

# ***Knowing who you are: Heritage language, identity and safe space in a bilingual kindergarten***

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*Abstract: Evidence shows that when young children's diverse language heritages are valued and supported, there are benefits for their linguistic and conceptual development, their sense of identity and their learning. However, there are few early learning settings in Australia which nurture young children's bilingual repertoires. And, while it is well established that early childhood is a critical period for first and second language acquisition, there is a lack of empirical research available on children's bilingual development in institutional early childhood education and care. Against this backdrop, our article reports on a study of a bilingual Samoan community kindergarten (a'oga amata) in southeast Queensland. In this paper, we focus on how the a'oga amata supported the maintenance of the children's heritage language and culture. We explore language use in the a'oga amata, the cultural values underpinning the educators' practices, and the positive responses of the children and parents in the study. We also examine the constraints on the community leaders and educators' efforts to create an authentic bilingual experience in this English-dominant environment. Finally, we revisit the notion of safe spaces for young bilingual learners (Conteh & Brock, 2011) and rearticulate the need for clear language policies that support heritage language education.*

**Keywords:** *Australia, Pacific Islanders, Samoan, a'oga amata, kindergarten, immersion, heritage language, safe space*

## **Introduction**

The Early Years Learning Framework for Australian early childhood educators acknowledges that children's use of their home languages underpins their sense of identity and conceptual

development (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). It states that children have “the right to be continuing users of their home language as well as to develop competency in Standard Australian English” (p. 41). A wealth of evidence shows that acknowledging children’s diverse linguistic repertoires is important not only for language development, but also for building strong social and cultural identities, and successful learning in school (Baker 2006; Cummins 2000; García & Wei, 2014). Yet in English-dominant Australia, there are few early learning programs which nurture young children’s bilingual development. And, while it is well established that early childhood is a critical period for first and second language acquisition, there is a lack of empirical research available on children’s bilingual development in institutional early childhood education and care (Benz, 2015, 2017). Against this backdrop, this article reports on a study of an *a’oga amata*, a bilingual Samoan-English community kindergarten in south-east Queensland.

In this paper, we focus on the aspects of our study that were guided by the research question “how does the *a’oga amata* support heritage language and culture?”. The paper begins with a survey of literature concerning the value of bilingual language programmes for children’s early years development. Next, it describes the ethnographic methods that were used to gather data in the study. The paper then explores language use in the *a’oga amata*, the cultural values underpinning the educators’ practices and the positive responses of the children and parents in the study. The final part of the paper examines the affordances and constraints on the efforts to create an authentic bilingual experience in this linguistically diverse yet English-dominant environment. We argue for the creation of safe spaces for young bilingual learners (Conteh & Brock, 2011) and rearticulate the need for clear language policies that support heritage language education.

In multicultural contexts such as Australia, where this study was conducted, children who speak heritage languages are at various stages of bilingualism. Following Conteh and Brock (2011), we define bilingual learners as children who “live in two languages, who have access to, or need to use, two or more languages at home and at school” (p. 348). They do not necessarily have fluency, competency, or literacy in these languages. We adopt a broad definition of heritage languages as languages

spoken by immigrants and their children, and we follow Montrul's (2015) definition of heritage language speakers as the children of immigrants born in the host country or immigrant children who arrived in the host country at some time in their childhood. The steady decline of heritage language use, the lack of intergenerational language transmission and the shift to English among Pacific Islanders in Australia and New Zealand has long been apparent (McCaffery & McFall-McCaffery, 2010). The low self-esteem and identity insecurity that often follows the loss of heritage languages has also been well documented (Samu, et al., 2019). Therefore, our discussion of the literature that informed our study focuses on the value of bilingual language programmes for children's early years development.

