MedCrave
Step into the World of Research

Sociology International Journal

Review article

Open Access

CrossMark

Thematic teaching as a tool for culturally responsive early childhood education in Samoa: towards a Samoan culturally grounded pedagogical framework

Abstract

Early childhood education (ECE) provides an important foundation for children's learning, identity, language development, relationships, and participation in family and community life. In Samoa, however, the effectiveness of pedagogical approaches cannot be considered independently of the cultural, linguistic, relational, spiritual, and ecological contexts in which children grow and learn. This conceptual article examines thematic teaching as a potential vehicle for culturally responsive and culturally sustaining early childhood education in Samoa. Drawing on Samoan and Pacific scholarship, culturally responsive pedagogy, culturally sustaining pedagogy, Indigenous education, and decolonising perspectives, the article argues that thematic teaching can extend beyond its conventional function as a curriculum-organising strategy. When teachers select themes from children's lived experiences and explore them through Samoan language, cultural values, relationships, Indigenous knowledge, family participation, and community resources, thematic teaching can become a culturally grounded pedagogy.

The article builds on previous research identifying thematic teaching as an established approach in Samoan preschool contexts while also recognising challenges related to teacher preparation, resources, and differing ways of understanding children's learning. It proposes a five-part Samoan Culturally Grounded Pedagogical Framework: (1) beginning with the child's world; (2) placing Samoan language and culture at the centre; (3) integrating learning through meaningful themes; (4) sharing curriculum authority with aiga and community; and (5) protecting Indigenous knowledge through appropriate cultural protocols. The framework positions children not simply as individual learners but as relational beings situated within aiga, nu'u, genealogy, language, culture, spirituality, and the natural environment. The article concludes that thematic teaching can provide a practical bridge between curriculum expectations and Samoan ways of knowing and being. However, the proposed framework remains conceptual and requires empirical investigation, teacher collaboration, community validation, and contextual adaptation before claims about its effectiveness can be made.

Keywords: Samoa, early childhood education, thematic teaching, culturally responsive pedagogy, culturally sustaining pedagogy, Samoan pedagogy, indigenous knowledge, Samoan language, aiga, community

Volume 10 Issue 5 - 2026

Kuinileti Lauina Viliamu Faamatuainu,[1] Rev Malotau Lafolafoga[2]

[1]Faculty of Education, National University of Sāmoa, Samoa
[2]Centre for Samoan Studies, National University of Sāmoa, Samoa

Correspondence: Kuinileti Lauina Viliamu Faamatuainu, Faculty of Education, National University of Sāmoa, Samoa

Received: October 7, 2026 | **Published:** November 9, 2026

Introduction

Early childhood education is increasingly recognised as a critical foundation for children's later learning, wellbeing, identity, and participation in society. Yet pedagogical approaches developed within one cultural context cannot automatically be assumed to operate in the same way within another. What constitutes effective teaching, meaningful participation, independence, relationships, communication, and learning may be understood differently across cultures. This issue is particularly important in Pacific educational contexts where children's learning is deeply connected to family, community, language, land, spirituality, relationships, and collective responsibilities.

For Samoa, early childhood education is located within a distinctive social and cultural environment. Children are members of aiga (family) and nu'u (village) before they enter formal educational settings. Their experiences of learning begin through relationships with parents, grandparents, siblings, extended family, church, village, land, ocean, language, stories, songs, ceremonies, and everyday responsibilities. Consequently, an ECE pedagogy that recognises only the individual child while separating learning from these relational and cultural contexts risks providing an incomplete account of how Samoan children experience and understand the world.

This concern is reflected in scholarship from Samoan and American Samoan educational contexts. Henward, Tauaa, and Turituri,[1] for example, demonstrate that apparently universal ideas such as "child-centredness" require cultural contextualisation. Their study of American Samoan teachers highlights the limitations that can emerge when pedagogical expectations are introduced without sufficient attention to local cultural knowledge and expectations. Similarly, Taleni and Surtees[2] argue for a Samoan pedagogy of the heart grounded in values including tautua (service), alofa (love), and osiosiga (reciprocity). Their work reinforces the importance of understanding pedagogy not simply as a technical method but as a culturally located relational practice.

