

How do leaders support improvement in Pacific early childhood services?

July 2015



Introduction

This report highlights the crucial role of leaders in Pacific early childhood services to manage changes that improve learning outcomes for Pacific children. Other leaders may find this report useful when considering improvement-focused changes in their centres.

ERO evaluated eight Pacific services with good leadership practices that offered an education curriculum in a Pacific language, were reviewed between March 2011 and March 2013, and given a three-year return time. Some services previously had supplementary (early review return) reports.

Working within a Pacific context

In the Pacific context, relationships are central to the wellbeing of a Pacific person. An important aspect of a Pacific person's identity is cultural practice. Cultural practice includes the language, values, and social institutions that make up a particular ethnic group's culture or society.³ Cultural practices also play an important role in passing cultural knowledge from one generation to another. This knowledge is often portrayed in stories, cultural models and metaphors.

Leaders of Pacific early childhood services in this report viewed their role as custodians of the Pacific cultural practice within the context of their centre. They knew that it was important to provide an early childhood education that was culturally responsive to the children. This included the use of Pacific knowledge and values to guide the curriculum and for the Pacific language to be embedded in the programme. The leaders nurtured relationships with Pacific elders and social institutions, and encouraged the services to link with other Pacific groups to support Pacific children and families' language, culture and identity.

Background

Improving educational outcomes for Pacific learners is a priority for the education sector. The *Pasifika Education Plan* (PEP) is a government strategy to improve the way the education system helps Pacific children to realise their potential.

Early childhood services are responsible for implementing a curriculum based on *Te Whāriki* that builds strong learning foundations for children.

In August 2007, ERO published a national report¹ that highlighted wide variation among Pacific services in the quality of education and care they provided. Many offered programmes that were culturally enriching and some were of high quality. However, in many Pacific services children were not receiving quality education and care.

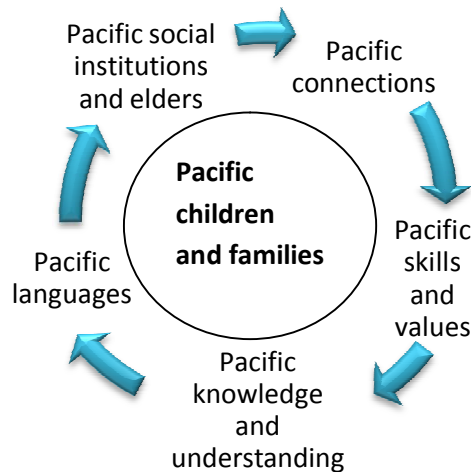
The 2011 ECE Taskforce² identified some barriers to participation of Pasifika children in ECE. The Ministry of Education is addressing these barriers through the Participation Programme and the work of the Early Learning Taskforce, especially the Pasifika Church Strategy and the Pasifika Organisation Strategy.

1 www.ero.govt.nz/National-Reports/Early-Childhood-Monographs-The-Quality-of-Education-and-Care-in-Pacific-Early-Childhood-Services-August-2007

2 www.taskforce.ece.govt.nz/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/Final_Report_ECE_Taskforce.pdf

3 Macpherson, C. & Macpherson, L. (2000). The children of Samoan migrants in New Zealand. In P. Spickard & J.W. Burroughs (Eds.), *Narrative and Multiplicity in Constructing Ethnic Identity* (pp. 70-81). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

ECE leaders: custodians of Pacific cultural practice within their service



Effective leadership for improvement

ERO found that strong relationships and a sense of stewardship were the cornerstones of the improvements made by the leaders. Leaders understood their responsibility for managing the resources allocated for the children's education. They knew that they had to be accountable and were courageous in talking about these improvements with children's parents and families, the local Pacific community, and relevant government agencies. They also knew that they could not do it alone and used external advisers to support them to implement the strategies/actions and to evaluate the impact.

