

Bilingualism and Heritage Language Maintenance: Parental Perspectives on French Educational Pathways in Australia

BILINGÜISMO Y MANTENIMIENTO DE LA LENGUA DE HERENCIA: PERSPECTIVAS PARENTALES SOBRE LAS TRAYECTORIAS EDUCATIVAS EN FRANCÉS EN AUSTRALIA

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Abstract: This study examines the perspectives of parents of heritage speakers of French regarding educational options and pathways through the education system available to their children. Research into the educational choices and trajectories of heritage language learners has been identified as a significantly underexplored area. Data for this study was collected by means of an online questionnaire completed by 74 parents from across three states in Australia. Responses revealed parents' strong impetus to educate their children in their heritage language but encountered difficulties in accessing services to support their heritage language learning goals. Key areas of concern included limited opportunities in the early childhood and secondary education sectors and inappropriateness of curriculum options and teaching practices designed for foreign language learners. The study suggests a revision of curriculum options for heritage language learners and the creation of a dedicated syllabus for French which would align with offerings available for other languages.

Keywords: Heritage language, Heritage language learners, French, language maintenance, languages in Australia, parental perspectives.

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Resumen: Este estudio examina las perspectivas de padres y madres de hablantes de herencia del francés con respecto a las opciones y trayectorias educativas disponibles para sus hijos dentro del sistema escolar australiano. La investigación sobre las elecciones educativas y los itinerarios de aprendizaje de estudiantes de lenguas de herencia ha sido identificada como un área significativamente poco explorada. Los datos de este estudio se recopilieron mediante un cuestionario en línea completado por 74 padres en tres estados de Australia. Las respuestas revelaron un fuerte interés de las familias en que sus hijos reciban educación en su lengua de herencia, aunque se enfrentan a dificultades para acceder a servicios que apoyen sus objetivos de aprendizaje del francés como lengua de herencia. Las principales áreas de preocupación incluyeron las oportunidades limitadas en los sectores de educación inicial y secundaria, así como la falta de adecuación de las opciones curriculares y prácticas pedagógicas diseñadas para aprendices de lenguas extranjeras. El estudio sugiere la necesidad de revisar las opciones curriculares para estudiantes de lenguas de herencia y de desarrollar un programa específico para el francés que se alinee con las ofertas disponibles para otras lenguas.

Palabras Clave: lengua de herencia, estudiantes de lengua(s) de herencia, francés, mantenimiento lingüístico, lenguas en Australia, perspectivas parentales.

Recibido: 3 Noviembre 2025 / Aceptado: 27 Noviembre 2025

Introduction

The rapid and widespread effects of globalisation and cross-border mobility have not only amplified opportunities for interconnectedness but have also “altered the landscape of languages education” (Scarino, 2021, p. 162). While most societies across the globe have become increasingly more culturally and linguistically diverse, most, if not all countries, continue to grapple with issues around acknowledging and integrating diversity, and diverse languages, into the educational apparatus which is, to a large extent, characterised by monolithic, normative, and monolingual hegemonic ideologies (Veliz & Chen, 2024).

Australia has experienced numerous waves of immigration which have increased the linguistic and cultural diversity of its communities. Social and educational policies along with pedagogical practices have been influenced by these changes. However, policy makers, curriculum developers and educators have often viewed migrants’ home languages or heritage languages (HL) as more of a problem to be solved than a resource to be nourished and developed. In an increasingly globalised world with changing linguistic landscapes, advocates of language maintenance promote the preservation and development of HLs as they strengthen attachment to ethnic and cultural identity (Sun et al., 2023). In order to succeed in sustaining HL maintenance, critical factors include government policies on language and diversity, language education and an active role of family and community involvement (Montrul, 2016; Montrul, 2023; Nesteruk, 2010).

In Australia, it has been recognised that despite well-meaning yet highly abstract statements of national educational objectives that fully embrace linguistic and cultural diversity (Fielding & Harbon, 2022; Veliz, 2023), there continues to exist a notable decline in the provision of avenues for nurturing the diverse linguistic repertoires of students in Australian classrooms (Scarino, 2013; Steele et al., 2025; Veliz, 2024). A prominent concern is the declining interest in languages other than English, which poses a significant issue for maintaining linguistic and cultural diversity (Veliz, 2024). To this end, the role of parents in nurturing and maintaining children's HLs is vital, thus serving as the cornerstone for linguistic, cultural, and identity development (Huang & Liao, 2024; Liang & Shin, 2021; Montrul, 2023). For this to be effectively achieved, there must be optimal educational avenues available for parents to support their children's heritage language development. However, it has been noted that some parents decide to focus on the development of their children's skills in the majority language and abandon HL development based on "folklore influence of non-specialist opinion" (Baetens Beardsmore, 2003, p.11) from sources such as friends or teachers who may provide poor advice and provoke anxiety in parents who do not have access to relevant services or reliable sources of information applicable to their situation.

