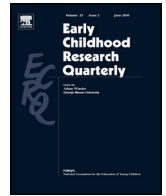




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# Associations between child home language, gender, bilingualism and school readiness: A population-based study

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines school readiness profiles of kindergarten children for the largest language groups in British Columbia, Canada. School readiness data were drawn from a population-level database that contains teacher ratings of children's school readiness, obtained via the Early Development Instrument (EDI; Janus & Offord, 2007). School readiness profiles ( $N=95,537$ ) were compared according to children's home language background (English, Cantonese, Mandarin, Punjabi, and Tagalog) serving as a proxy for cultural/ethno-cultural background, and gender (49% female). Furthermore, children speaking Cantonese, Mandarin, Punjabi, or Tagalog as their home language were divided into monolingual and bilingual groups according to their English proficiency, using administrative records of children's home language and English Language Learner (ELL) status. Analyses were conducted via multilevel modeling, controlling for the nested structure of the data (children within classrooms) and for children's families' socioeconomic status (i.e., income). The most prominent findings were that bilingual children were rated higher than the overall average on virtually every aspect of school readiness. Cantonese and Mandarin speaking children were rated most highly on pre-academic skills, and Punjabi-speaking children on emotional and social competencies and behaviors. English Language Learners in all language groups were rated as being more shy and reluctant to display socially scripted behaviors than non-English Language Learners.

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## 1. Introduction

Children's early language skills in the language of school instruction have received an increasing amount of attention as English Language Learners (ELL) from immigrant families form a growing part of North American classrooms (Capps et al., 2005; Hernandez, Takahashi, & Marotz, 2009; Ramlo, 2009; Statistics Canada, 2011b; Winsler, Burchinal et al., 2014). Questions of critical importance for educators center around the influences these diverse social and cultural factors exert on children's developmental readiness for school (Crosnoe, 2007; Gandara, Rumberger, Maxwell-Jolly, & Callahan, 2003; Graue, 1993; Sue & Okazaki, 1990; Vygotsky, 1980) and on how schools and teachers understand culturally diverse children's early development (Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Kannen, 2008). Research in education acknowledges that it is vital for teachers and schools to develop an understanding of (i) how

ethno-cultural, socioeconomic factors, and gender relate to children's development and competencies, (ii) how social and cultural factors are related to parental expectations about school readiness, and (iii) how social and cultural factors affect teachers' and schools' expectations, assumptions, decisions, and practices with respect to school readiness (Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Graue, 1993; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000; Zigler & Styfco, 2004). This study primarily focuses on the first question, specifically, on the joint associations between children's school readiness profiles as rated by their kindergarten teachers, and their language background (as a proxy for ethno-cultural background), bilingualism (classified according to children's home language and English Learner Status), socioeconomic status (estimated via block-level median family income), and gender.

Social and cultural context shape both teachers' and parents' expectations about children's development and school readiness, varying significantly according to ethno-cultural background (e.g., East Asian, South Asian, or Filipino family background in Western Canada) and socio-economic factors (Beiser, Hou, Hyman, & Tousignant, 2002; Graue, 1993). In turn, children's transition to school is related to the social and cultural expectations of their

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parents and teachers. When parents' and teachers' expectations correspond with, or are complementary to each other, rather than conflicting, children are more likely to be successful in school (Alexander, Entwisle, Blyth, & McAdoo, 1988; Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2007). Teachers and parents, however, often emphasize different aspects of school readiness competencies, with parents focusing on pre-academic skills, and teachers emphasizing motivation, attitude, discipline, and social and emotional skills (Lewit & Baker, 1995; Meisels, 1998). Whether or not a child speaks both her or his own heritage home language and the language of instruction can be a key component in school readiness. Children who enter school without a functional understanding of the language of instruction can be at a significant disadvantage (Duncan, Ludwig, & Magnuson, 2007; Duncan & Magnuson, 2005, 2012; Han, 2012). In contrast, bilingual children begin school with a number of cognitive advantages that lead to early school success (Akhtar, Menjivar, Hoicka, & Sabbagh, 2012; Barac & Bialystok, 2012; Bialystok, 2001; Cummins & Mulcahy, 1978; Hammer et al., 2014; Kapa & Colombo, 2013) and socio-emotional skills that facilitate further acquisition of the language of instruction (Kim, Curby & Winsler, 2014; Winsler, Kim, & Richard, 2014). Finally, school readiness expectations are also influenced by gender role expectations with gender differences in children's school readiness and educational attainment found repeatedly (Buchmann, DiPrete, & McDaniel, 2008; Winsler et al., 2014).

