

Toward Improving Methods for Studying Language Minorities in National Studies

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Purpose and Goal

- Purpose: To highlight the unique challenges and opportunities in studying Language Minority children in national population studies.
- Goal: To help shape roundtable conversation by including issues of relevance for national population studies.

Federally-sponsored, nationally representative studies considered here

- Early Childhood Longitudinal Studies – Birth and Kindergarten Cohorts
- Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey
- Head Start Impact Study
- Early Head Start
- National Household Education Surveys Program
- Pre-Elementary Education Longitudinal Study
- Census

Nationally representative population studies have unique strengths

These studies:

- Answer key research questions in a way that is generalizable to the population of interest as a whole
- Provide opportunities to identify unique strengths and challenges of key subgroups of children and families
- Offer information on the broader context affecting key subgroups of children and families
- Examine how strengths and challenges differ for different subgroups

But these studies pose special challenges, too

- Typically these studies are designed to represent all members of a specific population
 - Children born in or entering Kindergarten in a specific year
 - Children in Head Start
 - Children in U.S. households
 - Children with disabilities
- So, samples include both language minority children and their language majority peers.

But these studies pose special challenges, too

- Measures and approaches should provide equally appropriate and comparable data for all subgroups
- These studies are often critical for policy makers and cover a wide array of topics
 - Limited room for experimental, supplemental, or time-consuming measures
- These studies typically employ a large field staff spread all over the country.
 - It is essential that procedures are standardized and can be administered reliably by non-clinicians in non-clinical settings.

What are some of the specific challenges we face?

- Defining and identifying populations of Language Minority children
 - Language screeners (typically English and Spanish)
 - Parent reports of all languages and primary language used in the home
 - Teacher reports and school/program records
- Ensuring large enough samples of Language Minority children
 - Oversampling where necessary (e.g., localities or programs with larger populations of Language Minorities)
 - But often only have sufficient samples to look at Spanish-speaking populations.

What are some of the specific challenges we face?

- Interviewing parents of Language Minority children
 - Requires interviewer fluent in relevant language
 - Standardized procedures require careful translation and testing of all instruments
 - Often not feasible to translate instrument into all possible languages – use interpreter or just translate into most common languages and do not include others in sample?
 - Concerns about reliability with simple translation or interpretation
 - Addressing different dialects

What are some of the specific challenges we face?

- Assessing Language Minority children
 - How to best represent the range of skills and knowledge of Language Minority children while still ensuring comparability to other subgroups?
 - How to determine which language(s) to use to measure which skills, given child's unique language progression?
 - Need standardized procedures to greatest extent possible

What are some of the specific challenges we face?

- Assessing Language Minority children
 - In longitudinal studies, how to measure growth over time? Across different languages?
 - Which measures to choose?
 - Need measures that are reliable and valid for each subgroup
 - Need comparable information across subgroups, so prefer the same measures for all children wherever possible

Addressing these challenges

- Consider specific research questions and goals of study
- Design study to allow for greatest integration of language minority populations as possible
- Evaluate the design as study progresses

Addressing these challenges

- Document key aspects of design for language minorities and non-language minorities separately
- Continue to re-asses methods per current state of the art regarding research on language minority populations.

Summary

- Nationally representative studies add important contextual information to what we learn from smaller studies focused exclusively on Language Minorities.
- Existing measures make it difficult to ensure that we are measuring Language Minority populations appropriately.
- Even with good measures, the question of *how* to assess and how to measure progress over time is a major challenge.

Summary

- Questions of measurement pose some of the most difficult challenges, but issues of sampling and analysis also arise.
- Addressing these challenges draws from sound design, method, and documentation rules most often already integrated into project work, but attuned to the particular needs of the language minority population.