Aboriginal English in early childhood: Respecting children's right to communicate in community dialect and develop their skills in supportive contexts

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Acknowledgement of country

Language and literacy

- A complex relationship!

- Strong language skills in early childhood are predictive of literacy success

Aboriginal English dialect

- 80% of Aboriginal people speak some form of AE
- Linguists recognise non-standard dialects as valid forms of communication, equal to the standard dialect and effective for carrying out necessary functions
- Non-standard dialects may be stigmatised and not regarded as ‘good’ English

Aboriginal English dialect

- Speakers of non-standard dialects need to speak their own dialect / language for communication within their cultural community and for identity
- Children also need to learn to speak the standard dialect so they can succeed academically

Aims of the research

1. To investigate the use of Aboriginal English (AE) dialect in the local area
2. To gather perspectives from early childhood educators (ECEs) and teachers about some of the factors affecting language and literacy development in Aboriginal children
3. To measure whether the children's use of dialect changed as they progressed into the school context

Method

Participants were video-recorded in the preschools:

- 21 Aboriginal children
- 21 non-Aboriginal children
- 10 ECEs
- The children were recorded in groups of 2-3 children with an educator

Method (continued)

- The video-recorded interactions were transcribed and analysed using Systematic Analysis of Language Transcripts (SALT) software (Miller & Chapman, 2010)
- The children's communication was studied for linguistic features (semantics, syntax, pragmatics), verbal and non-verbal communication

Method (continued)

- Interviews with ECEs, parents and teachers were conducted regarding factors affecting children's communication and literacy development
- The interviews were transcribed and analysed qualitatively for themes

Findings – use of AE dialect

- The Aboriginal children ALL used some features of AE dialect
- Some children used more features than others
- The children used many different features, eg grammatical or phonological features
- The linguistic features used by the Aboriginal children were significantly different to those used by the non-Aboriginal children

Findings (continued)

Aboriginal children in this research were more likely to:

- Use cluster reduction, consonant deletion and omission of /h/
- Eg first -> firs
- Spoon - > boon
- Hair -> air

Findings (continued)

Zero use of copula was a common feature

Eg, “this a cookie”

“them big”

Findings (continued)

Overall, the Aboriginal children produced fewer intelligible utterances as a percentage of their total utterances than the non-Aboriginal children

This finding is supported by linguistic theories that describe the different emphasis on the roles of the *speaker* versus the *listener* in Aboriginal English

Findings (continued)

10 children were recorded twice, with an Aboriginal ECE and a non-Aboriginal ECE. There were 4 Aboriginal and 6 non-Aboriginal child participants at this service.
Their communication in each different context was analysed.
A Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-ranks test revealed that:
In culturally-matched contexts, the children's communication featured significantly greater lexical diversity, (ie a higher number of different words) than a non-matched context.

Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-ranks test (n=10) for Number of Different Words (NDW) in matched and non-matched cultural contexts

(*z* = -2.55, *p* = .011)

Context	Mean	SD	Median	IQR
Culturally-matched	70.9	20.8	71.5	22
Non-matched	52.4	13.9	49.5	23

Findings – factors affecting language and literacy development

Educators and parents perceived many factors that could influence Aboriginal children's language and literacy development

relationship
probably
learned
model
something
preschool
make
last
thing
know
still
get
help
hearing
talking
development
learning
bit
cultural
sometimes
worked
speech
think
much
class
term
support
though
well
just
teaching
course
reading
different
child
level
talk
one
community
language
understand
long
good
really
lot
progress
average
sounds
working
literacy
aboriginal
differences
example
communicate
back
yes
children
like
mum
group
quite
years
need
related
speak
communication
come
parents
lots
school
year
first
little
concerns
ear
skills
home
kids
use
way
also
training
things
got
time
words
now
correct
needs
even
shy
family
better
times
early
great
experience
indigenous
dialect
classroom

Responses from Aboriginal participants tended to indicate awareness of dialectal differences:

- *you can tell where they're from, the more Aboriginal it is the further out I find they come from, the further out west. (ECE3)*

- *the majority have some lingo going, that they talk and use at home. (ECE5)*

Participants were more detailed in their discussion of the individual children in their care / classroom. These two educators were discussing the communication of one of the children:

he can communicate well, just another one of those…whether he chooses to or not. You can ask A something and he'll just look at you without giving you an answer, that sort of thing, …

it may be confidence, "well am I going to say the wrong thing and get myself in trouble?"

(ECE3)

Factors affecting Aboriginal children's language and literacy

Key concepts emerged from the coding process

WHO (2001) framework was employed as a structure when grouping the concepts into themes

Themes

Knowing the child and their family shapes perceptions and builds understanding (of both the educator and the Aboriginal child)

Barriers to Aboriginal children's communication and literacy development

Factors *supporting the Aboriginal child's development* and progress

Core themes	Knowing the child and family	Barriers to children's development	Factors supporting children's academic development and progress
Key concepts	Community involvement Valuing language and culture Developing relationships at several levels: • Child-teacher level • School-family level • School-community level	Compromised health & wellbeing Limited attendance at school or preschool Low emergent literacy skills at school-entry level *Family influences* *Teacher experience or training in working with Aboriginal children* *Cultural differences*	Teaching strategies for language and literacy learning Child's individual strengths Individual (1:1) support for school-based learning *Family influences* *Teacher experience or training in working with Aboriginal children* *Cultural differences*

CASE STUDIES

Examples from ECEC contexts - discussion around best practice in the early education and care of Australian Aboriginal preschool children

Case Study 1: Detroit

Importance of family; context; knowledge of the child; knowledge of the community

The first time I ever saw Detroit he was in a puddle

Boats and fishing
Acknowledging family context

Building trust first

“I love watermelon! I have this at home,”

The fence is no longer a barrier

Dad says: *“He’s happy playing here, I know it’s good for him. He’s doing good ay”.*

Participating in Culture

Family

Detroit: "*Look!!! Sonya, look, see her, she's good ay!*"

“This is my flag, this is me, Aboriginal”

Detroit: I'm good at climbing ay, I'm like a monkey.

Celebrating what is important to them with people who understand, people in whom they trust, gives them the confidence to be who they are, it's ***being*** and ***belonging*** at it's most complex level.

Case study 2: Ameliah

Building Trusting relationships

Connectedness to Culture

Family

Outcome 2 – Children are connected and contribute to their world

Children belong first to a family, then to a school and then to a wider community. When children demonstrate a sense of belonging and comfort in their environments they are showing a sense of belonging to groups and communities.

Ameliah: ***"That's my dad. I love my dad."***

Ameliah: Your strong sense of self was evident, your attachment and sense of belonging to your family and their importance in your life evident as you thought about them, pictured them in your mind, talked to me about not only their facial features but also your feelings for them.

In the end, you had achieved something that I could see gave you a great sense of pride and accomplishment and this was further evident when you showed your mum at the end of the day.

Ameliah's strong connection to her family and the love she shares with them is never far away from her mind and her sound ability to use a range of materials and experiences to make representations of her parents and family demonstrates her confidence and involvement in learning through play.

Relationships with the community

Understanding of AE has enabled ECEs to

- enhance relationships with the local community and
- facilitate learning through consideration of culture and context as central to children's sense of being and belonging

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