

## **A Case Study of Bilingual and Monolingual Educators in Two Australian Early Childhood Settings**

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### **Abstract**

One quarter of the Australian population is born overseas and one in five Australians speak a language other than English (ABS, 2016). This has led to an increase in the number of bilingual children enrolled in early childhood settings. Despite this changing landscape there is a lack of support for bilingual children enrolled in early childhood settings as many children do not receive any assistance to maintain their home language. This study examined the understanding and perceptions of two monolingual and two bilingual early childhood educators in NSW on how to best support bilingual children. Four early childhood educators (two monolingual and two bilingual) from two different Early Childhood Centres in Australia were interviewed and asked about their knowledge and beliefs regarding bilingualism. Results showed bilingual educators to be more positive and knowledgeable about bilingualism. All educators acknowledged challenges of not being able to communicate with children and their families as they did not speak any English. Participants in this study appeared to have limited knowledge of the nature of bilingualism and had varying beliefs around how to best support bilingual children. The results showed an inherent lack of differentiation with respect to educators' approach to pedagogy when teaching bilingual children. Implications for professional development and practice are discussed.

**Key words** : bilingualism, early childhood education, early years, educator beliefs

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## **Introduction**

Australia's long history of migration has led it to become among the most culturally and linguistically diverse societies in the world (ABS, 2016; Jones Diaz, & Harvey, 2007). The high level of immigration in Australia has led to a marked growth in the number of bilingual children in early childhood settings, with one third of all children in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services speaking a first language other than English (ABS, 2016; AEDC, 2015; Cazebas & Rouse, 2014). The increasing number of bilingual children attending Australian early childhood services highlights the need for greater awareness around how to best support the unique needs of culturally and linguistically diverse children (Espinosa, 2015; Hu, Torr & Whiteman, 2014). The purpose of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of monolingual and bilingual educators' perceptions of bilingual children. In particular, the study aimed to examine whether differences existed in educators' understandings of bilingualism and their approaches to supporting bilingual children in ECEC settings.

### **The developmental benefits of bilingualism**

A significant body of research has established that children are capable of acquiring multiple languages in the early years of life and are able to learn a new language without compromising the first (Byers-Heinlein, 2013; Conboy, 2013; Espinosa, 2015). There is a general agreement among researchers that a child is considered to be bilingual if they experience between 10-25% exposure to each language on a regular basis (Byers-Heinlein, 2013). It can simultaneous, where children obtain two languages at the same time, or sequential, where a second language is acquired once their first language is partly mastered (Cazebas & Rouse, 2014; Espinosa, 2015). Being raised in a bilingual family does not necessarily lead to bilingual proficiency (Jones Diaz, & Harvey, 2007). Children's acquisition of language is dependent on their social environments, exposure to the language and the frequency of language input (Genesee, 2015). In Australia, children often experience subtractive bilingualism, which usually occurs when the second language (English) is learnt and the home/first language is diminished due to the dominant nature of

English within society. (Ball, 2012; Cazebas & Rouse, 2014; Jones Diaz, & Harvey, 2007; Wong Fillmore, 1991).

Research conducted with bilingual children emphasises the developmental benefits associated with dual language acquisition. Bilingualism is associated with advancements in abstract reasoning, phonological awareness, numeracy and reading ability (Han & Thomas, 2010; Sandhofer & Uchikoshi, 2013). Children's home language maintenance also promotes a strong sense of identity, provides a foundation for second language learning and enhances executive functioning (Adescope, Lavin, Thompson, & Ungerleider, 2010; Shin, 2010).

Despite the benefits of bilingualism, many Australian children do not receive the necessary support to foster their home language. A survey of 49 Australian early childhood educators revealed that they provided limited or sporadic support for a child's home language, and tended to focus instead on their ability to communicate in English (Jones Diaz, & Robinson, 2000).

Data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) revealed that although most children maintained their home language throughout the early years, children attending centre-based services were more likely to experience language loss compared with family-based settings (Verdon, McLeod, & Winsler, 2014). This difference was most likely a result of the wider use of the home language in family-based care, whereas centre-based services are predominantly English speaking. Many early childhood settings employ a subtractive orientation towards bilingualism where the focus is on learning the dominant language with the belief that this will help children learning the dominant language more quickly. However, this often leads to a diminished use of their home language. Findings such as these underscore the need for early childhood settings to support home language, as well as English development, to facilitate the linguistic, social and cognitive benefits associated with bilingualism (Espinosa, 2015). The learning of English should not occur at the expense of a child's first language.

