

Linking Culture and Language to Aboriginal Children's Outcomes: Lessons from Canadian Data

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Abstract

Aboriginal children have been shown to have poorer health and educational outcomes compared to non-Aboriginal children. Culture is an important determinant of health and well-being, yet it is rarely studied in terms of its association with young children's outcomes. Language being one component of culture, the revitalization of traditional Aboriginal languages is an important contributor to both individual and community health as well as educational achievement. This paper will summarize multiple studies using data from the Aboriginal Children's Survey and the Aboriginal Peoples Survey to highlight various outcomes for Aboriginal children in Canada, first in terms of the role of cultural participation, and then specifically speaking an Aboriginal language, on young Aboriginal children's education and health outcomes.

Résumé

Il a été démontré ailleurs que les enfants autochtones sont en moins bonne santé et ont des résultats scolaires plus faibles relativement aux enfants non autochtones. La culture est un déterminant important de la santé et du bien-être, mais on ne l'étudie que rarement en fonction de son association aux résultats scolaires chez les jeunes enfants. La langue étant un des constituants de la culture, la revitalisation des langues autochtones traditionnelles est un contributeur important à la santé individuelle et communautaire ainsi qu'à la réussite scolaire. Cet article résume plusieurs études en utilisant les données de l'Enquête sur les enfants autochtones et l'Enquête auprès des peuples autochtones pour mettre en évidence divers résultats sur l'éducation et la santé pour les enfants autochtones au Canada – d'abord en termes du rôle de la participation culturelle, puis en ciblant ceux qui parlent une langue autochtone particulière.

Introduction

Recent evidence suggests that Aboriginal children have poorer health and educational outcomes than do non-Aboriginal children (UNICEF, 2009; MacMillan et al., 2010; Smylie, 2009). While socio-economic factors are known correlates of health and education, the influence of Aboriginal culture, including language learning and participation in cultural activities, have been subject to much less empirical examination. This paper reviews the literature on associations between Aboriginal cultural participation and children's outcomes, including two indicators of school readiness (verbal and behavioural outcomes) and school learning. It also highlights a number of empirical studies that have used population-based data from the 2006 Aboriginal Children's Survey (ACS) and the 2001 and 2006 Aboriginal Peoples Survey (APS) to examine these associations.

Population-based Aboriginal survey data

Aboriginal Children's Survey

The 2006 Aboriginal Children's Survey (ACS) is one of two cross-sectional, population-based sources of data on Aboriginal children in Canada. The ACS collected extensive information about Aboriginal children

younger than age 6 in urban, rural and northern locations across the country (Statistics Canada, 2008a). The aim was to present a picture of the early development of Aboriginal children and their social and living conditions. A Technical Advisory Group (TAG) comprised of specialists in early Aboriginal childhood development provided guidance on the survey design. The target population was off-reserve First Nations children, Métis children, and Inuit children in the 10 provinces, and all children in the three territories. The sample was selected from children whose parental responses to the 2006 Census of Canada indicated that they had Aboriginal ancestors; and /or identified as North American Indian and/or Métis and/or Inuit; and/or had treaty or registered Indian status; and/or had Indian Band membership. The person most knowledgeable about the child responded on his/her behalf. The overall response rate was 81%, yielding a sample of 12,845 that represented approximately 135,000 Aboriginal children younger than age 6.

Aboriginal Peoples Survey

The Aboriginal Peoples Survey (APS) is a cross-sectional survey of the social and economic conditions of Aboriginal peoples in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2008b). Unlike the ACS which was conducted in 2006 only, the APS was conducted in 1991, 2001, 2006, and

2012 (the latter two time periods did not cover the on-reserve population). The APS was designed and implemented in partnership with national Aboriginal organizations, and was translated into 20 Aboriginal languages. Selection was based on the household population whose census responses indicated that they had Aboriginal ancestors; and/or identified as North American Indian and/or Métis and/or Inuit; and/or had treaty or registered Indian status; and/or had Indian Band membership. The child component of the APS (ages 0 to 14 in 2001; ages 6 to 14 in 2006) was completed by parents; the adult component was self-reported by those aged 15 or older.

Cultural participation

Cultural activities foster a connection to the past and may include spending time with elders, participating in endeavours such as seasonal events or traditional ceremonies, and speaking an indigenous language. Opportunities for cultural participation take many forms and occur in various locales. The family is one important resource that provides cultural awareness, learning, and experiences. However, the community is also important for culture promotion, activities, and fostering participation. Features of the community or resources within, such as child care, preschool, or school may foster or hinder cultural participation, as a result of factors such as social cohesion, organization of cultural activities, and opportunities to learn and practice a language, particularly a second language.

Cultural continuity—connecting to the past and building a future—is critical for self-identity development by providing stability as children transition through various life stages (Chandler & Lalonde, 2008). More specifically, knowledge of one's culture and membership in a social group may influence self-identity, which improves psychological well-being and self-esteem (Usborne & Taylor, 2010). Taylor (1997; 2002) suggests that a strong sense of collective efficacy serves as a comparative standard against which individual traits can be measured. Cultural identity—an understanding of group norms and behaviours—may therefore have a positive impact on self-identity, and thus increase well-being.