Within Samoa itself, thematic teaching has already been used in preschool contexts. Viliamu and Esera[3] investigated teachers' knowledge and use of thematic teaching in a Samoan preschool and identified both its potential and challenges. Their research

©2026 Faamatuainu et al. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and build upon your work non-commercially.

Copyright: ©2026 Faamatuainu et al.

indicates that thematic teaching can support learning, but that teacher preparation, professional development, resources, and materials influence how effectively the approach is implemented.

This article takes the discussion further. Rather than asking only whether thematic teaching is an effective instructional strategy, it asks: How might thematic teaching be reconceptualised as a culturally grounded pedagogical approach for Samoan early childhood education?

The central argument is that thematic teaching can become more than a method of organising curriculum content. If themes emerge from children's lived experiences and are explored through Samoan language, culture, relationships, Indigenous knowledge, family participation, and community contexts, thematic teaching can provide a practical structure for culturally responsive and culturally sustaining pedagogy.

The article therefore proposes a five-part conceptual framework for Samoan early childhood education. The framework is not presented as an empirically validated model. Rather, it is offered as a theoretically informed starting point for further research, professional dialogue, teacher education, curriculum development, and community consultation.

The Samoan early childhood context

Samoan children enter early childhood settings with substantial cultural knowledge. This knowledge may not always resemble the forms of knowledge traditionally privileged within formal educational institutions, but it is nevertheless important to children's identity and learning. Children learn through participation in everyday family life. They observe, listen, imitate, practise, assist, communicate, and gradually develop an understanding of their responsibilities within relationships. Learning therefore occurs through participation rather than solely through direct instruction. The child's learning environment extends beyond the classroom to the home, village, church, ocean, gardens, plantations, family gatherings, and other community spaces.

The Samoan concept of aiga is particularly significant. Aiga is not simply a household unit. It represents a network of relationships, responsibilities, identities, histories, and obligations. Similarly, nu'u represents more than geographical location; it is a social and cultural community in which relationships and responsibilities are organised.

These relational dimensions have important implications for ECE pedagogy. A learning experience about "family," for example, may involve children identifying family members, learning kinship terms, drawing family structures, sharing family stories, practising respectful greetings, discussing responsibilities, singing family songs, or exploring traditional forms of care. Such learning cannot easily be separated into isolated curriculum subjects. Language, social learning, literacy, numeracy, cultural knowledge, identity, and values can develop simultaneously.

The environment also forms part of children's learning. A theme such as Le Vasa (the ocean) may involve language development, environmental awareness, storytelling, mathematics, science, art, movement, cultural knowledge, and discussion of family livelihoods. Similarly, La'au ma Fugala'au (plants and flowers) can provide opportunities to explore traditional knowledge of plants, gardening, colour, counting, vocabulary, stories, drawing, observation, and environmental responsibility.

This illustrates why thematic teaching may be particularly relevant in Samoa. Thematic learning can create connections among areas of knowledge that are already interconnected in children's everyday experiences. However, cultural inclusion should not be reduced to placing a few Samoan objects, songs, foods, or celebrations into an otherwise externally designed curriculum.

A culturally grounded pedagogy requires deeper consideration of how knowledge is understood, who has authority to share it, how relationships shape learning, what languages are used, and what cultural values guide participation.

Thematic teaching in Samoan early childhood education

Thematic teaching involves organising learning experiences around a central topic, concept, event, interest, or experience. Instead of teaching knowledge as a series of disconnected activities, teachers create relationships among different areas of learning through a common theme.

In Samoan preschool education, thematic teaching is not a new idea. Viliamu and Esera (2019) describe its use in a Samoan preschool and note that teachers' knowledge of thematic teaching is influenced by initial teacher education and continuing professional development. Their study also identifies the importance of practical preparation and sufficient teaching resources.

The significance of this research is twofold. First, it confirms that thematic teaching already has a place within Samoan ECE practice. Second, it indicates that simply introducing thematic teaching does not guarantee culturally meaningful implementation. Teachers need knowledge, skills, resources, and professional support to develop themes effectively.

