

# Parents' perspective on early childhood education in New Zealand: Voices from Pacifica families

<http://dx.doi.org/10.23965/AJEC.43.1.06>

**Pratika Singh**

Early Childhood Centre, Auckland

**Kaili C Zhang**

Excelsia College and Indiana Wesleyan University

**AOTEAROA/NEW ZEALAND HAS** a reputation for being a world leader in early childhood education. However, research indicates that many early childhood teachers in New Zealand encounter difficulties when working with children and families from diverse backgrounds. In addition, though a plethora of research has been done on early childhood teachers' partnership with parents of multicultural backgrounds, little attention has been given by researchers to Pacifica parents' perspective on early childhood education in New Zealand. This article draws on findings from an interpretative study on three Pacifica families' views about their cultural practice at home and their views about early childhood education in New Zealand. It is believed that investigating parents' views on early childhood education and early childhood services in New Zealand can provide better support for families and children from Pacifica backgrounds.

## Introduction

Aotearoa/New Zealand has a reputation for being a world leader in early childhood education, and the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (which means 'a woven mat'; Ministry of Education, 1996), was indeed one of the first developed in the world—holistic in nature and with bi-cultural foundations (Te One, 2013). However, despite the fact that the New Zealand curriculum for early childhood education provides a framework for teachers to consider effective partnerships, research indicates that many early childhood teachers in New Zealand encounter difficulties when working with children and families from diverse backgrounds (e.g. Cooper & Hedges, 2014; Guo, 2005).

In New Zealand, Pacifica is a generic term that represents many Pacific Island cultures: Samoan, Tongan, Cook Islands Māori, Fijian, Niuean, Tokelauan and Tuvaluan. The Pacifica Education Plan (PEP) 2013–2017 (Ministry of Education, 2013) has specific goals, targets and actions for early learning. However, though the PEP mandates that all Pacifica parents and communities should understand the importance of early learning and that early childhood education (ECE) services should effectively engage Pacifica families (Ministry of Education, 2013), in reality, a clearer picture of how the Pacifica parents are participating in ECE is lacking. In addition, though a plethora of research has

been done on early childhood teachers' partnership with parents of multicultural backgrounds, little attention has been given by researchers to Pacifica parents' perspective on early childhood education.

This article draws on findings from an interpretative study on three Pacifica families' views about their cultural practice at home and their views about early childhood education in New Zealand. It is believed that by investigating parents' views on early childhood education, ECE services in New Zealand can provide better support for families and children from Pacifica backgrounds.

## Literature review

Due to the rapidly changing cultural tapestry of New Zealand, providing culturally competent care in early childhood services has been an uphill task. The Ministry of Education (2013) statistics show that the proportion of Pacifica children who participated in ECE services increased from 85.9 per cent in 2010 to 91.2 per cent in 2015. Many educators and researchers (e.g. Devine, Teisina & Pau'uvale, 2012; Hennig & Kirova, 2012; Zhang & Law, 2011) also recognised the challenges early childhood teachers face in supporting the cultural identity of immigrant children and their families. Therefore, some

argued that in order to provide the support that Pacific children need, it is essential to incorporate the cultures of the Pacific into early childhood services in New Zealand (Hedges & Lee, 2010; Terreni & McCallum, 2003).

The role of culture and environments in child development has been recognised by many psychologists and early childhood educators. For example, at the core of the developmental Vygotskian theory is Vygotsky's belief that human development (which includes child development as well as the development of all humankind) is the result of interactions between people and their social environment. These interactions are not limited to actual people but also involve cultural artefacts, which serve to support the integration of a growing child into the culture and to transform the very way the child's mind is being formed. Vygotsky (1993) refers to the key characteristics that define how humans interact and make meaning as special cultural tools, acquisition of which extends one's mental capacities, making individuals the masters of their own behaviour. In the course of child development, a child typically learns how to use these cultural tools through interactions with parents, teachers or more experienced peers. Teachers thus need to be aware of the various cultural norms among the children and their families so that they can support learning by enabling children to utilise their own cultural tools as well as the cultural tools of others (Bird & Drewery, 2004; Conkbayir & Pascal, 2014).