To develop a more nuanced understanding of available pathways for HL support and maintenance among parents of heritage speakers of French, this study focuses on parental perspectives and practices around educational options and pathways available to their children within the Australian education system. Despite the growing multiculturalism, research into the educational choices made and trajectories sought by parents of heritage language learners (HLLs) remains significantly underexplored (Hornberger, 2005). Understanding parental perspectives on educational options for HL maintenance available to them is crucial for advancing heritage language education, benefiting individual students, their families, and enriching society as a whole. The research question that arises from this context is: What are parental perspectives on educational options and pathways for heritage speakers of French in Australia?

Heritage language maintenance and bilingualism

Definitions of the term heritage language (HL) abound in the literature on bi/multilingualism. Montrul (2023), for instance, points out that "heritage languages are socio-politically minority languages learned in a bilingual or multilingual context" (p. 5). HLs are deemed non-majority languages spoken in or inherited from family contexts (Montrul, 2023; Montrul & Polinsky, 2021; Wilson, 2020). Similarly, Rothman (2009) has defined it as a language that is spoken in the home environment or that is readily available to young children. In the Australian context where English is the majority language, HLLs might be defined as "bilingual in English and a home language other than English with varying degrees of proficiency in the home language" (Van Deusen-Scholl, 2003, p. 211). Rothman (2009) concurs that an individual is deemed a HLL if and only if they have 'some' (our emphasis) command of the HL acquired in naturalistic environments. García-Martín (2023) define HLLs as "bilingual individuals who grow up in what is considered an asymmetrical bilingual environment" (p. 1), which is an environment where the HL does not have a dominant role or status.

A central aspect of the above-mentioned definitions is their interconnection with culture and identity. Montrul and Polinsky (2021) indicate that HLs carry “connections to one’s family history, ethnic affiliation, attribution or appropriation, and cultural links” (p. 1). This means that HLs are not merely a means of communication but are deeply embedded in the cultural richness of individuals’ identity (Lee & Jeong, 2013). They serve as a bridge to one’s heritage, linking past and present generations through a shared language that embodies the values, traditions, and experiences of their community. This cultural connection is crucial for maintaining a sense of identity and belonging within a larger societal context that might not always recognise or value these diverse linguistic backgrounds (Szecsi & Szilagyi, 2012).

In an exhaustive exploration of families’ discourses about HL development, Guardado (2018) presented a typology of 10 discourses of HL maintenance and loss that emerged in a total of 65 audio-recorded interviews with members of 34 Hispanic families. The discourses included utility, cohesiveness, identity, affect, aesthetics, validation, correctness, opposition, access, and cosmopolitanism. Analysis of the discursive positionings uncovered a wide array of perspectives and beliefs that families hold regarding the importance and challenges of maintaining their heritage language and, therefore, fostering bilingualism. Moreover, the maintenance of HLs is crucial for nurturing bilingualism, which has numerous benefits. Bilingualism enhances cognitive flexibility (Adi-Japha et al., 2010), improves creative thinking skills (Lee & Kim, 2025), and promotes greater cultural awareness and empathy (Bekerman, 2004). It also provides individuals with additional linguistic resources, allowing them to navigate and succeed in diverse sociolinguistic environments (Antoniou, 2019). By contrast, HL loss can have profound negative consequences. Tse (2001) points out that the consequences of HL loss extend beyond the individual or family, impacting the community and society at large. When HLs are lost, communities lose valuable cultural knowledge and linguistic diversity, which can lead to the erosion of cultural identities and the weakening of social cohesion.

Parental involvement in HL development

Parental goals, motivations, attitudes towards bilingualism and practical constraints such as time and energy have been found to have significant impact on the opportunities HLLs have to engage in language development (Liang & Shin, 2021). While parental involvement refers broadly to the everyday ways parents support their children’s language learning, family language policies represent more systematic, deliberate and consistent patterns of language use within the home that guide how, when and with whom particular languages are spoken. Parents may be preoccupied with financial and practical concerns associated with resettlement and lack the time or knowledge to initiate language maintenance strategies (Nesteruk, 2010) or create the necessary conditions to establish family language policies in an environment that fosters bi/multilingualism (Wilson, 2020). Some may be concerned with the acquisition of literacy or grammatical accuracy, or the need to maintain literacy to enable re-entry to school in the country of origin. All this is further compounded by contradictory ideologies around bilingual parenting which view it as benefit and a threat (Piller & Gerber, 2021).

A range of parental strategies are reported in the literature that aim to support children's HL maintenance. In general, most scholarly research, grounded in sociocultural theories of language (e.g. Johnson, 2009; Lantolf, 2007; Swain, 2006; Swain et al., 2011) indicates that socialization, interaction and collaboration are vital elements for HLs to be learned, maintained and sustained. A common strategy found within family language policy studies is fostering communication among family members (Dağdeviren-Kirmızı, 2023; Hu et al., 2014). Additionally, Bohnacker (2022) reported that collaborative reading activities were useful and effective strategies in maintaining Turkish as a HL in a Swedish context. Other strategies reported in the literature include sending children to HL classes (Mattheoudakis et al., 2017) as well as frequent visits to the family's home country (Gharibi & Seals, 2020) and proximity and constant interactions and communication with family members and grandparents (Et-Bozkurt & Yağmur, 2022).