Data from the 2006 ACS suggest that approximately three out of four First Nations children living off-reserve and Métis children take part in traditional or seasonal activities, as do seven out of eight Inuit children (Guèvremont, 2010). Despite these high rates, not all communities are perceived as offering opportunities for cultural involvement—for example, the parents of fewer than half (43%) of off-reserve First Nations children reported that their neighborhood had excellent, very good, or good Aboriginal cultural activities (Findlay & Kohen, 2012a).

Cultural participation, verbal skills and behaviour

With data from population-based surveys, it is possible to examine associations between involvement in cultural activities and developmental outcomes. Analyses of data from the ACS have investigated topics such as verbal and behavioural competencies among pre-school children.

Verbal skills are particularly important indicators of early child development. They pertain to the ability to communicate and to understand and be understood by peers and adults, regardless of the specific language used (Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal). Speech and language difficulties are among the most prevalent developmental issues for Aboriginal children (de Leeuw, Fiske, & Greenwood, 2002; Minister of Public Works and Government Services, 2000). For instance, 13% of 2- to 5-year-old First Nations children living off reserve surveyed in the ACS were reported by their parents as having a speech or language difficulty (Findlay & Janz, 2012); this compares with 4% of Canadian children aged 2 to 5 overall (CASLPA-ACOA, 2010). Early verbal outcomes are important as verbal abilities in the preschool period are required for communication with adults and peers and have also been associated with increased school readiness and academic achievement (Duncan et al., 2007; Justice et al., 2009; Sabol & Pianta, 2012; Young et al., 2002) and with greater social competence (Longoria et al., 2009).

While associations between child and family factors (for example, socio-economic status) and verbal outcomes are well established (Janus & Duku, 2007), an emerging literature suggests that neighbourhood characteristics are associated with children's verbal outcomes (Carpiano, Lloyd, & Hertzman, 2009; Kohen et al., 2002; Lapointe, Ford, & Zumbo, 2007). Culture can be part of the fabric of a neighbourhood, and may involve social ties, supports, shared values, and the availability of role models (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). A 2012 study (Findlay & Kohen, 2012a) using data from the ACS examined associations between neighbourhood cultural participation and four indicators of preschool verbal outcomes (expression, mutual understanding, story-telling, and speech and language difficulties) among off-reserve First Nations children. Parental reports of opportunities to participate in cultural activities in the community were related to children's verbal competence, including a positive association with mutual understanding, and a negative association with speech and language difficulties. These associations held when controlling for potentially confounding child, family, and community socio-demographic characteristics (for instance, mean household income and percentage of residents with less than a high school education). Neighbourhood cultural participation can also be linked with Aboriginal children's behaviour. ACS data suggest that engaging in cultural activities and spending time with elders are associated with higher pro-social behaviour scores (Findlay & Kohen, 2012). Thus, preschool-aged children living in communities

that offered opportunities to take part in cultural activities were more likely to have higher verbal outcome scores and demonstrate greater behavioural competencies.

Furthermore, neighbourhood resources such as child care are a potential source of exposure to Aboriginal cultural activities. Many Aboriginal children participate in regular non-parental child care, which is care provided by a relative or stranger while the parent(s)/guardian(s) are at work or studying. Specifically, 52% of First Nations children living off-reserve, 54% of Métis children, and 43% of Inuit children were in child care, a proportion comparable to the rate for the population overall (Findlay & Kohen, 2010). Approximately one-quarter of parents of off-reserve First Nations children and 17% of parents of Métis children reported that their child care arrangements promoted traditional and cultural values and customs. The child care experiences of Inuit children were even more likely to include traditional and cultural activities, with 67% of parents reporting arrangements that promoted cultural values and customs. Use of an Aboriginal language in the child care setting was most common among Inuit children: 66% as compared to 16% of First Nations children and 6% of Métis children in child care. Child care arrangements which included the use of an Inuit language also commonly included traditional and cultural values and customs as well.

Given the impact that time in child care can have on development, being in an environment that is accepting of your heritage, customs, and background is likely to be associated with behaviour. According to results from the ACS (Findlay & Kohen, 2010), off-reserve First Nations children who engaged in traditional and cultural activities and customs in child care were rated by their parents as better behaved, notably, being more pro-social (that is, getting along with other children or readily sharing with other children), compared with children in child care that did not include traditional activities. This difference remained significant when socio-demographic characteristics (for example, parental education and household income) were taken into account. For Inuit children, speaking an Aboriginal language in the child care environment was important, as those who spoke an Inuit language were rated by their parents as more pro-social. The results therefore demonstrate that child care arrangements that promote traditional and cultural values and customs are associated with verbal and behavioural competencies in the preschool period.