### **Heritage language and culture in early years education**

Early years education has immense value for children's development. In the prior-to-school years, children experience rapid social, emotional, cognitive and personal development, and the positive contribution early years education and care (ECEC) can make to this development is widely recognised (Cannon et al., 2018; European Commission, 2011; McLeod et al., 2018; OECD, 2017). ECEC is a key strategy for equalising opportunity and overcoming early disadvantage (Peleman et al., 2020) with evidence of the positive effects of quality ECEC lasting well into adolescence and adulthood (McLeod et al., 2018; van Huizen & Plantenga, 2018). However, the benefits of bilingual programmes in early years education are less widely accepted. Reviewing the effects and consequences of bilingual education for young children in American contexts, the cognitive neuroscientist Ellen Bialystok (2018) concluded, "there is no credible evidence that bilingual education adds or creates a burden for children, yet it is incontrovertible that it provides the advantage of learning another language and possibly the cognitive benefits of bilingualism" (p. 676). These advantages are well known in the field of education (Cummins, 2000; Nieto, 2009), but they have not led to bilingual programmes in ECEC becoming more widely implemented.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations General Assembly (1989) acknowledges that children's heritage languages and cultures are essential to their education. Article 29 states that children's education should emphasise, among other points:

The development of respect for the child's parents, *his or her own cultural identity, language and values*, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own. (Article 29, emphasis added)

Article 29 affirms that respect for a child's heritage culture, language and values should be embedded in their education wherever that education may occur. In some places, ECEC has promoted this right through programmes called 'language nests', which immerse children in heritage language and culture and actively involve heritage families, carers and communities in the language nests' daily activities and operation (Brown & Faster, 2019; Chambers, 2015; Glasgow, 2019; McIvor & Parker, 2016; Okura, 2017). However, language nests face many challenges operating in contexts where the policy environment, curriculum, resources and educators are tailored for the official or dominant language of that context (Brown & Faster, 2019; Tualaualelei & Taylor-Leech, 2021), and consequently these types of programmes are relatively rare across the ECEC landscape. For example, in Aotearoa New Zealand where language nests originated, statistics for 2019 showed that only 444 of 4,596 ECEC services, or 9.7%, were Indigenous language nests (Ministry of Education, 2021), and the scarcity of such programmes in Australia means that equivalent figures are not available. The rarity of these programmes raises questions about how children who have heritage languages and cultures and who attend mainstream ECEC can have these recognised or embedded in their prior-to-school educational experiences.

Research from the fields of heritage language and culture is unequivocal about the benefits of such programmes for children's wellbeing and identities. ECEC programmes which affirm children's heritage languages and cultures have been shown to help smooth the transition children make from their homes to ECEC contexts because the linguistic environment is an extension of their familial experiences (Glasgow, 2019; Tagoilelagi, 2017). As children's personal and social identities evolve, they also gain a stronger sense of self in relation to others which contributes to their self-esteem and overall wellbeing (Cooper, 2014; Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003; Rogoff, 2014; Vygotsky, 1978). Furthermore, while the valorisation of heritage languages and cultures benefits all children in multicultural contexts by promoting intercultural

knowledge and respect, heritage language programmes are especially valuable for Indigenous children, whose communities face historical and ongoing threats to the legitimacy and importance of their languages and ways of living (del Carpio, 2020; McIvor & Anisman, 2018; Tangaere, 2006). It is therefore important to acknowledge the broader social benefits of heritage language programmes which include language revitalisation and community empowerment (Berardi-Wiltshire et al., 2019; Hickey & de Mejía, 2014; Reyhner, 2010). More research is needed into the variety of contexts in which these programmes are run if we are to better understand the nuances of how heritage language programmes promote these benefits.

