New Zealand’s Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, plans to raise her newborn daughter bilingually in Māori and English. Her desire for her child – and all New Zealand children – to grow up proficient in more than one language is not unusual in today’s world and echoes the desires of many Australian parents, too. A recent study of young Australian mothers found high levels of support for bilingual child rearing.

Mothers wanted to give their children “the gift of bilingualism” and spoke glowingly about the many advantages and benefits they hoped bilingualism would bestow on their children. They felt that proficiency in another language in addition to English would enrich their children’s future, that it would give them a career edge, and that it would allow them to travel overseas but also connect with diverse communities in Australia. Many also believed that bilingualism would give their children a cognitive advantage and they were aware of health benefits of bilingualism such as delayed onset of dementia.

In short, like New Zealand’s PM, the mothers in the study aspired to raise their children with English and another language for many good reasons. There was another similarity: while they knew what they wanted, they did not quite know how to achieve their goal. Like Ardern they confided that, while they were sure they wanted their children to learn English and another language, they found it difficult to figure out “how that will happen.”

The main difficulties with raising bilingual children in Australia – as in any English-dominant society – can be traced back to the overbearing role of English. The dominance of English makes bilingual parenting extra hard
for a number of reasons.

To begin with, Australians often have relatively low levels of proficiency in another language and this can lead to deep insecurities. How do you do “being a competent parent” while fighting insecurities whether your pronunciation is good enough or struggling to find the right word?

Second, you may want bilingualism for your child. But you also want your child to be well adjusted, to make friends easily and to do well in school. English is the indispensable means to achieve these goals. So, you may suffer from a niggling doubt that the other language may detract from your child’s English.

By focusing on the other language in the home, do you inadvertently jeopardize your child’s academic success or their friendship groups? Research shows that this is not true but it can certainly seem that way when your child throws a tantrum in the supermarket and everyone stares at you as you try to calm her down in another language.

Third, contemporary parenting is difficult and fraught with anxieties at the best of times. Bottle or breast? Disposable or cloth nappy? Soccer or cricket? The number of decisions we have to make seems endless and each decision seems to index whether we are a good parent or a parenting fail.

Questions of language choice and language practices add a whole other dimension to the complexities of modern parenting: When should you start which language? Who should speak which language to the child? Is it ok to mix languages? The list goes on and on. Parents not only need to figure out answers to these questions, they also need to live their answers out on a daily basis.

Furthermore, parenting is not something that we do in isolation. Mums and dads may not arrive at the same answers. When one partner is deeply committed to bilingual parenting and the other is not, that can easily put a strain on the relationship. Many couples know that mundane questions like whose turn it is to do the dishes can easily escalate into a fight when everyone is tired and juggling too many responsibilities. Now imagine such daily problems amplified by debates over whose turn it is to read the bedtime story in the other language or whose fault it is that the bedtime story in the other language is always the same because there are only two books in that language in the local library.

The parents of New Zealand’s “First Baby” want to raise their daughter bilingually because they recognize that bilingualism is important in today’s world – just like Australian parents. They do not quite know how to do it and they will undoubtedly struggle turning their aspiration into a reality as their daughter grows up and starts to have her own ideas about bilingualism. Having to make language decisions part and parcel of all the mundane parenting and family decisions that we all make all the time will be a challenge – just as it is for Australian parents.

But that is where the similarity ends.

New Zealand parents do not have to face the challenges of raising their children bilingually alone – in contrast to Australian parents. We all know that it takes a village to raise a child. Parents need the support of the wider community. This holds even more so when it comes to bilingual parenting. Specifically, bilingual families need institutional support, particularly from schools, in order to thrive.
New Zealand’s te kōhanga reo or “language nests” are preschools that operate through the medium of Māori and have been highly successful in supporting bilingual proficiencies in Māori and English. Additionally, there are now plans to make bilingual education in Māori and English universally available in all public schools by 2025.

In Australia, our policy makers have so far ignored the aspirations of an ever-growing number of families for meaningful language education that fosters high levels of linguistic proficiency in English and another language. In fact, the overbearing role of English in academic achievement often means that schools actively conspire against the wishes of families. As a result, those best able to raise bilingual children in Australia are those who have the means to afford specialized private schools, extended overseas holidays or bilingual nannies.

When will our leaders end the disconnect between families’ linguistic aspirations and the education system? When will we see an all-of-society effort to help put the bilingual proficiencies needed to thrive in the 21st century within the reach of all?

Reference

Piller, I., & Gerber, L. (2018). Family language policy between the bilingual advantage and the monolingual mindset. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 1-14. doi:10.1080/13670050.2018.1503227 [if you do not have institutional access, you may download an open access version here. The number of OA downloads is limited, so, institutional users, make sure to leave this link for readers without institutional access ... An OA pre-publication version is available here].