Furthermore, the New Zealand curriculum (i.e. *Te Whāriki*) advocates that 'children learn through responsive and reciprocal relations with people, places, and things' (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 43). In relation to this, some researchers pointed out that the focal points of relationships are communication, providing scaffolding for the children's endeavours, and opportunities for social interaction and connection with the community and the world around them (e.g. Devine et al., 2012; Hay & Nye, 2006; Zhang, 2010). The importance of social interaction is also emphasised by Vygotsky, who stated that adults and other children surrounding a child are crucial for supporting and enhancing the child's development (Vygotsky, 1993). According to Diglin (2014), one of the strengths of *Te Whāriki* is that it promotes the idea that children learn and develop through a variety of interactions. The authors of *Te Whāriki* cited the work of the developmental psychologist Bronfenbrenner, who proposed an ecological model of childhood development (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Ministry of Education, 1996). Within Bronfenbrenner's model, the overall development of children is influenced by a variety of forces. These forces include the child's school or early childhood services, family, neighbourhood, their socioeconomic status and cultural context (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). According to *Te Whāriki*, teachers should strive to build links between the children's homes and their early childhood centres, as these links serve to bring together these forces so they each function to support rather

than undermine children's development (Ministry of Education, 1996). Through this process, early childhood teachers have opportunities to acquire knowledge about the children, their family and their broader sociocultural contexts (Ministry of Education, 1996).

As it is evident that different cultures have different values, beliefs, customs, attitudes and knowledge in ways to bring up a child (Bird & Drewery, 2004), Cooper and Hedges (2014) maintained that it is important that teachers have some understanding of the cultures of the children and how different cultures affect children's interests and the ways in which they learn. Mara (2000) provided a Pacific Islanders' perspective, which indicates that Samoan parents have always desired that their children grow up knowing who they are within the Samoan *aiga* (which means family in the Samoan language) and community as well as succeeding in *palagi* (which means a white or non-Samoan person in Samoan) terms.

In New Zealand, the Pasifika Education Plan (2013–2017) has specific goals and actions for early learning. These include that all Pacific parents, families and communities understand the importance of early learning and that ECE services effectively engage Pacific children, parents, families and communities. Terreni and McCallum (2003) suggested that teachers should have a genuine interest in learning about the child's culture, and that teachers can learn about the child's culture and country of origin through developing a relationship with the child's family. Teachers should understand that they are both teachers and learners, and recognise that the parents who come to early childhood services are an invaluable source of information about their children, their child-rearing and cultural practices (Terreni & McCallum, 2003).

There has been a lot of research and emphasis given to how teachers can and should support children from different cultural backgrounds. Some researchers (e.g. Hedges, 2010; MacNaughton & Hughes, 2007) argued that teachers should exploit the diversity that is present in their learning centres and should encourage parents of diverse cultural backgrounds to play active roles in the centres. However, without parents' input, it appeared that teachers could not build appropriate knowledge about children of minority cultural backgrounds (Keats, 1997). Early childhood service providers can achieve this through communicating in culturally-appropriate ways and encouraging parents/guardians, extended family and elders in the community to participate in the ECE program (Ministry of Education, 1996).

Furthermore, Guo (2015) submitted that children's individual needs and interests are important in multicultural education but they are not enough. She argued that although it is important to see that the children's daily needs are met, their routines are followed and they are happily engaging with friends, teachers should reflect deeply on how much they actually understand children's

families and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, the social contexts within which their children develop and grow, must be authentic and appropriate in order for the children to develop to their full potentials (Mara, 2000).

Hedges and Lee (2010) emphasised the importance of partnership with early childhood teachers and parents, and that teachers also need to be trustworthy and respectful and make appropriate efforts to overcome any barriers that may exist in partnership with families. Many parents also expect teachers to be proactive in developing relationships with them, and learning about their cultural backgrounds (Education Review Office, 2016). Yet, establishing and maintaining positive relationships are complex and difficult aspects of teaching practice, when teachers are not willing to make extra efforts and change their own beliefs and pedagogy (Hedges, 2010). Notions of power, control and expertise, and issues related to the teacher's knowledge, can affect relationships and understandings within diverse communities to the detriment of children's learning (Hedges, 2010).