The metaphor of the fe'e avevalu—the octopus with eight arms—provides an appropriate conceptual image for thematic teaching. A central theme can connect multiple areas of learning, much as the arms of an octopus extend from a central body. The metaphor also invites a culturally situated interpretation: learning does not necessarily need to be fragmented into isolated subjects when children encounter knowledge as connected experiences.

For example, a theme such as O Lo'u Aiga (My Family) might include Samoan vocabulary and oral language; storytelling and family narratives; drawing and early writing; counting family members; exploring age and relationships; songs and movement; family roles and responsibilities; respectful forms of communication; photographs and family artefacts; discussions with parents and grandparents.

The teacher therefore does not need to teach "language," "mathematics," "social studies," and "art" as separate experiences. The theme becomes a context through which multiple forms of learning occur. The challenge is ensuring that the theme does not become merely a convenient label placed over conventional teaching. A culturally grounded thematic approach requires the theme to influence what is taught, how it is taught, whose knowledge is included, and how children participate.

From thematic teaching to culturally responsive pedagogy

Culturally responsive teaching emphasises the importance of drawing upon students' cultural experiences, knowledge, languages, identities, and ways of understanding as resources for learning. Gay[4] (2018) argues that culture is not an obstacle to learning but an important resource for effective teaching. This principle has particular significance in Samoa. If children's existing knowledge is treated as separate from "school knowledge," educational settings may

Copyright: ©2026 Faamatuainu et al.

unintentionally communicate that the knowledge children bring from home is less important than knowledge introduced through formal curriculum structures.

A culturally responsive thematic approach reverses this relationship. Children's experiences become legitimate starting points for curriculum planning. For example, rather than introducing a generic theme called "Animals," a teacher might begin with animals children encounter in their own families and communities. The teacher could explore chickens, pigs, dogs, fish, birds, or other locally meaningful animals. Children could discuss names, sounds, habitats, uses, family responsibilities, stories, songs, and cultural meanings.

Similarly, a theme about food could begin with meaʻai faʻa-Sāmoa. Children might discuss taro, breadfruit, bananas, coconut, fish, vegetables, and other foods. They could explore counting, measuring, vocabulary, preparation, family roles, gardening, nutrition, stories, and cultural practices. The difference is important. The curriculum is not simply "translated" into Samoan. Instead, the child's cultural environment becomes a source of curriculum knowledge.

This aligns with culturally sustaining pedagogy, which extends beyond recognising culture toward sustaining linguistic and cultural practices within education.[5] In this sense, Samoan language and culture are not merely resources that make learning easier. They are themselves valuable forms of knowledge and identity.

A Samoan perspective on child-centred learning

The idea of child-centred pedagogy is widely used within ECE. It generally emphasises children's interests, participation, agency, choice, exploration, and active involvement. However, "child-centredness" cannot be assumed to have the same meaning in every cultural setting. Henward et al.[1] demonstrate this issue in their study of American Samoan Head Start. Their research challenges the assumption that a standardised version of child-centred practice necessarily represents culturally appropriate practice. They show that pedagogical expectations can conflict with local understandings when cultural knowledge and expectations are not considered.

This is important for Samoa because the child is not understood only as an autonomous individual. The child is also relationally situated. A Samoan child may understand learning through relationships with parents, grandparents, siblings, teachers, elders, church members, and other community members. Participation, listening, respect, service, cooperation, and reciprocity can therefore be important dimensions of learning. This does not mean that children should have less agency. Rather, agency can be understood relationally.

A culturally grounded approach may therefore ask: What choices can children make within relationships? How can children express their ideas respectfully? How can children learn through cooperation? How can children contribute to group learning? How can family knowledge become part of classroom learning? How can teachers recognise children's existing cultural competence?

Thematic teaching offers opportunities for this form of relational child-centredness because themes can emerge from children's interests while remaining connected to family and community.

