

**Promoting Successful Transitions from  
Pasifika Early Childhood Education Centres  
to English-Medium/Mainstream Primary Schools**

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Ruta Mckenzie (Facilitator - CORE Education)

Mark Tulia (Pasifika Education Coordinator - Ministry of Education)

Keryn Davis (Senior Researcher - CORE Education)

Jan Dobson (Participation Facilitator – Contractor)

Tino e Tasi ECE

Lalaga ECE

Mapusaga Aoga Amata ECE

Hornby Barnardos Pasifika ECE

Tafesilafa'i ECE

Niu Tongan ECE

Kidsfirst Kindergarten Hoon Hay

A special thank you to Lois Christmas, my appraiser whose support and encouragement got me to this point.

## **Terms**

*Early Childhood Education (ECE)*: includes all types of licensed and regulated early childhood education provision (Te Whāriki, p 7).

*Te Whāriki*: early childhood curriculum.

*The New Zealand Curriculum*: statement of official policy relating to teaching and learning in English-medium New Zealand schools (NZC).

*Pasifika*: encompasses a diverse range of peoples from the South Pacific region who live in New Zealand and continue to have family and cultural connections to Pacific Island nations, particularly Samoa, Tonga, Cook Islands, Fiji, Niue, Tokelau and Tuvalu. Pasifika may be recent migrants, long settled in New Zealand, or New Zealand-born (Te Whāriki, p 9).

*Transition*: the process of moving from an early childhood education setting to primary school.

## **Executive Summary**

There is a lack of research on successful transitions for Pasifika children who are over-represented in the least supported transitions.

The research explored the factors that promote successful transitions to school for children attending Pasifika ECE centres and a review of the academic literature. Observations of children were undertaken and interviews conducted with teachers and parents in ECE centres. Other educational professionals were interviewed separately.

Major themes emerging from interviews and literature include the importance of;

- Identity, Language, and Culture
- Relationships
- Curriculum links between Te Whāriki and The New Zealand Curriculum
- Transition programme
- Strong leadership

## **Purpose**

I am currently Principal at Hornby Primary School, a position I have held since Term 2, 2010. The school has a Pasifika roll of approximately 18% and was involved in a Pasifika Networked Learning Community in 2010 then participated in the Pasifika Success Talanoa Project (PSTP) 2011-2012.

The focus of this project is to develop an informed insight into the needs and aspirations of Pasifika learners, parents, extended families and communities in order to ensure Pasifika learners experience successful transitions to English-medium primary schools.

I will apply the findings within my own school, cluster and wider educational community and expand on the significant progress achieved already to ensure our Pasifika learners experience a positive transition from ECE to primary school.

## **Background and Rationale**

*“Transition to school from an early childhood service is a critical time for children as it sets them on their learning pathway for life”* (Education Review Office, May, 2015, p. 56). In the same evaluation conducted by the Education Review Office (ERO), findings showed that Māori and Pacific children were disproportionately over-represented in the least supportive services.

There is a clear lack of research and evidence around successful transitions for Pasifika learners from ECE to primary school. Sally Peters (2010) identified the urgent need for more research for Pasifika children transitioning from ECE to primary school. In particular, she pinpoints the need to gather the voices of children and parents in order to identify how to improve less favourable transitions. In addition, Ruta Mckenzie (2009) explains that more Pasifika children are moving directly from Pasifika early childhood settings into mainstream Palagi primary schools and *“there is still very limited information on transition to school based around early childhood settings”* (p. 1).

The New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) highlights the importance of transitions from early childhood education to primary school when discussing curriculum design, *“Students are helped to build on existing learning and take it to higher levels”* (p. 39). Furthermore, the Ministry of Education has identified Pasifika learners as a priority group and the vision statement in the Pasifika Education Plan (PEP, 2013-2017) builds on this priority, *“Five out of five Pasifika learners participating, engaging and achieving in education, secure in their identities, languages and cultures and contributing fully to Aotearoa New Zealand’s social, cultural and economic wellbeing.”*

## **Methodology**

The project utilised action research methodology because of its relevance when searching for solutions to everyday, real problems experienced in schools. I followed the teaching as inquiry model, posing questions, gathering data reflecting and organising data to identify trends and themes (Eileen Ferrance, 2000).