Additionally, to fully support family's efforts and attempts to help maintain and develop their children's HL, the role of educational pathways is pivotal. Some research (e.g. Chumak-Horbatsch, 1999; Kravin, 1992) has shown that "parental input is not sufficient by itself" (Nesteruk, 2010, p. 273) for sustaining the ongoing development of a family's HL. The availability of social networks along with schools that are supportive of the HL is vital for families to aspire for sustainable balanced bilingualism (Nesteruk, 2010). In the context of Australia, Piller and Gerber (2021) assert that it is true, as it is in many other English-dominant societies – that the limited success and systematicity in the teaching and learning of languages other than English is due to lack of support systems in place outside the home environment. Dettwiler-Hanni et al. (2024) point out that parents view the development and preservation of HLs as a primary responsibility within the home and family environment. They recognise their role in creating opportunities for their children to engage with the language through daily interactions, cultural practices, and community connections. However, they also acknowledge that support from educational institutions could play a crucial role in reinforcing HL maintenance.

Some of the educational options that families seek are bilingual schooling environments. In a US study, families' attitudes towards Chinese-English bilingual education were investigated with a view to better understand their reasons for choosing bilingual education and expectations (Lao, 2010). Through a survey administered to 86 families with children enrolled in the bilingual program, findings shed further light on the perceived benefits of bilingualism such as better career opportunities, positive effects on self-image and communicative skills that allow for engagement and connectedness with the Chinese-speaking community. However, some discrepancy was found between parents' expectations and practice around the development of children's proficiency. To this end, the study found that varied levels of Chinese proficiency in children was due availability of resources, especially in the home environment. Similarly, Lee and Jeong (2013) qualitatively examined the experiences of Korean-American students, parents and teachers who were part of a Korean-English dual immersion program. Data were collected through observations and interviews which gleaned insights into the potential of bilingual programs for the development of bilingual and bicultural skills that enhance cultural and ethnic identity.

These studies highlight the growing interest among families in bilingual education as a means to support their children's linguistic and cultural development. The findings highlight the perceived benefits of bilingualism, including enhanced career prospects, improved self-image, and stronger connections to cultural communities. Yet, while the focus on bilingual education for heritage languages has been well-documented, challenges persist, particularly when comparing these tailored programs to more general foreign language learning options. For example, the popularity of French as a foreign language ensures many opportunities for interested foreign language learners. 29 Alliance Française groups around Australia offer foreign language programs for all ages, 24 of which are located in regional areas (Alliance Française Australie, 2025). In NSW, French was the second most popular language taken by year 12 students in 2023 after Japanese (NESA, 2023). While it may appear that HL of French have the benefit of easily accessible language learning opportunities, both of the above-mentioned popular language learning avenues are not intended to meet the needs of HLL and are targeted at the foreign language learner of French with little prior knowledge of the language.

This availability of French foreign language programs means that HLL may find themselves in programs that are not targeted at their needs and ability level, a situation which is further complicated by the notion that “foreign language learning and second language learning may be a much more dissimilar psychological experience than we have previously supposed it to be” (Paulston, 1992, p.6). This difference in language learning experiences has led to the call for teachers to work towards recognising and catering for the differences between HLL and second language learners in their classrooms (Montrul, 2016).

Notwithstanding the benefits associated with bilingual education and foreign language programs, research (e.g. Lee, 1996; Lew & Choi, 2020; Poon, 1999) suggests that (monolingual) schools have an absence of mainstream structured approaches to HL education. In turn, the responsibility generally lies with parents to decide if, when, where and how their child might be educated in their HL (Montrul, 2023; Nesteruk, 2010), and often to bear the burden of teaching their child or creating the conditions and opportunities for language contact, which may result in parental ‘hardship and distress’, and often to bear the burden of teaching their child or creating the conditions and opportunities for language contact, which may result in parental ‘hardship and distress’ (Romanowski, 2021, p.1228). For families who choose to develop the literacy aspect of their child's language development, this may prove especially difficult. Verhoeven (1996) attributes success in early literacy acquisition to “both the value attached to literacy in the home and to the steps taken by parents to explain this value to their children”. This is a profound responsibility with the potential to become burdensome in unsupportive conditions. Without access to HL educational opportunities, language contact and literacy development opportunities may be limited to the family, and for those who do not have local network of relatives this can further add to the parental burden, positioning parents as the primary source of language instruction (Tran et al., 2024).

Adding to the complexity, children's perspectives on and attitudes towards their HL have also garnered attention. Wilson (2020) conducted a study on the experiences

of five French-English bilingual children to capture their perspectives on bilingual upbringing and their attitudes towards their parents' management strategies. Through a range of data collection methods such as semi-structured interviews, language portraits and family observations, the findings suggest that children are able to describe their diverse languaging practices and their parents' 'management' strategies to ensure their HL is used in the household. Nonetheless, while children show positive attitudes towards their HL, they are unable to explicate the reasons for their positive behaviour.

