

ABSTRACT

Background: The UK is linguistically rich, but faces a decline in language learning, with no official policy on multilingualism and a need to value the country's language diversity (Taylor, 2013). A significant component in many linguistic minority communities is complementary schooling, which has wide-ranging educational and societal implications (Li, 2006).

Aim: This study examines potential cognitive and social benefits of bilingual development in primary school children that attend complementary schools, compared to those who do not, from the first time-point/baseline data of a three-year longitudinal project in East London.

Method: A sample of 153 bilingual pupils aged 4-9 years was recruited, including 73 across five complementary schools from Albanian, Russian, Tamil, and Gujarati communities, and 80 across four state primary schools, representing 35 heritage languages. Children were tested in two sessions: 1) cognitive measures (attentional control, executive functioning, object naming); 2) social development measures (ethnic and national identities, perceived competence). Additional information was collected on family affluence (a measure of socioeconomic status), and perceived exposure, use and proficiency for each language.

Results: Correlational analyses revealed a positive association between English proficiency and family affluence, and ethnic and British identities were positively associated with respective language use and exposure. In comparative analyses, controlling for age and family affluence, children that attend complementary schooling reported significantly higher proficiencies in both English and heritage language, particularly in literacy of the latter, compared to non-attendees. Children with more balanced proficiencies reported stronger ethnic identity and performed better in the executive functioning task.

Conclusions: Findings indicate the role of complementary schools in literacy and identity development and that of proficiency in producing cognitive benefits. Further considerations of these factors in subsequent time-points and modelling with these cohorts are discussed.

Relevance to the general public, professionals, or policymakers: This study aims to bring to light the potential benefits of early bilingual development and how those may be enhanced by the under-recognised context of complementary schools. The presentation will highlight how such schools contribute to language learning and explore how they can better connect with the mainstream education sector.

Keywords: early bilingualism, complementary schools, heritage languages, cognitive development, social development

Preference for an oral presentation.

References

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