas born applicants for teaching discriminates against otherwise suitable bilingual Pasifika applicants for initial teacher education programmes. This has the negative consequence of reducing the number of qualified ECE teachers able to teach in Pasifika and/or bilingual settings.

Recommendations:

That the Ministry of Education:

- Establishes immersion classes in primary schools where there are Pasifika ECE immersion services in the school grounds (or close vicinity) to enable the ECE children to attend and continue their learning of their first language
- Funds research to examine the effectiveness of multi-ethnic models of Pasifika ECE
- Develops a funding model that focuses on increasing participation (particularly in Pasifika language services) to support Pasifika children’s early education in their first language
- Re-instates development and production of Pasifika language literacy materials to enable children to learn literacy skills in their first language, and to support language maintenance

That the NZ Teachers Council:

- Reviews its IELTS (English language testing) requirement for overseas Pacific applicants who otherwise meet the criteria for initial teacher education programmes.

Current achievement outcomes based on the present resourcing of Pasifika ECE services

Currently there is no systemic data about outcomes for children enrolled in Pasifika language centres or in any other ECE services. This is an area of current national interest. We recommend that future outcomes data be based on Te Whāriki, the national ECE curriculum and that indicators relating to language, culture and identity be developed with Pacific community input.

Collaborations and partnerships in ECE between government, communities, private and voluntary sectors to improve the prevalence and quality of Pacific languages

NZCA considers that Pacific language initiatives will be most effective if the following partnerships are supported: (1) communities with early childhood centres; (2) communities with schools; (3) ECE centres with schools; (4) communities with ECE centres and schools; and (5) teacher educators with communities, centres and schools. Furthermore we feel that collaboration between the Ministry of
Education and Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs to support those partnerships will help to realise the goals of the Pacific Education Plan.

**Recommendation:**

- That Government fosters and supports partnerships fundamental to accessing ECE services for children whose first languages are Pasifika languages.

**Mechanisms to inform the ECE system, using research and feedback on the current uptake and quality of Pacific languages in Pasifika ECE services**

To date, there has not been a review of the quality of Pacific language ECE services. However the Education Review Office has undertaken a number of national reports examining the effectiveness of specific categories of ECE services (e.g. infant and toddler services) and/or their effectiveness for specific groups of learners (e.g., Maori learners). It would be timely for such a report to be undertaken in relation to Pasifika services so that a better assessment could be made of the system’s performance for these learners.

We note that the current MOE descriptors of ‘immersion’ and ‘bilingual’ are based on the percentage of reported instruction time in a Pasifika language. These descriptors are too wide to enable useful and accurate conclusions to be made about the effectiveness of bilingual Pacific services without further information and analysis.

**Recommendations:**

- That ERO collaborates with Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs to develop appropriate guidelines for evaluation of Pasifika language services
- That ERO use these guidelines to carry out a national review of Pasifika language services; and
- That MOE fund and support development of NZ best practice guidelines for Pasifika language ECE programmes.

**Pathways to address the findings and recommendations of this inquiry**

Collaboration between the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs is needed to give effect to the recommendations of this enquiry. It is proposed that a cross agency group be established with responsibility for Pasifika education and that this group monitor the following statistics: Pasifika ECE enrolments (in and beyond Pasifika language ECE services); the quality and effectiveness of Pasifika ECE services; the number of qualified bilingual ECE teachers and their deployment patterns; the nature and quality of children’s transitions from ECE to school and the impact of this on early learning.

It is also our recommendation that Pasifika community leaders be invited to promote the importance of community language learning.

**Recommendation:**

- That Government established an interagency group overseeing the education of Pasifika children, with a special focus on participation in high quality Pasifika ECE.
Conclusion

Pacific peoples of New Zealand have shown significant leadership in establishing ECE centres, churches and community centres and are committed to preserving their unique languages and cultural identities. NZCA strongly advocates for appropriate resourcing of high quality early childhood education for all Pasifika children that strengthens their culture, language and identity and positions them as resourceful and successful citizens of Aotearoa and the world.

_O_ le lā’au ola e tū, ‘ae ‘ua ōia_

_The tree stands but has been marked to be felled._

_Unless we act now Pacific languages will be gone before very long_