Leaders wanted to ensure that core Pacific knowledge, values and beliefs were passed on to future Pacific generations through established processes and institutions such as churches. They emphasised the importance of collaborative cultures where teachers were valued and supported, high-quality practices were maintained, decisions were shared, and relationships with Pacific elders and social institutions were nurtured. For these leaders, it was a reaffirmation of the importance of being strongly rooted in their cultures, and maintaining strong relationships with families and social institutions like churches that supported high levels of wellbeing.

Using cultural models

Leaders, parents and the local Pacific community discussed and identified cultural models that were important to them.

How did ERO approach the evaluation?

ERO recognised the need for a culturally appropriate method of data collection.

Talanoa is rooted in Pacific oratory traditions and literally means a formal or informal face-to-face conversation. *Talanoa* involves a deep and interpersonal relationship. It is a preferred method of data collection because relationships are the foundation on which most Pacific activities are built. *Talanoa* is recognised in many Pacific Island nations and is natural for most Pacific peoples.

While *talanoa* is about talking, it allows rich contextual and interrelated information to emerge as stories that are told together. These stories are what *talanoa* integrates and weaves to make authentic knowledge such as cultural models and metaphors from which valid solutions for Pacific issues can be found.

ERO's *talanoa* with each service was guided by these investigative questions:

- What is the role of the leader? How is the leader supported in their role?
- How does the leader promote the service's philosophy, vision and goals to ensure these are enacted in the service?
- How does the leader work in partnership with staff, parents, family and communities to achieve positive outcomes for all children?
- How does the leader contribute to ongoing improvement — curriculum development, staff appraisal, management performance and review of service?

They used the cultural models to guide their discussions and decisions about making improvements. Following are examples of cultural models used by these services (ERO sought permission to include these).

Falalalaga (Samoan) The art of mat weaving

We looked at other concepts and decided to use mat weaving – Falalalaga. It is like the way we raise our children, it is a continuous process, it never stops. The process of Falalalaga helps us to recognise the different developmental stages of our children. We use this process in planning programmes for our different age groups and in our self review.



Fale Hanga (Tongan) Weavers House

As a Tongan, a fale Hanga is very important to us, it represents shelter, families, community meetings. The idea came about because we have a fale in our yard here at the centre.

We created the fale in 3D so that we could actually touch it, display it and move the posts around. We work on each post at a time. The model is something we can actually see and test.

It is also a good way for our parents to understand the concept of the Pou. If we were to actually build one, a real fale, they would have input towards the planning and building, what it would look like etc.

In the past, parents would come and listen to what we would have to say, we would hand out paper after paper but they couldn't relate to what we were saying as they couldn't see or touch, it's not really there.



Kopu Tangata (Cook Island) Our partnership with our whānau

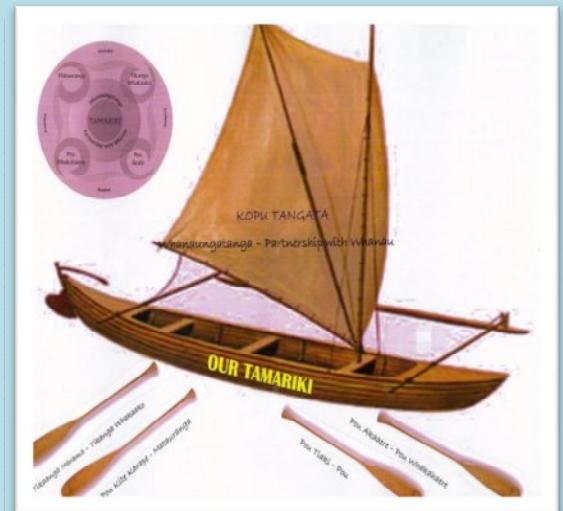
The actual waka itself is all about our tamariki, all our children, they're on the journey, so the waka is going through the journey. The sails of the waka, are the *Kopu Tangata*, which means our partnership with our whānau, our partnership with our whānau, is working with our tamariki to work together, that's the whole whanaungatanga.