In most English-speaking countries, ECEC is largely delivered in English rather than bilingually, in tandem with children's heritage languages or dialects. The most successful heritage language programmes in ECEC appear to be full immersion language programmes (Glasgow, 2019; Hickey & de Mejía, 2014; Hickey et al., 2014; Luning & Yamauchi, 2010) but these depend heavily on what is possible within a given policy and educational system environment (Brown & FASTER, 2019; Tualaulelei & Taylor-Leech, 2021). There are examples of successful programmes offered in the United States and Canada (see McIvor & McCarty, 2017). In the Australian context, respect for cultural diversity is articulated in guiding educational documents such as the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration (Education Council, 2019) and the Early Years Learning Framework (Department of Education, 2009), but few ECEC services offer bilingual or full immersion language programmes. The few initiatives that are offered are vulnerable to lack of systemic support or funding (Slaughter & Lo Bianco, 2017) so they are often short-lived, a situation that has resulted in a paucity of research about the potential of language nests and similar programmes for promoting respect for children's heritage languages and cultures in ECEC.

In view of the many benefits of heritage language programmes for children's development and the imperative that respect for heritage language and culture should be embedded in early years education, there is cause for concern that such programmes are so rare in the Australian context. To contribute to knowledge in this area, our study set out to investigate how bilingual programmes can support heritage language and culture. Our research site was a bilingual kindergarten language nest, known as an *a'oga amata* in Samoan.

### Project background

The kindergarten was established in an early learning centre servicing an area where the language most spoken at home in addition to English, was Samoan (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Led by a large community church in co-operation with a non-profit ECEC provider, which we will call Starpath Early Learning, the *a'oga amata* was embedded in the church's wider work to serve the Pacific Islander Community. The *a'oga amata* was situated in an area where a high number of children are classified as 'developmentally vulnerable'<sup>1</sup> according to the Australian Early Development Census (Commonwealth of Australia, 2015). Acting in response to a cross-sector plan to reduce child vulnerability by encouraging parents to enrol their children in ECEC, and to concerns in the church congregation that Samoan children were not settling or developing a sense of belonging in school, the church community leaders negotiated with Starpath to open a bilingual Samoan-English program. A bilingual programme rather than a full Samoan immersion programme was established because the class was located within an already established mainstream early childhood centre. A bilingual programme was also preferred because the centre already ran kindergarten programmes in English, but they were neither staffed nor resourced to run programmes in other languages. For these reasons, Starpath opened the *a'oga amata* to children of backgrounds other than Samoan. This decision had repercussions for language learning and use, which we will discuss later.

### Methods and data analysis

The participants in this study were Samoan children aged 3.5 to 4 years old (n=18) who were enrolled at the *a'oga amata* and their parents/caregivers (n=10). The families had come to Australia via different migration routes; some via the Cook Islands and others via New Zealand. Although our study focused on the Samoan parents and children in the *a'oga amata*, we could not ignore its impacts on the non-Samoan children in the programme, who came from Malaysian and Indigenous Australian backgrounds.

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<sup>(1)</sup> 'Developmentally vulnerable' is defined in the Australian Early Development Census as a domain score in the lowest 10% of scores in at least one of five categories: physical health, behaviour, emotions, language and communication (Australian Government, 2018).

Some children attended Starpath in regular classes and moved to the *a'oga amata* as soon as it opened but for most children and families, the *a'oga amata* was their first experience of formal ECEC. Also participating were two Samoan educators, both with extensive prior experience of teaching in *a'oga amata* overseas, and the two church community leaders who were instrumental in setting up this particular *a'oga amata*. Pseudonyms are used for all participants. The parents in this study were not all fluent speakers of their heritage languages. Although there is a large Samoan community in Australia – according to the 2011 census 36,575 people reported speaking Samoan at home (Ndhlovu & Willoughby, 2017) – it is important to appreciate that not all heritage language speakers learn to speak their heritage language with fluency (e.g., Cook, 2002; Ndhlovu & Willoughby, 2017).