Contact was made with Ruta Mckenzie (CORE – Facilitator) who introduced me to four Pasifika ECE centres which involved face-to-face meetings. Through these initial contacts I connected with two more Pasifika ECE centres and one Kidsfirst Kindergarten that had a high Pasifika roll and also had a strong relationship with the local primary school who had a Samoan bilingual unit. In total, seven ECE centres were visited.

Five methods were used for the data collection phase of the project:

- Interviews with teachers
- Interviews with parents
- Interviews with other educational professionals
- Informal observations of children
- Academic literature review

### Teachers and Parents

Interviews were conducted in an informal relaxed manner. Most teachers were interviewed individually while others were interviewed in a small group. All parents were interviewed individually. In total, 26 teachers and 4 parents were interviewed. It is important to note that all teachers were also parents.

### Educational Professionals

Interviews took place in a range of locations and involved informal discussions. Keryn and Tufulasi were interviewed separately while Mark and Jan were interviewed together.

- Keryn Davis (Senior Researcher – CORE Education)
- Tufulasi Taleni (Kaiarahi – Pasifika - University of Canterbury)
- Mark Tulia (Pasifika Education Coordinator - Ministry of Education) and Jan Dobson (Participation Facilitator – Contractor)

### Children

Informal observations of children were undertaken during structured learning and free play. Observations were often conducted alongside teachers and included robust discussions about children and teaching philosophy. Observations ranged from one to three hours.

### Academic Literature

The methodology also involved searching for and accessing academic literature on transitions. Advice was also sought from educational professionals on relevant literature.

