

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

Kerry Taylor-Leech, Griffith University.
k.taylor-leech@griffith.edu.au

○ Eseta Tualaulelei, University of Southern
Queensland. eseta.tualaulelei@usq.edu.au





Introduction



- Early Years Learning Framework: Children have “the right to be continuing users of their home language as well as to develop competency in Standard Australian English” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 41)
 - Diverse language heritages benefit children’s social, linguistic and conceptual development (Baker 2006; García & Wei, 2014)
 - In English-dominant Australia, there are few early learning programs which nurture young children’s bilingual development.
- 
- 

Amataga lelei a'oga amata (A good start to learning)

- 7-month study of lived experience of Samoan children, families and educators involved in an a'oga amata (a bilingual, Samoan-English kindergarten).
- 'Funds of knowledge' approach validating perspectives of the families and community and recognising the children as owners and creators of valuable knowledge.
- Methods reflected Pasifika ways of knowing – *Talanoa* (talking circles), observations, photos and video recordings.



We explored -

How the a'oga amata supported heritage language and culture



Children as bilingual learners and heritage language speakers

- **Bilingual learners:** Children who “live in two languages, who have access to, or need to use, two or more languages at home and at school” (Conteh & Brock, 2011, p. 348). They do not necessarily have fluency, competency, or literacy in these languages.
- **Heritage language speakers:** The children of immigrants born in the host country or immigrant children who arrived in the host country at some time in their childhood (Montrul, 2012).

Heritage language use in the a'oga amata

Language on display

Language on display throughout the classroom



Social communication

Used for social communication, emotional support, managing transitions, scaffolding and socialisation



Authentic language

Authentic, natural language in meaningful contexts



Language use in play

In free play, the children almost exclusively used English,

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...I listen hard to hear whether they are using any Samoan, but they are only using English. (Fieldnote 5/12/18)

except when they were imitating the teacher.



“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 tausi ai matou le fanau. Amene.” (Thank you, Lord, for giving us food to take care of us. Amen). (Fieldnote 16/10/18).

Increased engagement with heritage language

October Penina [the educator] 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). Amosa sat at the back corner of the mat, tumbling around. . . Brandon and Alofa began playing with the bongo drums . . . When Jenny ran around the classroom for the umpteenth time, Penina called out, “Aua le tamo’e!” (Don’t run). (Fieldnote 16/10/18)



November

The children got very excited about doing a sāsā [seated rhythmic dance]. While Penina played the sāsā on her phone, the children watched and listened. 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).



Heritage language use at home

Samoan was being revived in the home and, in some cases, children were teaching their parents

The children are 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 . . . and they try and teach everyone else...(Talanoa 8/2/19)

As a child, one parent had always felt embarrassed when her mother spoke to her in Samoan, 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).

Cultural values

Usitai, faaaloalo, alofa and tautua (obedience, respect, love and service) continually emphasised in communication with the children and came through strongly in the talanoa

Parents happy that traditional Samoan values were being modelled by the educators and felt these values would help their children make the transition to school

"I feel like the respect, what they learn within the a'oga amata, you know...these are transferable things that they can implement or take on while transitioning into Prep"

Benefits

- Promoted values and aspects of Samoan culture and language that matter to children, families and their communities.
- Provided curriculum-aligned learning experiences and culturally responsive activities and nurtured children's sense of belonging.
- Provided continuity between the home and care/educational environment.
- Enhanced family attitudes towards their heritage languages and cultures.


Constraints

- Limited range of Samoan language resources.
- Staff capacity and qualifications.
- No support for Samoan after the children transition to primary school.



Safe spaces



○ Spaces where participants feel that they can express themselves through their linguistic and cultural practices, knowing that those around them share common language, culture and life experiences (Jones Diaz, Morgan & Chodkiewicz, 2018). 

Sites where children and their families are at the centre. Learners feel a sense of belonging and positive home-school links continue into primary school (Conteh & Brock, 2011).

○ Places where all learning experiences in the home, community and school are valued (Brooker, 2006). 

Conclusion

- Asymmetries between English and the heritage language – in teaching practices, resources and student proficiencies – resulted in the predominance of English.
- Need to understand more about family language practices and address how heritage language revival can be supported in home and school in the Australian language environment.



References

- Baker, C. (2006). *Foundations of bilingual education and bilingualism* (4th ed.). Multilingual Matters.
- Brooker, L. (2011). Taking children seriously? An alternative agenda for research. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 9(2), 137-149. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718x10387897>
- Conteh, J., & Brock, A. (2011). Safe spaces? Sites of bilingualism for young learners in home, school and community. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 14(3), 347-360. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2010.486850>
- Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (2009). *Belonging, being & becoming. The early years learning framework for Australia*. <https://www.dese.gov.au/nationalquality-framework-early-childhood-education-and-care/resources/belonging-being-becoming-early-years-learningframework-Australia>
- García, O., & Wei, L. (2014). *Translanguaging: Language, bilingualism and education*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jones Diaz, C., Morgan, L., & Chodkiewicz, A. (2018). Developing early literacies in informal settings: The importance of cultural representation in an Aboriginal playgroup. *The International Journal of Early Childhood Education*, 25(1-2), 29-42. <https://doi.org/10.18848/2327-7939/cgp/v25i01/29-43>
- Montrul, S. (2015). *The acquisition of heritage languages*. Cambridge University Press.