The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC), which measures children's development as they commence school, revealed that children with a language background other than English were more likely than other children to be developmentally vulnerable on one or more AEDC domains (AEDC, 2015). Children from diverse backgrounds were

vulnerable on domains such as social competences, language, cognitive skills, communication skills and general knowledge. When children's home language is accepted and valued they demonstrate greater motivation and engagement in learning (August & Shanahan, 2006); this occurs in settings where children's languages are regularly included in a meaningful way (Purcell, Lee, & Biffin, 2007). The immersion in a linguistically responsive educational environment reduces the level of discontinuity, which in turn increases their self-esteem, confidence and sense of belonging (Cummins, 2007).

Many of the benefits of bilingualism are dependent, in part, on the use of effective strategies designed to support bilingual children's language acquisition (Byers-Heinlein, 2013; Cazebas & Rouse, 2014; Genesee, 2015). These strategies include incorporating literacy experiences in the home language, teaching all children phrases in other languages, using non-verbal communication and engaging in authentic cultural experiences (Cazebas & Rouse, 2014; Giambo & Szecsi, 2015). Research also highlights the crucial role bilingual educators play in enriching the learning on linguistically diverse children through access to children's home language, facilitating partnerships with families and assisting monolingual staff in their support of bilingual children (Gerrity, 2003; Harvey & Myint, 2014).

### **Role of early childhood educators in supporting bilingual children**

Early childhood educators play a vital role in promoting positive attitudes towards cultural and linguistic diversity among young children (Connolly, 2007). Research shows that educator perceptions not only influence their approaches to pedagogy and practice but also the relationships they form with bilingual children. When educators learn words or phrases in the home language it sends a message to the children and families that their language is valued, respected and important (Ball, 2012; NAEYC, 1995). Findings from a study by Oliver and Purdie (1998), which examined the language attitudes of 58 primary school children in Australia, underscores the potential negative impact educators can have on bilingual children's self-perceptions and engagement; children's attitudes towards their home language changed from positive to negative over time, as they were instructed within a dominant monolingual educational context.

While there are limited number of studies examining attitudes around bilingualism, there

is a body of literature exploring educators' attitudes towards cultural diversity that can be drawn upon to better understand the influence of educator perceptions on practice (Cabezas & Rouse, 2014; Gichuru, Riley, Robertson & Park, 2015). Research suggests that if educators critically examine their beliefs and address personal bias in relation to diversity, they can provide appropriate support through the development of a culturally responsive curriculum (Han & Thomas, 2010). Buchori and Dobinson (2015) examined Australian early childhood educator's perceptions around culturally diverse children and how these perceptions impacted their pedagogical practices. The findings revealed that while educators had positive attitudes towards multiculturalism, which was typically viewed as the "co-existence" of diverse cultures", they were often preoccupied with ensuring children conformed to the dominant culture. Furthermore, educators' lack of awareness of their own prejudices and cultural biases led to a tokenistic and superficial approach to teaching.

A review of national and international research shows educators are ill prepared to support culturally and linguistically diverse children within the classroom (Cabezas & Rouse, 2014). A survey distributed to 50 Cypriot primary school teachers revealed that they did not feel knowledgeable to deal with multilingual issues that arose in their classroom (Christopoulou, Pampaka, & Vlassopoulou, 2012); a lack of knowledge was attributed to inadequate training around issues of bilingualism. A similar pattern of results was reported in study of 689 early childhood educators in the United States which showed that approximately half believed that they were not adequately prepared to educate bilingual children and needed additional training to increase their skills in this area (Ryan, Ackerman & Song, 2004). In Australia, Hu, Torr and Whiteman (2014) explored the perceptions of early childhood educators and found that they believed children's home language use limited their ability to engage in conversations with other children.

