

The Next



Generation

Aspirations of Migrant Adolescents and Parents

Ruth Weston

Over the last 20 years, people from non-English-speaking countries have represented an increasing proportion of Australia's migrant intake. These people are particularly disadvantaged in terms of access to information and participation in the broader community. What happens to the children of this migrant generation? RUTH WESTON reports.

Although the majority of people who immigrate to Australia are skilled in English, around 30 per cent of recent migrants from countries where English is not spoken as a first language have little or no command of English (ABS 1996). These migrants are particularly disadvantaged in terms of access to information and participation in the broader community.

Parents in limited-English families may opt to experience considerable hardship in their new country in the hope of improving the life chances of future generations. Some of the circumstances experienced by migrant families with parents with limited English skills were explored in a recent study by Weston (1996).

The analysis was based on families in nine urban and two rural areas who participated in the Australian Living Standards Study (ALSS) and had at least one child aged less than 20 years. Families who spoke a language other than English at home were divided into two groups: those who indicated that a parent had poor or no command of English ('limited-English families'), and those who indicated that both parents or sole mother were proficient in English ('sound-English families'). These two groups were compared with families who spoke only English at home ('English-only families').

Of the three groups referred to above, those with limited-English language skills ('limited-English families') exhibited the lowest socio-economic status (SES), a trend consistent with 1991 Census data (BIMPR 1996). For example, over 40 per cent of parents had no more than Year 10 of schooling and less than 20 per cent had tertiary qualifications. In addition, the parents in this group indicated lower personal well-being on a range of measures including sense of mastery and satisfaction with life as a whole. Thus, although some parents

in this group may later become proficient in English, other factors, such as low educational attainment and low self-esteem, may hinder their prospects for achieving employment or moving to skilled jobs.

What happens to the offspring of parents with little or no command of English? Will they be locked in a cycle of unemployment or low skilled work? How does the outlook of these young people compare with that of young people whose parents speak only English at home, or who speak a foreign language but are proficient in English?

The Sample

The research literature indicates that high educational aspirations of parents and their children can have a profound *positive* impact on the educational attainment and subsequent employment and income of young people (see Abbott-Chapman 1994; Parr & Mok 1995; VandenHeuvel, Robertson & Doube 1994).

Data from the Australian Living Standards Study were used to look at how well adolescent children in limited-English families were faring in terms of educational aspirations and achievement. The following analysis focuses on information pro-

vided by nearly 2,850 secondary school children or school leavers and their parents who participated in the ALSS. Eighty-five per cent of these young people lived in English-only families (N = 2421); 9 per cent lived in sound-English families (N = 260); and the remaining 6 per cent lived in limited-English families (N = 165).

A fairly even gender split was evident in each of these groups, and the majority in each group were enrolled in secondary school (76 to 84 per cent). While all young people surveyed were aged 12 to 20 years, those in limited-English families were more likely than other groups to be at least 16 years old (58 per cent, compared with 43 to 47 per cent). The effect of this difference on trends in educational aspirations is explored below.

Virtually all young people in the English-only families, 56 per cent of those in the sound-English families and 35 per cent of those in the limited-English groups were Australian-born. Of the two groups which spoke a language other than English at home, 77 per cent in each group were either born in Australia, South-East or Southern Asia or North-East Asia. The South-East and Southern Asia region formed the most common *foreign* birthplace, especially for those in limited-English families (28 per cent versus 17 per cent).

Socio-economic patterns for families with adolescent children resembled the patterns apparent for all families in the different language groups (Weston 1996). Adolescents in limited-English families were the most likely to have family incomes below the poverty line, neither parent in paid work, a blue collar background and parents with no more than Year 10 of schooling.

Educational Aspirations

Consistent with their parents' views, most sons and daughters in Years 7 to 10 expected to complete Year 12, and such expectations did not vary significantly across the different language groups.

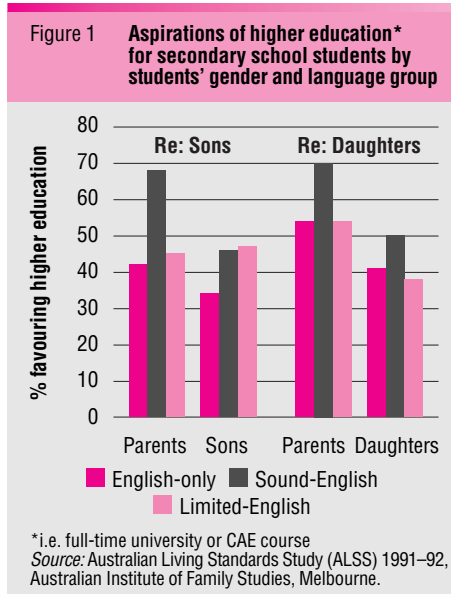
Of the various options suggested to them, full-time higher education (at a university or a College of Advanced education (CAE)) was the most frequently mentioned aspiration of parents and students in all language groups. This is not surprising given that higher education is more likely to



result in professional occupations and higher salaries. However, although full-time tertiary education was the most frequently endorsed of the various options, it was endorsed by no more than half the sons and daughters in the three language groups (see Figure 1).