The research team followed the participating children for seven months. We used observations, fieldnotes, photography and video recordings to gather qualitative data. In addition, to respect Pacific Islander ways of knowing, we invited the children's parents and educators to participate in *talanoa* or talking circles, a Pacific Island style of discussion (Vaiotele, 2006). The benefit of the *talanoa*, which included plenty of switching and mixing between Samoan and English, was that they pursued topics that the participants raised or found important in contrast to formal interviews which usually follow the interests of researchers. In total, the team conducted 17 observations between 1 and 3 hours long, produced 50 pages of fieldnotes, took 150 still photographs, approximately 110 video clips and held five 45-minute *talanoa*. The data were thematically analysed using the qualitative data analysis application, NVivo 12. Findings were presented to research partners in a final report and knowledge-sharing session (see Taylor-Leech et al., 2019).

## Findings

In this part of the article, we turn our attention to observations and findings from our thematic analysis of the data. We commence with a discussion of the ways in which Samoan was used with the children and how they responded. We then go on to discuss the cultural values underpinning the *a'oga amata* and give examples of how the educators enacted these values.

### *Heritage language use*

The lead educator systematically used formulaic language such as greetings and goodbyes with the children and made full use of teaching opportunities such as counting and alphabet games

when the children came together at ‘mat time’ (group time). Although she had no formal training in language teaching, she took full advantage of kindergarten routines and transitions to introduce Samoan at key points in the day, such as when children were lining up to go inside from outdoor play. This was a highly effective teaching strategy because it took place through meaningful interaction (King & Mackay, 2007). Extract 1 below typifies how the educators provided comprehensible input in meaningful contexts:

Extract 1.

Before morning tea, Penina [the lead educator] sang, “*O ai lou igoa? o ai lou igoa?*” (What’s your name? What’s your name?) and one by one, after the children responded with their names, they went to wash their hands. Penina said encouragingly to each child, “*Tama [teine] lelei, fa’alogo ma usita’i*” (Good boy/girl, listen and obey). Penina kept up a steady stream of talk in Samoan. When the children returned from watching their hands, for example, she asked “*Lani, ua fufulu ou lima? Teine lelei, Lani*” (Lani, have you washed your hands? Good girl, Lani). (Fieldnote 16/10/18).

The children also heard other adults using Samoan from parents at pick-up and drop-off times, and from visitors to the *a’oga amata* such as the community leaders and other members of the Pacific Islander community.

### *Children’s responses*

In free play, however, the children almost exclusively used English, as seen in extract 2 below. This could be expected when not all the children in the *a’oga amata* were Samoan, and all spoke English as a shared language:

Extract 2.

Chan (Chinese-Malaysian background), Aso and Amosa (both Samoan background) are sitting on the floor nearby and playing with marbles and rolling them around in the lid of a biscuit tin. Each boy has a marble, and they are watching to see whose marble wins. They are very absorbed in their game, keeping up a descriptive narrative and making sure each player follows the rules. I listen hard to hear whether they are using any Samoan, but they are only using English. (Fieldnote 5/12/18).

As the children settled into the daily routines of the *a’oga amata* and became more confident, their ability to comprehend



and use Samoan increased. Extract 3 below shows how the children had become familiar with the routine of saying Grace:

Extract 3.

“*O lea le mea fai ae le'i a'ai?*” (What do we do before we eat?) Penina asked the children. The children launched immediately into the children’s grace: “*Fa'afetai i le Atua, foa'i mai mea'ai e tausii ai matou le fanau. Amene.*” (Thank you, Lord, for giving us food to take care of us. Amen). (Fieldnote 16/10/18).

The children became increasingly engaged in mat time, which was always focused on cultural activities. The lead educator’s use of Samoan at mat time gradually extended from basic greetings, commands and directives to more exciting cultural activities and games, as two extracts below from our fieldnotes show:

Extract 4.