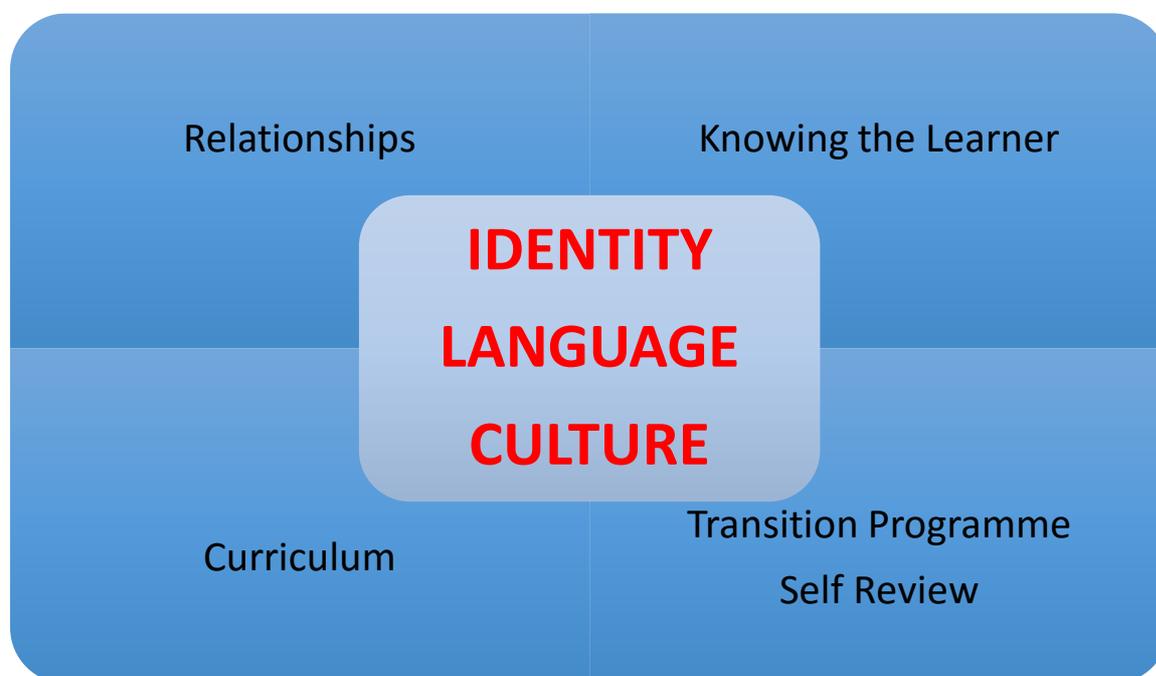
### Key Questions

- what supports successful transitions for children in Pasifika ECE centres to mainstream primary schools?
- what do schools need to be aware of that would support successful transitions?

Following interviews, major themes were identified and linked to relevant literature to explore data more thoroughly.

## Findings

I have identified four major themes, all of which are underpinned by Identity, Language, and Culture. *“Pasifika Success will be characterised by demanding, vibrant, dynamic, successful Pasifika Learners, secure and confident in their identities, languages and cultures, ...”* (Pasifika Education Plan, 2013-2017).



### Knowing the Learner

If we know our learners, we are well-placed to meet their academic, social, emotional and spiritual needs. The Pasifika Education Plan (2013-2017) places Pasifika learners, parents, families and communities strategically at the centre. In the primary setting we talk about the child being at the centre, this view may not always take account of parents, extended family or community. Teacher D made this distinction, *“Palagi have a nuclear family view, whereas Pasifika have an extended family world-view.”*

Teacher C backed this view up, *“You cannot view the child in isolation.”*

Schools need to understand the family makeup:

- who is in the family?
- where does the child fit in the family?
- what language is spoken at home?
- who picks the child up after school and who is at home after 3pm?
- what church does the family attend and when?

It is essential that the school unpacks each Pasifika child’s ‘cultural backpack’ to get a complete overview and understanding of the child, parents and extended family. Teacher J reinforces this point when stating, *“Knowing the learner is crucial. We need to find out where they come from ...”*

Truly ‘knowing the learner’ will enable schools to build on the knowledge, skills and dispositions the child and family bring with them. When discussing the importance of cultural identity, Macfarlane makes the point, *“Success in the classroom should not require*

students to ‘leave their cultural identity at the gate’” (Macfarlane et al., 2007, p. 74) in (Peters, p. 17).

### Relationships

Peters (2010) highlights the importance of respectful reciprocal relationships as being central to successful transitions. Relationships:

- between children and teachers
- between adults involved in the transition
- between school teachers and ECE teachers

Schools who provided ‘very responsive’ transitions to school took considerable time building relationships with parents and whanau, the children’s ECE teachers and with children themselves (ERO, May, 2015). Peters (2010) states that relationships also play a critical part in children developing a sense of belonging and wellbeing at school, *“Only then can they engage in learning and continue to grow as a learner”* (ERO, May, 2015 p. 4).

Teachers also identified the importance of relationships;

*“Get to know families, once they see you are supportive and they are recognised, they will engage”* (Teacher D).

*“Strong relationship with teacher is important”* (Teacher I).

The role of the teacher cannot be overstated in terms of developing positive relationships.

*“The culture of the child cannot enter the classroom unless it has first entered the consciousness of the teacher”* (ERO, May, 2015, p 6). Teachers who view each child through a ‘Pasifika lens’ are more likely to establish positive relationships that promote successful transitions and positive learning outcomes.

Being made to feel welcome when entering the school comes through strongly in the interviews. Being greeted in their first language, pronouncing names correctly, both parent and child makes a positive impression. Do not underestimate the value of pronouncing names correctly, it is critical and shows you value each individual’s identity, language and culture. Teacher F’s comment supports this when explaining the importance of greeting parents in their language, *“It creates a sense of belonging.”*

If one feels welcome, a sense of belonging will develop, and through belonging comes participation and through participation comes learning (Davis, Mckenzie & Mactier, 2017).

