

# Social Roles of Migrant Children in Australia

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# Immigrant Children in Australia

- In 2006 **35%** of children in Australia (about 1.5 million) lived in migrant families (ABS 2006 Census of Population and Housing).
- Half of the children living in migrant families were under 9 years of age.
- Currently, of the 200,000 migrants who enter the country every year about **67% arrive through the skill stream program**, and the rest through the family stream scheme. This means that most recent migrants have completed tertiary education or are highly skilled.
- In 2007 the NSW Department of Education and Training reported that **27% of all school enrolments** at government schools were of students of Language Background other than English (LBOTE).



# Why focus on migrant children?

- **Little attention** has been paid to them in Australian research.
- They are usually perceived as **resilient and as adaptable** to new contexts, however they also **undergo stress and difficulties** that have been mostly overlooked.
- Most studies on migrant children in Australia have focused on their language and academic achievement, but there is **limited data on other important dimensions in their lives** (health, emotional wellbeing, economic and social roles).
- Much of the work on migrant children has considered them as objects, rather than subjects of study. Little attention has been paid to their **agency** and the roles they perform.

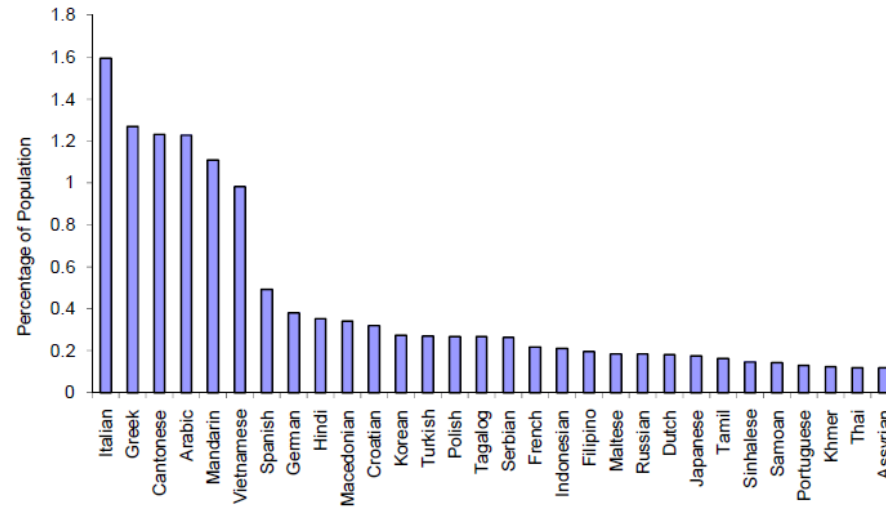


# The study

- DEEWR funded research on the transition to school of new arrivals.
- Qualitative study on the experiences of parents, teachers and children as recently arrived migrant students (5-8) start school in Australia.
- Two language groups (Spanish and Indonesian speaking migrant families) were selected considering their contrasting backgrounds, their growing representation in public schools, and their under representation in research.
- 20 families who arrived within the last 5 years and who had children of primary school age born overseas participated in semi-structured and in-depth interviews.
- 12 educational practitioners from Sydney's public schools servicing these families also participated in semi-structured and in-depth interviews.

**Chart 1.5**

**Top 30 Overseas Language Groups -Australia: 2006 Census**

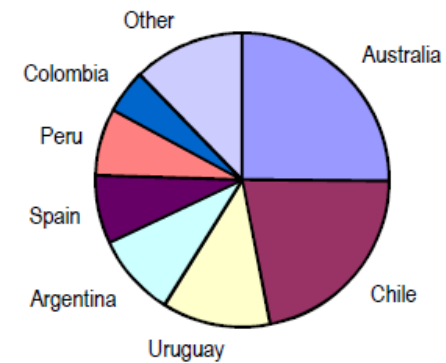


Rank	Language	2006 Census	% of population	Rank	Language	2006 Census	% of population
1	Italian	316,893	1.6	16	Serbian	52,531	0.3
2	Greek	252,226	1.3	17	French	43,217	0.2
3	Cantonese	244,558	1.2	18	Indonesian	42,037	0.2
4	Arabic	243,662	1.2	19	Filipino	39,044	0.2
5	Mandarin	220,603	1.1	20	Maltese	36,517	0.2
6	Vietnamese	194,855	1.0	21	Russian	36,505	0.2
7	Spanish	98,000	0.5	22	Dutch	36,183	0.2
8	German	75,635	0.4	23	Japanese	35,110	0.2
9	Hindi	70,008	0.4	24	Tamil	32,701	0.2
10	Macedonian	67,832	0.3	25	Sinhalese	29,055	0.1
11	Croatian	63,616	0.3	26	Samoan	28,521	0.1
12	Korean	54,625	0.3	27	Portuguese	25,778	0.1
13	Turkish	53,859	0.3	28	Khmer	24,710	0.1
14	Polish	53,389	0.3	29	Thai	23,640	0.1
15	Tagalog	53,284	0.3	30	Assyrian	23,527	0.1