## 2. Approaches to school readiness

School readiness has been a highly contested construct in education over the past decades (Pianta, Cox, & Snow, 2007; Shepard, 1997). Perhaps the earliest and most pervasive approach has been a maturational view, which purports that the unfolding of biological development is the primary determinant of a child's readiness, with the consequence that chronological age and/or pre-kindergarten screening has become the most widely used criteria for kindergarten entry (Meisels, 1998; Snow, 2006). Studies of the practice of red-shirting (the voluntary practice of postponing a child's kindergarten/school entry) and the relationship between readiness screening and school outcomes, however, have generally been mixed (Carlton & Winsler, 1999; La Paro & Pianta, 2000; Snow, 2006). In general, red-shirting is typically associated with higher socioeconomic status and with boys, but red-shirting has also been found in at-risk samples to be more likely when maternal education is low (Winsler et al., 2012). Most studies of children for whom school entry was delayed have found only selective advantage or failed to find academic advantage or show reduction in retention rates (Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Snow, 2006). In fact, in one study that controlled for school readiness in retention outcomes, the only demographic variables that were predictive were family poverty, a child's non-ELL status, and pre-school experience (Winsler et al., 2012). Moreover, some of the more widely used screening tests are relatively poor predictors of later school success, placing only a little more than 50% of screened students with accuracy (Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Meisels, 1998).

Increasingly, educators have come to the realization that a child's school readiness must be contextualized (Guhn, Janus, & Hertzman, 2007; Piotrkowski, 2004; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Contextualizing the construct of school readiness allows a child's competencies to be viewed relative to the school or classroom which the child attends and shifts to a bidirectional focus that includes the schools' readiness, or ability to meet a child's needs as well as a child's developmental level (Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Meisels, 1998). Contextualizing also allows development to be considered in relation to the family, school, and community whereby a child's development becomes a social construction

based on the reciprocal interactions of biological endowment and the socio-cultural environment (Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Graue, 1993; Piotrkowski, 2004; Snow, 2006; Vygotsky, 1980) and is perhaps best understood as a component of an entire ecological system (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Dewey & Bentley, 1960). Concepts such as relative functionalism (Sue & Okazaki, 1990) and cultural moderation (Ungar, 2011; Ungar, Ghazinour, & Richter, 2013) apply the notion of interaction to the question of how cultural factors relate to differences in developmental outcomes for different cultural groups. The underlying rationale is that in specific historical-cultural contexts, certain abilities, behaviors, and characteristics are particularly functional and/or desirable, either for all, or for certain subgroups of the population. In a society like Canada, in which multiple cultures have been merging over past decades, one may assume that children from different cultural backgrounds have been raised according to different perceptions of what early developmental skills and abilities are desirable, and, consequently, emphasized in the home environment (Ho, 1994).

Taking an approach toward school readiness that emphasizes a child's ecological context eliminates the need for employing school readiness assessments as screening tests for kindergarten entry and moves instead toward utilizing such assessments as tools for "programming rather than placement" (Carlton & Winsler, 1999, p. 347). It also suggests that, to be useful, interpretation of school readiness assessments must attend to the pattern or profile of competencies in multiple areas that children bring to school, particularly in relation to socially and culturally diverse subgroups. Several studies using an approach that characterizes typologies or profiles of competencies across dimensions of school readiness have found good predictability to early school outcomes and yielded characterizations that potentially have implications for teacher and school instructional planning. McWayne, Fantuzzo, and McDermott (2004), using an ecological approach to study the relationship between multiple preschool competencies and school readiness, identified seven distinct profiles (labeled numerically 1–7) that were distinguished by their scores on dimensions of General Classroom Competencies, Approaches to Learning, and Interpersonal Classroom Behaviors. Profiles high on Classroom Competencies and Approaches to Learning were both associated with early academic success measured at the end of the preschool year. Neighborhood and preschool classroom qualities did not differentiate the children's profiles. Focusing on cognitive and social domains as the best predictors of early school success, Konold and Pianta (2005) identified six school readiness profiles in children aged 54 months, representing natural variation in domains of school readiness. The profiles were characterized as, (1) attention problems, (2) low cognitive ability, (3) low/average social and cognitive skills, (4) social and externalizing problems, (5) high social competence and (6) high cognitive ability/mild externalizing. Regardless of social skills, high cognitive functioning predicted the highest achievement test performance both concurrently and in first grade. Children with high social competence but average cognitive abilities also outperformed children characterized by the four remaining profiles both concurrently and at first grade, suggesting alternate pathways to school success.

A comprehensive study of early childhood readiness profiles (Hair, Halle, Terry-Humen, Lavelle, & Calkins, 2006), using the U.S. Early Childhood Longitudinal Study data, identified four kindergarten profiles across five domains of school readiness (physical health, socio-emotional development, approaches to learning, cognitive development, and language development) that were related to early school outcomes on parallel dimensions rated by parents and teachers at the end of first grade. Children above the mean on all school readiness dimensions were characterized with profiles of "comprehensive positive development", those above average on physical, social and emotional well-being had pro-

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