Visual literacy came through strongly in the interviews with both teachers and parents. Parents want to see some cultural connection they can identify with. It could be something as basic as a picture or photo, map of Pasifika countries, numbers in Pasifika languages, or cultural items such as a tapa cloth. Visual literacy displays in schools will strengthen relationships with Pasifika children and parents.

Being able to make connections outside the school setting also strengthens relationships. Teacher P discussed the possibility of attending a church service as a way of developing positive relationships with families. Personal experience supports this approach. When watching a game of rugby one Saturday at a suburban park, I was approached by a parent from school and asked what I was doing there. I replied that this was my ‘patch’, I had attended the local primary, intermediate and high schools and played rugby for the club for

25 years. It turned out the parent had also attended the intermediate and high schools. This meeting outside of school was the catalyst for what is now a very strong trusting relationship between the family, school and myself.

A common theme we often hear is, 'Pasifika families are difficult to engage.' Comments from interviews highlight two areas worthy of consideration.

1. Pasifika societies are hierarchical, "*Teachers and principals have these titles and are held in high regard*" (Teacher G).

In general, Pasifika families view teachers as having all the knowledge to know what is best for their child and are happy to drop the child off at school and leave them to it. As a result, Pasifika families may not recognise the importance of the school-home partnership and therefore developing a relationship with the teacher and school is not a high priority.

2. As discussed above, as a result of a teacher's status in Pasifika society, parents are often viewed as shy. Parents are unlikely to contact teachers or discuss concerns they may have about their child. To question the teacher could also be viewed as disrespectful in Pasifika culture.

Shyness could also be attributed to a lack of English (Teacher E). This reinforces the importance of knowing our families. If we are aware there are language barriers, we can put strategies in place, such as having another parent to translate. "*Involve someone who can speak the language during transition or an older child*" (Teacher P).

Teacher N and Mark (Pasifika Education Coordinator) provided useful insights into relationship building. Teacher N highlighted the importance of 'service to others'. Service is one of the key Pasifika values in the Pasifika Education Plan (2013-2017). When meeting parents for the first time, be proactive, ask them to join you for a cup of tea and biscuit. Don't ask them if they would like to join you as this gives them the opportunity to say 'no'. Now of course, they may have legitimate reasons to say 'no' which is fully understandable.

Mark identifies three stages of relationship building; (1) welcoming, (2) covenant (3) 'doing together' stages.

Stage 1. Like Teacher N, he highlights the importance of the welcoming phase and uses the '*Three cups of tea before business*' analogy. Take your time, do not be in a rush, developing relationships takes time. Hence the 'three cups of tea', it may not happen after one.

Stage 2. A covenant or mutual agreement arises out of this stage. The school and families co-construct a plan or project that aligns with families wishes and aspirations.

Stage 3. '*Do it together*'. School and families work collaboratively to achieve goals. For example, organising a Fiafia or building a school fale. This is a good way of utilising family strengths and interests which reinforces a sense of belonging discussed previously.

Additional steps may be required for parents and families to develop a sense of reciprocity. Mark's strategy could provide an effective starting point. The following teacher comments support this notion;

*"Give them responsibility and they will feel recognised and develop a sense of belonging. Empowering and giving Pasifika families a 'voice'"* (Teacher D).

*"Utilise parents' skills and knowledge"* (Teacher M).

## Curriculum

All ECE centres visited were implementing Te Whāriki. Children were demonstrating the dispositions in Te Whāriki and the key competencies in the NZC. Children were participating, contributing, self managing and demonstrating leadership in ECE centres. We must bridge the learning experiences from ECE to school, if not, we are ignoring the prior learning, knowledge, skills and dispositions that children bring with them to school. Teachers in ‘very responsive’ schools knew Te Whāriki and worked with ECE teachers to ensure alignment of learning experiences (ERO, May, 2015).

Teachers in both ECE and schools need to appreciate the natural alignment between the dispositions in Te Whāriki and the key competencies in the NZC.

