

Research Snapshot

English proficiency at school entry for bilingual children in Australia



Background

Australian society is culturally and linguistically diverse with over 160 languages spoken and around 15% of all Australian children speaking a language other than English at home (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1999, 2006). 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. In contrast, bilingual children entering school with well-developed English language skills may have a range of developmental advantages over their monolingual peers (Goldfeld, et al., 2013).

It is critical therefore to identify factors that provide opportunities for bilingual children to develop English language skills before they enter the school system. However, it is important that children do not gain English proficiency at the expense of their home language. Attending quality early education and care settings such as preschool may be one such intervention target that seems likely to promote English proficiency by providing increased exposure to the English language (Halle, et al. 2012). To date there has been limited data available to explore this possibility in the Australian context.

Aim

This AEDC* research snapshot explores the relationship between English language skills at school entry and attendance at different types of early childhood education and care settings (ECEC) including preschool, day care centres, and other informal non-parental care, for bilingual children in Australia.

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

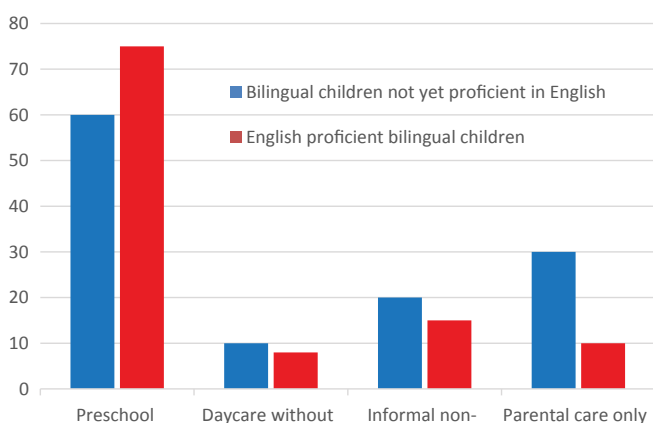
Key Findings

Around a fifth of the children (17.8% in this population cohort) were bilingual. Of these children, most were proficient in English when they entered school (85.6%), although a substantial minority (14.4%) were rated as not yet proficient in English.

The percentage of bilingual children who attended ECEC by English proficiency is shown in Figure 1. Preschool (including day care with a preschool programme) was the most common form of ECEC that children attended in the year prior to school entry (80.6%), although a lower percentage of bilingual children overall attended preschool than children from English speaking backgrounds. A lower proportion of bilingual children who were not yet proficient in English attended preschool (60.7%) than bilingual children who were proficient in English (73.9%). Bilingual children who were not yet English proficient also had higher rates of attendance at day care without preschool, informal non-parental care, and being in parental care only in the year prior to school entry.

Further analysis revealed that bilingual children who attended preschool had significantly higher odds of being proficient in English at school entry than those who had not attended preschool. In contrast, bilingual children who attended day care without preschool, informal non-parental care, or parental care only, had decreased odds of English proficiency at school entry.

Figure 1. Percentage of bilingual children who attended ECEC by English proficiency



Implications

For Policy and Practice:

To promote positive outcomes for bilingual children, intervention targets that promote proficiency in the language of instruction before these children reach the school setting may be beneficial.

The findings of this study suggest that preschool may be an opportunity to promote English proficiency prior to school entry, with important implications for interventions that aim to reduce inequality in skills. High quality ECEC settings such as preschool can provide cognitively stimulating and responsive learning opportunities, encouraging the development of language and cognitive skills (Magnuson, et al., 2004). For bilingual children, in addition to these general benefits, it is likely that preschool attendance also provides increased exposure to the English language and further opportunities to develop English language skills, including intentional instruction in phonological and phonemic awareness, vocabulary, text comprehension, and oral language (Halle et al., 2012).

The results also showed a lower proportion of bilingual children attended preschool, suggesting that local service providers may be able to assist by more actively seeking out and engaging bilingual families, and ensuring that staff and services are welcoming and culturally appropriate.

It is very important that children do not gain English proficiency at the expense of their home language. Bilingual preschool programmes should also be explored as a way of supporting both proficiency in English and the child's home language.

For Research:

Bilingual children who were not yet proficient in English were overrepresented in the most disadvantaged areas of Australia (see Table 1). Further research is needed to fully understand the role of disadvantage in influencing outcomes for bilingual children in Australian communities.

The quality of the ECEC services is also likely to be important, with a beneficial impact being seen for preschool attendance but not for day care without a preschool program. Although the quality of ECEC settings was not able to be measured directly in the current study, it seems likely that this may be due to preschool programs generally being of a higher quality. Future research should consider the quality of ECEC settings when investigating the impact of these services on language development.

For further details

Details of the research paper

This study draws on data from the 2009 national Australian Early Development Census (AEDC). During the period from 1 May until 31 July 2009, school teachers across Australia reported on the health and development of all children in their first year of full-time schooling.

Published article details: O'Connor, M., O'Connor, E., Kvalsvig, A., & Goldfeld, S. (2014). The relationship between early childhood education and care and English proficiency at school entry for bilingual children in Australia. *New Zealand Research in Early Childhood Education*, 17, 161 - 181.

For access to AEDC data and more details, please visit: www.aedc.gov.au

References

A full list of references used in the development of this snapshot is available online with this [link](#).

About research snapshots

AEDC snapshots provide a brief and accessible overview of research being undertaken in relation to the AEDC. The Australian Government under the AEDC programme funded this project. 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) 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.

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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.