Livia Gerber has just completed her Master of Research thesis entitled "We really believe that we have given our children a gift": Discourses on bilingual child-rearing in an online parenting forum. The thesis is now available for download from Language on the Move here.

Background
In 1994, when I was in kindergarten, as part of a project on multiculturalism, my primary school in Newcastle, NSW, conducted interviews with pupils from immigrant backgrounds. My family had only arrived in Australia a few months prior: my parents knew very little English, and I knew none. As part of the project, a picture book was made by the school, with photographs and descriptive captions telling the story of each pupil’s previous life in far-away places; Switzerland, in my case. On the very last page of this picture book, there is a photo of myself, proudly wearing my first school uniform during my first Easter Hat Parade. Below the photo, a short note, obviously dictated, and copied in the unsteady hand of a five-year-old. In the note, I thank the children in my class for taking care of me and for ‘writing for me all the words I need’. Although my primary school was evidently interested in making its multicultural students feel welcome, their focus, unsurprisingly, was primarily on my (linguistic) integration: the ‘words I needed’ were English words. This obviously left the maintenance of my mother tongue to my parents. At the same time as the local school was pressuring my parents to make certain I learnt English as quickly as possible, my mother was relentlessly pressured by my grandparents to ensure their grandchildren would not forget their Swiss-German roots.

Bilingual child-rearing in an English-dominant environment is not an easy task. In a society that largely sees English monolingualism as the norm, promoting a language other than English, often with little community or institutional support, can be a daunting undertaking. The paradox of my five-year-old self’s thank-you note in a book celebrating multiculturalism and multilingualism, sparked my interest in the tension between the dominance of English and the valorisation of diversity as it is experienced by families.
Abstract

My thesis seeks to explore the ideologies underpinning parental decisions on family language policies in a predominantly English monolingual environment. Focussing on how the notion of ‘good’ parenting is linked to bilingualism as a child-rearing strategy, the discursive construction of bilingual parenting is explored in one of the largest online parenting communities in Australia, essentialbaby.com.au, using critical discourse analysis. The corpus consists of 15 discussion threads totalling 266 comments posted between 2007 and 2014 by parents and carers seeking and giving advice on bilingual child-rearing. This forum was chosen for three reasons: first, with over 255,000 members it is one of Australia’s largest online parenting forums and it enjoys a broad audience. Secondly, this is a ‘mainstream’ forum that is not a priori concerned with language. It is not specialised in bi- or multilingualism, so members are largely non-experts, making it possible to analyse peer advice as opposed to expert advice. Lastly, an investigation of parental beliefs about bilingual child-rearing in a general parenting forum will reflect more widely popularised discourses within the wider public. Therefore, these – mostly anonymous – conversations can be understood as a manifestation of public knowledge about bilingual parenting. Specifically, the online parenting forum is seen as an environment to explore how parents talk about bilingual child-rearing, and the language ideologies that underlie parental advice on ‘good’ bilingual parenting.

The Bilingual Bonus

Findings suggest that raising a child in two or more languages is often associated with providing the child with what I term the bilingual bonus. Bilingual competencies are associated with a range of cognitive, health, personal, and economic benefits that are unavailable to monolingual peers. Therefore, the increased dissemination of the benefits associated with bilingualism, particularly in the popular media, valorises parental decisions on bilingual child-rearing. Additionally, bilingual family language policies, such as the ‘one parent – one language’ strategy, have become incorporated into mainstream parenting strategies due to the increasing valorisation of bilingualism in general discourses. As a result, parents strongly believe that bilingual competency can only be achieved by implementing a bilingual language learning strategy that promotes double monolingual language acquisition. Overall, parental efforts in raising children with an additional language positions parents as ‘good’ caregivers who are providing their children with an advantage in life. Nevertheless, this study finds that parents are often faced with contradictory bilingual child-rearing realities that inform their language-related parenting decisions. These contradictions indicate that the same tension exists today that existed over two decades ago when I wrote my thank-you note: the tension between the dominance of English and the valorisation of bilingualism. The research extends existing literature on how the monolingual mindset operates on an individual level, and has implications for language policy at individual, institutional and state levels.