### **The role of the bilingual educator**

The presence of bilingual educators within ECEC settings is a critical component to supporting linguistically diverse children (Harvey & Myint, 2014). In particular, bilingual educators enrich pedagogical possibilities through providing increased access to children's home language, facilitating partnerships with families, offering stories or songs in their

home language and assisting other staff to understand how it feels to be part of a linguistic minority (Gerrity, 2003; NAEYC, 1995; Tabors, 2008). Ball (2012) compared the perceptions of bilingual and monolingual educators in relation to linguistically diverse children in ECEC settings across New Zealand. The findings revealed that all educators believed that home languages were important, particularly in fostering children's linguistic identity, and that bilingual educators had a vital role in supporting children's home languages, assisting monolingual staff, modelling positive attitudes to bilingualism and communicating with families. These beliefs were reflected in educators' practice through the inclusion of a child's home languages at the centre and in supporting bilingual educators to incorporate their language on a daily basis (Ball, 2012).

Despite the importance of interactions for teacher-child relationships, there is limited research that examines whether bilingual educators' ability to communicate in the home language positively impacts their relationships with linguistically diverse children. Several studies, however, indicate that teachers and children who share the same ethnic background are reported, by the educator, as having a more positive teacher-child relationship (Graves & Howes, 2011; Saft & Pianta, 2001). Furthermore, Harvey and Myint (2014) collected rich narratives from bilingual teachers and discovered that they believed home language was a communication tool for nourishing trusting relationships and affirming children's bilingual identities. At present there is no policy with respect to bilingualism or language use within Australian early childhood educational settings.

Given the important role of the educator in shaping young children's educational experience it is important to better understand the potential for variation in both practice and attitude as a function of the cultural background and language status of both the educator and the child. Currently one in four people in Australia are born overseas (ABS, 2016) which means that many children enrolled in early childhood centres come from linguistically and ethnically diverse families (ABS, 2016). However, currently there is little knowledge on whether these children receive support for both home and dominant language. We also know little about educators' views and knowledge of bilingual children and whether there are differences between mono- and bilingual educators in terms of perceptions and knowledge. The purpose of this study therefore was to gain an in-depth understanding of monolingual and bilingual educators' perceptions of bilingualism as well

as how best to support bilingual children in ECEC settings. The study was guided by the following questions: (1) Do monolingual and bilingual educators differ in their understandings of bilingualism? ; (2) Do monolingual and bilingual educators differ in their perceptions of how to best support bilingual children in ECEC setting?

## **Method**

A multiple case study design was used to provide a detailed description and analysis of the phenomenon across two early childhood services.

### **Participants**

Two monolingual and two bilingual educators from two early childhood centres participated in the research project. Bilingual educators were defined as those that spoke two or more languages on a regular basis (Purcell, Lee, & Biffin, 2007). Monolingual educators were those who only spoke one language, with educators self-identifying as either monolingual or bilingual. All four participants were female and had been working in their current service between three months and two and a half years. Both bilingual educators spoke English and shared a common home language. Table 1 provides an overview of key demographic characteristics for each of the four participants. Both sets of educators were paired within the same classroom setting. Neither of the chosen settings followed an official language program model, which is typical of the Australian Early Childhood Education and Care context.

The participants were recruited through a local government organisation in South West Sydney. This geographical area was selected based on the diversity present in the local community, with 14% of the total population born overseas and 25% speaking a language other than English at home (ABS, 2016). The organisation nominated two early childhood settings based on the presence of bilingual children as well as monolingual and bilingual educators. A demographic profile for both classrooms is outlined in Table 2.

Table 1. *Educator participants in this study*

	Monolingual Educator 1 (M1)	Bilingual Educator 1 (B1)	Monolingual Educator 2 (M2)	Bilingual Educator 2 (B2)
Centre	Centre 1	Centre 1	Centre 2	Centre 2
Language	English	Bengali & English	English	Bengali & English
Background		English		
Gender	Female	Female	Female	Female
Age	20	39	38	52
Qualification	Traineeship	Early Childhood Diploma	BEd: Early Childhood	Early Childhood Diploma
Years of Experience	1 year	7 years	14 years	7 years
Time at the current centre	1 year	2 years	3 months	2 ½ years

