Bilingualism
in the Bush
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LINGUIST, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR ELIZABETH ELLIS AND EARLY CHILDHOOD SPECIALIST, PROFESSOR MARGARET SIMS HAVE RECRUITED MIGRANT FAMILIES IN REGIONAL AUSTRALIA TO TRACK THEIR ATTEMPTS TO MAINTAIN NATIVE LANGUAGE IN BROADLY MONOILINGUAL Contexts.

Over many years of conducting community workshops on bringing up bilingual children, A/Prof Ellis believes there is a lack of institutional support and information outside metropolitan centres for migrant families trying to keep their native tongue.

Their research project, Bilingualism in the Bush, is working with children aged 2-7 and their families to document ways native language is maintained at home and in society via such services as early childhood education.

The project looks at how migrant families maintain language in towns across northern New South Wales where a critical mass of speakers, networks and resources do not exist.

Many migrant families are plurilingual – a new concept in linguistics which recognises that people draw on a repertoire of multiple languages in different ways.

“Growing up plurilingual means that children maintain a connection to their home culture and wider family, but research also shows that supporting the child’s first language results in more creative and flexible approaches to learning. Children develop improved social skills through using more than one language, which of course enhances employment and other opportunities in life,” A/Prof Ellis said.

The researchers are documenting the diverse strategies parents use to support their children’s linguistic identity, such as the use of new technologies.

Currently the research investigates the experiences of nine families across Armidale, Tamworth, Moree and Wagga. It is a three-year research project funded by the Australian Research Council with support also from the UNE School of Behavioural, Cognitive and Social Sciences.

A/Prof Ellis and Prof Sims are hopeful that their findings will inform policy and community services in regional Australia, filling some current gaps in migrant family support.

Associate Professor Elizabeth Ellis has published widely in the field of linguistics, specifically on plurilingualism and language identity. She is also an experienced teacher educator within the international language education field.

Professor Margaret Sims’s research focuses around quality of community-based services for young children and their families. She has researched extensively on issues relating to quality child care, working with infants and toddlers and with families who have diverse needs. Recent work includes an examination of the path to early childhood professionalism in a number of different countries, and the role of educational leaders in this process.
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Improving outcomes for rural and regional communities is at the heart of UNE’s research endeavour. UNE is addressing the most challenging threats to the health, sustainability and livelihoods of regional communities, throughout Australia and abroad.

Professor Annabelle Duncan, Vice-Chancellor & CEO