



Consistent and Persistent: Successful Home Language Maintenance among Vietnamese-Australian Families

RESEARCH

VAN H. TRAN 

SARAH VERDON 

SHARYNNE MCLEOD 

*Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article



ABSTRACT

Informed by Spolsky's language policy theory, this study explores Vietnamese-Australian families' experience of successful home language maintenance in three aspects: language practices, language ideologies, and language management. Seven parents from five families whose children achieved high bilingual proficiency scores in the speech and language assessment of the VietSpeech research program were invited to participate in a focus group to discuss successful strategies for home language maintenance. The discussion was undertaken in Vietnamese. Thematic analysis of the bilingual transcription revealed four themes: motivations, challenges, practices, and recommendations for home language maintenance support. The parents' motivations for home language maintenance included communication with grandparents and relatives, maintenance of cultural identity, parents' need to speak their home language, and cognitive and emotional benefits. Challenges faced by the families were related to children starting school and growing older, parents' lack of time and persistence, and insufficient support in terms of formal Vietnamese education, resources, and teacher quality. The families' strategies for successful language maintenance included speaking Vietnamese all the time as well as teaching Vietnamese directly using textbooks and indirectly through regular activities including book reading, daily interactions, and watching Vietnamese TV. The parents' recommendations focused on changes in language education policy and advocacy, better resources, and raising awareness of the benefits of home language maintenance. This study provides insights into the successful experience of home language maintenance of Vietnamese-Australian families and can be used by multilingual families, educators, policy makers, speech-language pathologists, and other professionals to support home language maintenance.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Van H. Tran

Charles Sturt University, AU
vtran@csu.edu.au

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A *home language* is the language commonly spoken by family members at home and/or in the community that is different from the majority language of a society or context. The number of people speaking a home language other than English is substantial in many English-speaking countries, including Australia (20.8%), the US (22%), and Canada (20.6%) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016; Statistics Canada, 2021; US Census Bureau, 2019). Home language maintenance has been a focus in recent research given its importance for cultural belonging and identity as well as the challenges and the methods of maintaining home languages.

In addition to the maintenance of home language being a worthy pursuit in its own right, there are also many benefits to multilingualism and the maintenance of a home language. Such benefits include enhanced intergeneration cohesion, cultural identity maintenance, greater career opportunities, and strengthened cognitive function (Bialystok et al., 2007; Espinosa, 2015; Little, 2020). Despite the reported advantages, home language maintenance can be a challenging process due to a lack of parental motivations, knowledge and strategies, and inadequate support in terms of language policy. Previously, researchers have explored factors associated with home language maintenance among different linguistic communities worldwide (Decapua, 2009; Kim & Pyun, 2014; Xia, 2016). Limited research has been conducted on how Vietnamese is used among the Vietnamese diaspora across the world including Australia. This paper showcases successful home language maintenance in a group of Vietnamese-Australian families, specifically with regards to their motivations, challenges, practices of home language maintenance, and recommendations for support.

Home language maintenance has been reported to be a parental aspiration for reasons including familial cohesion, cultural identity maintenance, cognitive and academic advancement, and career opportunities (Connaughton-Crean & Padraig, 2017; Lee, 2013). For example, a study with minority language children in Ireland indicated that the children's parents wanted them to maintain their home language so that they could communicate with and maintain connections with their relatives in the home country (Connaughton-Crean & Padraig, 2017). Researchers have also reported a number of barriers to home language maintenance including children's older age (and increasing socialisation with peers), parents' attitudes towards home language maintenance, and the lack of community and societal support (Lee & Gupta, 2020; Piller, 2019).

Once children have started school and are older, it is often harder to maintain their home language (Kim & Pyun, 2014). One of the main reasons is due to increased exposure to the majority language, which is typically the language of instruction in schools, particularly in English-speaking countries (Xia, 2016). Apart from that, higher levels of education involve more schoolwork, resulting in children having to compromise on time spent learning their home language to spend time on school subjects and activities in the majority language (Kondo, 1997; Lee & Gupta, 2020). When children get older, they also experience physical and emotional changes that may affect their attitudes towards home language (Chumak-Horbatsch, 1999). Children have been reported to show agency in making their own decisions around which languages they speak, regardless of their parents' request of using home language (Kaveh & Sandoval, 2020; Kondo, 1997). Additionally, children are more likely to communicate in the preferred language of their peers, which is often the majority language of their social context (Zhang & Slaughter-Defoe, 2009).

Parents' positive attitude towards home language maintenance is a key factor in maintaining home languages (Tran et al., 2021b). Previously, researchers have shown that children have higher proficiency and use of home language when their parents have a stronger conviction of the importance of home language maintenance (Tran et al., 2021b). Parents who are indecisive about home language maintenance tend to neglect home language when choices are made between working to maintain their home language and other priorities. Furthermore, many studies have demonstrated that while many parents hold positive views towards home language maintenance, their language practices do not reflect strategies for maintaining the home language (Kaveh & Sandoval, 2020; Tran et al., 2022). Lack of consistency and persistence is a key barrier to home language maintenance (Fishman, 1991; Hakuta & D'Andrea, 1992).

The lack of support from society and the government is another challenge faced by families who want to maintain their home language. These barriers include a lack of resources, diverse

community attitudes, inadequate multilingual education in early childhood education sector, inaccessible formal education of home language, and low-quality community language classes (Espinosa, 2015; Pauwels, 2005). For example, a study by Lee and Gupta (2020) of 40 Korean parents in the US found that the parents believed that their children would benefit better if schools offered Korean as a foreign language.