Penina allowed children to lead the reading of the alphabet and they got louder and rowdier as they progressed. “*Oka!*” (Goodness!) Penina exclaimed at Jenny who was running round and round the classroom, “*Fai fa'alelei, lae pu'e le ata*” (Do it properly, they’re taking our picture). Penina spoke in Samoan and did not translate. Amosa sat at the back corner of the mat, tumbling around. While counting the numbers, Penina called out “Amosa!” to get his attention. Brandon and Alofa began playing with the bongo drums during the ‘Tasi tasi tasi’ song. Amosa sat down the whole time and covered his ears. When Jenny ran around the classroom for the umpteenth time, Penina called out, “*Aua le tamo'e!*” (Don’t run). (Fieldnote 16/10/18)

By a few weeks later, as extract 5 shows, the children were more accustomed to the mat time routine and the educator’s use of Samoan. The drumming of the *sāsa* (a seated rhythmic dance) aroused their anticipation and willingness to engage in the cultural activity:

Extract 5.

The children got very excited about doing a *sāsa*. While Penina played the *sāsa* drumming on her mobile phone, the children watched her point to the words displayed on a poster and listened to the tune with obvious enjoyment. They slapped their hands on their laps in time to the rhythm and, at the end of the song, called out “Hei, hei, ho!” The children then asked for the song again and it was repeated, along with a series of other Samoan songs. (Fieldnote 6/11/18).

Over time, the children's use of Samoan moved from passively hearing the language in routines and at key transition points and using it orally in educator-led group activities using formulaic language to using more creative language in free play; for example, by making games out of teaching each other the Samoan alphabet, colours and numbers that they had learned during mat time. Their language growth was not always only directly observable in the *a'oga amata* but was also reported to us by parents observing their children's language use at home. One parent told us:

Extract 6.

They're more confident to bring it out so they'll come back home they'll sing the song and then they'll do the alphabet and then they'll try and teach their cousins, so they have cousins around their age that um stays with us um so they're half Samoan and half Rarotongan and they're interested as well, all because they see that A and K [her two children] are like very happy you know singing the songs and they try and teach everyone else... (Talanoa 8/2/19)

### *Parents' responses*

Conversations in the parents' talanoa about heritage language use invariably led to reflections on their own linguistic upbringing. While they expressed pride in their children's language development, their reflections were often tinged with sadness at the loss of their heritage languages. Parent A was pleased with his child's emergent bilingualism, but acknowledged with a note of regret that he had been brought up only speaking English, "I'm so glad that I put him in it, because he can understand both English and Samoan so for me that's a huge thing, because I straight up just spoke English and I didn't know any better." (Talanoa 8/2/19).

Seeing what their children were learning clearly prompted parents to rethink their own linguistic identities. Parent B told us how as a child, she had spoken fluent Samoan, "because I was surrounded by [Samoan] all the time...my dad couldn't speak English...my grandma couldn't speak English." When she moved to New Zealand, "I lost it easy, I lost it straight away, 'cos when my grandma passed, there was no one else." (Talanoa 20/10/18). Parent C noted her change in attitude to her heritage language as her child brought Samoan home. As a child, she had always felt embarrassed when her mother spoke to her in Samoan, "I was like, oh no speak English mum, I've got my friends here." That

shame had turned to pride as her daughter encouraged her to embrace her culture, “She’s teaching us...and that’s something, um, that we encourage her to do, you know, encourage her to embrace her culture, embrace, um, her language.” Her pride too was tinged with regret at the loss of her heritage language, “I’m 31 years old and she’s only four and she knows more Samoan than me.” (Talanoa 20/10/18). These comments resonate with research in New Zealand documenting the emotional toll of language shift and loss on identities among Pacific Islander immigrants (Samu et al, 2019).