Our four oars are like the four pou of ERO's Ngā Pou Here. We have used Cook Island language to describe the meaning of the oars. We don't have Fale in the Cook Islands. We are one with the land and the sea. That's why we thought we'd use the waka as our metaphor.

We showed parents the waka. We told them how we wanted to give them something that related to their children here in the Puna, and we shared our story how we related to the sea and the land. We talked about the waka being an important symbol for us. The families agreed and thought it was a good idea as well.

This has been useful to use in the centre because you can see it with the children, because we're taking them on a journey too.

It's working for us. We use it in our planning and for self review too.

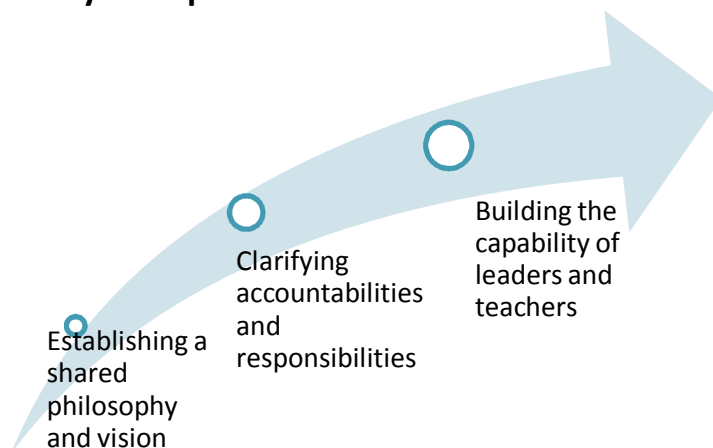


The leaders of these services used their cultural models and asked themselves:

- What do we want to improve for the children in our service?
- What would be our top priority?
- Why do we need to make these improvements?
- How will we make them?
- What will this mean for the children, their parents and families, and the teachers?

These services had undergone varying levels of organisational change and leadership development. ERO's review recommendations were the catalysts for these changes. The leaders knew they had to make improvements and took risks because their own comfort zones were being challenged. Their trajectory of improvement was due to establishing a shared philosophy and vision, clarifying accountabilities and responsibilities, and building the capability of leaders and teachers.

Trajectory of improvement



Key themes

Four key themes emerged from the *talanoa* about the improvements in the services:

- Leading organisational change.
- Developing leadership capability.
- Leadership for curriculum.
- Ensuring quality.

These themes interweave, inform each other and are dependent on each other. They are examined in more detail in the following pages.

Improvement-focused changes



Leading organisational change

In each service, the manager's leadership was pivotal for managing changes needed to improve learning outcomes for children. They were committed to ongoing improvements, mentored staff and closely monitored teaching practice.

What's important?	What does good practice look like?	For example:
Clear philosophy	The values and beliefs of the services were written in both English and the Pacific language of the service. The philosophy reflected how the values and beliefs were put into practice on a daily basis. It also reflected the principles of the early childhood curriculum <i>Te Whāriki</i> .	<i>The amoga amata's philosophy was an interpretation of the Samoan fale (house) where the roof represented the children. The children's learning was central and was expected to be of high quality. The children were supported in their confidence to speak in Samoan; they shared with and cared for each other in a comfortable environment.</i>
Clarity of role	Roles were discussed with staff and teachers so that they knew what their duties were and what support they should access. In some, major organisational changes were led by the board or management committee who identified specific roles for teachers.	<i>The board appointed a new centre manager in July 2013 and provided her with very clear key performance indicators that were mainly related to the recommendations from a previous ERO report. The board received good quality information about the curriculum, enrolment data, funding, and staffing matters which assisted them to make resourcing decisions.</i>
Decision making	Services functioned well when the board, managers, teachers, children and parents were all included in decision making about the identified improvements. They built on the strengths that each group brought to their role.	<i>In 2010, the board needed support with restructuring the centre. They spoke to teachers, parents, the local Pacific community, and sought external assistance with the restructuring and to implement the recommendations of ERO's report. In 2013, ERO said the centre was well placed to promote positive outcomes for children and gave the centre a regular three-year review return time.</i>
Partnerships for change	Services emphasised the importance of nurturing and caring relationships between the board and teachers. Leaders and teachers found ways of keeping dialogue open and making time to listen to each other.	<i>For one centre manager, it was important for her to understand the board's vision and views. She worked alongside the board to respond to the challenges but also recognised cultural protocols. "I think this also helped them to understand me too, as a young leader in a changing world."</i>