In conclusion, the maintenance of heritage languages (HL) presents both opportunities and challenges for families, particularly in contexts where formal educational support is limited. While bilingual education and foreign language programs offer certain advantages, the burden of HL education often falls on parents, who must navigate complex decisions and responsibilities to support their children's linguistic development. The importance of fostering a positive attitude towards HLs in children cannot be overstated, as it plays a crucial role in sustaining their bilingual identity and cultural connections.

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive cross-sectional methodological design (Cohen et al., 2018) to develop an understanding of parents' views and perceptions of educational pathways for their children as heritage speakers of French. Through a descriptive cross-sectional design researchers attempt to understand 'the state of affairs' (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998) of a particular phenomenon at a given time. While we recognise that individuals' views and perceptions are fluid and in a constant state of change, the 'snapshot' of data collected in this study is valuable as it provides a nuanced understanding of the attributes of choices, avenues and pathways that parents deem adequate, necessary or (un)available for their HL children at a given time.

Participants

Respondents for this study volunteered to participate and were accepted according to criteria that they were all adults living in Australia, competent in English, and the guardian, parent or expectant parent of a child or children with heritage from a French speaking country. This included parents who did not have French speaking heritage themselves. Participants self-selected to respond to the questionnaire with the knowledge that they could withdraw at any time and the information they provided would be entirely anonymous.

The questionnaire was advertised through Facebook, so the participants were all users of this website, and members or followers of participating French parenting groups, French local area community groups or Alliance Française groups. Hornberger (2005) recommended that studies of this nature recruit participants through HL educational services, but it was decided that this was not an appropriate approach

to address the research question in this case. French parenting groups were targeted for participant recruitment instead of seeking participants through HL education services. A study which only included the opinions of those currently engaging educational services may include a bias towards the importance of these services and might not capture the important data about reasons and rationale for not using them.

Dissemination through the Alliance Française was intended to reach a wider audience. The social media French parenting groups were mostly located around capital cities, whereas Alliance Française groups were located in some regional centres, allowing opinions of those in areas with fewer options for HL education services to participate in the study. The researcher contacted the administrator of each French parenting group or page targeted on Facebook and requested that they post the advertisement approved by the University's Human Research Ethics Committee, which included a link to the questionnaire. The researcher did not recruit participants directly, however, some groups requested that the researcher post the advertisement and link on the Facebook page for them.

Institutional approval was granted by the University's Human Research Ethics Committee prior to data collection and the study was conducted in accordance with the approved research protocol. The information sheet for participants was provided electronically and informed consent was acquired online from all participants before commencing the questionnaire. The study was described to participants as aiming to explore language development opportunities and services used by heritage speakers of French, their goals for their children's language development, pathways taken through the education system, and demand for additional services and support currently not available.

A total of 49 groups were contacted across all Australian states and territories in metropolitan and regional areas. Ten groups agreed to participate in advertising the questionnaire to their members. The groups defined themselves as covering the following locations:

- Rockhampton, QLD
- Sunshine Coast, QLD
- Brisbane, QLD
- Gold Coast, QLD
- North Coast, NSW
- Sydney, NSW
- Adelaide, SA

A total of 74 participants agreed to be a part of the study. Interested participants were advised that a short summary of findings would be available on a designated website at the completion of the study, and a link was provided. The provision of results by means of a website was chosen to maintain anonymity by not collecting email addresses as a method of disseminating results.

Data collection and analysis

Data for this study was collected through an online questionnaire completed by 74 parents across three Australian states. The findings highlight parents' strong motivation to educate their children in their heritage language but also reveal the difficulties they face in accessing necessary support services. Key areas of concern include the limited opportunities in early childhood and secondary education sectors and the inadequacy of curriculum options and teaching practices designed primarily for foreign language learners. These insights point to the need for a comprehensive revision of curriculum options for heritage language learners and the development of a dedicated syllabus for French that aligns with those available for other languages. By addressing these challenges, we can better support heritage language education and foster a more inclusive and linguistically diverse society.

All data was managed by the researcher alone and analysed using Excel spreadsheets. Firstly, data was downloaded from the Qualtrics platform and checked for accuracy. Closed questions were quantified and analysed to generate descriptive statistics, allowing the identification of some general patterns in the data set. Open ended qualitative responses and comments were operationalised by coding into nominal category scales, then the data was further organised, processed and, where possible, descriptive statistics were generated to summarise and detail what the data revealed. Categorisation was based on themes – through a thematic analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Butler-Kisber, 2017) – which emerged from close engagement and analysis of the data with respect to the areas of interest outlined in the literature review. This was conducted in a rigorous and consistent manner.

Due to the descriptive design of this study, many of the results could be quantified and reported as simple sums, frequencies or percentages, in a manner that sufficiently explained the results and addressed the research question. For rank scale responses, central tendencies and dispersions were calculated to enable clearer analysis and description of findings.

Findings

While the findings are driven largely by the various dimensions that were addressed in the survey questionnaire, parents' responses to open-ended questions shaped the coding categories and search for emerging themes. These added greater depth and additional insights into the closed-ended responses captured in the survey. The coded data is reported under five themes: (i) Language maintenance and bilingualism, (ii) Language program participation, (iii) Rationale for school choices, and (iv) The role of schools in HL education.