Parents support their children's home language maintenance in a number of ways, including implementing family language policies, reading books in their home language, and teaching their children to read and write in their home language (Banasiak & Olpińska-Szkiełko, 2021). For example, in a case study by Decapua (2009), the family's successful maintenance of German in the US was attributed to a range of practices, including the family's consistent family language policy, the mother's teaching of reading and writing skills, books read in German, the child's attendance at a German language school, and communication opportunities with German speakers. Despite much of the literature in the field of home language maintenance focusing on the many barriers to raising children multilingually, particularly in English-dominant contexts, home language maintenance can be successful in these contexts. This study examines efforts by Vietnamese-Australian parents who have overcome difficulties and supported their children to maintain their Vietnamese language.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Spolsky's (2004) language policy theory provides a theoretical lens for investigating the experiences of the families' home language maintenance. The framework outlines three components in language policy: language practices, language ideologies, and language management. In the family context, language practices refer to the use of a language among family members while language ideologies are related to their beliefs and attitudes towards that language use. Language management is comprised of policies and practices that influence the use of the language in the family. These three aspects of language policy are interrelated. What family members perceive of a language (language ideologies) can impact their use of that language (language practices) as well as their practices related to language use (language management). Language management can influence the use of a language in the family.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study is a part of the VietSpeech Australian Research Council Discovery Grant (DP180102848) on Vietnamese-Australian children's speech and language competence and gained ethical approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee at Charles Sturt University (H18084). The aim of this paper is to explore the successful experience of home language maintenance among Vietnamese-Australian families, specifically:

1. Why did the parents think home language maintenance was important for their families?
2. What did they find challenging in maintaining home language for their children?
3. What strategies did they use to help their children maintain their home language?
4. What societal level support did parents think would be helpful for Vietnamese home language maintenance in Australia?

METHODOLOGY

The importance of this paper lies in its methodology, which was designed to amplify the voices of parents who have been successful in facilitating home language maintenance with their children. To achieve the aims of this paper, the focus on successful home language maintenance was foregrounded in every step of the research design. First, the selection of participants required the identification of families whose children demonstrated high levels of competency in their home language. This selection drew not only on self-reported success of the parents in home language maintenance, but also objective speech and language data that supported their successful transmission of the home language to their children. Second, the first author is herself a Vietnamese-Australian mother raising her children bilingually; therefore,

her lens in the construction of the questions that guided the discussion and her facilitation of the conversation around home language added authenticity to the methodology, enabling the study to be grounded and informed by the lived experience of the participants and the topic that was being explored. Third, the use of a focus group design allowed parents to speak about their own experiences of success while also enabling them to elaborate on and share issues raised, reflect and recall while others talked, and draw out insights that may not have been identified from one-on-one interviews (Austin & Sutton, 2014). The focus group design allowed rich data to emerge from the interaction, which highlighted commonalities and differences in the experiences of the group in supporting home language maintenance. Finally, the inductive approach to data analysis meant that interpretations of the data were not restricted by current frameworks or understanding of successful home language maintenance, allowing findings to be driven solely by the experiences of the participants. The strength of this approach was further enhanced by the use of member checking, allowing participants the final say over the findings that emerged from this study.

A total of seven parents from five families took part in the focus group discussion. These parents were previous participants in the VietSpeech project selected as a result of their children's strong competence in both Vietnamese and English based on their speech and language assessments and parent report of strong communication skills in Vietnamese. As described in Table 1 below, these parents were aged between 33 and 44 years old ($M = 41.43$; $SD = 3.54$) and had an average length of stay in Australia of 14.86 years ($SD = 4.79$). All of the parents had undertaken postgraduate education. One family lived in Melbourne and four families lived in Sydney. One family also had Vietnamese grandparents living with them permanently.

The focus group discussion was held online via Zoom and recorded using the Zoom recording function. All the invited families, including five mothers and two fathers, participated in the discussion in Vietnamese. The discussion was guided by eight questions (see Appendix A) and was two hours long.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data collected in the focus group study were analysed inductively using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) in NVivo12 (QSR International, 2018). Data analysis took place in eight steps as documented in Howe et al. (2018):

1. *Transcription.* The data were transcribed in Vietnamese by the first author, who is a native Vietnamese linguist.
2. *Translation.* The transcription was translated into English by the first author, who is a translator accredited by the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI). The translation results were reviewed by the second and third authors who are native speakers of English and discussed with the first author to ensure the translation is comprehensible to English language readers.
3. *Confidentialising the data.* All data were reviewed and de-identified to protect the identity of the participants. Pseudonyms were used instead of participants' names and location names were removed.
4. *Digital uploading.* Transcribed and translated data were uploaded into NVivo12 for analysis.
5. *Initial coding schema development.* The authors reviewed the first page of the transcript to develop the initial coding schema (Johnson, 1997) and discussed the level at which the data would be coded and the way open codes would be labelled. Data were coded as units of meaning, which comprised one or more phrase or sentences.
6. *Phase one analysis.* Each unit of meaning was analysed inductively and assigned one or more open codes by the first author (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For example, the response "As for my family, since the children were small, we have been keeping a rule that if our child finds it hard to say a sentence in English, we accept his English sentence but then he would have to say that in Vietnamese again" was coded as "Rule since young", "Strict when children were small", and "Parents asking children to say in Vietnamese again".

Table 1 Family Demographics.
Note: * = families participating in Study 2 of VietSpeech project; PG = postgraduate.

FAMILY	PARENT (PSEUDONYM)	AGE	LENGTH OF STAY IN AUSTRALIA (YEARS)	EDUCATION	LOCATION	EDUCATION/WORK BACKGROUND	NUMBER OF CHILDREN	AGE OF ASSESSED CHILD	LIVING WITH GRANDPARENTS
Family 1*	Father (Ninh)	43	16	PG	Sydney	Engineering	2	6	No
	Mother (Huệ)	43	16	PG		Language education			
Family 2*	Father (Quý)	43	14	PG	Sydney	Banking	3	7	Yes
	Mother (Hồng)	43	20	PG		Language education			
Family 3*	Mother (Thủy)	44	21	PG	Sydney	Computer science	3	6	No
Family 4	Mother (Vy)	41	11	PG	Melbourne	Language education	3	4	No
Family 5*	Mother (Trúc)	33	6	PG	Sydney	Language education	2	6	No

7. *Phase two analysis.* Once all the data had been coded, the first and second author examined the list of 154 open codes. These open codes were grouped into four themes based on the four research questions. Subthemes were created under the four main themes. In this process of grouping themes, the open codes were revised and codes of the similar or conceptually related themes/subthemes were merged. This process brought the total number of open codes to 102 which were compiled into 19 subthemes within four major themes.
8. *Member checking.* A summary of the key themes and subthemes identified from the analysis were sent to families for member checking to receive their feedback prior to finalisation and publication of the findings. All of the families responded with agreement to the summary and no further feedback was provided.

RESULTS

Four themes were identified based on the research questions: (1) motivations, (2) challenges, (3) practices, and (4) recommendations for home language maintenance support. (Table 2) These themes and associated subthemes will be considered in turn.