# Birthplace of Selected Language Groups

-New South Wales: 2006 Census

<b>Spanish</b>			
Australia	11,846	23.9	
Chile	10,303	20.8	
Uruguay	5,607	11.3	
Argentina	4,311	8.7	
Spain	3,538	7.1	
Peru	3,479	7.0	
Colombia	2,279	4.6	
El Salvador	1,666	3.4	
Philippines	516	1.0	
United States of America	235	0.5	
Other	5,782	11.7	
<b>Total</b>	<b>49,562</b>	<b>100.0</b>	



<b>Indonesian</b>			
Indonesia	15,417	80.9	
Australia	3,034	15.9	
Singapore	72	0.4	
New Zealand	35	0.2	
Malaysia	27	0.1	
Germany	26	0.1	
England	17	0.1	
Greece	10	0.1	
Netherlands	10	0.1	
Hong Kong (SAR of China)	10	0.1	
Other	396	2.1	
<b>Total</b>	<b>19,054</b>	<b>100.0</b>	

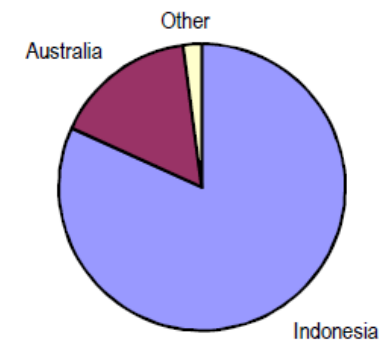


TABLE 3C  
ENROLMENTS OF STUDENTS OF LANGUAGE BACKGROUND OTHER THAN ENGLISH BY  
LANGUAGE, 2007 - Largest Language Groups

Language	Total Students	As % of Total LBOTE
Chinese	37,716	18.2%
Cantonese	20,116	9.7%
Mandarin	15,090	7.3%
Other Chinese	2,510	1.2%
Arabic	26,626	12.9%
Vietnamese	13,275	6.4%
Greek	9,085	4.4%
Hindi	7,774	3.8%
Tagalog	7,645	3.7%
Italian	6,952	3.4%
Samoan	6,413	3.1%
Korean	6,381	3.1%
Spanish	6,265	3.0%
Farsi	4,624	2.2%
Macedonian	4,318	2.1%
Turkish	4,311	2.1%
Serbian	3,925	1.9%
Tongan	3,702	1.8%
German	3,207	1.5%
Tamil	2,914	1.4%
Indonesian	2,828	1.4%
Assyrian	2,776	1.3%
French	2,525	1.2%
Maori	2,337	1.1%
Urdu	2,259	1.1%
Bengali	2,234	1.1%
Khmer	2,166	1.0%
Japanese	2,133	1.0%
Croatian	2,023	1.0%
Punjabi	1,967	1.0%
Thai	1,965	0.9%
Russian	1,885	0.8%
Maltese	1,649	0.8%
Dutch	1,370	0.7%
Portuguese	1,358	0.7%
Fijian	1,341	0.6%
Sinhalese	1,323	0.6%
Afrikaans	1,302	0.6%
Lao	1,122	0.5%
Polish	1,091	0.5%
Others	14,444	7.0%
<b>Total LBOTE</b>	<b>207,031</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Languages with enrolments less than 1000 were included in OTHERS

# Preliminary Findings

- After a few difficult weeks the transition of new arrivals into primary school seems to be rather smooth. Australian schools seem to be well equipped to welcome and help them integrate.
- Migrant children seem to catch up with the **academic** demands of school soon after they arrive. Many become top performers in their classes.
- In schools, migrant children participate in a socialisation process that will put them in a **position of advantage** compared to the (generally) slower acculturation process their parents, grandparents, and non school age siblings go through. School provides them with an **immediate and instructional immersion** into Australian culture and the English language.
- Children's **faster understanding** of their new cultural setting allows them to become language and cultural brokers for their parents, younger siblings, peers, and even teachers.

## Migrant children as language and cultural brokers

- In Australia (as in other receiving countries) migrant children often become **informal language translators and cultural mediators** for their parents, siblings, newly arrived peers, and teachers.
- Although this phenomenon has been studied by linguists and social scientists, there has been limited analysis of its **implications** on children's lives.
- While translating and mediating, children become active participants and interpreters, they **assume new roles, forge new identities and develop new responsibilities**.
- Some children report becoming **tired, anxious, or frustrated** when having to act as language or cultural brokers. Parents and teachers, on their side, often feel **relieved** to be able to rely on children as mediators.