Language maintenance and bilingualism

Before delving into parents' perspectives on educational pathways for the maintenance of their children's HL, they were asked questions about French language

use in the home environment. Of the 74 families, 98% stated that French was spoken in their home. This shows families’ strong impetus for maintaining a linguistic and cultural repertoire that is supportive of their HL. Parents’ motivations to maintain their HL in the household environment and further pursue educational options for their children’s HL were variedly driven by a desire to maintain family connections (29%), an intrinsic value associated with the French language, culture and cultural heritage (36%) and future opportunities for work, education and travel (35%). These motivations highlight the significance of HL maintenance not only for fostering bilingualism but also for ensuring the transmission of cultural knowledge and values across generations.

The active use of HL within the home is fundamental to the development of bilingualism in children, as it creates a naturalistic environment where the language can flourish. When asked about their children’s attitudes towards learning French, almost half the parents indicated a “generally positive” attitude towards it as seen in Table 1 below.

Table 1
Children’s attitudes towards learning French

Category of Response	Percentage of respondents
Generally positive	47%
Neutral	27%
Fluctuates	14%
Generally negative	12%
Total	100%

Besides parents’ opinions on their children’s attitudes towards bilingualism, a large portion of parents (89%) considered bilingualism to be beneficial, citing examples including improved cognition, curiosity, intercultural awareness, open mindedness and academic achievement. Examples of responses to the open-ended question ‘What do you think are the advantages or disadvantages of children learning more than one language?’ included “better brain development” (Parent 43), “better to start at birth with two languages as it helps with brain development” (Parent 38), “I think their brains might develop faster” (Parent 36). With a firm belief that learning and maintaining their HL, parents commented that one other benefit is “increased awareness that other countries/cultures do things differently” (Parent 56). Similarly, Parent 52 indicated that bilingualism is an avenue for “openness towards the world” that enables children to “compare cultures, literature, etc. see the common points and differences, the nuances”. Parents’ perceived benefits also extended, most importantly, to areas of academic development. For example, Parent 39 outlined that maintaining their HL would allow their child “to learn another language” and “help develop high abilities in literacy”.

In conclusion, parents' perspectives highlight the vital role that HL maintenance plays in fostering bilingualism and preserving cultural heritage within families. The preference for using French at home reflects a strong commitment among parents to ensure that their children remain connected to their linguistic roots. Parents' motivations, driven by family connections, cultural pride, and future opportunities, highlight the multifaceted value of HL maintenance, which they also attach to the perceived benefits of language maintenance.

To nurture opportunities for language maintenance and development of bilingualism, parents sought educational options for their children in various forms and formats.

Language program participation

Parents outlined their child's pathway through the educational system to date and indicated if their child was able to participate in a French language program with each education provider. A total of 75 individual student pathways were provided. Responses indicated that parents were most successful at enabling their children access to a French program by engaging private tutoring or after-hours programs. The second most effective connection with French programs appeared at the primary school level, where the greatest frequency of enrolment in bilingual programs was reported (36%). Bilingual programs were difficult to access in secondary schooling with only 17% of learners attending a school with an available program. Higher levels of enrolment (34%) in classes intended for learners with no cultural or linguistic background in French were reported at this level. Distance education was engaged as an additional means to access French language education, and some courses were completed in conjunction with mainstream schooling. This was enabled by the CNED program offered by the French *Centre National d'Enseignement à Distance* (National Centre for Distance Education) following the French national curriculum, or the NSW School of Languages, which provides language courses to students in NSW public schools for languages not available at the student's campus.

Lower rates of access to French language programs were reported in early childhood education. Forty-five percent of learners had access to French language education through their preschool, many of whom were engaged in a French only program following the French national curriculum. Babies and toddlers had the poorest access to French educational services, (30%) but the highest rate of participation in dedicated HL programs (24%), generally taking the form of playgroups organised by parents, French speaking associations or after-hours language schools.

While 21% of parents indicated there were no French language education services in their local area, for families that did have access, family factors including time, cost and location were the most common reasons cited for not engaging with opportunities (42%), followed by dissatisfaction with the suitability of the program (32%). Many of these parents were frustrated by programs tailored for learners with no cultural or linguistic background in French that were not appropriate to their needs.

When asked about services they would like to utilise that were presently unavailable, many parents desired increased availability of after school hours services. Some comments disclosed a preference for services tailored to the needs of HL learners and provided by schools. Several parents remarked on the unsuitability of programs aimed at learners with no cultural or linguistic background in French, and one expressed dissatisfaction with the French CNED distance education, calling for a program aimed at the needs of bilingual children.

Rationale for school choices

When parents were asked the question ‘Are there any other factors you think are important when choosing a school or educational program for your child(ren)?’, responses varied across the multiple options they were presented with. However, the majority of parents (83%) deemed ‘school factors’ important when choosing schools or educational programs for their bi/multilingual children. Table 2 provides an overview of response rates across categories and sub-categories.

