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**OVERCOMING LANGUAGE BARRIERS
IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of

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Angela Katina Beauchamp

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Abstract

New Zealand's increasingly heterogeneous population places manifold demands on the education sector to educate and integrate children who do not speak English. Children of migrant background attending early childhood settings are assumed to benefit in English language obtainment from attending early years educational facilities, but does the mere placement in such settings achieve the desired outcome? Limited research exists into how minority language children acquire English whilst attending preschool settings, how this impacts on their first language, or on how teachers support their second language development.

There is little insight into what motivates teachers in their interactions and decision-making, how they adjust teaching content, and whether they engage in language-specific teaching activities at all. To address this gap, this study considers questions regarding the relationship between early childhood teachers' knowledge of second language acquisition and the type of support they report implementing. I investigate educators' views and reported practices, as well as the influence of professional training, institutional policies, and philosophies.

This research used a qualitative perspective and was benchmarked against comparative reflections of my own teaching experience. The inductive methodology involved semi-structured interviews of early childhood practitioners, covering a selection of educational settings in the Wellington region that practise distinct philosophies.

Results show that teachers rely on their centres' philosophies and socio-cultural practices as per Te Whāriki - the New Zealand curriculum - in their work with minority language children. The consensus was that early childhood education is to prepare language foundations through emotional confidence and cultural capability, not to set

academic standards, and children's perceived natural ability to learn by osmosis is accorded much credence. These findings suggest that teachers' knowledge regarding complex language and cognitive processes could be significantly improved. Furthermore, support for te reo Māori and Pasifika first languages in New Zealand notwithstanding, practices tend to facilitate institutionalized monolingualism. Future research in all migrant language learning would add to the knowledge base about second language acquisition in New Zealand and the role of early childhood education in this dynamic. As well, there is scope for a discussion on language inequities and the possibilities of a plurilingual society.

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“If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.”

Nelson Mandela

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Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgments	iv
Table of Contents	v
List of Tables	viii
Chapter One: Introduction and Background	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Research Objectives	4
1.3 Background and New Zealand Perspectives of Second Language Acquisition	7
1.4 ESOL Practices	9
1.5 Te Kōhanga Reo	11
1.6 Pasifika Language Nests	14
1.7 Chapter Overview	17
1.8 Conclusion	18
Chapter Two: Literature Review	19
2.1 Introduction	19
2.1.1 Monolingualism	20
2.1.2 Bilingualism and Multilingualism	23
2.1.3 Additive and Subtractive Language Acquisition	26
2.1.4 Language Shift	28
2.1.5 Summary	28
2.2 Theoretical Considerations of Children’s Second Language Acquisition	30
2.2.1 First Language Acquisition Theories	30
2.2.2 Second Language Acquisition Theories	31

2.2.3 Sociocultural and Bioecological Considerations	33
2.3 Current Classroom Practices and Findings on Second Language Acquisition	36
2.3.1 The Importance of Social Inclusion	36
2.3.2 The Importance of Knowledge of Cognitive Processes and Pedagogy	38
2.3.3 The Importance of Teachers	40
2.4 Conclusion	42
Chapter Three: Methodology	44
3.1 Introduction	44
3.2 Participants	45
3.2.1 Description of Participating Centres	47
3.2.2 Participant Profiles	49
3.3 The Study Design	49
3.4 Research Parameters and Limitations	52
3.5 Data Generation	52
3.6 Conceptual Framework	54
3.7 Conclusion	56
Chapter Four: Data Analysis	57
4.1 Introduction	57
4.2 The Social Context	58
4.2.1 Parents	59
4.2.2 Culture	63
4.2.3 The Individuality of the Child	65

4.3 Immersion or Submersion	67
4.4 Professional Knowledge and Training	69
4.5 Centre Philosophies	71
4.6 Conclusion	72
Chapter Five: Discussion and Recommendations	74
5.1 Introduction	74
5.2 Significance of Teachers' Knowledge	74
5.3 Institutionalizing Monolingualism	81
5.4 Recommendations	83
5.5 Future Research	85
5.6 Conclusion	87
Chapter Six: Conclusion	88
6.1 Introduction	88
6.2 Summary	89
6.3 Research Context	91
6.4 Concluding Comments	92
References	93
Appendices	103
Appendix A - Interview Questions	103
Appendix B - Information Sheet	106
Appendix C - Consent Form	108
Appendix D - Self-reporting sheet	109

List of Tables

Table 1	People who speak te reo Māori	12
Table 2	Participation in Pacific-medium education	14
Table 3	Most common languages spoken by multilingual people	21