THEME	SUBTHEME
Motivations of home language maintenance	Communication with grandparents and relatives in Vietnam Maintenance of cultural identity Parents' need to speak their native language Benefits of multilingualism
Challenges in home language maintenance Vietnamese	Difficulties related to children's age Parents' lack of time and persistence Difficulties related to community support and education resources
Practices and strategies for successful home language maintenance	Home language maintenance practices Speaking Vietnamese at home Teaching Vietnamese to the children Having family language policy Home language maintenance strategies Being consistent and persistent Maintaining Vietnamese identity and love for Vietnam and Vietnamese language Promoting communication in Vietnamese through connections with Vietnam Making it fun
Recommendations for home language maintenance support	Support factors Community and ethnic culture Parents' education background and work experience Recommendations Language education policy and advocacy Resources Raising awareness of home language maintenance

Table 2 Summary of themes and subthemes.

MOTIVATIONS

The parents discussed four main reasons for their families to maintain their Vietnamese language: communication with grandparents and relatives in Vietnam, maintenance of cultural identity, parents' need to speak their native language, and the cognitive and emotional benefits of multilingualism.

All the families shared that they wanted their children to maintain their Vietnamese language so that they could talk with their grandparents and relatives in Vietnamese. For example, in [Excerpt 1](#), Thủy mentioned her children needed to speak Vietnamese because the grandparents could not speak English.

Excerpt 1 Thủy.

ORIGINAL	ENGLISH TRANSLATION
... thứ nhất là để nói chuyện được với ông bà. Em vẫn nói với các cháu là ông bà không biết tiếng Anh, mình vẫn còn họ hàng ở Việt nam, nếu các con không nói được tiếng Việt thì các con không thể giao tiếp với mọi người ở Việt nam được.	... the first reason is to talk with grandparents. I always tell my kids that grandparents can't speak English, we still have relatives in Vietnam, if you can't speak Vietnamese, you won't be able to communicate with our people in Vietnam.

Five parents mentioned preserving cultural identity is one of the drivers behind their efforts in maintaining their home language. For example, in [Excerpt 2](#), Vy explained maintaining Vietnamese helps her children understand their identity.

Excerpt 2 Vy.

ORIGINAL	ENGLISH TRANSLATION
Em thì em nghĩ một cái quan trọng nữa về vấn đề identity. Khi mà lớn lên ở đây cháu sẽ chịu ảnh hưởng của văn hóa Úc, nhưng sẽ có một lúc nào đó nó sẽ tự hỏi là mình thuộc về đâu. Khi mà em nghĩ nó có tiếng Việt, nó có gốc nào đó, nó sẽ hiểu được cháu có một phần là người Việt nam, giúp cho cháu có một gốc vững.	I think what really matters is their identity. I know they will grow up with the influence of Australian culture, but I believe there will be a time when they ask themselves where they belong to. I think if they can speak Vietnamese, they will understand part of their identity is Vietnamese, and that they have a firm root.

Some parents mentioned they chose Vietnamese to talk to their children as it is their native language. As Trúc said, she wanted to speak Vietnamese to her children for her own need. She found it easier and more genuine to express her emotions and feelings in Vietnamese because “Dù những câu bình thường như “Mẹ yêu con”, em vẫn có thể nói được, nhưng tự trong sâu trong lòng, vẫn thân thương hơn khi mình nói bằng tiếng mẹ đẻ của mình” [I can still say emotional sentences like “I love you” in English but from the bottom of my heart, I know I feel it more when saying it in my mother tongue].

The families also wanted their children to speak Vietnamese for the benefits of multilingualism including the cognitive and social-emotional advantages. For example, Huệ stated: “Chị vẫn giữ hai ngôn ngữ vì nó phát triển *cognitive development* của nó” [I want them to be bilingual because I believe in the cognitive benefit of multilingualism]. Three parents also said they felt Vietnamese-Australian children had a gap in their emotional life if they focused on English; therefore, they tried to maintain Vietnamese for their children to fill that gap, as was expressed by Trúc in [Excerpt 3](#).

Excerpt 3 Trúc.

ORIGINAL	ENGLISH TRANSLATION
Các bạn nhỏ bên này em thấy thiệt thòi, vì cái gắn kết gia đình, không có nhiều người thân là các bạn ấy đã thiệt thòi về tinh thần rất lớn nên nếu gia đình không duy trì ngôn ngữ tiếng Việt cho các bạn thì các bạn bị thiếu hụt rất lớn về tinh thần.	I find children living here are disadvantaged in that they do not have family connections, they do not have many relatives around, that's their disadvantage in terms of emotion so if we do not maintain Vietnamese for them, it would be a big loss for them.

In summary, parents wanted their children to maintain Vietnamese so that the children can communicate with grandparents and relatives in Vietnam, the children can maintain their cultural identity, the parents can speak their native language with their children, and the children will benefit from the social-emotional and cognitive benefits of multilingualism.

CHALLENGES

The parents shared a number of difficulties they encountered when helping their children maintain Vietnamese. These challenges are related to children's age, parents' lack of time

and persistence, the unavailability of Vietnamese language curriculum, insufficient resources, unsatisfactory teacher quality, and a lack of community consensus.

Most parents indicated that their children spoke Vietnamese when they were younger; however, at times they needed some encouragement. For example, Thủy mentioned “Nhà em khi con còn bé thì dễ nói tiếng Anh hơn, thì thường em yêu cầu nói lại bằng tiếng Việt” [When the kids were small, they were more prone to speaking English, so I would often ask them to say the sentence again in Vietnamese]. According to the parents, it was harder to maintain Vietnamese language when their children grew older because they “không thể ép được bọn nó nữa” [can no longer force them] (Ninh). Huệ added “Càng lớn thì càng nhiều *code-switching*” [The older they grow, the more code switching they would use]. Hồng indicated that children had less time for Vietnamese language maintenance due to increased school priorities when they get older, as can be seen in Excerpt 4.

Excerpt 4 Hồng.