Table 2. *Demographic profile of the early childhood centres*

	Centre 1	Centre 2
Number of staff	10 staff	13 staff
Total number of rooms	2 rooms	2 rooms
Total number of children enrolled at the centre	50 children	62 children
Number of bilingual children	4 bilingual children	22 bilingual children
Number of children who shared a mutual home language with bilingual educator	0 children	6 children
Mean age of children	44 months	49 months
Gender of children	10 male 8 female	14 male 12 female

## Measures

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the four educators. Interviews lasted between 35 to 45 minutes. Educators were invited to discuss their views about bilingualism, their experience of bilingual children within ECEC contexts, the support provided to bilingual children in the early childhood service, the role of bilingual educators and reflections on their social interactions with these children. The semi-structured nature of the

interviews ensured that educators' perspectives and understandings were comprehensively and systematically explored (Jamshed, 2014).

### **Analysis**

Analysis was approached in three stages. In the first stage, the researchers familiarised themselves with the data and began to generate initial ideas for a coding scheme. Using a deductive approach based on existing literature (Graves & Howes, 2011; Saft & Pianta, 2001) responses were grouped under key overarching themes. Illustrative quotes or exemplar for each theme were also identified. In the second stage, an inductive process was used to generate a coding structure, with categories derived from the empirical data. The coding process carried out was thorough, comprehensive and inclusive, with all transcriptions coded. Reliability and validity of the data was ensured through a cross checking process conducted by one of the researchers who was blind to the initial coding using a subset of illustrative quotes and examples to ensure that each quote or example had been coded appropriately. Participant responses were re-examined carefully to ensure that the agreed codes were applied across all data. The process of analysis involved switching focus between the nodes and full responses to maintain the depth of participants' perspectives.

## **Results**

The content analysis of the interview data revealed seven key themes that are explored below: knowledge of bilingualism, challenges of bilingualism, advantages of being bilingual, perceptions around language development, educators support for bilingual children, encouraging home language and the unique role of the bilingual educator.

### **Educator understanding of bilingualism, language development and perceptions around children's development**

Overall, analyses of interview responses revealed more similarities than differences

among the monolingual and bilingual educators in their knowledge of bilingualism. Educators appeared to have limited understanding of the nature of bilingualism including the advantages and disadvantages of bilingualism and the language development of bilingual children. When asked, for example, whether the educator knew about the different stages of language acquisition, a monolingual educator said, *'No, I don't [know anything about the stages of language acquisition]. I would say they are withdrawn [when they first arrive]* (M1). A bilingual educator described how she thought children learned both languages, *"That come from home, from mum and dad when they speak their own language they hear that one.. and then they watch tv show... they hear the other language, the English. The pick [up] both language from home."*(B1). She used her experience as a bilingual parent to illustrate her point: *" I am thinking of my boys... they started that way"*.

Where differences existed, bilingual educators were more likely to: hold more positive attitudes towards bilingualism and disagree with suggestions that bilingualism negatively impacts children's development. Both bilingual educators felt that children's ability to speak two or more languages was a major advantage of bilingualism; *"It is definitely a big advantage that if you use that two languages and more like two, three languages... you can use that if needed"* (B2). Two of the educators shared an example of how a bilingual child helped educators overcome a language barrier with a new child who spoke limited English; *"We had a child that was new and could barely speak English but the other child could speak the same language as him and he was saying 'oh he wants this'...They wouldn't talk to each other but he could just understand"* (M1). One of the monolingual educators reflected on how monolingual children benefit from exposure to different languages as it fosters cultural awareness and respect; *"The other kids are able to see the different cultures. A child who is monolingual...when we are doing those experiences with other cultures you can see them gaining respect as well"* (M1).

