

Our Children Our Communities Our Future

Research Snapshot

Early developmental outcomes of Australian children from diverse language backgrounds at school entry



The start of full-time schooling is an important time for children and their families, and can have lasting implications on a child's educational trajectory. Australian schools typically have a strong monolingual orientation, which necessitates English language proficiency for the learning and assessment of academic content. As such, children from diverse language backgrounds entering school with limited proficiency in the language of instruction may face additional challenges in negotiating the transition to school.

Australia is a culturally and linguistically diverse society, with over 160 languages spoken and around 15% of Australian children speaking a language other than English at home (ABS 1999; ABS 2006). Children from language backgrounds other than English ('linguistically diverse'), include children who are competent in both their home and English languages, as well as some children who are not yet proficient in the English languages ('limited English proficient'). Children that begin school with limited English proficiency can face additional challenges in keeping pace academically while simultaneously learning the English language. Previous research suggests that:

- proficiency in academic English takes much longer to master compared to the relatively swift assimilation of conversational English (Hakuta, Butler & Witt, 2000)
- limited English skills are associated with reduced early academic achievement in English (Brinkman et al., 2009; Halle et al. 2012; Keiffer, 2008)
- limited English proficiency may also carry implications for broader health and psychosocial development, though there is less research in this area (Guhn et al., 2010; Janus & Offerd, 2007; Puchala, Vu & Muhajarine, 2010)
- higher rates of socioeconomic disadvantage in this population may be an added risk factor, particularly for linguistically diverse students with limited English proficiency.

In contrast, children who speak a language other than English at home and begin school with well developed English language skills (i.e. are bi or multi-lingual) appear to have a range of developmental advantages. These children actually tend to outperform their monolingual peers on some cognitive tasks (Goldfeld et. al., 2012).

Aims

The aim of the current study is to report on outcomes of bilingual students in Australia across major domains of early childhood functioning (physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, and language and cognitive development).

This research used the 2009 Australian Early Development Census (AEDC)* data (representing more than 97% of Australian children in their first year of full-time schooling) to understand the interrelationships between language backgrounds, proficiency in English and early developmental outcomes at school entry.

AEDC domain results were reported for both Englishproficient and emerging bilingual students who are not yet English proficient to provide a more complete picture of the bilingual student population. Outcomes for children from English-speaking backgrounds and their level of English proficiency at school entry were also included for comparison. Only four AEDC domains were examined, excluding communication skills and general knowledge, because information about children's English proficiency came from a question that is also included in calculating this domain score.

Table 1. Main languages other than Englishspoken at home

Languages other than English spoken in the home Top 10	Number of children	
Arabic	5,565	
Vietnamese	3,935	
Greek	2,003	
Chinese languages:		
Chinese **	1,206	
Mandarin	1,755	
Cantonese	1,677	
Hindi	1,495	
Spanish	1,171	
Italian	1,082	
Aboriginal English	990	

** Chinese language not specified by the teacher

Key Findings

Around one fifth of Australian children (17.8%, n=44,018) speak a language other than English at home (Table 1 outlines a list of languages mostly spoken in the Australian home). Most of the children from a non-English language background were proficient in English when they began school (n=6,361). The absolute number of children with poor English skills was similar for children from both English language (n=6,495) and linguistically diverse backgrounds (n=6,361). The results also show that children with poor English proficiency at school entry tended to come from more disadvantaged areas, were more commonly male, and that a smaller proportion had attended preschool (see Table 2).

Linguistically diverse students who were not yet proficient in English when they began school were significantly more likely to be developmentally vulnerable on four AEDC domains (physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, and language and cognitive development). In contrast linguistically diverse students who entered school with proficient English language skills were slightly less likely to be developmentally vulnerable on emotional maturity and physical health and wellbeing domains. Bilingual children therefore appear to start school with some subtle developmental advantages.

Meanwhile children from an English speaking background who were not yet proficient in their home language had the highest rates of developmental vulnerability; around twice those of their linguistically diverse peers who were also not yet proficient in English. Results suggest that proficiency in English at school entry is a key issue for children from both linguistically diverse and English speaking backgrounds. The developmental origins of these difficulties may be different for those children who are not yet proficient in English due to lack of exposure and opportunity to learn the language. Nevertheless, there is some overlap in the outcomes at school entry.