ORIGINAL	ENGLISH TRANSLATION
Lên <i>high school</i> là có các <i>language</i> khác nữa. Bây giờ mình cũng phải để ý <i>language</i> nào quan trọng hơn trong cuộc sống. ở trường nó bắt buộc phải học như thế. Các bạn ấy cũng cần học những cái đấy để <i>compete</i> trong công việc nữa.	When they get to high school, they also have other languages to learn. Now we also need to think of what language is more important in life. At school, the subjects are compulsory. They also need to learn those stuffs to compete in their future work.

Most parents also shared a concern that their children’s Vietnamese language did not improve after a certain level due to the home language environment where only certain topics were discussed. As Thủy stated: “Cái khó khăn là nó chỉ đạt đến mức cơ bản mà không biết làm sao để tiến lên” [The challenge is they have reached a certain basic level, and we don’t know how to get them to go further from there]. Trúc explained that was because “môi trường cho con luyện tiếng chỉ có thể có ở trong gia đình mà vì là môi trường gia đình nên chỉ có chừng đấy câu chuyện, không thể phát triển ra các đề tài khác được” [their only environment for home language is the family one, which is limited to certain topics, we can’t go further to other topics].

Time was one of the major barriers confronting parents in supporting their children to maintain Vietnamese. Some spent less time teaching their children Vietnamese when they had more children. Other parents found they could support their children better when they did not work full time. For example, in Excerpt 5, Trúc mentioned parents’ need to reduce workload to spend more time with their children.

Excerpt 5 Trúc.

ORIGINAL	ENGLISH TRANSLATION
Tuy nhiên để làm được việc đó thì mình phải có thời gian, bắt buộc hoặc bố hoặc mẹ chịu thiệt thời một chút, bớt lại công việc của mình cho con, nếu có điều kiện để làm như vậy thì mình có thể duy trì được.	However, we need time to do that. One parent has to sacrifice by reducing their workload. If we can do that, we can maintain Vietnamese.

Lack of persistence was also a problem for some families. Some parents recalled they sometimes spoke English with their children when in a hurry or tired. As Huệ stated: “Có những lúc em về em mệt thì em có thể nói như thế” [Sometimes when I came back from work and I was already tired, I might say that].

The parents also discussed their difficulties as a result of insufficient quality resources, unavailable Vietnamese language curricula, quality of teachers, and lack of community consensus. First, the parents found that available resource materials were not suitable for Vietnamese-speaking children living overseas (see Excerpt 6).

Excerpt 6 Hồng.

ORIGINAL	ENGLISH TRANSLATION
Thiếu <i>resources</i> . Em không có sách hay các <i>resource</i> phụ trợ để dạy tiếng Việt cho con như là, nếu như là một ngôn ngữ khác. ... giáo trình dạy cho người nước ngoài thì nhiều nhưng không đúng với những đứa trẻ sống ở nước ngoài và có yếu tố Việt nam.	Lack of resources. I don’t have good materials and resources to teach my children Vietnamese, like what they have in other languages. ... there are many materials for people living abroad but they are not age appropriate, not for Vietnamese children living abroad.

In terms of curriculum, the parents questioned the lack of Vietnamese language opportunities in the Australian school curriculum given the large number of Vietnamese speakers in Australia. They had difficulties in finding formal Vietnamese language classes for their children, as **Hồng** expresses in **Excerpt 7**.

ORIGINAL	ENGLISH TRANSLATION
Tại sao người Việt ở Úc đông như thế, <i>community</i> nhiều thế mà tiếng Việt lại không được dạy ở trong <i>NSW language school</i> . Ví dụ như con em, em muốn nó <i>take</i> một <i>course</i> tiếng Việt trong <i>curriculum</i> ở <i>high school</i> thì không có. ... Không có <i>formal Vietnamese education at school</i> . Cái <i>point</i> này rất hay. Tức là không có chính sách, chính sách ngôn ngữ của NSW, sử dụng tiếng Việt, môn học trong trường. Nó <i>impact</i> bọn em.	I have this question, while the Vietnamese community in Australia is quite large, why isn't Vietnamese language taught at NSW [New South Wales] language school? My daughter wanted to take a Vietnamese course in the curriculum at high school but they don't have it. ... There's no formal Vietnamese education. This is an important issue. That means NSW does not have a policy in terms of Vietnamese language use and Vietnamese in the curriculum. And that impacts us.

Excerpt 7 Hồng.

While weekend community Vietnamese language schools were available in some areas, many of the parents were not convinced of the quality of teachers and therefore did not send their children (for example, see **Excerpt 8**).

ORIGINAL	ENGLISH TRANSLATION
Em cũng từng đưa con đến dự thính, em thấy cô nói tiếng Anh quá nhiều, em rút luôn.	I sent my children to Vietnamese language school once and I noticed the teacher spoke too much English, I withdrew my son out straight away.

Excerpt 8 Trúc.

Some parents mentioned the lack of a common voice among the Vietnamese community in terms of Vietnamese language education, as can be seen in **Excerpt 9**:

ORIGINAL	ENGLISH TRANSLATION
Có một số cộng đồng họ tự lực rất tốt, trong một môi trường như vậy. Họ có <i>community</i> , có người đứng ra làm. Cộng đồng mình chưa có sự thống nhất. Cùng một chính sách, tại sao ngôn ngữ khác phát triển hơn?	Some communities do much better than us, in the same context. They have a good community with good leaders. Our community lack a consensus. The same policy for the whole state but why do some communities do better than the others?

Excerpt 9 Huệ.

In summary, parents face a number of difficulties in maintaining home language for their children due to their children getting older, parents' lack of time and persistence, insufficient resources, the unavailability of Vietnamese language curriculum, unsatisfactory teacher quality, and a lack of community consensus.

PRACTICES AND STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESSFUL HOME LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE

Despite the challenges that the families encountered, the parents managed to help their children maintain Vietnamese through home language maintenance practices and a consistent family language policy.

Home language maintenance practices

The parents shared their thoughts of factors contributing to the success of home language maintenance and discussed two main language maintenance practices: speaking Vietnamese at home and teaching Vietnamese.

Three of the families mentioned that they spoke Vietnamese at home all the time while two families spoke Vietnamese most of the time. One parent said: “**Bước chân vào cửa nhà là quán triệt 100% tiếng Việt**” [Since we enter our house, we speak Vietnamese 100% of the time] (Trúc). The families also spoke Vietnamese to their children even when they were outside of

the home, and they only spoke English when their interactions involved English speakers. In [Excerpt 10](#), for example, [Thủy](#) explained in detail her family language policy.

