

The association between mother's education level and early child language skills; findings from three European cohort studies

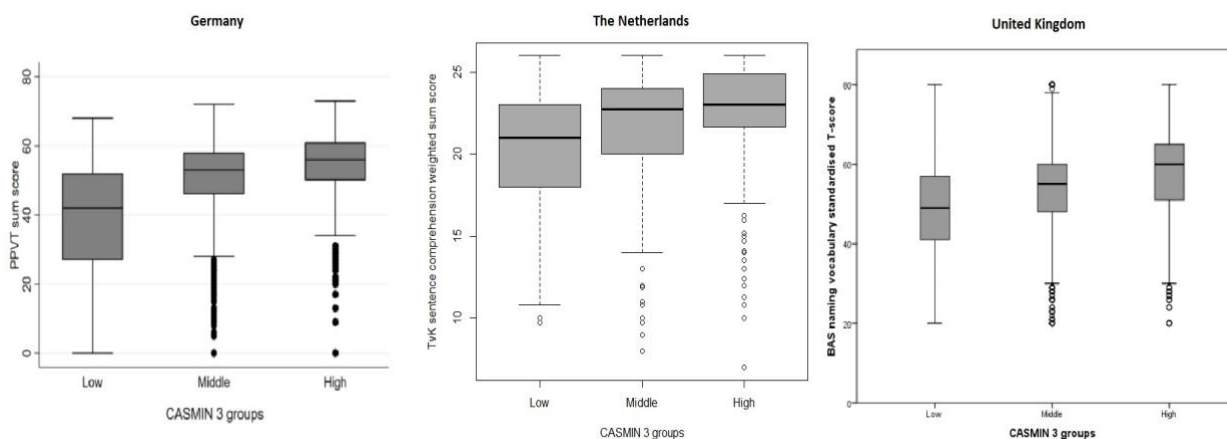
The development of language skills during the early years of a child's life are vital for school readiness, educational attainment, and later life outcomes¹. The socio-economic background of parents, as measured by occupation, income, and level of education, have been found to significantly affect child language skills and the differences we see between children.

As part of a European collaborative research project we used data from three European cohort studies; the National Educational Panel Study (NEPS) SC2 in Germany, Generation R in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, and the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) in the UK². Mother's level of education was a consistent and available measure

across all three cohorts, and by applying a common classification system across the data (CASMIN³) we grouped education into low (below national standard), middle (national standard) and high (university degree or higher) and investigated child language skills when children were aged between 5 and 6 years old.

Key findings:

- Across all three cohorts we found significant differences between child language skills⁴ based on the education of their mother's. The below graphs for each country show children of mother's with the lowest levels of education having significantly lower language skills than children of mother's with middle or higher levels of education.



¹ Law, J., Rush, R., Schoon, I., & Parsons, S. (2009). Modelling developmental language difficulties from school entry into adulthood: Literacy, mental health, and employment outcomes. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 52(6), pp. 1401-1416.

² For more information: NEPs - <https://www.neps-data.de> Generation R - <https://generationr.nl> and MCS - <https://cls.ucl.ac.uk/cls-studies>

³ Kerckhoff, A., Ezell, E., & Brown, J. (2002). Toward an improved measure of educational attainment in social stratification research. *Social Science Research* 31(1), pp. 99-123.

⁴ Language measures in the cohorts differed, with some measuring expressive or receptive vocabulary.

- Importantly, we found a gradient across all three countries, and a significant difference in child language skills between those of low and middle levels of education. This later finding suggests that increases in mother's education do not have to be large or to high levels (i.e. university) to reduce differences in child language skills.
- Our findings show that there continues to be differences in child development and countries have not yet been able to achieve a level of social change that has been beneficial to early child development.
- In Germany and in the UK, 23% of mother's had a low level of education (10% in the Netherlands). This identifies a large target group that could be offered intervention and support to increase education levels.
- The full published working paper can be found at: https://dynamicsofinequality.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/DIAL_1021.pdf

What this research adds?

There continues to be significant variation in early child language skills associated with mother's level of education. Many children were shown to have below average language skills at the age they start school.

We found a gradient between mother's education and child language skills, and that parental education doesn't have to be dramatically increased to reduce differences. This is important as it highlights the need for policy to support increases in parental education and adult learning.

Policy implications and recommendations:

- Inequalities in young children's language skills across different European countries continues and this research highlights the need for greater focus on early years policy to support children and reduce the existing difference in language skills before children start school.
- Policy to support parents in developing their own education and learning, as this research highlights that small increases in parents education have a significant impact on children's language skills.
- Where national targets exist it is important to keep working to these so that young people leave education with a national standard level as this will reduce future intergenerational inequalities.



This paper was developed as part of the work of the SEED Consortium. SEED stands for Social InEquality and its Effects on child Development: A study of birth cohorts in the UK, Germany and the Netherlands (Grant # 462-16-030). The consortium members are: Manja Attig, Gwendolin Blossfeld, Marie-Christine Franken, Wei Huang, Pauline Jansen, Claudia Karwath, Lisanne Labuschagne, James Law (PI), Cristina McKean, Robert Rush, Nathalie Tamayo Martinez, Hans-Günther Roßbach, Marc van der Schroeff, Jutta von Maurice, Helen Wareham, Anna Volodina and Sabine Weinert.

Website: <https://research.ncl.ac.uk/norfaceseed/>

Email: admin.seed@ncl.ac.uk

This brief should be cited as: Wareham, H., Huang, W., Labuschagne, L. & Law, J. (2021) The association between mother's education level and early child language skills; findings from three European cohort studies. Publications archive - dynamicsofinequality.org