Developing leadership capability

Professional learning and development (PLD) for teaching staff was a priority. Teachers were encouraged to review what they did and identify ways to improve their work with Pacific children, their parents and families. They challenged their own assumptions about children and learning.

What's important?	What does good practice look like?	For example:
Professional learning and development	In these services, identifying and undertaking relevant PLD was critical to help make continuous improvements. Managers played an important role in upholding their service's philosophy and in guiding and supporting staff.	<i>At one centre, staff were supported to take on leadership roles. The centre manager encouraged teachers to identify the support they needed, including relevant PLD. One PLD focus had supervisors attend PLD on appraisal which helped them to appraise teaching staff who directly reported to them and to discuss some of the challenges with the centre manager.</i>
Reflective leaders and teachers	Leaders and teachers at these services had ways of knowing the progress they had made in developing culturally relevant learning environments. They focused on Pacific children as competent and confident learners and were responsive to their parents' and families' aspirations. They were also clear about what still needed to be done and the challenges associated with this.	<i>The centre had a buddy system where qualified teachers worked with non-qualified teachers to plan each day's programme together. Each teacher had a planning book to document daily and weekly self reflections. They shared their reflections during staff meetings to discuss what worked, and to identify the next steps with their colleagues.</i>
Partnerships for leading	Developing and maintaining respectful relationships among teachers enabled these services to be more responsive to children's interests. Teachers had increased opportunities to take ownership of areas for curriculum development. They also actively encouraged parents and families to participate or take a lead in a range of initiatives.	<i>The centre manager had taken on the administrative duties, which allowed the supervisor time to concentrate on the programme. The supervisor's role changed to management of the curriculum and monitoring of professional practice. Since the change, there had been an improvement in the quality of teaching practice and staff performance.</i>

Leadership for curriculum

Teaching practices were inclusive and respectful of Pacific values and beliefs. Parents and families contributed to the curriculum and enhanced teachers' professional knowledge. This meant that programmes better reflected children's culture, values and beliefs. Teachers were receptive to feedback from families, other teachers, local schools and the wider Pacific community.

What's important?	What does good practice look like?	For example:
Language	The Pacific language of the service was consistently used in conversations and was evident in planning documents and assessment records. Most staff spoke the Pacific language fluently. Rituals and routines such as prayers and songs incorporated Pacific values. In some services, the children were confident in leading these sessions.	<i>All the teachers were fluent speakers of the service's Pacific language. Providing the curriculum in the Pacific language and the commitment by the teachers to constantly lift their practices was the main reason this service was able to provide a culturally relevant curriculum despite having undergone some organisational changes.</i>
Community engagement	Teachers took time to get to know the children and their families. The families understood the values and stories used by the service. Children's portfolios were inclusive of and meaningful to their families. Families' 'voices' were sought and visible in the children's learning and, in some services, in planning documents.	<i>The centre used the Ara (pandanus tree) for planning and assessment because the children's parents understood it, which helped the teachers with explaining the children's learning. Parents also used the Ara to share their aspirations for their children.</i>
Linking curriculum to Te Whāriki	The curriculum was child-focused, giving children the freedom to choose where, when, and who they played with. Teachers knew the children well, provided programmes that engaged and extended their learning, and were responsive to their cultural contexts. The curriculum reflected the services' commitment to bicultural learning.	<i>Teachers used open-ended and interesting questions to prompt children's thinking and curiosity. They encouraged children to ask questions. Teachers knew of the cultural tensions that can exist with this approach, so they supported children to be respectful and responsible when asking questions.</i>
Partnerships for Learning	Leaders understood and put into practice genuine collaborative approaches for working with Pacific parents and families. Where they had previously gathered parents and families' ideas, they now make decisions together. Parents and families were involved in setting goals and discussing their child's progress.	<i>This centre has well-established networks with other Pacific services and teachers were encouraged to share ideas and learning. Children were invited to perform at local community events, which helped to build their confidence.</i>