ORIGINAL	ENGLISH TRANSLATION
Ra ngoài thì nếu vấn đề mình nói có liên quan đến người nói tiếng Anh thì mình nói tiếng Anh, còn nếu không thì vẫn nói tiếng Việt.	When we go out, if what we talk is related to the English-speakers present, we speak English, if not we still speak Vietnamese.

Excerpt 10 Thủy.

The parents taught Vietnamese to their children both directly using textbooks and indirectly through daily interactions and activities including book reading, watching Vietnamese TV, and other literary forms.

The parents used Vietnamese language textbooks from Vietnam or Vietnamese textbooks for foreigners and designed their own materials to teach their children. [Hong](#) shared her experience: “Nhà em thì dùng sách dạy tiếng Việt cho Tây bé, em thấy cái đấy tốt hơn dùng sách Việt nam” [We used the Vietnamese textbooks for children learning Vietnamese as foreign language. I found that better than books from Vietnam.]

The children of these families also learnt Vietnamese with their parents through a number of daily activities in Vietnamese including communication, reading books, watching TV programs, singing lullabies, and reading poems. The parents shared that they tried to help their children speak Vietnamese through daily interactions. The common pattern was that the parents explained the words, children repeated them, followed by children saying the whole sentence again in Vietnamese. This model of Explain, Repeat, and Say was commonly practised by all the families. As [Thủy](#) said: “...em sẽ nói cái từ đấy của con tiếng Việt và con nói lại từ đấy và thường bảo con nói lại cả câu bằng tiếng Việt cho mẹ” [...I would tell them the words in Vietnamese, ask them to repeat the words and say the whole sentence in Vietnamese again]. The parents agreed that it was important to give them time to recall Vietnamese words themselves if the parents believed their children knew the words. As [Trúc](#) said: “Em sẽ bảo là thế thì con thử nghĩ lại, chờ một chút, bởi vì bố mẹ biết là con biết từ đó” [I would suggest that he thinks again, we could wait as we knew he knew the words].

Some parents shared how they dealt with situations when their children could not find the words in Vietnamese and avoided frustrations when both parents and children did not understand what the other wanted to say. They would use a “soft method,” letting the children say the words in English, and they translated the utterance into Vietnamese for the children to know what it should be in Vietnamese. [Excerpt 11](#) shows how [Huệ](#) dealt with her children speaking English at home.

ORIGINAL	ENGLISH TRANSLATION
Con đang excited về conversation, mình không ép con phải nói tiếng Việt mà sẽ chỉnh dần sau đó. Như nó kể về một cái gì đó chẳng hạn, em sẽ không stop nói lại và bảo con phải nói tiếng Việt. Em sẽ có biện pháp để feedback nhưng không làm cho nó thấy mẹ đang correct nó. Để cho conversation tiếp tục.	They were excited to talk about what happened at school, the conversation was going well, we should not force them to speak Vietnamese but correct their language little by little after that. If they were telling me something, I would not stop them and ask them to speak in Vietnamese. I will somehow feedback on their language use but without letting her know that I am correcting them. I would let the conversation go on.

Excerpt 11 Huệ.

A parent mentioned her intentional diversification of Vietnamese vocabulary when speaking so that her children could learn more words through daily conversation because, she explained: “vì con không có con đường nào nhập từ mới nhiều ngoài bố mẹ” [there’s no other way of language input other than with parents] ([Trúc](#)).

The parents indicated that reading books with their children was one of the most effective home language maintenance strategies. For example, [Trúc](#) stated: “Thời gian bọn em xây dựng tình yêu với sách, khi đọc một cuốn tiếng Anh thì sẽ đọc một lần bằng tiếng Anh và sau đó dịch cả câu chuyện ra tiếng Việt” [We helped them build their love with books. They read an English book once and translate the whole book into Vietnamese]. Some parents used poems,

lullabies, songs, and TV programs to teach Vietnamese and to build their children’s love of their Vietnamese culture (see [Excerpt 12](#), for example).

ORIGINAL	ENGLISH TRANSLATION
Con nhà em nó xem tivi Việt nam nhiều, cái đấy làm nó học nhiều. Nó xem tivi thời sự tiếng Việt nó có thể hiểu được hết, hoặc nó xem các <i>show</i> “Người đây là ai”, <i>show</i> có hài, học rất nhanh, Rap Việt, các chương trình <i>show</i> của Việt nam.	My kids watch a lot of Vietnamese TV, they learn a lot of Vietnamese from that. They watch news in Vietnamese, they understand, they watch other shows, like <i>Who is the person</i> , fun shows, <i>RAP Viet</i> , they learn very quickly.

Excerpt 12 Hồng.

Having family language policies

Most of the parents shared that they had a strict rule of only speaking Vietnamese at home as well as outside of the home unless there was an English speaker involved. Therefore, the children only used English when at school or when going out with their friends. As **Ninh** said: “Nhà em rất đơn giản, con cái nói chuyện với bố mẹ, chị em với nhau cũng hoàn toàn bằng tiếng Việt” [My family’s policy is simple: children talk to parents in Vietnamese, sisters talk to each other also completely in Vietnamese]. They made it clear to their children that if they spoke English, they would have to say the same sentence again in Vietnamese (see [Excerpt 13](#), for example).

ORIGINAL	ENGLISH TRANSLATION
Bạn ấy biết như thế từ nhỏ nên khi đi học về mà muốn kể chuyện bằng tiếng Anh thì bạn ấy ý thức được là phải nói cả bằng tiếng Việt cho mẹ, là bạn ấy sẽ nói lại ngay bằng tiếng Việt.	My son knows that so since small, he was always aware if he wanted to tell his school stories in English, he would have to tell in Vietnamese as well, so he would switch back to Vietnamese right away.

Excerpt 13 Trúc.

The parents were also strict about not mixing English when speaking Vietnamese. As **Thủy** stressed in [Excerpt 14](#), their family tried their best not to use English when speaking with each other.

ORIGINAL	ENGLISH TRANSLATION
Nhà em nguyên tắc cũng triệt để, bố mẹ con cái nói chuyện với nhau bằng tiếng Việt, cố gắng để không chêm từ tiếng Anh.	My family’s rule is also strict. Parents and children talk to each other in Vietnamese, trying our best not to mix English in.