Indeed, when the partnership between early childhood teachers and parents is strengthened, the participation rates of Pacific children in the early childhood services are more likely to increase. In fact, in the past few years, increasing Pacific children's participation rates has become a policy target for New Zealand (Cooper & Hedges, 2014). Yet, participation may not engender positive learning outcomes for children from diverse cultural backgrounds without attention to parents' voices and perspectives. Cooper and Hedges (2014) also argued that in order for diverse children and families to genuinely benefit from participation in early education, teachers might usefully adopt more analytical, culturally-responsive and dialogic approaches when engaging parents and learning from them about what their needs and concerns are. However, the importance of the Pacifica parents' voices and perspectives on early childhood education in New Zealand are rarely acknowledged by the public.

In addition, though a plethora of research has been done on early childhood teachers' partnership with families of multicultural backgrounds, little attention has been given by researchers to Pacifica parents' perspectives. There is, therefore, a great need to hear the voices from Pacifica families. The primary goal of this study was to investigate Pacifica parents' perspectives on early childhood services in New Zealand, and it was hoped that by looking at these families' experiences, early childhood programs can support their values and practice more effectively.

## Methodology

According to social constructivism, our knowledge of reality, including the domain of human action, is a social construction by human actors and that this applies equally to researchers (Walsham, 1995). In addition, as the social

world influences how each individual constructs the truth, understanding social process involves getting inside the world of those generating it (Berger & Luckman, 1967). From this perspective, the interpretative study, which is informed by social constructivism, is well-suited for exploring hidden reasons behind complex, interrelated or multifaceted social processes (Walsham, 1995). This interpretative approach is also appropriate for studying context-specific, unique processes. As this research sought to investigate Pacifica parents' views on early childhood education in New Zealand, it seemed that by constructing a qualitative interpretative study and involving people in specific settings, different perspectives and experiences would emerge. Therefore, the interpretative study method was chosen for this research.

## Procedure

The study site was chosen because it was a popular ECE centre located in an urban area with a diverse ethnicity of children attending, together with a group of staff members from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds. About eight per cent of the children at the centre were from Pacific Islands. As there were only four families that had at least one child of Pacifica background attending the centre, each of the Pacifica families was invited to participate in the study. Three families ( $n = 3$ ) agreed, resulting in a response rate of 75 per cent. When the study was completed, each family received an appreciation gift for their time and participation.

Data was gathered through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with each parent. Before the questionnaires were given and the interviews conducted, the authors were able to collect certain data by analysing the background information of the children at the centre with assistance from the administrator. Upon approval of the research project by the institutes where we worked, the questionnaire instrument was distributed to participants in person. A verbal and written notification regarding the administration of the questionnaire, the collection and analysis of the data, possible uses of the data, and the consent form assuring anonymity was given to participants prior to the completion of the questionnaire and the interviews. Pseudonyms were given to all participants.

## Participants

The three families that participated in the study were New Zealand permanent residents with various Pacifica backgrounds (i.e. Niue, Samoa and Fiji). The age of participants ( $n = 6$ ; i.e. the six parents of the three families) ranged from 22 years to 46 years. They all had more than secondary level of qualification attained from New Zealand. Interestingly, though all mothers were full-time housewives, two of them were trained early childhood teachers. All three fathers were professionals working in a variety of industries, including engineering, high-tech and

financial services. These families had good knowledge of the New Zealand education system and were keen to see that their children fit in well with the system. It was also interesting to note that each family had two children, and each of the children attended early childhood education starting from age two.