### **Challenges of bilingualism**

Challenges around bilingualism raised by educators included communication difficulties with children and families, lower academic achievement, challenging behaviors and confusion. Monolingual educators were more likely to mention challenges than bilingual

educators. However, the greater differences appear to be centre based with Centre 1 citing more challenges than Centre 2. Within this centre, the educator completing her traineeship (M1) reported the greatest number of challenges. A monolingual educator identified communication difficulties as a significant challenge to effectively supporting bilingual children. While she did not feel that bilingualism prevented bilingual children from engaging and playing with other children, it did present difficulties when attempting to communicate and build connections with the child. She recalled an experience where she asked the child if he had prayed before his meal and her feeling of alarm when he nodded and continued to eat; *"I remember looking at the teacher going 'oh no' and she goes 'that's all we can do'"*(M1). The educator also felt a sense of helplessness at being unable to comfort the child using verbal reassurance; *"I couldn't communicate with them when they were upset. I could only really try to physically comfort them because the things I was saying wasn't helping"* (M1). Educators from Centre 1 shared examples of how communication difficulties had caused a bilingual child to become distressed;

*"We had a bilingual child first start off he was just upset... we just couldn't do anything for him. We just had to set up a bed near the gate because that's where he wanted to be, close to the gate... He was just that upset and used to be spoken to in that other language"* (M1).

She explained that the staff had to seek assistance from the family in order to reassure and calm the child. Bilingual educator 1 recalled an experience where the educators could not understand what a young child wanted and as a result the child became distraught; *"In the baby's rooms...we had to call parents because...he was just crying and crying...but we are not understanding"* (B1). Three of the four educators reported having difficulty communicating with parents and the extended family;

*"I remember the family was worried that their child wasn't eating anything. So me trying to communicate back to him that he is eating and it is hard to know that they are understanding what you are saying to them because he would just nod and smile "* (M1).

Educators sometimes used visual aids to help families understand their message or they would have to ring the parents of the child as to relay a message as the grandparents of the child did not speak any English.

### **Advantages of bilingualism in ECEC contexts**

Benefits of bilingualism focused mostly around linguistic outcomes. Acquiring multiple languages was seen to be important for communication and for maintaining children's cultural identity, "*They can understand their home language so with their Aunt, Uncles when they are together for occasions... they understand what's going on, whereas if they only speak one language they wouldn't understand what's happening*" (M2). Both bilingual educators felt that children's ability to speak two or more languages was a major advantage of bilingualism, "*It is definitely a big advantage that if you use that two languages and more like two, three languages... you can use that if needed*" (B2). One of the monolingual educators reflected on how monolingual children benefit from exposure to different languages as it fosters cultural awareness and respect; "*The other kids are able to see the different cultures. A child who is monolingual...when we are doing those experiences with other cultures you can see them gaining respect as well*" (M1).

The bilingual educators were more likely to agree that bilingualism improved cognitive development and that bilingual children were more talented than monolingual children, commenting that bilingual children experience cognitive benefits, as their brains need to process more than one language, "*They have to work out the two languages. They have to find the way how we can use that two languages...Their brains works that way*" (B2). A monolingual educator also talked about metalinguistic awareness or the ability to think about language and its use; "*It's good cognitively. They're thinking about words..and how to say them...in two different ways*" (M2).

### **Perceptions around language development of bilingual children**

All four educators believed that bilingual children experience confusion when exposed to different languages at home and at the early childhood setting, "*I think the confusion [is a disadvantage]. I think as they grow older it would become easier but when they are younger at preschool, when they are trying to explain ... and they are confusing the words over*" (M1). Both monolingual educators felt that children were demonstrating confusion when they mixed words from two languages in the same sentence. "*They go through a*

*stage of confusion... They sort of mix two languages together" (M2). The educator, though acknowledged that it probably appeared to demonstrate confusion more to the adult than to the child. Another educator recounted how parents frequently mixed their languages when communicating with their child; "They are raised like that and so it's like they are trying to do the same thing [as their parent] but it's just confusing them a bit (M1)."*

Monolingual educators were more likely than bilingual educators to cite challenges, with both educators citing communication difficulties as a significant challenge to effectively supporting bilingual children, *"I couldn't communicate with them when they were upset. I could only really try to physically comfort them because the things I was saying wasn't helping"* (M1). Dealing with challenging behaviours that often occurred as a result of poor communication and challenges in communicating with extended family were also issues raised by the monolingual educators.