Excerpt 14 Thủy.

Home language maintenance strategies

The parents also mentioned other factors they thought important in maintaining Vietnamese. These include being consistent and persistent, maintaining their Vietnamese identity and love for Vietnam and Vietnamese language, promoting communication in Vietnamese through connections with Vietnam, and making home language maintenance fun.

Most of the parents shared that home language maintenance requires “mỗi ngày một ít, dạy cháu mỗi ngày một ít” [persistence, teaching them a little bit everyday] (**Thủy**). They indicated the need to be consistent in their efforts. As **Huệ** elaborated in [Excerpt 15](#), home language maintenance is not only speaking the language but also maintaining the culture and the familial cohesion.

ORIGINAL	ENGLISH TRANSLATION
<i>Consistent</i> là trong tất cả các hành động của mình. <i>Consistent</i> qua <i>community</i> , <i>identity</i> , <i>culture</i> , cùng một lúc, chứ không phải chỉ giữ tiếng Việt, mà còn phải cả việc nó yêu ông bà, bố mẹ, văn hóa.	Consistency means I maintain Vietnamese in many ways, community activities, maintaining identity, culture, all at the same time, not only maintaining Vietnamese language, but also maintaining their love for their grandparents, parents, and culture.

Excerpt 15 Huệ .

One parent stressed the importance of consistency between the parents in maintaining Vietnamese for children because “không thể một người tiếng Việt, một người tiếng Anh, hoặc thích nói tiếng Việt lúc nào thì nói, vì rất khó, vì môi trường phát triển tiếng cho con bên này chỉ

có gia đình” [it wouldn’t work if one parent speaks Vietnamese, and the other speaks English or does not care which language should be spoken at home. That makes it very hard as the only home language environment for children is family] (Trúc). Parental consensus and dual effort were also evident in the way the mothers presented as “we,” “my husband and I,” or “my family” when talking about their practices (see [Excerpt 16](#), for example).

ORIGINAL	ENGLISH TRANSLATION
Nhà em cũng như vậy, ... nếu có từ nào mà thực sự bạn ấy không biết thì hai vợ chồng sẽ nói cho bạn ấy từ đó tiếng Việt và nói lại cả câu bằng tiếng Việt.	Same with my family, if there are words he doesn’t know, my husband and I would tell him the words in Vietnamese and ask him to say the whole sentence again.

Excerpt 16 Trúc.

The parents agreed on the importance of maintaining Vietnamese identity and love for Vietnam and Vietnamese in maintaining home language. They indicated it would be hard to expect children to use Vietnamese if they did not have a positive attitude towards their Vietnamese identity or did not like Vietnam and Vietnamese language. As Huệ said: “... muốn dạy tiếng Việt cho con thì phải cho con tình yêu với tiếng Việt và Việt nam” [...if we want to teach kids Vietnamese, we have to help them build the love for Vietnamese and Vietnam].

Five parents found it helpful to expose their children to different Vietnamese communication opportunities through interactions with relatives, visits to Vietnam, and school attendance in Vietnam. This is expressed by Hồng in [Excerpt 17](#).

ORIGINAL	ENGLISH TRANSLATION
Nếu mà tạo được một cái <i>belonging, community feel</i> cho nó rất quan trọng. Ví dụ như bọn em cố gắng đưa chúng nó về Việt nam, cái đây là học nhanh nhất. Về Việt nam ví dụ 2–3 tuần các bạn <i>catch up</i> rất nhanh, các bạn có môi trường đấy.	If we can build a sense of belonging and community feeling, that’s very important. For example, we try to take them to Vietnam, that’s the fastest way of learning. They can catch up really quickly within 2–3 weeks in Vietnam, they have the language learning environment.

Excerpt 17 Hồng.

Some parents mentioned it was important to avoid frustration and to make Vietnamese learning fun. They believed that once the children like the language, they will want to learn it. For example, in [Excerpt 18](#), Hồng mentioned that learning Vietnamese in a fun way motivated her children better.

ORIGINAL	ENGLISH TRANSLATION
Đại khái là cái gì buồn cười và vui thì khuyến khích chúng nó học tiếng Việt rất nhanh. Chúng nó muốn xem.	In general, whatever is fun and recreational will motivate them to learn Vietnamese and learn very fast as they like watching them on TV.

Excerpt 18 Hồng.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HOME LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE SUPPORT

The parents indicated two main factors that would support home language maintenance: first, local cultural community, and second, parental education and work background. They also recommended societal support in terms of language education policy and resources. The parents believed that “*community, em thấy cộng đồng là yếu tố quan trọng*” [community, I think, is an important factor] (Huệ) in home language maintenance. They shared their observations of other immigrant communities in Australia with successful home language maintenance. They were interested in understanding whether the “*yếu tố văn hóa*” [culture factor] (Ninh) was an important factor in home language maintenance as they noticed some groups seemed to maintain home language better than others, given similar conditions. Both Quý and Trúc discussed the success of the Korean community in maintaining their language “100% *bản năng sử dụng tiếng Hàn*” [100% used Korean as a habit] (Trúc).

One parent, Vy, raised the question of whether the parents’ education background and work experience were a positive factor in home language maintenance. Vy pointed out that most of the focus group members “*có liên quan đến ngôn ngữ, hoặc là giáo viên*” [have education

background or work experience related to language or education], therefore, they “hiếu được tầm quan trọng của ngôn ngữ nên giúp con nói được càng nhiều ngôn ngữ càng tốt” [understand the importance of languages to children’s development and support the children to learn as many languages as possible].

The parents discussed three recommendations related to home language maintenance: changes in language education policy and advocacy, better resources, and greater public perception of home language maintenance. All the parents expressed their desire for Vietnamese language education in the school curriculum and the need for advocacy for language policy to promote home language maintenance. Hồng compared the “many Chinese community classes” with “Vietnamese language schools” that “rely on volunteer teachers only” advocating for the need for “Vietnamese curriculum at school”. Vy affirmed this view, indicating “chính sách cho bang New South Wales là một nhưng cũng là của cả nước Úc, thì nó giúp được cho cái cộng đồng của mình” [a policy is needed for not only New South Wales but also for the whole Australia. It will help our community].