### **Data analysis**

Data analysis was based on the transcribed version of participants' (i.e. parents') responses to the questionnaire and interviews. By employing the qualitative data analysis methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1965), the transcribed data was first categorised and labelled in the process known as open coding. In this process, data from each participant was constantly compared throughout the study. This allowed for further generation of concepts and identification of relationships among components in an axial coding stage. Finally, the data was categorised into three conceptual domains including Pacifica parents' views about their cultural practice at home, Pacifica parents' expectations of schools in New Zealand, and Pacifica families' relationships with the childcare centre. The processes of open and axial coding were merged and the results of this study were reported in narrative statements, which encapsulated participants' perspectives on early childhood education in New Zealand. These statements include rich descriptions of the categories that evolved from the data analysis, a compilation of detailed information about participants' meaning-making and quotes as supportive evidence.

### **Findings**

The following are the three main themes that emerged from the data:

- a. Pacifica parents' views about their cultural practice at home
- b. Pacifica parents' expectations of schools in New Zealand
- c. Pacifica families' relationships with the childcare centre.

It could be argued that some of the comments made by participants fit equally well into more than one theme, but for organisational reference, each was placed in only one.

#### **Pacifika parents' views about their cultural practice at home**

Each of the three families presented as nuclear families, but often attended meetings, gatherings and various functions with extended families that lived in New Zealand, as well friends in local Pacifica communities. All families indicated that aunts, uncles and grandparents have played a big role in their children's lives. Even though some of their relatives did not live in New Zealand, the parents contacted them often and let them know how the children were doing. All three families made trips back to their own countries at least once a year to attend family reunions and

other important occasions. In the Pacific cultural 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. The three families all stated that, at home, they all taught their cultural values such as obeying authorities, respecting elders and the importance of gatherings with extended families to their children. One parent stated that she has been teaching her son to speak in the Samoan language since he was a baby. Another parent said that he often invited their relatives to eat at his house, as in their culture, eating together is very important. This family also attended a Samoan-speaking church where their child sang in the church choir. All families shared that they all required their children to behave well (e.g. show respect to adults, turning off digital devices) in all family gatherings and community functions.

Furthermore, all three families put a lot of emphasis on discipline, and that extended families do take part in the upbringing of the child, as their cultures all recognise that 'it takes a whole village to raise a child', as one mother put it. Discipline approaches, which were used by parents, grandparents and aunts and uncles alike, included taking away an activity or one of the children's favourite toys as a consequence when their children misbehaved. All parents found that loss of privilege worked well in their families. Two families indicated that their challenge was to be consistent with their discipline approach and help young children understand the consequences.

Interestingly, all of the three families reported that they found it a big challenge to follow routines and keep their schedules at home. The reasons being, in their home cultures, people are 'laid back and don't necessarily follow tight or strict schedules', as one parent explained. Three other parents said that when they grew up, their original families did not have the tradition of keeping routines and, therefore, they did not have examples to follow. For example, one mother shared that her daughter often had a hard time waking up for school at 7.30 am when she did not get her 11 hours of sleep, but she found it very challenging to put her on a sleep schedule.

It is also interesting to note that all parents wanted their children to learn their mother tongues but the teaching was carried out mostly by the elders in the extended families, such as grandparents. Only one family sent their child to a Māori class to formally learn Te Reo (the Māori language). The child's father is half Māori and half Niuean, and as the grandparents both passed away, there were no means to teach the child the parents' mother tongues other than sending him to school. All parents commented that if they could, they would send their children to respective cultural childcare programs to learn their mother tongues and cultural values, so that their children could have ample opportunities to nurture their own language, religion and

culture. They believed that quality Pacifica ECE services (mainly set up by Pacific communities) not only use their community language and culture, they also provide truly bi-cultural learning experiences that are also inclusive of other cultures within the centres. Unfortunately, there were no Pacifica early childhood education services where these families lived. Interestingly, two of the parents indicated that they also understood that in the absence of a reinforcing culture in everyday life, it is difficult for them to truly have their children 'grow up the Pacifica way' and become 'bi-culturally competent', even if their children were able to attend any Pacifica ECE services.