### **Educators' perceptions of how to support bilingual children in ECEC settings**

All four educators held quite positive attitudes towards teaching related perceptions of bilingualism, with very few differences emerging between monolingual and bilingual educators. The educators identified a range of strategies used to support bilingual children: incorporating the home language, learning key phrases, using communication techniques, adopting a relational pedagogy, building partnerships with families, integrating home languages within literacy experiences, promoting cultural awareness and supporting the acquisition of the second language. Monolingual and bilingual educators had different perceptions around the best way to supporting a child who had limited English;

*"Firstly communicate with the parents, get the information on key words that they might use at home. If you have multicultural staff that speak their first language, use them to assist that child with the settling process. Talk to the child using...non-verbal as well as verbal gestures"(M2).*

Both Monolingual Educator 2 and Bilingual Educator 1 believed that bilingual children require additional support in the early childhood environment;

*"Obviously they need extra support because...they're learning the second language. We sort of assist them, spend more time communicating with them. Teaching the routines and rules and even through songs I guess they are learning to speak another language. They need a lot of help in the*

*early childhood setting just to feel comfortable and to be able to communicate with them" (M2).*

B1 agreed that bilingual children needed extra support to settle into the centre. M1 cited the need to treat each child as an individual when deciding upon which strategies to use to support children;

*"I suppose it would be different because they each have their own independent level. The newest child, who is bilingual, he was very independent... but another child... you would have to encourage him... because he was still having the separation troubles" (M1)*

There was an inherent lack of differentiation with respect to their approach to pedagogy, with all four educators approaching programming and planning in the same way for all children regardless of whether the child was bilingual or monolingual. B2 believed that both monolingual and bilingual children benefitted from learning other languages, *"If it is a book from other culture monolingual children can learn that language too. Last year we learned English and Bengali counting. All children love that counting"* (B2). Another educator (M1) agreed that it was not necessary to modify their approaches as bilingual children are still engaging and playing with other children; *"It wouldn't change for bilingual and monolingual because from what I see the bilingual child is still engaging. The language barrier was there but it wasn't stopping them from doing the activities"* (M1). In contrast, Monolingual Educator 2 felt that educators may include more cultural activities and languages in the programming and planning if there are bilingual children in the group; *"You might... include more different cultures and languages in the program and planning...stories, songs, even puzzles"* (M2).

Limitations were identified across both centres with respect to how the centre supported the education and care of bilingual children, *"I know [the director] tries to connect with the parents when we ask them to bring in a sheet with a few self-help words... I think if we are not doing anything more, we could definitely improve"* (M1). One educator commented on the importance of introducing support for bilingual children on a daily basis rather than for special occasions or events: *"Even just songs, because I don't think the babies room do much of it either. Yeah it would be good to see some of that on an everyday basis"* (M1).

All educators appeared unsure as to whether the centre had resources for educators on supporting bilingual children. *"I think we could find some [resources]. I know we are*

*starting to bring stuff in from another centre” (M1). Another educator commented: “I think we have a cultural awareness book” (B1). As a result of the interview and additional reflection one educator stated: “It is an eye opener... how we could be lacking having those experiences with children about the different languages and cultures” (M1).*

### **The role of the bilingual educator**

Monolingual, as well as bilingual educators, recognized the valuable role that bilingual educators play in ECEC settings. One of the key roles mentioned by the educators was the inclusion of home language and culture. One monolingual educator was particularly passionate about utilizing bilingual educators during literacy experiences; *“You can read it in English and they’ll read it in the other language” (M2). Bilingual Educator 1 (B1) commented on how she included her home language during group times through singing nursery rhymes. Another monolingual educator (M1) stated, “I think they have, not a responsibility, but they’re the ones who are bringing more cultural things into the centre (M1)”. The educator also noted, however, that the bilingual educators in her centre rarely incorporated their home language.*

Both educators from C2 recognised the important role bilingual educators had in building partnerships with families. For the educators of C2 building partnerships with families was considered important. The monolingual educator from this centre mentioned on a number of occasions, throughout the interview, about her bilingual colleague’s ability to effectively communicate with families; *“Bilingual educators would obviously find it easier to speak to parents...if they speak the same second language other than English” (M2). She mentioned that she had accessed support from bilingual educators to communicate with families with limited English about their child’s development.*

One of the bilingual educators (B2) believed that her home language was a powerful tool that fostered the formation of secure attachments with bilingual children in her care. She recognized that when a child hears their home language in the ECEC service, it creates a sense of security, particularly if the child is distressed. While monolingual and bilingual educators recognize the value of bilingual staff, three of four of the participants mentioned that it was most beneficial if children shared the same home language with the educator.

