

# Bilingual children in preschool - Language on the Move

By Ingrid Piller



Dr Kerry Taylor-Leech researches early childhood education in an English-Samoan bilingual preschool

Early childhood is an important period in the physical, social, emotional, cognitive and linguistic development of a child. To support child development during that period, care for young children has been increasingly professionalized and moved out of the family and into preschools. Formal early childhood education, particularly in the year or two before entering primary, [is widely considered to enhance school readiness](#). Overall, preschool is assumed to be beneficial for educational success.

But how does institutional childcare affect bilingual families? Most of what we know about early childhood bilingualism comes from research conducted with families where one or both parents are not only the main caregivers but also the main providers of linguistic input.

What happens to bilingual development when young children spend a significant amount of their time in institutional childcare is still an under-researched field. One reason it is under-researched is that it is rare. Where it does not exist and where childcare is through the medium of the dominant language we know that the minority language loses out early, [even in institutions and contexts that ostensibly value diversity](#).

Against this background any form of bilingual childcare is to be welcomed. But how do they actually work?



Bilingual signage in the a'oga amata (Image credit: Kerry Taylor-Leech)

In this week's [Lecture in Linguistic Diversity](#), [Dr Kerry Taylor-Leech](#) from Griffith University addressed precisely this question for an English-Samoan bilingual preschool program in Queensland. The preschool, or a'oga amata in Samoan, was established in 2018 in [Logan City](#), and the researcher and her colleagues followed the children in the program for seven months.

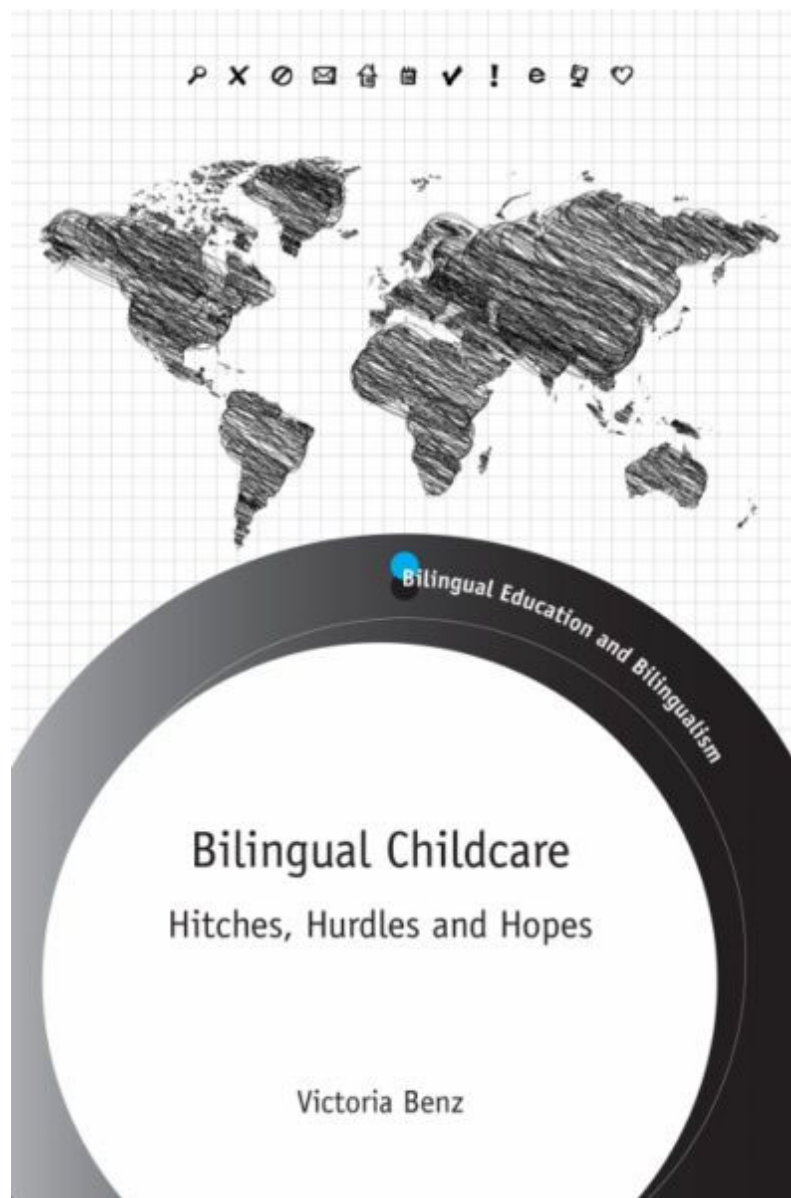
Although designed as an early bilingual immersion program, English dominated as medium of communication. Samoan was mostly used symbolically: it was on display in the preschool's linguistic landscape and was used to greet, thank and praise children.

Dr Taylor-Leech explained that the main reason for the relatively limited presence of Samoan was that not all children in the room were of Samoan heritage and even those who were did not necessarily speak the language. In fact, one mother reported that, as a result of attending the program, her four-year-old daughter was more proficient in Samoan than she was herself.

Parents valued the program very much. Even more than the language, they valued that their children were oriented to [Samoan values of usitai, faaaloalo, alofa and tautua – obedience, respect, love and service](#). In addition to providing the children with a sense of cultural belonging and a positive affirmation of their Samoan identity, the program also succeeded in enhancing the children's school readiness.

While the program was highly successful with regard to cultural affirmation and preparation for mainstream education, it was not so successful with regard to bilingual proficiency. Because English was the dominant language in the program, the children's exposure to Samoan was ultimately limited. Furthermore, as the

presenter explained, there was no program available that would continue to support Samoan after the children had transitioned to primary school.



Bilingual childcare by Dr Victoria Benz (Multilingual Matters, 2017)

To me, the bilingual development – or rather lack thereof – in this Queensland a’oga amata sounded uncannily similar to that in the [Sydney-based English-German bilingual childcare center](#) studied by [Victoria Benz](#). This researcher observed a number of asymmetries between the two languages – with regard to teaching practices, material resources and student proficiencies – all of which resulted in the predominance of English in this ostensibly bilingual childcare center.

If you are up-to-date with your [2019 Language on the Move Reading Challenge](#), you will have read the full study, the gripping sociolinguistic ethnography [Bilingual Childcare: Hitches, Hurdles and Hopes](#), in May.

Dr Benz also found that the predominance of English was further assured by the policy environment and the attitudes of parents and teachers. Unwittingly, these meant that the two languages were pitted against each other. Even more problematically, the goals of developing bilingual proficiency and ensuring school readiness were conceptualized as in conflict with each other because when we talk about “literacy” in Australia we mean “literacy in English” and in English only.

That school readiness and bilingual proficiency are currently conceived as incompatible was also confirmed in [another study investigating parental attitudes towards bilingual childrearing conducted by Livia Gerber and myself](#).

As long as our education system is based on an artificial tension between bilingualism and educational success, it is hard to see how even the most well-intentioned bilingual early childhood programs can actually support the aspirations of bilingual families.

## References

- Benz, Victoria. 2017a. [Bilingual Childcare: Hitches, Hurdles and Hopes](#). Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Benz, Victoria. 2017b. [Bilingual parenting in the early years](#). *Language on the Move*
- Piller, Ingrid. 2015. [Paying lip-service to diversity](#). *Language on the Move*
- Piller, Ingrid, and Livia Gerber. 2018. "[Family language policy between the bilingual advantage and the monolingual mindset](#)." *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*
- Vaá, Unasa LF. 2009. "Samoan [custom and human rights: An indigenous view](#)." *Victoria U. Wellington L. Rev.* 40:237