### **Pacifica parents' expectations of schools in New Zealand**

All parents reported that they were generally happy to send their children to a typical early childhood centre (i.e. local, non-culture specific program), such as the research site, where their children get to learn to get along with children from diverse backgrounds. Two of the parents expressed the desire for the ECE program to teach their children about different cultures and show respect to people from different backgrounds. More specifically, the parents would like the childcare centre to help their children understand and respect differences and similarities among those in the community, and help their children socialise and make friends with children from different ethnic backgrounds. Another parent insightfully pointed out that celebrating major holidays of different cultures (which the centre had been doing) was a good way to promote inclusion, but some age-appropriate follow-up activities and depth of exploration of cultural diversity would help both school staff and children to overcome stereotypes and become more culturally competent.

In addition, four of the parents indicated that as teachers' understanding of different cultures could have a significant impact on children's development and success, in order to further support the development of Pacifica children, it is important for school staff to learn and understand more about their families' cultural values and beliefs. Two of the fathers also expected the childcare centre to help foster their children's resilience so that the children could grow holistically.

Furthermore, five out of the six parents expected that their children are respected and treated the same as the other New Zealander children. They wanted their child to learn to communicate well and 'survive and thrive in the New Zealand school system', as explained by one parent. This was also reflected in the response of one father:

*Education is very important to our family. Both my wife and I expect the school to support our children to learn and achieve well. We hope our son will be ready for Primary 1 when he turns six, and that when he goes to primary school, he will be treated as an equal in the New Zealand education system.*

These findings are consistent with other studies emphasising the importance of parents' expectations of ECE providers and the role these expectations played in the home-centre relationships. For example, Meade (2012) posited that the three aims expressed by a majority of parents were that they wanted their child to have opportunities to learn and explore, and develop abilities to engage in conversations, and learn to make friends and mix with diverse people. A survey carried out by Mitchell and colleagues (2006) also discovered that parents' general aspiration for ECE centres was that their children would have opportunities to develop their skills and knowledge to the fullest. It is evident that both the literature and findings of the current study highlighted the importance of schools having a shared understanding about what each party could expect of the other, and only when families' expectations are met, parents are more willing to build relationships with schools and support school policies. This leads to the next theme: Pacifica families' relationships with childcare services.

### **Pacifica families' relationships with the childcare centre**

The data gathered from both the questionnaire and the interview showed that parents were generally happy with their child's day-care programs and they felt included in the childcare centre. All three families said their relationships with the centre were 'reasonably good', as one parent indicated. All parents reported that developing and maintaining good relationships with school personnel matters to them and their children.

It appeared that one of the reasons why Pacifica parents were generally confident in the teachers' skills and knowledge was the professionalism and qualifications of ECE teachers. This resonated with the Ministry of Education statistics (2013) which showed that by 2013, 77 per cent of European teaching staff were fully registered teachers, and about 76 per cent of Asian teachers, 69 per cent of Pacifica teaching staff and 66 per cent of Māori teaching staff were qualified teachers. These statistics also showed that the number of Pacifica teaching staff had increased significantly, from 18 per cent in 2002 to 69 per cent in 2013 (Ministry of Education, 2013). This is also reflected in the diversity of the staff team of the research site where there were two teachers from the Pacific Islands, one from China, one from South Korea and two Māori teaching-assistants.

Four out of the six parents had a strong focus on the importance of positive attitudes towards learning, and all of these four parents indicated that they were confident that the teachers were doing all they could to help their children grow in this area, as most of the teachers at the centre were 'highly qualified', according to one parent's comments during the interview. This parent observed:

*In general, in all childcare centres in New Zealand, nearly 80 per cent of the teaching staff were qualified teachers. Our confidence in the teachers has certainly contributed to the home-centre relationships.*

Another parent talked about her experience:

*I enjoyed the relationships with the EC staff as both my child and [I] feel included in [the] early childhood centre. The teachers are very professional and knowledgeable, compared to those I know in my home country.*

A mother related her relationship with the centre to the positive changes she noticed in the past few years. She commented that five years ago, when she sent her elder son to the same preschool, she never really felt included because her child's wellbeing and development were hardly discussed in meetings between the teachers and her family. She also observed that her friends' children were also in similar situations, though they attended different ECE programs. However, now she was much happier with the current ECE centre her second child attended, where there were two Pacifica teachers on staff. As a Niue parent, she felt that her child was welcomed and valued in the program, and the teachers there cared about her child's overall wellbeing. Their family's relationship with the centre also developed and improved over the years.