Two educators mentioned the importance of building relationships with bilingual children to ensure they feel safe, secure and supported. Bilingual Educator 2 stated that while supporting the acquisition of the second language was important, the first priority should be to build a relationship with that child, "*Slowly, slowly educate the English. But first thing is make attachment and build a relationship with the parents and the child*" (B2). She also explained that using her home language when comforting a bilingual child helped the child to feel a sense of belonging.

### **Encouraging home language use**

Both the monolingual and bilingual educators interviewed discussed incorporating home languages as a way to support bilingual children. "*If [the child] is from my culture and my language, I straight away use that language and comfort them and... translate English...[I] use both languages so they can understand better*" [B2]. B2 explained how she used her home language and English to facilitate play between a bilingual child, who shared her language, and a monolingual child. The monolingual educator from Centre 2 also reported learning key words in the child's home language; "*You communicate with the parents [to] find out key words that the child may use and understand*" [M2]. However, she acknowledged that, as a monolingual educator, she occasionally found it difficult to pronounce these words.

The use of a child's home language was not occurring as regularly in Centre 1. The bilingual educator (B1) stated that the educators mostly used English and then learned several self-help related phrases in the child's home language. She indicated that the support the educators provided for the home language depended on the parents' requests; "*It depends...if the parents would like to continue their own language then we give support...because we don't have any skills to speak that language*" (B1). Both educators (B1 and M1) highlighted the lack of home language use at the service among the children. "*They mostly [speak English to each other] when they are in their playing environment*" [M1]. Bilingual educator 1 also reflected on how the home language was only used to assist children to settle before progressing to English. She felt that it was difficult to truly determine the benefits of children using and hearing their home language in the ECEC

service as it was not used at the centre.

## **Discussion**

The findings of this study provide insight into educators' perceptions of bilingualism in early childhood. The data highlighted several differences, but also many similarities, between monolingual and bilingual educators in terms of their understanding and support of bilingual children as well as their perceptions of their relationships with bilingual children. Both groups of educators had limited understanding around the nature of bilingualism in the early years. The lack of knowledge on bilingualism is consistent with previous research conducted in school and ECEC settings showing educators often feel ill prepared to support bilingual children and lack the necessary knowledge to deal with multilingual issues in the classroom (Christopoulou, et al., 2012; Ryan, et al., 2004). Where differences did exist, bilingual educators tended to hold more positive attitudes towards bilingualism than monolingual educators did; bilingual educators were more likely than monolingual educators to agree with positive statements about bilingualism and disagree with statements that suggest that bilingualism negatively impacts children's development. This is an important finding as teachers' reflections on second language teaching are critical in their professional activity (Palviainen & Mard-Miettinen, 2015).

The four educators in this study identified a series of challenges they had encountered when dealing with bilingual children in ECEC settings. These included: communication difficulties with children and families, confusion when learning two languages, academic disadvantages and challenging behaviours. Overall, monolingual educators reported more challenges around bilingualism than advantages, a finding consistent with previous research that shows a tendency for researchers and educators to adopt a deficit model of bilingualism (De Angelis & Dewaele, 2009; Paradis, Genesee, & Crago, 2010). Given the influence of educators' attitudes on practice, future intervention efforts need to prioritize attitudinal shifts and beliefs along with knowledge and skills.

The main challenge mentioned by the educators in this study was the difficulty communicating with the bilingual child and their family, in particular for monolingual

educators but also for bilingual educators who speak a language different from the child's native language. While in the US many bilingual educators share common home language (i.e., Spanish), in Australia due to the large variation in languages spoken (ABS, 2016) shared home language between educators and children is less common. The use of visual aids to facilitate communication with the families proved to be effective in certain cases. The ecological perspective highlights the importance of building partnerships with families as they are the first educators of their child and have invaluable information to share about their language and cultural background (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In this way, it is important for educators to adopt strategies to overcome the communication barriers to ensure a sense of connection and consensus across both contexts.