Table 2
Factors for choosing educational programs

Category of Response	Sub-category of Response	Approximate percentage
School factors		83%
	School culture	31%
	Curriculum	24%
	Teacher training	17%
	Reputation	7%
	General	3%
Family factors		17%
	Location	10%
	Hours	3%
	Cost	3%
Total		100%

In relation to aspects of the school curriculum, parents emphasized the importance of having a balanced approach to languages, reflecting a desire for equitable treatment of both English and French within the educational system. Parent 14 expressed the view that “Both [English and French] languages should have a 50-50 importance,” highlighting the need for a curriculum that gives equal weight to both

languages. This perspective highlights the parents' hope for a bilingual education that does not privilege one language over the other, allowing their children to develop strong proficiency in both languages simultaneously.

Additionally, parents also expressed concerns about tailoring the curriculum to meet the diverse needs of students, depending on their future educational trajectories. Parent 28 pointed out the necessity of orienting the program to the specific needs of the students: "The aim of the program needs to be orientated to the students: are students going back into a French system or are the students in the Australian system (hence their English needs to be excellent and not the French taking over) with additional French education as add-on?". This comment reveals a nuanced understanding of the different pathways students may take, whether they plan to reintegrate into a French educational system or continue within the Australian system.

Parents indicated the importance of 14 possible factors when selecting an educational program in a rank scale response format. Biculturalism expressed by a desire to 'mix with Australian children' was the most significant factor. Face to face classes were preferred over distance education, and a higher priority placed on convenience of location over lower fees or cost. Teachers who are native speakers of French were preferred over native speakers of English. Teachers' understanding of bilingualism was also highly valued by parents. Opportunities for students to gain credentials recognised in French speaking countries proved to be less significant, along with facility of movement between international education sectors. This was consistent with the lower rate of families planning to relocate internationally. When asked for additional factors not included in the fourteen proposed options, parents focused on characteristics of schools over family considerations. School culture was again the feature that attracted most consideration, with student wellbeing, school values and class sizes listed as contributing elements, in addition to curriculum options and teacher training.

Parents' selection of current and former educational programs for their children centred around the availability of French curriculum options. Of the family-based considerations, location was ranked most significant. While most families based their decision around schools available in their local area, one parent notably reported they had moved interstate to enable access to a suitable school "We relocated to QLD for the bilingual program, to give our children an opportunity to learn to read and write French" (Parent 7).

Participants were asked to indicate schools they desired their children to attend in the future. Attitudes towards primary school options were optimistic. All families hoped to participate in a French language program, and many expected to enrol in a bilingual school. Some parents were less confident about accessing French language options at the secondary school level:

"My son attends a public primary school that is bilingual. At present, the local high school does not offer the same French services. He is in kindergarten at the moment and at present, we are unsure what we will do for high school" (Parent 11).

Even though some parents (28%) indicated they might enrol their child in a secondary school with no access to French programs, they do, however, aim to address this through distance education.

“We are so far away from any French programs/school, but I want my child to have an opportunity to be able to read and write in French and understand and practice it hence I will be looking at distance education” (Parent 18).

In summary, parents’ comments reveal that they place significant value on a balanced approach to bilingual education, prioritizing factors such as biculturalism, native French-speaking teachers, and convenient school locations. The availability of French curriculum options heavily influenced their choice of educational programs, with many parents willing to make considerable sacrifices, such as relocating, to ensure their children’s access to quality bilingual education. While there is optimism regarding primary school options, concerns about the continuity of French language education at the secondary level were evident.

The role of schools in HL education

When asked about the role of schools in developing children’s HL skills, some clear ambivalence was observed. While families invest time and resources in finding educational avenues for supporting their children’s HL development, 45% of the families attribute a ‘high importance’ role to schools in fostering children’s HLs. Table 3 provides an overview of the response categories across various levels of importance.

Table 3
Schools’ importance in HL development

Category of Response	Percentage of respondents
High importance	45%
Moderate importance	27%
Low importance	28%
Total	100%

The question, ‘What role do you think schools have in developing your child(ren)’s French language skills?’, was intended to elicit parental expectations for school support regarding bilingualism and particularly the development of biliteracy. Besides the three importance categories as shown above, parents were given the opportunity to elaborate further on their views through open-ended questions.

Parent 15, alluding to the ‘high importance’ category, indicated that [schools have] a big role, in encouraging writing, reading and playing with other children in French.

Emphasizing the social dimension of language learning and development, Parent 27 said “The social aspect of schools has a huge potential to influence a child’s preferred language”. Further stressing the importance of schools, Parent 54 commented that schools have “a large part as they [children] will not learn by only hearing 1 parent speak French”.