Theoretical framework

The proposed framework draws together four complementary theoretical perspectives: culturally responsive pedagogy, culturally sustaining pedagogy, Indigenous knowledge/decolonising perspectives, and Samoan relational pedagogy.

Culturally responsive pedagogy. Gay[4] positions students' cultural knowledge and experiences as important resources for teaching and learning. Applied to Samoa, this means that teachers should recognise children's language, cultural practices, family experiences, and community knowledge as legitimate foundations for curriculum planning. Thematic teaching provides a practical mechanism for doing this. Teachers can identify themes that emerge from children's everyday experiences and use them to connect learning areas.

Culturally sustaining pedagogy. Paris and Alim[5] extend culturally responsive approaches by emphasising the importance of sustaining linguistic and cultural pluralism. For Samoan ECE, this means that the purpose of cultural inclusion should not simply be to make mainstream learning more accessible. Education can also contribute to the continuity and vitality of Samoan language and cultural practices. A theme such as O Loʻu Nuu therefore provides more than an opportunity to learn vocabulary. It can sustain ways of speaking about place, relationships, identity, responsibility, and belonging.

Indigenous knowledge and decolonising education. Thaman[6] argues that decolonising Pacific education requires attention to Indigenous perspectives, knowledge, and wisdom and a critical examination of the dominance of Western philosophies, content, and pedagogies. Smith[7] similarly emphasises the relationship between knowledge, power, Indigenous peoples, and colonial systems of research and representation. For Samoan ECE, this perspective raises an important question: Whose knowledge is considered legitimate within the curriculum?

A thematic approach can reproduce colonial patterns if teachers simply use Samoan topics to teach externally defined knowledge. Conversely, it can support Indigenous knowledge if Samoan concepts, language, histories, relationships, and community knowledge genuinely shape curriculum content and pedagogy.

Samoan relational pedagogy. Recent Samoan scholarship provides an increasingly important foundation for culturally grounded pedagogy. Taleni and Surtees[2] conceptualise a Samoan pedagogy of the heart through values such as tautua, alofa, and osiosiga. Their work positions teaching as relational and culturally situated rather than purely technical. Similarly, Matapo et al.[8] describe the development of a Samoan pedagogical framework for pepe meamea through culturally located dialogue, collaboration with Samoan cultural experts and teachers, and processes of talanoa and lalaga. This work demonstrates the value of developing pedagogy with communities rather than simply adapting externally developed models.

Together, these perspectives support the central proposition of this article: thematic teaching can provide a practical structure through which culturally grounded pedagogy can be enacted.

Towards a Samoan culturally grounded pedagogical framework

This article proposes a five-part framework.

***Part 1*:** Begin with the Child's World. The first principle is that curriculum should begin with the world children know.

Children's family, village, language, environment, interests, experiences, and relationships can provide meaningful starting points for curriculum development.

Possible themes include O Loʻu Aiga – My Family. O Loʻu Nuu – My Village. O Laʻu Aʻoga My School. Le Vasa – The Ocean. Laʻau ma Fugalaʻau – Plants and Flowers. Meaʻai Sāmoa – Samoan Food. Manu o Samoa – Animals of Samoa. Tautua ma Galuega – Service

Citation: Faamatuainu KLV, Lafolafoga RM. Thematic teaching as a tool for culturally responsive early childhood education in Samoa: towards a Samoan culturally grounded pedagogical framework. *Soc Int J* . 2026;10(5):141–146. DOI: 10.15406/sij.2026.10.00471

Copyright: ©2026 Faamatuainu et al.

and Work. Fale ma Aiga – Home and Family. The objective is not to restrict children's learning to what they already know. Rather, familiar experiences become bridges to new knowledge.

Part 2: Place Samoan Language and Culture at the Centre. Language should not be treated as an additional component of thematic teaching. For Samoan children, language is closely connected with identity, relationships, values, knowledge, and cultural meaning. Teachers can use Samoan vocabulary, stories, songs, proverbs, greetings, oral histories, family narratives, and culturally appropriate forms of communication throughout thematic learning. For example, the theme O Lo'u Aiga could introduce kinship vocabulary while simultaneously exploring respect, relationships, responsibilities, and identity. This approach recognises that language is not simply a tool for communicating information. It is also a carrier of culture.