A number of variations were noted across the two centres in the way they supported bilingual children. C1 predominantly used English to communicate with bilingual children, whereas C2 appeared to include the home language on a daily basis, these differences may be due, in part, to the higher density of bilingual children attending C2 compared with C1. The educators in C2 were also more proactive in supporting the acquisition of the second language. When examining factors shaping educator perceptions and practices, it is therefore important to develop a clearer understanding of the contextual characteristics of ECEC settings which encompasses not just educator characteristics but also the demographics of the children enrolled.

Given the extensive literature base documenting the benefits of home language support, it was concerning that three of the four educators in this study often abandoned the use of a child's home language once they acquired English (August & Shanahan, 2006; Espinosa, 2015; Genesee, 2015). Use of the home language was seen as a temporary approach to support the bilingual children in transitioning to the ECEC setting rather than a permanent strategy to maintain the home language. Researchers suggest that limited support for a child's home language, in predominantly English speaking centres, can lead to subtractive bilingualism or language loss (Ball, 2012; Tabors, 2008). In this way, it is important to create an environment that is supportive of home languages to reduce the occurrence of language loss (Jones Diaz & Harvey, 2007).

Research examining variations in ECEC quality have demonstrated that when children attend higher quality pre-schools, this predicts higher achievements in mathematics, science

and socio-behavioural outcomes in both the short and long-term (Sylva et al., 2014). The quality of care, which is reflected in intentional and relational pedagogical approaches together with a number of key structural qualities (i.e., staff-child ratios and educator qualifications) combined with family factors predicts children's achievement and adjustment before they start school and even beyond. Given the influence of the educational context on educators' perceptions of bilingual children, it is essential that we develop a much clearer picture of the indicators of quality educational environments for children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Educators play a crucial role in shaping the short- and long-term outcomes of bilingual children. This study represents a first step in exploring differences in monolingual and bilingual educators' perceptions in the Australian early childhood educational context. The current findings point to the potential for variation in educator attitudes and practices depending on: the language background of the educator; characteristics of the educational context; as well as the level of experience educators have working with bilingual children. Given the importance of effectively supporting bilingual children, further research is needed not only to replicate these findings but to examine other factors that may influence educators' pedagogy and practice within environments that cater for bilingual children.

A number of educational implications emerged as a result of this study. The findings revealed that early childhood educators have limited knowledge of bilingualism. This highlights the need for a greater focus within pre-service teacher education on the nature of bilingualism and language acquisition as well as the approaches that are ineffective in supporting bilingual children. Within the current study, three of the four educators abandoned the use of the child's home language once they acquired English. As such, educators need to be informed of the importance of including a child's home language in the ECEC setting. The Early Years Learning Framework recognises the importance of children continuing to use their home language as well as to develop competence in English (DEEWR, 2009); "they have the right to be continuing users of their home language as well as to develop competency in Standard Australian English" (p.38). This is particularly crucial as a lack of support for a child's home language can lead to subtractive bilingualism and language loss (Conboy, 2013). Therefore, educators need to be provided with opportunities to participate in professional development and training in order to improve

educators' understanding of and ability to support bilingual children.

The current study has raised awareness around educators' limited support of a child's home language. This reinforces the need for the government to introduce language policies relating to bilingualism and home language support in the ECEC context. These language policies will support educators in their ability to provide quality education and care of bilingual children. Furthermore, all educators in this study were unaware of whether their centre had a specific policy on bilingualism. Therefore, early childhood services also need to adopt policies around bilingualism to enhance educators are able to effectively support these children.

### **Limitations**

This study was limited as it had a small sample size with only four educators participating in the research. While this limits the generalisation of findings, the results of the study still contribute to our emerging understanding of the impact of both educator characteristics and the educational context on educators' perceptions of bilingual children. As the bilingual educators in this study did not share their home language with bilingual children in their classrooms, the results might have been different when we would have interviewed bilingual educators who shared their home language with several children in the centre where they were employed. Our sample was one of convenience as we relied on a local government organisation for the selection of participants. Future studies could include a larger number of participants as well as more diversity in educators' background (e.g., level of education, when bilingual sharing language with several children in centre).

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