The parents also discussed the need for better training and resources targeting children who are learning Vietnamese outside of Vietnam, as Hồng explains in Excerpt 19:

ORIGINAL	ENGLISH TRANSLATION
Cái mà <i>training</i> cho bố mẹ, dạy cho bố mẹ <i>methodology</i> , chứ không phải ai cũng có <i>background</i> về <i>language</i> hay các mẹ khác làm cô giáo, nên cái khóa ngắn cũng tốt.	The training for parents, teaching parents about methodology is great. Because not all parents have backgrounds in language and education, so a short training is helpful.

Excerpt 19 Hồng.

Further, Huệ mentioned the need to raise parents’ awareness of the importance of home language maintenance because “Đây là bản chất của vấn đề. Khi mình đã giải quyết được vấn đề này mình sẽ *follow up* được nhiều cái khác. Cái này là cái *perception* thay đổi” [That’s the key thing. Once we can solve that, other problems will be solved. It’s important to change perceptions].

DISCUSSION

This focus group study sheds light on five Vietnamese-Australian families’ home language maintenance experiences, in particular the motivations, challenges, practices, and recommendations for support. The findings of this qualitative study provide detailed and nuanced support for results from previous quantitative studies regarding factors associated with home language maintenance among Vietnamese-Australia families (Tran et al., 2021a; Tran et al., 2021b) and Vietnamese families’ language policy (Tran et al., 2022). The parents’ discussion indicated that successful maintenance of Vietnamese in their families was linked with the parents’ language use including both informal and formal teaching and their positive attitudes towards language and identity maintenance. This is in line with findings from Tran et al. (2021b) indicating the strong association between parents’ language use and attitudes and children’s home language maintenance in Vietnamese-Australian families. Strict family language policies were also one of the key factors associated with successful home language maintenance. This confirms findings from the study by Tran et al. (2021b) that children from families with consistent family language policies had a higher level of home language proficiency and use.

The study also includes findings that echoed previous studies on home language maintenance among other immigrant communities in the world. First, there were many strengths related to home language maintenance. The parents considered maintaining cultural identity one of the most important motivations for their efforts in home language maintenance. Previous studies found that parents had a strong sense of cultural identity and they wished to pass it on to their children through language maintenance (Enstice, 2012; Kennedy & Romo, 2013; Saravanan, 2001). They also wanted to invest in the home language as “cultural capital” that is valuable across the world (Nordstrom, 2016, p. 519). Further, the families wanted to maintain home language so that their children could communicate with grandparents and relatives in Vietnam. This is in line with findings from previous studies indicating that most parents wanted their children to maintain home language to talk to their grandparents and relatives (McAlister,

2018; Mejia, 2016). Another reason for home language maintenance shared by the families was related to the benefits of multilingualism including better cognitive functioning and enhanced emotional life, which echoed findings from previous studies (Little, 2020; Sun, 2019). Families who wanted their children to maintain home language believed that multilingualism helped brain functioning and enriched their social-emotional life.

Second, the parents' difficulties in home language maintenance were related to children's age, increased schoolwork at higher education levels, and parents' lack of time and persistence. These are commonly found in previous studies that also indicated home language maintenance becomes more challenging after children commence formal schooling (Xia, 2016) and after they reach adolescence (Kondo, 1997). The parents' concern that their children's Vietnamese proficiency did not progress beyond a certain level is in line with previous research suggesting that, in contrast to the majority language, home language writing skills did not improve when the children grew older (Kim & Pyun, 2014). Insufficient time and persistence in home language maintenance have previously been discussed as one of the main factors leading to language loss (Fishman, 1991; Hakuta & D'Andrea, 1992).

Third, the lack of formal Vietnamese education in the school curriculum, insufficient resources, and unsatisfactory teacher quality were also reported as barriers in home language maintenance and were reflected in the parents' recommendations for support. Previously researchers have suggested the home language immersed curriculum since primary level would have promoted the learning as well as raised the respect of the home language (Lee, 2002; Tinsley & Board, 2016). Vietnamese education is offered only in schools where there is a high demand (e.g., with a large cohort of students with Vietnamese heritage) (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2021; Willoughby, 2014). This indicates the lack of equal access to community language education in Australia including Vietnamese education (Reath Warren, 2017) and suggests a top-down change in the national language policy to enable students speaking a home language to access that language education since starting school. The parents' concerns related to lack of resources and dissatisfaction of teacher quality echoed others' findings from studies in home language education in the US and Australia (Brecht & Ingold, 2002; Eisenclas et al., 2013). The discussion of these issues in this focus group confirmed concerns related to home language maintenance among immigrant communities in English-speaking countries including the Vietnamese in Australia.

In terms of practices that helped the success of home language maintenance, the families reported two main routines: speaking Vietnamese at home all the time and teaching Vietnamese directly using textbooks and indirectly via daily interactions and other media. These findings are in keeping with studies of home language maintenance among Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Spanish, and German families in the US, Australia, and Canada. The parents in these studies also reported they used strict policies of speaking their home language among family members (Keh & Stoessel, 2017; Kennedy & Romo, 2013) and created a home language learning environment with parents as instructors helping the children learn the language using textbooks and language games (Babae, 2013; Xia, 2016) and through regular activities including book reading, conversation, and TV and video watching (Biedinger et al., 2015; Dixon et al., 2012; Kheirkhah & Cekaite, 2015; McAlister, 2018). Apart from parents' formal and informal teaching of Vietnamese, focus on the use of Vietnamese from a young age was a key factor in the language maintenance success among the families within this focus group. This echoed previous studies in home language maintenance among different immigrant communities in Germany, Israel, and the US, that also found the success rate of home language maintenance was higher when children were exposed to the language at an earlier age (Biedinger et al., 2015; Chumak-Horbatsch, 2008).

While only one parent suggested the possible impact of parental education and work background on the children's successful home language maintenance, this statement was supported by the demographic characteristics of the parents. Most of the parents (4 out of 7) had tertiary education and/or worked in the disciplines of language or education and all of them had a postgraduate qualification. Researchers have shown that parents' educational background has a significant impact on children's language and literacy development (Calvo & Bialystok, 2014; Hartas, 2011; Hosseinpour et al., 2015; Petchprasert, 2014). However, previous studies on home language maintenance among Vietnamese families in Australia found higher socio-economic backgrounds were significantly associated with more negative

attitudes towards home language maintenance, which in turn was linked to children's lower home language maintenance (Tran et al., 2021a). This is likely due to parents' perceptions of English as the language of success when living in an English-speaking country (Carhill et al., 2008). This was supported by the focus group discussion in this study that the important factor was parents' perceptions that determined the success of home language maintenance. Therefore, home language maintenance among families with high socio-economic status is possible when parents have positive attitudes and make an effort.