*Until July 2014, the AEDC was known as the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI)

Table 2. Summary of children's characteristics according to language

	Language Background			
	English		Non-English	
	% Proficient in English	% Not yet proficient in English	% Proficient in English	% Not yet proficient in English
Gender				
Female	50.2	33.3	50.8	40.7
Male	49.9	66.7	49.2	59.3
Preschool				
Attended	77.2	62.7	67.1	52.6
Did not attend	16	26.9	23.7	34.1
Community Economic status				
Most disadvantaged 20%	18.4	29.3	32.4	40.8
Most advantaged 20%	26.4	14.4	19.1	13.4
Total				
Number	196,984	6,495	37,657	6,361
%	78.9	2.6	15.1	2.6

Note. Results for several categories may not sum to 100% due to missing or incomplete data. Children with missing data on English proficiency and children with special needs are excluded from this analysis.

Implications

For Policy and Practice:

These findings add to our current understanding of the support needs of linguistically diverse children at school, along with providing additional information towards current educational policy. Proficiency in the language of instruction at school (in Australia, English) appears to be a major factor in beginning school optimally prepared for learning.

Children who are proficient in a home language and English have subtle advantages in some domains, which strengthens the case for further provision of additional supports to allow children to maintain and develop their home language skills.

It is also important to consider the practice and policy implications for children who arrive at school not yet proficient in English language skills, given they are relatively small in number and geographically dispersed. Individually tailored responses from each school will remain an essential component of intervention for these children. As well as English language and academic supports, psychosocial wellbeing can also be impacted, and therefore support is also likely to be needed to address the wellbeing of these students.

Preschool may offer a plausible and modifiable approach to improving outcomes at school entry for all children, including those from linguistically diverse backgrounds, as these programs provide a rich language learning environment. Local service providers may need to actively seek out and promote preschool attendance for children from linguistically diverse families, especially recent immigrant and refugee children.

For Research:

Findings suggest that linguistically diverse children who were not yet proficient in English at school entry show greater developmental vulnerability and a heightened risk of poorer outcomes. These outcomes are not just limited to the language and cognitive domain, which would be expected, but extends also to additional AEDC domains encompassing the social, emotional and physical dimensions. This suggests that researchers should take a broader focus when examining outcomes for bilingual students.

Findings suggest that the AEDC can be a meaningful measure of skills necessary to participate successfully within the dominant English-speaking context of schools. Further research is needed to explore the longer term outcomes and experiences of linguistically diverse children at school.

Study Details

This study draws on data from the 2009 national AEDC census, with results available from **www.aedc.gov.au**. During the period from 1 May until 31 July 2009, school teachers from across Australia reported on the health and development of all children in their first year of full-time schooling. The AEDC measures five important domains of early childhood development, physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive development (school-based), communication skills and general knowledge. Though the AEDC provides a robust measure of skills needed for effective functioning within the mostly English-language setting of Australian schools, it should be noted that it does not (nor intends to) measure skills demonstrated in languages other than English outside of the school context.

For further details

Details of the research paper

Article details: Goldfeld, S., O'Connor, M., Mithen, J., Sayers, M., & Brinkman, S. (2014). Early development of emerging and English-proficient bilingual children at school entry in an Australian population cohort. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 38, 42-51.

For access to AEDC*data please visit **www.aedc.gov.au** for details.

References

A full list of references used in the development of this snapshot is available online with this **link**.

About research snapshots

AEDC research snapshots provide a brief and accessible overview of research being undertaken in relation to the AEDC. The AEDC programme is funded by the Australian Government. For further up-to-date information consult the AEDc website and its many resources: **www.aedc.gov.au**

About the organisation

The Royal Children's Hospital Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) and the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute (MCRI) has been at the forefront of Australian research into early childhood and behaviour for over two decades. The CCCH conducts research into many conditions and common problems faced by children that are either preventable or can be improved if recognised and managed early. By working collaboratively with leaders in policy, research, education and service delivery, the Centre aims to influence early childhood policy and improve the capacity of communities to meet the needs of children and their families.

The Telethon Institute for Child Health Research's mission is to improve and to promote the health and wellbeing of all children through the unique application of multidisciplinary research. To achieve this mission we conduct high quality research, apply research findings to improve the health of children, adolescents and families, teach the next generation

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Since 2002, the Australian Government has worked in partnership with eminent child health research institutes, Centre for Community Child Health, Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne, and the Telethon Kids Institute, Perth to deliver the Australian Early Development Index programme to communities nationwide. On 1 July 2014, the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) programme became known as the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC), and was launched through a new website www.aedc.gov.au. The Australian Government continues to work with its partners, and with state and territory governments to implement the AEDC.