Aboriginal language and education outcomes

Language is a particularly important cultural endeavour, as it is a vehicle for transmission of cultural ideas and values (Usborne et al., 2011). Speaking an Aboriginal language has been shown to be a major component of cultural engagement (Hallett, Chandler, & Lalonde, 2007). Children who speak an Aboriginal language are more likely to engage in cultural activities, spend time

with elders, and participate in Aboriginal early child development programs, compared with children who do not speak an Aboriginal language (Guèvremont & Kohen, forthcoming). Reports on Aboriginal education have stressed the importance of promoting Aboriginal language and culture in schools (Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures, 2005), and the revitalization of traditional Aboriginal languages has been cited as a contributor to health (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Hallett et al., 2007).

According to the 2011 National Household Survey, 17% of people with an Aboriginal identity can conduct a conversation in an Aboriginal language; approximately three-quarters (78%) of them reported an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue, and for the remaining 22%, an Aboriginal language was a second language (Statistics Canada, 2013). This marks a slight decline in the percentage speaking an Aboriginal language, although a shift from Aboriginal mother tongue to second language acquisition has been noted over the past few decades (Norris, 2007). Although children are the least likely to be able to conduct a conversation in an Aboriginal language (Statistics Canada, 2008c), they are also the most likely age group to be learning an Aboriginal language as a second language (Statistics Canada, 2012).

Canadian and international studies have demonstrated that learning an Aboriginal language can be advantageous for children and youth educational outcomes (Louis & Taylor, 2001; Wright & Taylor, 1995; Bell et al., 2004; Fulford et al., 2007) such as literacy (Task Force on Aboriginal Language and Culture, 2005) and numeracy (Ministry of Education, 2008; Romero-Little et al., 2006), and to mental health (Louis & Taylor, 2001; Wright & Taylor, 1995). This is particularly true of immersion programs, although results for some Aboriginal language programs have been mixed (Fulford et al., 2007; Stiles, 1997; Cree School Board, 2008). A 2012 study (Guèvremont & Kohen, 2012) using data from the 2001 APS reported academic benefits for children who were Aboriginal language learners. Child age and health status, household income, number of people living in the household, and urban versus rural residence were all associated with speaking an Aboriginal language and with school outcomes. However, independent of these associations, Inuit children and on-reserve First Nations children who reported being helped to learn an Aboriginal language by their teacher were rated as more likely to do well in school than were children who did not speak an Aboriginal language. Compared with their non-Aboriginal-language-speaking counterparts, on-reserve First Nations children who spoke an Aboriginal language (but not necessarily learned at school) were more likely to do well academically and to look forward to school, and off-reserve First Nations children were more likely to look forward to going to school. The study also examined an older cohort of adults and found that the same positive results did not emerge—for Inuit and First Nations adults, speaking an Aboriginal

language was negatively associated with high school completion.

To investigate the possibility of a cohort effect, data from the child component of the 2006 APS were subsequently examined (Guèvremont & Kohen, forthcoming). The study focused on off-reserve First Nations children whose parent/guardian rated their facility in speaking an Aboriginal language (with effort, relatively well, or very well) and reported whether they spoke an Aboriginal language at school. Children who spoke an Aboriginal language, particularly those whose teachers helped them learn the language at school, had more positive educational outcomes, including parental satisfaction with the school and parental ratings of the importance of education, both of which have been associated with academic success (Charbonneau & Van Ryzin, 2012; Rumberger, 1995; Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997). Speaking and learning an Aboriginal language has thus been shown to be associated with positive school outcomes including looking forward to attending school, school performance, and positive parental perceptions including satisfaction with their child's school, and higher parental ratings of the importance of school for their children.

Conclusions and future directions

A substantial number of empirical studies provide evidence that Aboriginal cultural participation, which includes speaking an Aboriginal language, is associated with developmental and academic outcomes for Aboriginal children in Canada. Analyses of data from the 2006 ACS reveal positive associations between cultural participation and preschool children's verbal and behavioural outcomes, and results from the 2001 and 2006 APS suggest a positive association between speaking an Aboriginal language and youth educational outcomes, as well as positive parental school ratings. Further research is needed to better understand the processes underlying these associations as well as efforts to enhance existing data sources. This research might include an exploration of mediating and explanatory variables through which Aboriginal cultural participation affect children's outcomes. For example, what are the processes by which cultural activities and language knowledge lead to more positive child outcomes? Might they have an impact on increased self-esteem and positive self-identity? Might positive associations be through positive relationships with peers, role models, and others such as elders? Furthermore, how does community involvement in Aboriginal activities and how do Aboriginal activities in child care environments influence children's early outcomes, school readiness, and/or education outcomes? Processes that may be involved include both those that influence the child directly as well as those that may impact parental mental health or parenting behaviours. Studies focusing on processes both at the individual as well as the community level can play an important role in elucidating these relationships. Future efforts might also include longitudinal studies to allow for the

examination of the impact of these associations over time, as well as the inclusion of direct measures of educational outcomes as well as more detailed indicators of cultural participation such as time spent in activities and types of activities. Finally, another important component required to build on the understanding of the importance of Aboriginal cultural activities and language learning relies on qualitative research that can fill gaps that may not be amenable to measurement using a quantitative (or survey-based) approach. Taken together, the findings from our present review as well as the recommendations provided highlight the importance of investing further research into this area.

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