Te Whāriki Dispositions	New Zealand Curriculum Key Competencies
Wellbeing Belonging Contribution Communication Exploration	Managing self Relating to others Participating and contributing Using language, symbols and texts Thinking

In ECE children are learning through play, singing, dancing and making music. Songs reinforce learning, dispositions and values. In one ECE centre children sing a song that reinforces washing hands before eating food. *“Singing, dancing and making things is part of learning”* (Teacher H).

Peters (2010) highlights the importance of prior learning and high expectations, *“Children, whose teachers take time to get to know them, affirm their culture, recognise and build on their prior learning, and see promise rather than deficits, reflect many of the features of a successful transition that will support their learning”* (p. 2).

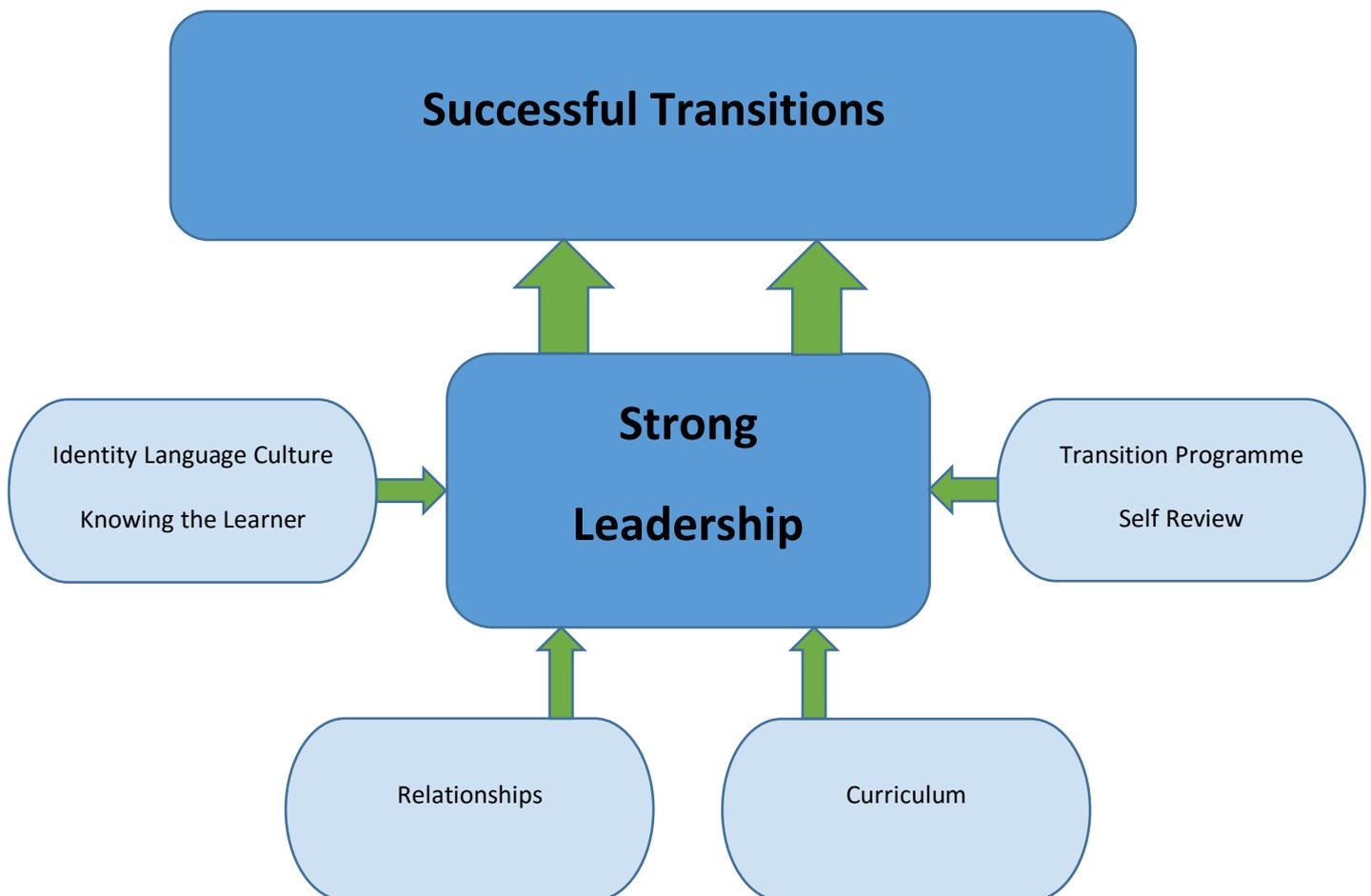
### Transition Programme and Self Review