Ensuring quality

Where leadership was most effective, the leaders and teachers in these services were clear about their roles and responsibilities, including what was expected of them. Self review led to changes in the curriculum, teaching and assessment practices, support for the learning environment, and organisational management. In some services parents participated in meetings about policy development and review of organisational philosophy.

What's important?	What does good practice look like?	For example:
Expectations – knowing what to do	Centre managers had clear expectations of their staff and met regularly to discuss strengths and challenges. They provided regular reports about the programme to the board or management committee, advocated for staff particularly around resourcing, professional learning and development, and shared decision making.	<i>The supervisor was part of the teaching team and acted as a 'floater' in the programme. This way she was able to mentor staff and monitor professional practice and philosophy in action.</i>
Accountability and responsibility	Leaders understood the difference between governance and management. They were also clear about the challenges of their roles and sought external assistance whenever they needed it.	<i>The board recruited the current manager when it was clear that the centre was at risk of losing its licence. The restructure enabled the management team to establish a sound platform for improving the quality of education and for staff to manage the challenges they previously faced.</i>
Relational trust	Leaders' integrity and ability to build relationships and trust amongst the school community was critical. They demonstrated this by listening to teachers, parents and children and understanding their interests and aspirations. Difficult situations were managed in a respectful manner and support was provided when needed. The leaders were also aware of their own challenges in managing changes.	<i>The centre manager was committed to providing high-quality early childhood education, but identified that her project-driven approach was not always shared by her team. She adopted an approach of high trust, delegation and shared leadership that has contributed to ongoing improvements in the centre.</i>

Improvement-focused questions for services

Leading organisational change

- What are our priorities for improvement?
- What do we know about how to make the necessary improvements?
- What support and resources do we need to make these improvements?
- How will we know that we have right expertise to support us to make these improvements?

Developing leadership capability

- What PLD do our leaders and teachers need to undertake to support improvement?
- Do we know the impact of PLD on improving learning outcomes for the children in our service?
How do we know this?

Leadership for curriculum

- What do we know about the responsiveness of our curriculum? How do we know this?
- How does our curriculum support the children's language, culture, and identity?
- How do we include parents in making decisions about their child's learning? How does this inform curriculum decisions?

Ensuring quality

- What do we know about the quality of our service?
- What impact have the improvements had on the quality of our service?
- What will these improvements mean for the children, their parents and families, and the teachers?

Improvement-focused journey for one Pacific service

The example below highlights how the leaders of one service managed the changes to improve learning outcomes for the Pacific children in their service.

Context

This centre is governed by a management committee that includes church members, staff and parent representatives. ERO's previous supplementary reviews in 2009 and 2010 identified areas for improvement in aspects of management processes and the quality of the programme. During this period, the centre also had a number of staff changes. ERO's 2010 report stated that the centre was becoming better placed to provide children with good quality education and care.

Catalyst for change

"There was a disconnect between the church's views and the Ministry's requirements for qualified ECE teachers – after the 2010 ERO report, the management committee embraced the recommendations and we worked together to implement them." (Leader voice)

Leaders wanted to maintain a positive ERO review. They also knew that their teachers had to be qualified. The leaders knew that effective strategic planning and self-review processes had to be implemented to assist in the development of a culture of ongoing improvement.