***Part 3*:** Integrate Learning Through Meaningful Themes. The third principle retains the strength of thematic teaching itself. A theme should provide an organising centre for multiple learning experiences. For example: Theme: Le Vasa – The Ocean. Language: names of sea creatures, descriptive words, storytelling and conversation. Early mathematics: counting fish, comparing sizes, sorting shells, patterns. Science: water, marine life, tides, weather, habitats. Creative arts: drawing, painting, movement, songs and craft. Social learning: family relationships with the sea, community activities and responsibilities. Culture: traditional knowledge, stories, practices, values and relationships associated with the ocean. Environmental learning: caring for the ocean and marine resources. The teacher's role is to identify meaningful connections rather than forcing every possible learning objective into the theme.

***Part 4*:** Share Curriculum Authority with Aiga and Community. A culturally grounded pedagogy cannot rely exclusively on teachers as curriculum experts. Families and communities hold knowledge that may not be available in formal curriculum documents. Parents, grandparents, elders, cultural practitioners, farmers, fishers, artists, craftspeople, church leaders, and other community members can contribute to children's learning. For example, during a theme about traditional food, a grandmother might demonstrate food preparation. During a theme about plants, a family member with knowledge of traditional plants might share appropriate knowledge. During a theme about the village, an elder might explain aspects of village history. Such participation changes the relationship between school and community. The community becomes a partner in curriculum rather than simply an audience for school activities. This approach is consistent with the wider Pacific emphasis on culturally based pedagogy and knowledge-sharing.[9]

***Part 5*:** Protect Indigenous Knowledge Through Cultural Protocols. The fifth principle is critical. Not all Indigenous knowledge should be treated as freely transferable classroom content. Some knowledge is associated with families, villages, elders, practitioners, or cultural responsibilities. Some knowledge may be sacred, restricted, or context specific. Therefore, culturally grounded teaching must include cultural protocols.

Teachers should consider: Who has authority to share knowledge? Is the knowledge appropriate for young children? Is permission required? How should knowledge be represented? Can photographs or recordings be taken? Can knowledge be reproduced outside the original context? How should elders or knowledge holders be acknowledged? What knowledge should remain within its cultural setting? This principle prevents "cultural inclusion" from becoming cultural extraction. It also connects culturally responsive pedagogy with Indigenous research ethics and decolonising approaches.[7]

The Five-Part Framework in Practice. The five principles can be represented as an interconnected framework:

Child's World → Samoan Language & Culture → Meaningful Themes → Aiga & Community → Cultural Protocols

These are not five sequential stages. They operate together. For example, a teacher may begin with children discussing what they do with their families. This leads to the theme O Lo'u Aiga. Samoan language provides the vocabulary and cultural concepts. Activities integrate literacy, mathematics, creative arts, social learning, and identity. Families contribute photographs, stories, songs, or experiences. Cultural protocols guide which knowledge is appropriate to share. The framework therefore shifts the question from: "What topic should I teach?" to: "What meaningful aspect of the children's Samoan world can become a context for interconnected learning?" This represents a significant conceptual shift.

The role of the teacher

A culturally grounded thematic pedagogy requires teachers to move beyond the role of activity organiser. The teacher becomes: Listener – listening to children and families; Cultural learner – continuing to develop cultural knowledge; Curriculum designer – connecting themes to learning goals; Facilitator – creating opportunities for exploration; Relationship builder – strengthening relationships with aiga and community; Cultural guardian – respecting appropriate knowledge boundaries; and Reflective practitioner – evaluating whether classroom practices genuinely support children's cultural identities.

This has implications for teacher education. Viliamu and Esera[3] found that initial teacher preparation and continuing professional development influence teachers' knowledge of thematic teaching. Teacher education should therefore include both the technical aspects of thematic planning and deeper preparation in Samoan culture, language, community relationships, and culturally grounded pedagogy.