ECE teachers are requesting more collaboration between primary teachers. They want to know what the school’s expectations are for New Entrants so they can be well prepared for the transition. Teacher H highlighted the *“Big gap between ECE and primary practices”* and also stated, *“We need to strengthen partnership between ECE and primary teachers.”* Teacher H is calling for a transition programme to bridge the practices between ECE and school, and also to inform parents about school expectations.

There is a definite desire on the part of ECE teachers to strengthen the partnership between their centres and primary schools. More collaboration and dialogue would increase teacher knowledge and awareness in both sectors which in turn would benefit children and parents in the transition process.

This highlights the importance of having a formal transitions programme. Transition must be viewed as a process rather than a one-off event (ERO, May, 2015). When discussing strategies that support transitions to school, Peters (2010) identifies the importance of dedicated ongoing resourcing if activities are to be maintained. There must be clear processes and procedures in place and someone responsible to lead the transition process.

Another important aspect is self review. Schools regularly review curriculum programmes, why would we not review our transitions programme? ERO (May, 2015, p. 49) discovered ‘very responsive’ schools had “... *robust, formal self review practices, and their responses were proactive.*” A successful transition programme would seek feedback from all stakeholders and be evidence-based.



Identity, Language, and Culture, Knowing the Learner, Relationships, Curriculum, Transition Programme and Self Review are all important factors in a successful transition from ECE to school. However, without strong leadership it is unlikely these factors by themselves will result in a successful transition. It is essential that leaders value transition and appreciate the importance of the process (ERO, May, 2015). Tufulasi (Kaiarahi – Pasifika) encapsulates this notion when stating Pasifika people “*Want to see that ‘Pasifika heart’ ... from leadership down.*”

If leaders lead by example and display a genuine ‘Pasifika heart’, value transitions and provide adequate support and resourcing, there is much more likelihood our Pasifika learners will experience successful transitions.

## **Implications**

In order to promote successful transitions to school, leaders and teachers must be cognisant of the following major interconnected themes;

- Identity, Language and Culture
- Knowing the Learner
- Relationships
- Curriculum
- Transition Programme and Self Review
- Strong leadership

Other themes that emerged from interviews and observations that would promote successful transitions include;

- Unpacking the Pasifika child's 'cultural backpack'.
- Ensuring children and parents/families feel welcome when they enter school.
- The child cannot be viewed in isolation.
- The importance of pronouncing names correctly.
- Visual literacy - ensuring the school environment reflects the child's background.
- Making connections with families outside of school if possible.

## **Conclusion**

The importance of transition to school from ECE cannot be underestimated. A successful transition can set a child on a successful learning pathway for life (ERO, May, 2015). The moral imperative demands that schools get this process right.

There are many interconnected factors that influence a successful transition. It starts with leadership in schools. Leaders who value the transition process implement a robust transition programme and provide adequate personnel and resourcing to ensure every child is well supported when they enter the school.

The Pasifika Education Plan emphasises the importance of Identity, Language, and Culture and situated at the centre is the learner, parents, families and communities. The child cannot be viewed in isolation, and therefore, it is essential schools unpack each child's 'backpack' so they truly get to 'Know the Learner.'

Parents want to feel welcome and connected when they enter the school. Schools that demonstrate a 'Pasifika heart' and develop genuine relationships with children and parents will increase the likelihood of a successful transition.

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