Deliberate actions

Leaders understood the expectations for accountability to their community. They restructured the management committee to include parents, staff, and church representatives, and supported shared decision making.

Leading organisation change

The leaders supported the improvement-focused changes by hiring a contractor to manage the centre's finances. They budgeted for current unqualified teaching staff to gain a qualification through a recognised training provider. They also recruited qualified teachers.

Developing leadership capability

Leaders created an inclusive, collaborative and nurturing environment for the children and teachers. Parents, teachers, and the church community were included in the review and translation of the centre's philosophy. Teachers and children spoke Samoan on a daily basis.

Leaders were committed to providing a high-quality ECE for Samoan children. They paid for whole centre professional learning and development (PLD) and ongoing targeted support for new staff to sustain teaching practice. A local kindergarten head teacher mentored the centre manager. The teaching staff underwent an external appraisal.

Leadership for curriculum

The centre's philosophy was an interpretation of the Samoan fale (house) where the roof presented the children. Therefore children's learning was central and expected to be of high quality. The philosophy guided all decisions about the curriculum. Children were supported to greet visitors in Samoan and to have conversations with parents and community elders.

The centre's cultural model was used as a self-review tool to improve the curriculum and make it responsive to children's interests. Improvements to the curriculum were informed by meaningful conversations with children and their parents, and ongoing teacher discussions.

Ensuring quality

Teachers worked with families to support children's learning and development. Parents were invited to workshops and community meetings about good quality ECE, centre excursions, and to assist with translating resource materials in Samoan.

The centre used the same self-review approach and tool to improve partnerships with families, identify PLD for teachers, and improve quality of health and safety practices, review documentation processes, and review reporting lines between staff and management.

Impact of the improvements

Children enjoyed a positive learning environment. They settled well on arrival and engaged positively with others. Children responded well to the support teachers provided and were comfortable to participate in a variety of learning situations. Leadership amongst children was fostered. Children had the opportunity to lead mat times and to be responsible for daily routines. They played cooperatively with one another and demonstrated independence and confidence.

The centre's environment celebrated Samoan culture and New Zealand's bicultural heritage. Teachers were proficient in the Samoan language. They consistently built children's confidence in using and understanding Samoan. While teachers used Samoan throughout the programme they supported children to improve their Samoan language through bilingual responses. Consequently, children conversed confidently with adults and one another.

Infants were cared for and nurtured by their teachers. Teachers were responsive to individual infant's routines and care needs, and developed strong and secure attachments. They understood the developmental stages of younger children, fostered their independence, supported language development, and promoted opportunities for infants to learn through play.



So what? Improved practice

Leaders of these Pacific services acknowledged the need to make changes to improve learning outcomes of Pacific children. This required courage and collaboration, and led to a shift in practices.

These services revisited and established a shared philosophy and vision that leaders, teachers, parents and families understood and could identify with. The philosophy guided the services' curriculum decisions such as identifying priorities for children's learning and supporting their language, culture, and identity by clarifying teachers' duties to ensure that the children experienced a high quality education.

Services moved from having an informal approach to self review to a more systemic, connected and coherent way of working that was aligned to their philosophy and strategic plan.

Services were clear about:

- who was responsible for implementing identified improvements
- how the improvements would be implemented and evaluated
- what support and resources were required to make the improvements
- why they need to evaluate and understand the impact of the improvements on the children, parents and families, and the teachers.

When the need arose, these services sought expertise to support them in implementing and evaluating the impact of their improvements.

These services changed the focus of their engagement with parents and families from just gathering ideas to involving them in shared decision-making for ongoing improvement. The knowledge and expertise of the children, their parents and families, and the local Pacific community was actively sought and acknowledged. Teachers' capability to take on leadership roles was developed through relevant and targeted PLD, which supported the model of shared decision-making for improved quality of education.

Leaders of these services knew they had to make improvement-focused changes but more importantly they recognised the need for them to know what difference, if any, these improvements made for the children in their centre, their parents and families, and the teachers.