The importance of Samoan language

Samoan language should occupy a central position in the framework. Language enables children to name their experiences, communicate with others, express identity, and access cultural knowledge. A theme taught primarily through English may contain Samoan content without necessarily providing a Samoan pedagogical experience.

For example, teaching about aiga is not simply equivalent to translating the English word "family" into Samoan. The concepts and relationships associated with aiga can carry meanings that require culturally grounded explanation. Similarly, words associated with respect, service, kinship, relationships, place, and social responsibilities may have meanings that cannot be fully represented through direct translation.

Thematic teaching therefore provides opportunities to develop language through meaningful contexts rather than isolated vocabulary exercises. Mara and Burgess,[10] in their work on literacy and quality teaching in Pasifika early childhood education, emphasise the importance of language-rich environments and culturally meaningful resources. Their work supports the value of integrating language and culture throughout everyday ECE practice.

Family and community as co-educators

One of the strongest possibilities of the proposed framework is its capacity to reposition families as co-educators. In many educational

Copyright: ©2026 Faamatuainu et al.

systems, parents are invited to participate primarily through meetings, celebrations, or information-sharing. A culturally grounded thematic approach can broaden this participation. Families can contribute knowledge directly to curriculum development. For example: Theme: O Lo'u Nuu. Children might: identify their village; learn the village name and history; draw important places; learn appropriate greetings; interview family members; discuss village responsibilities; explore local plants and animals; learn songs or stories; visit significant community places where appropriate.

The learning experience therefore extends beyond the classroom. The child sees that knowledge from home is valued within education, while families see that their knowledge contributes to their children's learning. This creates greater continuity between home and ECE.

Indigenous knowledge and cultural safety

The inclusion of Indigenous knowledge requires particular care. There is a danger that educational institutions can extract cultural knowledge, package it into curriculum resources, and then remove it from the relationships and responsibilities that give it meaning. A Samoan culturally grounded framework should therefore distinguish between cultural exposure, cultural participation, and cultural responsibility.

Cultural exposure may involve learning about a cultural practice. Cultural participation involves engaging with the practice appropriately. Cultural responsibility recognises that some knowledge carries obligations concerning who can share it, how it is used, and how it is transmitted. This distinction is particularly important when teaching about traditional medicines, healing practices, genealogy, sacred knowledge, traditional ceremonies, and other culturally sensitive areas. The goal should not be to place every aspect of Samoan knowledge into the classroom. Instead, teachers should establish respectful relationships with appropriate knowledge holders and determine what is suitable for children and for educational use.

Assessment within a culturally grounded approach

A culturally grounded thematic pedagogy also requires reconsideration of assessment. If assessment focuses narrowly on individual performance, it may fail to recognise relational forms of learning. Teachers can document children's learning through observations; conversations; storytelling; drawings; dramatic play; collaborative activities; songs; photographs; children's explanations; family contributions; portfolios; and demonstrations of participation. Assessment should ask not only: "What can the child do independently?" but also: "How does the child participate, communicate, contribute, relate, and apply knowledge within meaningful contexts?" This does not mean reducing expectations. Rather, it broadens the understanding of learning. The approach is consistent with the argument that culturally responsive pedagogy should recognise children's cultural and social resources rather than treating them as separate from academic learning.

Implications for teacher education

The framework has several implications for teacher education in Samoa. First, teacher education programmes should provide stronger practical preparation in thematic planning. Viliamu and Esera[3] (2019) identify the importance of hands-on preparation and professional development. Second, teacher education should strengthen students' knowledge of Samoan language and culture. Third, student teachers should have opportunities to work with communities and cultural knowledge holders. Fourth, teacher education should encourage critical reflection on assumptions embedded within imported pedagogical models. Finally, teachers should be prepared to distinguish between adapting an external approach and developing pedagogy from Samoan foundations. The aim is not to reject international educational knowledge. Rather, it is to create a dialogue between educational knowledge and Samoan knowledge.

