Editorial: Languages in Early Childhood Education

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In the context of ever-changing global movement of peoples in and between countries, linguistic diversity, and diversity in modes of communication and expression have become increasingly vibrant and visible (D'warte & Slaughter, 2021). These changes have also been reflected in research scholarship into languages acquisition where monolingual-centric assumptions have been disrupted by heteroglossic perspectives that view the linguistic repertoire of any individual, including the very young child, as complex – shaped by the "linguistic, cognitive, social and emotional" characteristics of the individual (Seltzer & García, 2020, p. 2). In orienting this to the classroom, Cummins & Early (2011) argue that the relationship between language and identity cannot be untwined but that indeed, a critical precondition for learning involves recognising and engaging with the cultural and linguistic knowledges and learning experiences of students.

In Australia, where more than 21% of the population speak a language other than English at home (ABS, 2017), critical questions are being raised about the role of language and identity in nurturing children's holistic development in educational settings and in early childhood contexts. This is the area of focus for this special edition. The array of languages and cultures in early childhood centres is rich, encompassing children who are monolingual speakers of English, emerging bilingual/bidialectic and plurilingual speakers of English and of languages other than English, and children who are first language speakers of Aboriginal English. Languages other than Standard Australian English, however, are typically positioned as complementary to education practices rather than central. The acquisition and maintenance of minority languages, for example, has traditionally been seen as

the purview of parents, extended families, and religious, ethnic and Indigenous communities of practices (Eisenchlas & Schalley, 2020).

Within early childhood frameworks, however, the critical importance of children's communication skills is clearly prioritised, with the recognition that, "Children's wellbeing, identity, sense of agency and capacity to make friends is connected to the development of communication skills, and strongly linked to their capacity to express feelings and thoughts, and to be understood" (DET & VCAA, 2016, p. 22). This includes, as stated in the national Early Year Learning Framework (EYLF, DEEWR, 2009), "the use and acquisition of home languages and Standard Australian English" (p. 43). The Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework argues that "The acquisition and maintenance of first or home languages has a significant and continuing role in the construction of identity. This is supported when early childhood professionals respect children's cultures and languages" (DET & VCAA, 2016, p. 18).

State of the art research tells us that pedagogies that affirm and build on linguistic and cultural identities have a positive impact on learning and teaching (e.g., Cummins et al., 2015; Norton & De Costa, 2018); foster engagement in learning (e.g., Slaughter & Cross, 2021); build confidence and a sense of agency for learners (e.g., Busch, 2012; D'warte, 2021), and can improve student learning outcomes (García et al., 2017; Sierens & Van Avermaet, 2014). However, although early childhood frameworks in Australia recognise the central role of language and identity, limited research investigating how languages are positioned and supported by educators, and the impact of this work on children's learning and development outcomes, has been undertaken at the early childhood level. Moreover, this research has tended to focus on English language acquisition or teacher strategies in supporting English language development (e.g., Cabezas & Rouse, 2016; Dobinson & Buchori, 2016; Niklas et al., 2018). While there is no question that English language development is essential for school success, we argue for a broader research program which takes a heteroglossic stance towards linguistic and cultural diversity, positioning children's diverse linguistic and semiotic resources as assets to support and be expanded through learning and development. Such research also needs to look at the complex of variables that inhibit such a stance, including attitudes and ideologies, teacher professional learning, and pedagogy.

Cohrssen, Slaughter and Nicolas' paper in this special edition contributes to this broader investigation into the conditions and educator behaviours that inhibit or best support multilingualism within Australian Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings. The authors elaborate how the critical role of languages in early childhood learning and development is addressed within the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009), identifying central notions of *Belonging, Being* and *Becoming* and recognizing the significance of children's languages – including their home languages – in learning and the development of identity. Drawing on a bioecological theory of development, the paper relates key principles of the EYLF to environments where multilingualism can thrive.

The authors argue that the extent to which language learning can be leveraged in ECEC contexts is strongly influenced by three variables: language ideologies, teachers' beliefs and attitudes, and plurilingual pedagogies. Their argument raises important questions, not least because it invites educators to engage in constructive reflection about their own beliefs and opinions, as well as the stance of the social and education systems in which they operate. For example, the "monolingual mindset" (Clyne, 2005), which sees proficiency in English as the main route to academic success, still dominates the education policy discourse in Australia, shaping many classroom practices and often framing English as an Additional Language/Dialect (EAL/D) learners within a deficit perspective. Educators are invited to consider how such a stance might influence their own assumptions, especially those attitudes which are unconscious, and which therefore lead to comments and behaviours with often unintended consequences.

Plurilingual pedagogies can support multilingual children to draw broadly from their linguistic repertoires to facilitate learning. In order to facilitate this heteroglossic approach to learning, high quality support for teachers is identified as essential, and the authors' recommendations relating to professional learning for ECEC staff and pre-service teachers are timely, as is the call for ongoing research into the current practices of ECEC educators.