It seems clear then that the *a’oga amata* was prompting the parents to reflect on their own linguistic journeys and providing an incentive to relearn the languages they had lost. The parents’ comments revealed that the *a’oga amata* was playing a role, however small, in changing family language practices, as the following extracts from the talanoa show: Parent D said, “At home, we speak English to our children but with our son attending the *a’oga amata*, we’re speaking Samoan more at home now, like my husband’s trying to speak more Samoan, even though I think he’s not pronouncing it right.” Parent E remarked, “Well I was talking to her in Samoan at home before, but now it’s more now, I try, I try really hard to um to speak to her in Samoan.” Parent F said about her son, “He’s come out of his shell now, and he’s teaching us a lot. We just have a giggle because we think he’s not learning anything and then just out of the blue, he just, like, says it.” Some parents wanted to learn more about their own languages so they could better support their children’s learning. As Parent G remarked, “If we’re passionate about our children learning their culture, we have to follow through with it and support them.” (Talanoa, 20/10/18). Evidently, language and cultural identity were interlinked for these parents.

The educators’ practice was informed by the Early Years Learning Framework (2009), which describes cultural competence as “going beyond awareness of cultural differences and developing the ability to understand, communicate with and effectively interact with people across cultures” (p. 16). Promoting traditional Samoan and Pacific Islander values of service, communality and respect aligned well with the framework and, from an intercultural perspective, all the children benefitted from the ethos in the *a’oga amata*. The Samoan children participating in our study experienced strong positive support for their identity and we observed that the

non-participating children, who were not Samoan, learned what it means to be welcomed, unconditionally accepted, and immersed in another language and culture.

### *Cultural values*

In our preliminary meetings with the community leaders, they stated their desire for the *a'oga amata* to foster a strong sense of Samoan identity, develop children's competence in their heritage language and assist the children's successful transition to school. Knowing Samoan was, in one leader's words, "that base level for all other learning to grow from...I think that's really key in knowing your identity and knowing who you are" (Talanoa, 27/11/18). Referring to Samoan parents' concerns that their children lacked a sense of belonging in the Australian school system, she said,

It's very disempowering when you leave your identity at the door and you have to be, who someone else says you have to be, very destructive. So, the hope for this, is we teach our young people to know who they are to value themselves to value their language (Talanoa, 27/11/18).

The lead educator endorsed this view, saying,

I know most families nowadays, they seem to lose, or they don't teach the kids, our language, so I believe this is like a beginning for these kids to really learn who they are and where they're from (Talanoa, 27/11/18).

In their daily activities and communication with the children, the educators stressed four core Samoan cultural values, *usitai*, *faaaloalo*, *alofa* and *tautua* (obedience, respect, love, and service) (Va'a, 2009). These values are clearly not exclusively Samoan, and they were easy for the non-participating parents of other cultural backgrounds in the *a'oga amata* to relate to. However, in the talanoa it came through strongly that the Samoan parents were particularly pleased these values were being modelled. Parent H spoke about "the caring nature of Samoans...being really genuine and wanting to help...they [Samoan people] love serving and some of those things I think will help them [the children in the study] as they transition into school as well" (Talanoa 20/10/18). The idea that respect for self and others would stand the children in good stead at school came up repeatedly; for example, Parent I said, "Learning respect and, you know, honouring your parents,

things like that, will help them to respect other children in the school.” Parent J emphatically agreed, “I feel like the respect, what they learn within the *a’oga amata*...these are transferable things that they can implement or take on while transitioning into Prep... you know, just in the culture respect is huge.” (Talanoa 20/10/18). For us, these comments show that the *a’oga amata* was clearly meeting the Samoan parents’ aspirations for their children to acquire cultural values that were important to them.

The educators went to great effort to create a Samoan cultural environment. The entrance to the kindergarten room was decorated with cultural motifs and a welcome sign made of bark cloth. The kindergarten room was filled with Samoan fabrics and other artifacts. Samoan culture was evident in the pictures of family and ways of life on display around the room, and both Samoan and English were also always visible in bilingual wall displays. Yet, the culture was most clearly expressed in the interactions and relationships that the lead educator built with the children in the *a’oga amata*. The interaction in the room was so like a Pacific-Islander extended family that Pacific Islander children from other kindergarten rooms would often find ways to slip into her room or were brought to her for comfort when they were upset.