Implications for curriculum policy

The proposed framework also has implications for curriculum development. Curriculum policy should provide sufficient flexibility for teachers to develop themes from local contexts rather than prescribing overly rigid content sequences. Policy should also recognise: Samoan language development; cultural identity; family participation; community knowledge; Indigenous knowledge; local environments; relational learning; and culturally appropriate assessment. A flexible curriculum would allow a teacher in one village to develop learning from that community's environment and experiences, while another teacher could develop a different thematic programme reflecting the local context. This approach recognises that Samoa is culturally connected but locally diverse.

Decolonising the early childhood curriculum

The proposed framework contributes to wider conversations about decolonising education. Decolonisation should not be interpreted simply as replacing Western content with Indigenous content. It involves examining the assumptions underlying knowledge, curriculum, pedagogy,authority, and assessment. Thaman[6] argues that decolonising Pacific education requires attention to Indigenous ways of knowing, perspectives, and wisdom. Smith[7] similarly emphasises the relationship between colonial power and knowledge production. Applied to ECE, these ideas raise questions about who defines "good teaching," whose knowledge counts, and what constitutes successful learning. A Samoan thematic approach can contribute to this conversation by positioning Samoan children's worlds as legitimate curriculum foundations. However, decolonising pedagogy should not become another externally prescribed model. It should remain responsive to Samoan communities and be developed through consultation, dialogue, reflection, and practice.

Challenges and limitations

The proposed framework should not be presented without acknowledging its limitations. First, this article is conceptual. It does not provide empirical evidence that the five-part framework improves children's learning outcomes. Second, Samoa is not culturally homogeneous in every respect. Differences may exist among villages, families, denominations, communities, and individual children. Third, teachers may have different levels of Samoan language and cultural knowledge. Fourth, time, staffing, resources, curriculum requirements, and professional development may constrain implementation. Fifth, community participation requires genuine relationships and cannot simply be added as an administrative requirement. Sixth, the framework requires careful treatment of Indigenous knowledge to avoid cultural appropriation or inappropriate disclosure. These limitations reinforce the need for future research.

Directions for Future Research. Future research could investigate the framework through collaborative studies involving teachers, children, families, cultural knowledge holders, teacher educators, and policymakers.

Possible research questions include: How do Samoan ECE teachers currently use thematic teaching? How do teachers and families understand culturally responsive thematic teaching? How

Citation: Faamatuainu KLV, Lafolafoga RM. Thematic teaching as a tool for culturally responsive early childhood education in Samoa: towards a Samoan culturally grounded pedagogical framework. *Soc Int J* . 2026;10(5):141–146. DOI: 10.15406/sij.2026.10.00471

does Samoan language influence children's participation in thematic learning? What forms of family and community knowledge are incorporated into the ECE curriculum? How do children experience culturally grounded themes? What professional development do teachers need? How can culturally appropriate assessment capture children's learning? What cultural protocols should guide the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge? How can the proposed five-part framework be adapted across different Samoan communities? What evidence can demonstrate the framework's influence on children's engagement, identity, language development, and learning? Participatory and Indigenous methodologies would be particularly relevant to such research because they can support relationships, community participation, and appropriate knowledge governance.

Discussion

The central contribution of this article is the reconceptualization of thematic teaching. Traditionally, thematic teaching can be understood primarily as a strategy for integrating curriculum areas. This article argues that, in Samoa, its potential is greater.

Thematic teaching can become a pedagogical bridge between formal curriculum and children's cultural worlds. The distinction is between teaching culture as a theme and Teaching through culture. The first may involve occasional cultural activities. The second requires culture to influence the relationships, language, content, pedagogy, participation, and knowledge systems through which learning occurs. This distinction is central to the proposed framework.

A theme such as O Lo'u Aiga should not simply become a lesson about family vocabulary. It can become a context for learning about identity, relationships, responsibilities, language, respect, storytelling, mathematics, literacy, creativity, and belonging. Likewise, Le Vasa should not simply become a science topic. It can provide a culturally meaningful context for learning about the ocean, environment, livelihoods, stories, language, responsibilities, and community relationships.

The framework therefore does not advocate replacing curriculum objectives. It advocates embedding those objectives within meaningful cultural contexts. This provides a potentially productive meeting point between international educational theory and Samoan knowledge.