Just as critical as the role of educators in early childhood language and development is the role of parents and caregivers in helping children to navigate the development of their multilingual repertoires. Scull et al's paper in this special edition focuses on the role of mothers as first teachers of children, exploring how parents and carers interact with young children in home languages as the basis for developing English language skills in play and

book reading activities. The paper reports on part of an ARC linkage project with families at two Families as First Teachers (FaFT) playgroups in two remote Northern territory communities, with data consisting of transcripts of video-recorded mother-child book reading and play sessions and FAFT Family Liaison Officers' reflections.

Findings foreground the importance of children's linguistic and cultural resources as the foundation for early childhood educational experiences that engage with families' aspirations for developing children's multilingualism. The research, drawing on Aboriginal caregivers' communicative and linguistic practices, draws out key principles and pedagogical approaches for parents (and teachers) of young children in terms of the importance of culturally and linguistically appropriate early learning programs that take into account local context, culture, priorities and strengths of communities. The research identifies a range of strategies and features that foster young children's multilingualism and cultural pluralism through language and communicative interactions with their caregivers.

An interesting facet of this work was a focus on gestural communication. Children in these remote communities are encouraged to use non-verbal and verbal communication, reflecting the rich cultural and linguistic communicative repertoires available to them. The research also highlights the linguistic dexterity of the mothers who made choices about moving between languages to effectively communicate with their young children. The data shows how local languages and English were used interchangeably for different linguistic purposes to consolidate learning and support children's understanding, providing valuable insights into the linguistic practices of mothers as first teachers of multilingualism for children.

The critical importance of culturally and linguistically appropriate early learning programs that take into account the priorities and strengths of communities is also explored through Taylor-Leech and Tualaulelei's study of a bilingual Samoan-English community kindergarten (or *a'oga amata* in Samoan) catering to 3–4-year-olds from Samoan and other cultural backgrounds, located in southeast Queensland. The research focus was not only on the role of the *a'oga amata* in supporting heritage language and cultural maintenance, but also on the cultural values embedded in the *a'oga amata* and how educators' communicative practices enacted these values. A variety of data

collection methods over a seven-month period was augmented with educators and parents engaging in talking circles, or *talanoa*, a Pacific Island style of discussion. For researchers and educators, this is a powerful example of the value in respecting different ways of knowing and interacting.

Nurturing the children's connection with their cultural heritage and pride in their language was found to be a key positive of the program. This was further reflected in parental [re] connection with languages and cultures that for some had been lost. An interesting issue the authors discuss is how the strong emphasis on key Samoan cultural values, while regarded by all as a positive aspect of the program, did not necessarily lead to concurrent heritage language learning objectives. Although the non-Samoan background parents appreciated the embedded cultural values, Samoan language learning was not their focus, and this resulted in some reduced emphasis on the language aspects of the curriculum. There are implications here for how other bilingual preschools structure and communicate their learning objectives.

As a grassroots initiative with limited resources, the challenges of preparing educators in the pedagogical approaches suitable for immersion or bilingual instruction was also cited as a significant constraint. Here the authors argue that the EYLF can play a role here by providing more explicit guidelines on the practicalities of developing sustainable bilingual and immersion programs.

The final paper in this special edition moves the exploration of culturally and linguistically appropriate early learning programs to the Northern Canadian perspective. Stagg-Petersen et al's paper explores the revitalization of Indigenous languages, reporting on the Niichi project that supported young Anishnaabek's (Indigenous) children's learning of their language and culture to grow a strong sense of Indigenous identity. Two authors of the paper and implementors of the project, Yvette and Jacinta, teach and live within this First Nation community.

The project involved the teachers finding meaningful ways for the children to hear and use language while engaging in cultural experiences on the land. The notion of intergenerational learning was central to the project, along with the key principles of considering the whole child in their educational journey, and the role of a whole community in raising a child.

'Niichi' means 'friend' in the Anishnaabemowin language and in the project, Niichi was a rabbit puppet who accompanied

children to various places in the community as part of the kindergarten program. Niichi, along with the children, learned Anishnaabemowin and Anishnaabe culture. Video footage was captured by Jacinta of the Niichi project activities. Hare's (2015) Indigenous pedagogies model was employed to analyse these videoclips of learning interactions to gain an understanding of how practices support children's language and cultural learning, and identity formation. A rich data set was generated for analysis from this methodological approach; an approach which could be used in research with First Nation and EAL/D students from varying contexts. The authors argue that critical intergenerational connections were created through the acknowledgement of Anishnaabemowin and Anishnaabek culture, and through the space provided for children to use both languages: they believe that the program success can be replicated in other contexts through the same mechanisms.

Transition into early childhood education is a critical time for children's social, emotional, cognitive and linguistic learning and development (DEEWR, 2019) but one where children's linguistic and cultural resources are vulnerable to elision in English-medium early childhood settings. The linguistic resources of Australian children are diverse and rich, closely linked to a sense of belonging and family. While *TESOL in Context* publications do not typically look at early childhood education, providing space for this special edition has allowed us to speak to different but important aspects of the role of cultural and linguistic knowledges in the learning experiences of children, as well as the work that needs to be done by researchers, educators and advocates to offer the best opportunities for a heteroglossic stance towards linguistic and cultural diversity to become more widely embedded in Australian early childhood settings.

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