In combination, these findings align with Spolsky's (2004) language policy theory which posits that the three elements of language practices, language ideology, and language management are necessary for home language maintenance. The families in this study who have been successful in maintaining Vietnamese with their children demonstrated strong consideration of each of these elements and described how their daily practices, positive attitudes towards Vietnamese, and strict management of language use all played a role in their success.

In addition to supporting Spolsky's language policy theory, the current study also contributes to the literature by including the perspectives of fathers and the holistic dynamic of the family in home language maintenance. The home language maintenance literature largely focuses on the role of mothers in home language maintenance (Kwon, 2017; Mejía, 2016). This is often because social dynamics in many cultures see mothers spending more time at home with their children in the early years. However, the minimization of fathers' roles in home language maintenance leaves a significant gap in the literature. The data in this study highlighted the pivotal role that fathers play in language practices, language ideology, and language management. The data also revealed the importance of both parents being in agreement and providing a consistent support for home language maintenance in two-parent households, which has not been adequately investigated (Kim & Starks, 2010). These findings add to the much-needed body of work considering the role of fathers in home language maintenance (e.g., Al-Sahafi, 2015).

IMPLICATIONS

The families' shared experience of home language maintenance has a number of implications. First, it appears that maintenance of home language in the focus group was dependent on individual families' efforts because the children from these families had high levels of language proficiency despite not attending Vietnamese community schools and having limited access to resources and quality formal community or school-based language education. Second, there is a need to support parents who do not have a background in language or education as well as to raise the awareness of home language maintenance among parents, particularly parents of higher socio-economic background. This was concluded as the majority of the parents in this study have a background or work in language and/or education and, as pointed out in Tran et al. (2021a), parents' attitudes towards home language maintenance was negatively associated with their socio-economic status. Third, the parents' shared experience indicated that, in keeping with Spolsky's (2004) language policy theory, strict rules (language management), consistency and persistence (language practices), and attitudes (language ideology) are key components of successful home language maintenance for families in a context where societal support is limited. The parents' recommendations related to language policy, formal community language education, and community strength in advocating for these changes implied the parents' strong desire for a change in the system for equal and adequate access to home language education.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Despite the contributions of this study, there are some limitations to be considered. First, the chosen families were not representative of all Vietnamese families with successful home language maintenance nor the entire Vietnamese community in Australia. Second, the views and opinions that members shared may not reflect their complete thoughts due to the possible tendency to avoid conflict among group members. Individual interviews might have resulted in a wider range of opinions. Third, the fact that the group discussion was conducted in Vietnamese and required translation for bilingual analysis was a strength that is rarely

found in focus groups research, but also could be a shortcoming. While the translation was undertaken by the first author, who is a professional NAATI-accredited translator, and was checked by and discussed with the other authors for transparent meanings to English readers, there could be conceptual equivalence issues occurring during analysis and translation due to the complexity of the topics. A final limitation is related to children's speech and language proficiency assessment used to identify families with successful home language maintenance, which was only conducted with one child in each of the families. Though parents' discussions confirmed their children's high proficiency in Vietnamese language, no further assessment was administered to the remaining children of the families to confirm the parents' statements.

CONCLUSION

This focus group study contributes to the literature by shifting discussion from the challenges of home language maintenance in English-speaking countries towards looking at success stories of those who have been able to maintain high proficiency within their families. The study sheds light on common issues regarding successful home language maintenance from the perspectives of Vietnamese-Australian families. These include the motivations and difficulties overcome by the families, daily practices to engage their children to maintain Vietnamese, and their recommendations for language maintenance support. The success of the families (given the limited societal support) suggests that home language maintenance is possible but requires a great amount of effort, time, persistence, consistency, and methods. Successful home language maintenance could be strengthened with more visible involvement of society and the government providing support in terms of language policy and resources. While the study was conducted with a small group of Australian families with Vietnamese heritage, its findings support previous quantitative studies of home language maintenance among the Vietnamese community in Australia as well as studies of other language communities across the world, providing further insights into factors associated with successful home language maintenance among the Vietnamese as well as other immigrant communities in Australia and in the world.

APPENDIX A. FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. Gia đình bạn có nói tiếng Việt ở nhà không? Gia đình bạn có nói tiếng Anh ở nhà không? Gia đình nói tiếng Việt/tiếng Anh khi nào? Với ai và Tại sao?
[Does your family speak Vietnamese at home? Does your family speak English at home? When, with whom, why?]
2. Duy trì tiếng mẹ đẻ (tiếng Việt) quan trọng như thế nào đối với bạn/gia đình bạn? Tại sao?
[Is home language maintenance important to you/your family? Why?]
3. Việc duy trì tiếng Việt được thực hiện như thế nào ở gia đình bạn?
[What does "home language maintenance" look like in your family?]
4. Bạn/gia đình bạn có "nguyên tắc sử dụng ngôn ngữ cho gia đình" không? Nếu có, bạn có thể cho biết cụ thể nguyên tắc đó như thế nào được không?
[Do you/your family have a "family language policy"? If yes, could you provide details of your family language policy?]
5. Bạn làm gì để duy trì tiếng Việt cho con?
[What is your experience of maintaining home language?]
6. Bạn thấy những việc nào là hiệu quả?
[What do you find helpful?]
7. Bạn gặp khó khăn gì khi duy trì tiếng Việt cho con?
[What do you find challenging?]
8. Theo bạn thì loại hình trợ giúp hay tài liệu nào sẽ giúp các gia đình duy trì tiếng mẹ đẻ dễ dàng hơn?
[What help/resources would make it easier?]

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Van H. Tran  orcid.org/0000-0002-8855-9313
Charles Sturt University, AU

Sarah Verdon  orcid.org/0000-0002-7503-5860
Charles Sturt University, AU

Sharynne McLeod  orcid.org/0000-0002-7279-7851
Charles Sturt University, AU

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