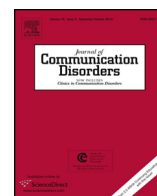




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Professional practices and opinions about services available to bilingual children with developmental disabilities: An international study



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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to gather information from school- and clinic-based professionals about their practices and opinions pertaining to the provision of bilingual supports to students with developmental disabilities. Using an online survey, data were collected in six socio-culturally and linguistically diverse locations across four countries: the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands. In total, 361 surveys were included in the analysis from respondents who were primarily teachers and speech-language pathologists working in schools, daycares/preschools, or community-based clinics. The overall picture that emerged from the data reflected a disconnection between practice and opinion. In general, respondents believed that children with both mild and severe disabilities are capable of learning a second language, although their opinions were more neutral for the latter group. However, children with both mild and severe disabilities who spoke only a minority language at home had less access to services for second language learners than did their typically developing peers, although respondents agreed that such services should be more available. Regardless of clinical group, children who lived in homes where a minority language was spoken were often exposed to, assessed in, and treated in the majority language only; again, respondents generally disagreed with these practices. Finally, second language classes were less available to children in the two disability groups compared to typically developing bilingual children, with general agreement that the opportunity to acquire a second language should be more available, especially to those with mild disabilities. Although the results indicate that there is a considerable gap between current practices and professional opinions, professionals appear to be more supportive of bilingual educational opportunities for these populations than was suggested by previous research.

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1. Introduction

In an increasingly globalized society, bilingualism and multilingualism are topics of interest for many policy makers, educators, and child development specialists. Many children grow up in communities where bilingualism is a necessity, rather than a choice (de Houwer, 1999); they need two or more languages in order to participate in society and communicate with the important people in their lives. Even for children whose home language matches the majority language of the society, learning additional languages can provide economic and social benefits. However, for children with developmental disabilities, the need for bilingualism is not always perceived as a priority. Many parents of children with disabilities such as Down syndrome (DS), specific language impairment (SLI), and autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are advised by professionals – including physicians, early childhood educators, and speech-language pathologists – to raise their children monolingually (Kay-Raining Bird, Lamond, & Holden, 2012; Kohnert, Yim, Nett, Kan, & Duran, 2005; Thordardottir, 2002). In fact, the services these children require (e.g., specialized assessments or therapy programs) are often unavailable in minority languages, resulting in a systematic lack of access to individualized interventions (D’souza, Kay-Raining Bird, & Deacon, 2012). In addition, children with disabilities are often counselled away from participating in optional second language instruction in school (Genesee, 2007).

Until recently, there has been limited research on the effect of multiple language exposure on language development in special populations. The largest body of research in this area has been focused on monolingual and bilingual children with SLI, with research from many countries contributing to this effort. In a summary of this research, Paradis (2010) found that “simultaneous bilingualism does not necessarily exacerbate the language development of children with SLI” (p. 247) and that “most evidence to date leans toward a positive attitude toward dual language learning for children with SLI who are in a supportive context for bilingualism” (p. 248). In addition, a small but growing body of research has compared early language development in children with ASD who are raised in monolingual versus bilingual households. All of these studies reached the same conclusion across a wide range of language measures: exposure to a second (or even a third) language does not negatively affect early language development in children with ASD (Hambly & Fombonne, 2012, 2014; Ohashi et al., 2012; Petersen, Marinova-Todd, & Miranda, 2012; Reetzke, Zou, Sheng, & Katsos, 2015; Valicenti-McDermott et al., 2013). These results were echoed in three studies that employed various measures to compare aspects of early language development in monolingual and bilingual children with Down syndrome; in fact, in language samples, the bilingual children in these studies had larger lexicons and higher mean length of utterances (MLUs) than their monolingual counterparts (Feltmate & Kay-Raining Bird, 2008; Kay-Raining Bird, Trudeau, Thordardottir, Sutton, & Thorpe, 2005; Trudeau, Kay-Raining Bird, Sutton, & Cleave, 2011).

Many of the studies reported previously were conducted in Canada, an officially bilingual country; thus, one might argue that the studies were conducted in a socio-cultural context that is especially supportive of bilingualism. However, some of the studies were also carried out in other countries, such as the United States (U.S.) (e.g., Valicenti-McDermott et al., 2013) and China (e.g., Reetzke, Zou, Sheng, & Katsos, 2015), providing support to the notion that the findings were not a result of the specific socio-cultural context, but were more likely reflective of the participants’ bilingual experience itself. Further support for this argument came from a study conducted in the U.S., which revealed that Spanish-English bilingual children with various degrees of bilingualism were not at an increased risk for language impairment, and that the overall language abilities of the bilingual and monolingual children were equivalent (Peña, Gillam, Bedore, & Bohman, 2011).

From this research, it appears that bilingual language exposure, at least prior to school entry, is not likely to have a negative impact on language development. However, this conclusion is often not evident in the decisions made by parents and professionals who provide services and supports to children with developmental disabilities. For example, in an early study, Kremer-Sadlik (2005) interviewed four sets of bilingual parents who were told by professionals to speak only English at home after their child received an ASD diagnosis; the parents complied, to various degrees, with a number of deleterious effects on family socialization and cohesion (e.g., the parents were less likely to address their child with ASD, the child did not engage in family conversations, and the parents rarely used English in family conversations). More recently, Fernandez y Garcia, Breslau, Hansen, and Miller (2012) and Jegatheesan (2011) interviewed two groups of bilingual mothers whose children had ASD. These mothers were also advised by health care providers to speak only English and to avoid using their native languages when communicating with their children with ASD. They reported struggling with feelings of loss and deep sadness after making the switch, and also reported that this resulted in numerous social barriers within their family, community, and cultural settings. In contrast, Yu (2013) interviewed Chinese-English mothers who also changed their home language to English based on professional advice after an ASD diagnosis. Yu reported that many of them believed that a bilingual lifestyle was not the most ideal situation for their child and would negatively affect their children’s learning. Yu pointed out, however, that their beliefs were likely influenced by prior advice from child development professionals. Together, these studies reflect the survey data in a recent study by Kay-Raining Bird et al. (2012), in which 49 parents of children with ASD from six different countries were interviewed about their experiences of raising children with ASD in multilingual homes. Of the 28 parents who reported receiving advice about language exposure from professionals, 62.5% were consistently advised not to expose their child to more than one language, 25% received mixed advice, and only 12.5% of parents were encouraged to continue exposing their child to more than one language. However, 78% of the 49 parent participants reported that their children with ASD were able to learn more than one language with varying degrees of language comprehension, functional ability, and literacy across individuals. These studies highlight a clear disconnection between professional advice and parental beliefs regarding the importance of bilingual language development.

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