# Migrant Children as Language brokers for other children

*“There is a new child at school who speaks Spanish and I am helping him so that he can understand what the teacher says. They put him in my class because I speak Spanish. The teacher wants me to help him too. So for example, if the teacher says ‘draw a flower’, I tell him what she is saying so he can do it too.*

*“But then, I am the last one to finish the assignments. It takes a lot of my time during class and sometimes I have to finish my assignments another day, and this is happening every day because I am helping this boy”*

(Rocio, Argentinian girl, 6)

# Migrant Children as Language brokers for parents

*“She helps me to get around, especially when we are out and about. She helps me with the shopping, or when we go to the doctor, and I keep on asking her how do you say this or that. She is my teacher”*

(Consuelo, Mexican mother of Jacinta, 7)

# Migrant children as language brokers for teachers

*“I was very fortunate to have Fendi and Nur in the classroom to help Mohammed who had just arrived in Australia, with no English skills. If I didn’t have them it would be much harder for me, and a lot harder for him, because he did have so many problems, and needed to communicate them. At the beginning I had little goals for Mohammed, Fendi and Nur would translate what he wanted to say, and I would write it, and all I would want him to do is just to be able to copy the sentence”*

(Y2 teacher at a Sydney public school)

# Migrant children as cultural brokers and socialising agents

*“In Peru it’s OK to identify people by their ethnicity or religion. You can say ‘that one is a black person, that one is a Chinese, that one is a Jew’. But my daughter and son get really upset if I refer to anyone in that way. When I told my daughter once ‘so you have a Chinese friend’, she got really upset and said: ‘That’s being racist. My friend has a name. In Australia we are all the same and you call people by their names’. This is what they teach them at school and I am learning from them”*

(Estela, Peruvian mother)

## Role reversal in migrant families

- *“Because I was not born here, it will never feel like my place, so I cannot teach my son much about the culture in which we live. I feel I am learning as he learns. Back in Indonesia I would feel a more confident mother. Here many times I learn from him. For example, I learn about the school system through him. My relationship with him is different to what it would be if we were back in Indonesia, where my role would be more the one of a mother who shows the world to her child. Here, he is showing me much of the world we live in to me, and it affects our mother-child role. Mostly, I learn from him about this culture”*

(Fathima, Indonesian mother)

## “Betwixt and between”

- Recently arrived migrant children face a **parallel socialization process**: one at home, one at school.
- They are **betwixt and between** what the **state** and community desire from them and what their **parents** expect from them and teach them.
- While the school aims at **standardising diversity**, the family attempts to maintain a **strong sense of connection** to an ethnic, linguistic and cultural identity.
- Migrant children transit between cultural worlds on a daily basis and often **become the link** between the old world and the new one.
- **Through school** they incorporate the norms, codes, and practices of the new culture –usually with difficulties—which they **will then translate** to their parents, grandparents and sometimes even younger siblings.
- As Orellana et al. (2001: 572) say children in migrant families help constitute and reconfigure transnational social fields and transnational practices that shape particular childhoods.

## Different migrant cultures, different processes

- Although Spanish and Indonesian speaking families report similar migratory experiences, their children's roles in this process **differ to certain extent**.
- While Spanish speaking children seem to adopt the Australian way of life faster and more willingly, and to be more **contestant** towards their parents, Indonesian speaking children seem to remain more attached to their cultural habits and more **supportive** of their parents.
- While Spanish speaking parents notice that their children become increasingly “Australianised”, many Indonesian parents report that they see their children are and behave differently at home and at school.

# Conflicts, Disagreements, Negotiations

- Mediating and transiting between two cultural worlds can lead to **intercultural and intergenerational conflict**.
- Many children show **embarrassment** when having to speak their home language in public, or towards their parents' strong accents in English.
- Many migrant parents report having arguments with their children about their (Australian) eating, dressing and lifestyle **habits** which are different to what parents would teach.
- Rather than parents imposing behavioral and cultural norms, often migrant children and their parents end up **negotiating** these.

## Implications for migrant children

- In many migrant families, the usual **parent-child relationship** takes a different shape. The **dynamics of power hierarchies** undergo a restructuration after arrival.
- Parents remain children's carers and decision makers, but children can assume **important roles** for their families, peers, and teachers.
- Immigrant children transit daily between two cultural worlds, **moulding particular identities** in the process, and struggling to create a **place for themselves** at different levels of society.
- Although they gain some **power** acting as mediators, they do not gain **authority**, and feel pressured to assume new responsibilities.

## Further research

- More research into **other migrant groups** is needed to find out about how culture can impact on the roles of children.
- More attention could be paid to the **emotional and mental health** of migrant children, rather than to their academic achievement.
- Further research could focus on the **identity formation processes** migrant children go through and on their impact on their social and general wellbeing.