## **Discussion**

Drawing up a balance sheet, we start with the benefits of the bilingual kindergarten programme. The *a’oga amata* promoted values and aspects of Samoan culture and language that were important to the children, the families and their communities. By providing curriculum-aligned learning experiences and activities that were culturally responsive, the *a’oga amata* nurtured the children’s sense of belonging and provided continuity between the home and care/educational environment. In addition, the Samoan parents’ attitudes to their heritage language became much more positive as their children brought it home.

However, there were significant constraints that undermined the potential of the *a’oga amata* to provide an immersive language experience. The limited range of Samoan language resources worked to minoritise both the educators and the language. The Samoan language storybooks which were available were kept aside for reading aloud to the children and the books available for the children to browse were exclusively in English. The fact that there were only two educators in a single dedicated room meant that

they were a visible minority in an otherwise, English monolingual centre. Clearly, while Starpath catered for cultural diversity, it did not cater for linguistic diversity. Moreover, the community leaders and educators were not blind to the fact that there would be no support for Samoan (or any other heritage languages) once the children moved on; and they recognised that without strong, consistent support from home, the children would quickly lose what they had learned when they transitioned into the English-speaking school environment (Fillmore, 1991).

The notion of ‘safe spaces’ describes places where bilingual learners can enact their identities, feel a sense of belonging, and successfully learn (Conteh & Brock, 2011, p. 349). We distinguish the idea from ‘cultural safety’, which we discuss in detail in Tualaualelei & Taylor-Leech (2021). Jones Diaz et al., (2018) use the term ‘meaningful spaces’ to describe sites where “participants feel that they can express themselves through their own linguistic and cultural practices, knowing that those around them share common language, culture, and life experiences” (p. 29). As Brooker’s (2011) work also shows, safe spaces for bilingual learners are places where all their learning experiences in the home, community, and school are recognised and valued, and children and families are “taken seriously” (p. 137). By this Brooker meant “listening to children and following their interests, respecting cultural diversity and developing partnerships with parents” (p. 138). Using these analogies, we conclude that in many ways the *a’oga amata* successfully constructed a safe space for the Samoan and other children. They felt secure in the learning environment, and experienced diversity by forming friendships with children from other cultural backgrounds, they developed social skills and ability to co-operate and learned to respond to diversity with respect.

However, from a language policy perspective, the positioning of the *a’oga amata* in a monolingual childcare centre as an exception, in which educators were ‘allowed’ to use Samoan and enact their culture, indicates an attitude of tolerance rather than the inclusion and promotion of bilingualism. The asymmetries between English and Samoan meant that the children’s exposure to Samoan was ultimately limited. As a postscript, not long after our study ended, the *a’oga amata* left Starpath’s premises and relocated to the church community centre.

### Concluding remarks

Our study highlights the importance of policies that support communities' desires for heritage language education (see also Seals, 2017). To date, there has been no comprehensive strategic national language policy developed in Australia where heritage languages can flourish (see also Samu et al., 2019). In a social context where English holds greater prestige than minoritised languages, initiatives like the *a'oga amata* struggle to achieve their aspirations.

As Peleman et al. (2020) argue, if ECEC is to be a genuine means of remediating inequality, it is essential to provide a high-quality environment which provides rich language input and stimulates children to express themselves, explore their full linguistic repertoires and come to know who they are. The Early Years Learning Framework does not go beyond rhetoric to provide specific guidelines and training requirements for how to actively support home languages, value children's linguistic heritages and foster bilingualism (Benz, 2017). Clear language policy guidelines for early childhood education at national, local and institutional level could create permissive space (Brown & Fester, 2019) to develop sustainable bilingual and immersion learning programs and provide appropriate employment and training opportunities that could create conditions in which young bilingual learners, their families, and educators themselves can thrive.

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