Culturally responsive pedagogy contributes an understanding of culture as a resource for learning. Culturally sustaining pedagogy emphasises the continuity of language and culture. Pacific decolonising scholarship challenges the dominance of externally imposed knowledge systems. Samoan pedagogical scholarship contributes relational values such as alofa, tautua, and osiosiga. Thematic teaching provides the practical curriculum structure through which these ideas can be connected.

Conclusion

Thematic teaching has established a place within Samoan early childhood education, but its potential extends beyond organising activities around topics. When grounded in children lived experiences, Samoan language, cultural values, relationships, Indigenous knowledge, family participation, and community contexts, thematic teaching can become a culturally grounded pedagogical approach. This article has proposed a five-part Samoan Culturally Grounded Pedagogical Framework: Begin with the child's world. Place Samoan language and culture at the centre. Integrate learning through meaningful themes. Share curriculum authority with aiga and community. Protect Indigenous knowledge through cultural protocols.

Together, these principles offer a way of connecting curriculum with children's identities and lived experiences. The framework does not suggest that Samoan ECE should isolate itself from international educational knowledge. Rather, it argues for a stronger position from which Samoan educators can engage with international theories and practices while retaining the authority of Samoan language, culture, relationships, and Indigenous knowledge. The significance of thematic teaching therefore lies not simply in the integration of curriculum areas. Its deeper potential is to create meaningful spaces in which children can learn through their culture, with their families, within their communities, and in ways that affirm who they are.

For Samoa, culturally responsive ECE should not be understood as an optional addition to quality teaching. It should be considered part of what meaningful quality teaching requires.

The proposed framework is a starting point rather than a final model. Its next stage should be collaborative empirical research with Samoan teachers, children, families, communities, cultural knowledge holders, and teacher educators. Through such work, thematic teaching can be examined not merely as a classroom technique, but as a possible pathway toward a more culturally grounded, relational, and sustainable approach to early childhood education in Samoa.

Acknowledgements

None.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

References

1. Henward AS, Tauaa M, Turituri R. Contextualizing child-centeredness: lessons from an American Samoan Head Start. *Policy Futures in Education*. 2019;17(3):383–401.
2. Taleni LT, Surtees N. A Samoan pedagogy of the heart: 'O auala a'oa'o e afua ma fa'atino mai le fatu. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*. 2024;59(1):31–47.
3. Viliamu KL, Esera E. O le fe'e avevalu: the thematic approach to teaching. Pacific-Asian Education. 2019;31:101–114.
4. Gay G. Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice. 3rd ed. Teachers College Press; 2018.
5. Paris D, Alim HS, eds. Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies: Teaching and Learning for Justice in a Changing World. Teachers College Press; 2017.
6. Thaman KH. Decolonizing Pacific studies: Indigenous perspectives, knowledge, and wisdom in higher education. The Contemporary Pacific. 2003;15(1):1–17.
7. Smith LT. Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples. 3rd ed. Zed Books; 2021.
8. Matapo J, Utumapu-McBride T, Tagoilelagi-Leota F. Indigenising infant and toddler pedagogy in Aotearoa New Zealand: a Samoan pedagogical framework for pepe meamea. The First Years: Ngā Tau Tuatahi. 2023;25(1):20–26.
9. Surtees N, Taleni LT, Ismail R, et al. Sailiga tomai ma malamalama'aga fa'a-Pasifika—seeking Pasifika knowledge to support student learning: reflections on cultural values following an educational journey to Samoa. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*. 2021;56(2):269–283.
10. Mara DL, Burgess FA. O le ulua'i faitautusi ma le tusitusi: O a'oa'oga maoa'e ma lona a'oa'oina i a'oga amata a le Pasifika = Early literacy: Quality teaching and learning in Pasifika early childhood education. New Zealand Council for Educational Research; 2007.

Citation: Faamatuainu KLV, Lafolafoga RM. Thematic teaching as a tool for culturally responsive early childhood education in Samoa: towards a Samoan culturally grounded pedagogical framework. *Soc Int J* . 2026;10(5):141–146. DOI: 10.15406/sij.2026.10.00471