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, (i.e. 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

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Median</th>
<th>IQR</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Culturally-matched</td>
<td>70.9</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>71.5</td>
<td>22</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-matched</td>
<td>52.4</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>49.5</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings – factors affecting language and literacy development

Educators and parents perceived many factors that could influence Aboriginal children’s language and literacy development.
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?”
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*
Knowing the child and family

Barriers to children’s development

Factors supporting children’s academic development and progress

Community involvement

Compromised health & wellbeing

Teaching strategies for language and literacy learning

Valuing language and culture

Limited attendance at school or preschool

Child’s individual strengths

Developing relationships at several levels:
- Child-teacher level
- School-family level
- School-community level

Family influences

Low emergent literacy skills at school-entry level

Individual (1:1) support for school-based learning

Teacher experience or training in working with Aboriginal children

Teacher experience or training in working with Aboriginal children
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

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
Detroit: “Look!!! Sonya, look, see her, she’s good ay!”
“This is my flag, this is me, Aboriginal”
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 its most complex level.

**Detroit:** I’m good at climbing, I’m like a monkey.
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: 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: “That’s my dad. I love my dad.”
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
References


Miller, J., & Chapman, R. S. (2010). *Systematic Analysis of Language Transcripts (SALT) for Windows (Student Version) [Computer software]*. Madison: Language Analysis Laboratory, Waisman Center, University of Wisconsin.


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