Those parents that consider schools having moderate or low importance in developing their children’s HL language seem to place more emphasis on the role of families and family language policies around the nurturing of HL development. One parent said “schools just provide support. What happens at home is the main thing” (Parent 45). A similar view is shared by Parent 34 who also believes that schools have a role in supporting the work families do in terms of nurturing their children’s HL development: “Schools reinforce what the child is learning with the parents, to be able to make it more a social language rather than only a mother-child language interaction”. Of the parents who have an inclination towards schools having ‘low importance’ in HL development, several alluded to their intentional decisions to settle in Australia and choose “Australian” schools for their children. One parent indicated:

“We have made the choice (by lack of other options really) to enrol our children in an Australian school. So, unfortunately, we can’t expect anything from the school in developing our children’s French language skills. So that’s the reality for us” (Parent 24).

Despite the increasing cultural and linguistic diversity across Australian schools, this parent’s assumption reinforces monolingual ideologies (Clyne, 2005; Veliz & Chen, 2024) that lead to low or no expectations whatsoever around schools being able to cater for linguistic diversity through support systems for HL development. This assumption/mindset is also evident in the following parent’s observation “We choose to live in Australia so I don’t think school have an important role” (Parent 12). Cognizant that state schools may provide little to no support, Parent 18 expresses that while no support regarding HL development is expected, they would expect recognition and respect for their cultural heritage:

“None, we don’t expect much support from the local school. We are using a Saturday school to cover French. we do not feel it matters if their state school do not cover French as long as they are not demeaning towards our culture and language”.

Notwithstanding the ambivalence expressed through parents’ opinions on the role of schools in supporting HL development, they took the opportunity to comment on aspects that relate to broader systemic issues around the unavailability of school support for children’s HL. Parent 11 pointed out that:

“For us as parents of English-French bilingual children, it’s very difficult to find an Australian school that can offer a quality program adapted to francophone children both in French and English. This means our children’s home language is likely to be unsupported or even discouraged in school”.

Similar views were shared by Parent 35 who also highlights the difficulty of finding a school that can accommodate and cater for their cultural and linguistic needs as a family:

“We live in Brisbane and they were no option for us - we could not find a school that taught French and offered the programs we needed. There are not many options for supporting French learning”.

These parents’ reflections highlight a critical issue within the Australian educational landscape about the prevalence of monolingual ideologies that overlook or marginalize the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse families. Despite the increase in diverse student populations in schools, there remains a significant gap in the provision of support systems for HL development.

Discussion

The findings from study on French-speaking families in Australia illuminate the complexities and nuances surrounding the maintenance of French as a HL and the pathways available for fostering bi/multilingualism in their children. In answering the research question formulated in this study ‘What are parental perspectives on educational options and pathways for heritage speakers of French in Australia?’, it is important to note that this study provides further supporting evidence to existing scholarly research (e.g. Dağdeviren-Kırmızı, 2023; Dettwiler-Hanni et al., 2024; Hu et al., 2014) on the central role of the home environment in nurturing and supporting HL maintenance. With 98% of the surveyed parents indicating that French is used in the home environment as an avenue to foster HL maintenance, we see evidence of not only clear family language policy as a cornerstone of language preservation but also of ethnolinguistic vitality (Et-Bozkurt & Yağmur, 2022).

This aligns with the literature, where maintaining a linguistic and cultural repertoire within the home is seen as fundamental to the development of bi/multilingualism (Montrul, 2023). The motivations behind this commitment—ranging from the desire to maintain family connections to ensuring future opportunities for their children—stress the multifaceted value parents place on HLs. This echoes the views of Guardado (2018), who found that families’ discourses around HL maintenance are shaped by a wide array of motivations, including cultural identity and future career prospects. While parents’ reasons for pursuing avenues to maintain their children’s HL varied, two elements stood out from the data. One pertains to parents’ overall positive views of bilingualism and its associated benefits such as increased cultural awareness, openness towards the world and greater ability to look at the cultural nuances of languages. The second relates to parents’ desire to maintain and strengthen family connections and, consequently, greater attachment to cultural traditions and values. These findings are in consistency with several other studies (e.g. Bohnacker, 2022; Dağdeviren-Kırmızı, 2023) which argue for the crucial role of family in inter-generational language maintenance and, importantly, cultural transmission. In addition, research shows that parents’ strong impetus for seeking HL maintenance paths for their children is a reflection of their underlying language ideologies, attitudes

and beliefs about the benefits of bi/multilingualism (Piller & Gerber, 2021). Parents' strong commitment to a systematic use of their HL in the home environment

Cognizant of the fact that the family environment is vital, yet not sufficient, for sustaining HL development, parents explored various pathways to maintain their children's HL which revealed both the opportunities and challenges. While different avenues are sought by parents (e.g. private tutoring, after-hours programs, bilingual programs), greater participation in educational pathways for HL development were observed in the primary years. Availability of opportunities such as bilingual programs or after school (private) classes were reported by parents. This is in line with scholarly research (e.g. Escudero et al., 2025; Irving-Torsh & Lising, 2022) which has revealed increased educational options for HL development in the primary years. In addition, parents in this study also reported access to educational pathways declined at secondary level, raising concerns about the continuity and viability to sustain children's HL throughout adolescence and adulthood (Nesteruk, 2010). Research has shown that where no consistent or systematic opportunities for HL maintenance are available across time, especially in contexts where the HL is a minority language, the risk for it to be replaced by the dominant language or lost by the third generation is much greater (Piller & Gerber, 2021; Verdon et al., 2014).