Parents also expressed appreciation for the staff members who made efforts to learn about their cultures and languages. One mother said that she was 'pleasantly surprised' when one of the teachers greeted her in Samoan (which is the first language for most people from the Samoan Islands) when she dropped her child off at school. Another parent said that being welcomed at the school made her feel that her culture was understood and valued, and as a result, encouraged her to approach school staff confidently. Along the same line of thought, two of the mothers shared that, when their children had just started school, some of the teachers made efforts to understand and pronounce the children's diverse names correctly. The connection that those teachers made helped to build a sense of belonging and trust for both the children and families. It is evident that when children's cultural identity was valued and strengthened, partnerships between home and school were also improved.

## Discussion and conclusions

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This qualitative study looks at three Pacifica families' experiences of childhood education in New Zealand. Analysis of the qualitative data accrued from questionnaires and interviews led to the identification of three different themes:

- a. Pacifica parents' views about their cultural practice at home
- b. Pacifica parents' expectations of schools in New Zealand
- c. Pacifica families' relationships with the childcare centre.

In general, the results from the current study concur with previously published research reports on partnership with parents of multicultural backgrounds (Cooper & Hedges, 2014; MacNaughton & Hughes, 2007). What is important about the new results is that though the Pacifica families participating in this study were generally happy with the

ECE programs their children attended, there is still much for teachers and other ECE workers to learn about the different cultural values and beliefs of these families, in order to better support the development of immigrant children. For example, the important role that extended families play in child-rearing is very unique and may not be known to all teachers. And in some cases, such as the families that participated in the study, the teaching of mother tongues was carried out mostly by the elders (e.g. grandparents) in the extended families. In addition, members of extended families all took part in the training and disciplining of the children.

Further, in this study, efforts and commitments parents made to help their children learn about their own cultures and languages, and to develop a sense of connectedness with their extended families and the Pacifica communities, were impressive. These findings echoed what the literature suggests about the importance of connection with the community and the world in child development (e.g. Hay & Nye, 2006; Zhang, 2010).

The findings also showed that all Pacifica parents who participated in the study, regardless of their educational background and economic status, expected the best education for their children. They particularly expected teachers to engage and support children in achieving success, and become 'bi-culturally competent'. These findings highlight the importance of schools having a good understanding of parents' expectations, and the need to develop ideas and clarity about respective roles and responsibilities. A two-way sharing of information will be critical for the development of the school-home relationship and children's learning.

As mentioned previously, New Zealand's ECE curriculum, *Te Whariki*, and ECE policy both emphasise the centrality of parents and families as partners in an ECE setting. In fact, one of the principles of *Te Whariki* is that 'the wider world of family and community is an integral part of the early childhood curriculum' (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 14). This principle resonates strongly with Bronfenbrenner (2005) and Vygotsky's (1993) views on the importance of social interactions for increasing the outcomes of child development, and the cultural contexts in which children grow. Teachers play an essential role in the development of relationships with parents and families. In addition, sufficient understanding of children's cultural backgrounds and their cultural practice at home will also further support home-school relationships and collaboration.

As with other studies, this study acknowledges some limitations, including the fact that there were only three families involved in the research, and the effects of socioeconomic conditions, religious differences and gender were not analysed in this study. Despite these limitations, the study is important because it serves as an attempt to empirically investigate Pacifica parents' perspectives on ECE in New Zealand, an area that is often neglected

by researchers in the field. The interpretative study method employed, allowed participants to offer fresh perspectives on ways to support Pacifica children in early childhood settings; it was also a direct and effective way of adding to experience and improving understanding. In addition, it is hoped that this small study will stimulate further, in-depth research into the issue of multiculturalism in ECE and various ways to enhance Pacifica parents' partnership with childcare centres. More studies should be conducted in order to gain a deeper understanding of the reasons behind parent perceptions.

## ORCID iDs

Kaili C Zhang: [orcid.org/0000-0003-2122-5527](http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2122-5527)

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