The lower participation rates in early childhood education (45%) and the even poorer access for babies and toddlers (30%) suggest that foundational language development opportunities are limited for younger children. This is particularly concerning given the importance of early exposure to HLLs in fostering long-term bilingualism (Van Deusen-Scholl, 2003). The findings also reveal a significant gap in the availability of tailored programs for HLLs, with many parents expressing dissatisfaction with programs designed for learners with no cultural or linguistic background in French. This mismatch between available programs and the needs of HLLs underscores the need for more targeted educational pathways that cater specifically to heritage speakers (Paulston, 1992).

Parents' decision-making around school choices reflects a clear prioritization of school factors, particularly those related to school culture, curriculum, and teacher training. The desire for a balanced approach to bilingual education, where both English and French are given equal importance, is evident in parents' comments. This aligns with the broader literature on bilingual education, where the equitable treatment of both languages is seen as essential for fostering strong bilingual and bicultural identities (Lee & Jeong, 2013).

However, the need to tailor the curriculum to the diverse needs of students, depending on their future educational trajectories, adds a layer of complexity to these choices. Some parents expressed concerns about whether their children would reintegrate into a French educational system or continue within the Australian system, highlighting the need for flexible educational pathways that accommodate different future scenarios. This reflects the findings of Lao (2010), who noted that parental expectations and the reality of language program outcomes can sometimes diverge, particularly when resources and support structures are insufficient.

Parental ambivalence regarding the role of schools in developing their children's HL skills is particularly noteworthy. While 45% of families attributed a "high importance" role to schools in fostering HLs, a significant portion viewed the role of schools as only moderately (27%) or minimally (28%) important. This ambivalence may stem from the perceived inadequacies in the current educational offerings, particularly the lack of structured approaches to HL education in mainstream schools (Montrul, 2023). The reliance on parents to fill the gaps left by the education system places a significant burden on families, who must navigate the challenges of HL maintenance often with limited support (Nesteruk, 2010).

This situation sheds light on the need for schools to play a more proactive role in supporting HL education, particularly through the provision of tailored programs that address the specific needs of HLLs. The literature suggests that parental involvement, while crucial, is not sufficient on its own to sustain HL development; the availability of supportive educational pathways is vital (Nesteruk, 2010). Schools, therefore, have a critical role to play in creating environments where HLs can thrive, which in turn can help alleviate some of the burdens currently placed on families.

Conclusion

The findings from this study highlight the complex interplay between parental motivations, educational pathways, and the broader sociocultural context in which heritage language (HL) maintenance takes place. While parents demonstrate a strong commitment to maintaining their children's HL and fostering bilingualism, they face significant challenges due to the limited availability of tailored educational programs and the varying levels of support from schools. To better support the maintenance of HLs, it is essential for educational institutions to offer more structured and targeted approaches that cater specifically to the needs of heritage speakers. This includes revising the curriculum options for HL learners and creating a dedicated syllabus for languages like French, aligning with the specialized offerings available for other languages. Such curriculum adjustments would not only help preserve linguistic diversity but also ensure that future generations remain connected to their cultural heritage. By doing so, educational systems can contribute to the development of a more inclusive and multicultural society, where the richness of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds is both recognised and nurtured.

Beyond its empirical findings, this study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by offering one of the few systematic examinations of parental perspectives on French as a HL in the Australian context. By highlighting gaps in curriculum design, discontinuities across educational stages, and the central role of family language policy, the study extends current understandings of how HL maintenance operates in multilingual societies. At the same time, the findings open several avenues for future research. Comparative studies across different heritage language groups could yield deeper insights into the structural factors that support or hinder HL development. Longitudinal research following children across early childhood, primary, and secondary education would further illuminate the long-term impact of educational

pathways on language maintenance. Additionally, expanding the scope to include teachers, school leaders, and policymakers could help identify opportunities for systemic change, while cross-context research linking the Australian case to Latin American multilingual settings would provide a valuable global perspective. Together, these directions can help build a more comprehensive understanding of heritage language education across diverse sociocultural environments.

Although this study focuses on French-speaking families in Australia, the findings resonate with broader global challenges surrounding heritage language education. Many Latin American and Ibero-American contexts face similar tensions in sustaining linguistic diversity, whether in relation to Indigenous languages, migrant communities, or transnational families seeking to preserve their linguistic repertoires. The limited institutional support, lack of HL-specific curricula, and reliance on families as the primary agents of language transmission identified in this study mirror the realities documented across countries such as Mexico, Chile, Bolivia, and Brazil. By highlighting how these challenges play out within the Australian system, the study offers insights that may inform educational reforms in other multilingual societies, particularly those aiming to strengthen heritage language pathways through more culturally responsive curricula and improved teacher preparation. In this sense, the Australian case provides a concrete example of how structural constraints can be addressed to better support linguistic diversity, offering lessons that are relevant to Latin American educational systems navigating comparable issues of multilingualism and linguistic justice.

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