In most cases, parents were more likely than their children to hold higher educational aspirations. Parents in sound-English families were more likely than parents in other families to indicate a preference for higher education, and a similar trend was apparent for daughters. In English-only families, parents were more likely to express high educational aspirations for daughters than for sons (54 per cent compared to 42 per cent), while sons in these families were least likely to aspire to higher education (34 per cent). Similar proportions of sons as parents in limited-English families had their sights on further education (47 and 45 per cent respectively).

Most of these trends continued to hold when the effects of differences in the age make-up of the groups were controlled. For example, the disproportionate number of parents in sound-English families who hoped for higher education was apparent



in relation to children aged 16 or over, and for younger children. For adolescents, girls aged 16 or over in sound-English families were the most likely to hope for higher education (69 per cent).

If high educational aspirations of parents and their children tend to have a positive

effect on the children's educational attainment, then it seems reasonable to suggest that the greatest probability of success arises when both parents and children share these high aspirations – other things being equal.

Figure 2 shows that parents and young people in sound-English families were the most likely of all groups to agree in hoping for higher education (42 per cent for sons; 45 per cent for daughters).

In other families, the most common tendency was for neither parents nor children to aspire to higher education. This was particularly true of sons in English-only families (49 per cent).

Thus, to the extent that parental and personal aspirations for higher education have a positive influence on educational outcomes (Abbott-Chapman 1994; Parr & Mok 1995; VandenHeuvel, Robertson & Doube 1994), students in sound-English families appear to be the most advantaged, and sons in English-only families, the least advantaged.

For most groups, the tendency for parents and children to have a shared expectation of higher education was greater where children were aged 16 or over. It was also most likely to be expressed in sound-English families whose daughters were of this age group (67 per cent, compared with 41 and 44 per cent of daughters in English-only and limited-English families). Of boys aged 16 and over, shared aspirations for higher education were evident in 50 per cent of sound-English families and 30 to 31 per cent of the other two language groups.

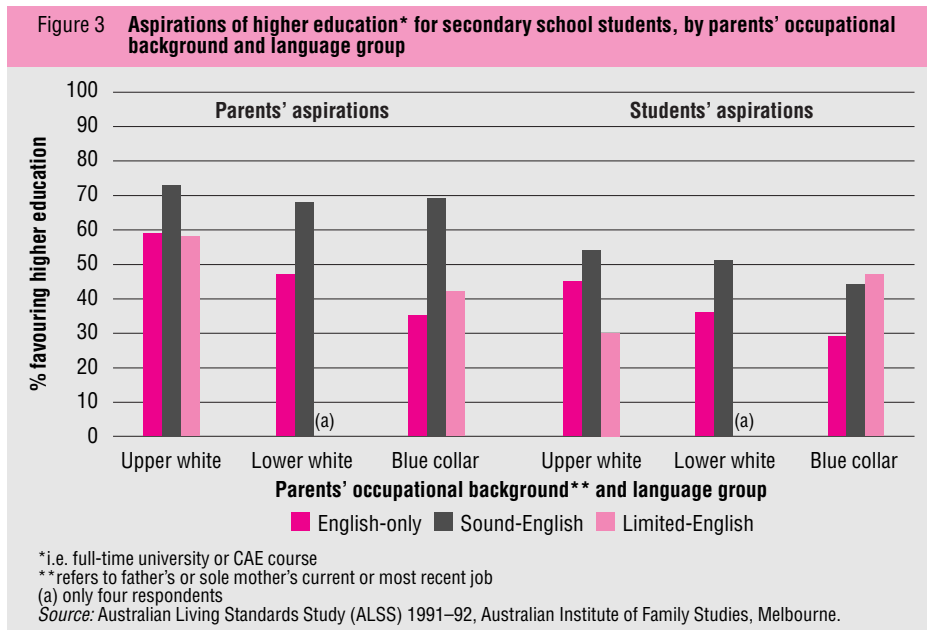
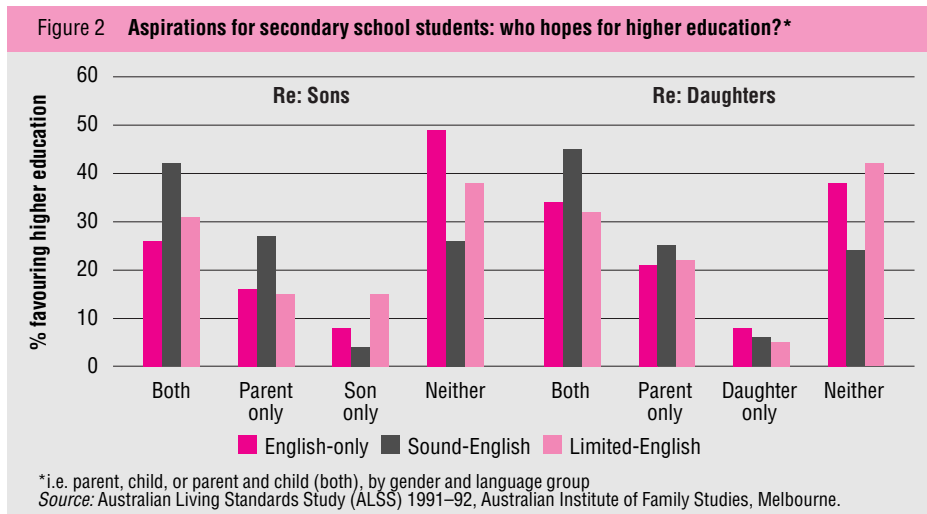
Socio-economic status

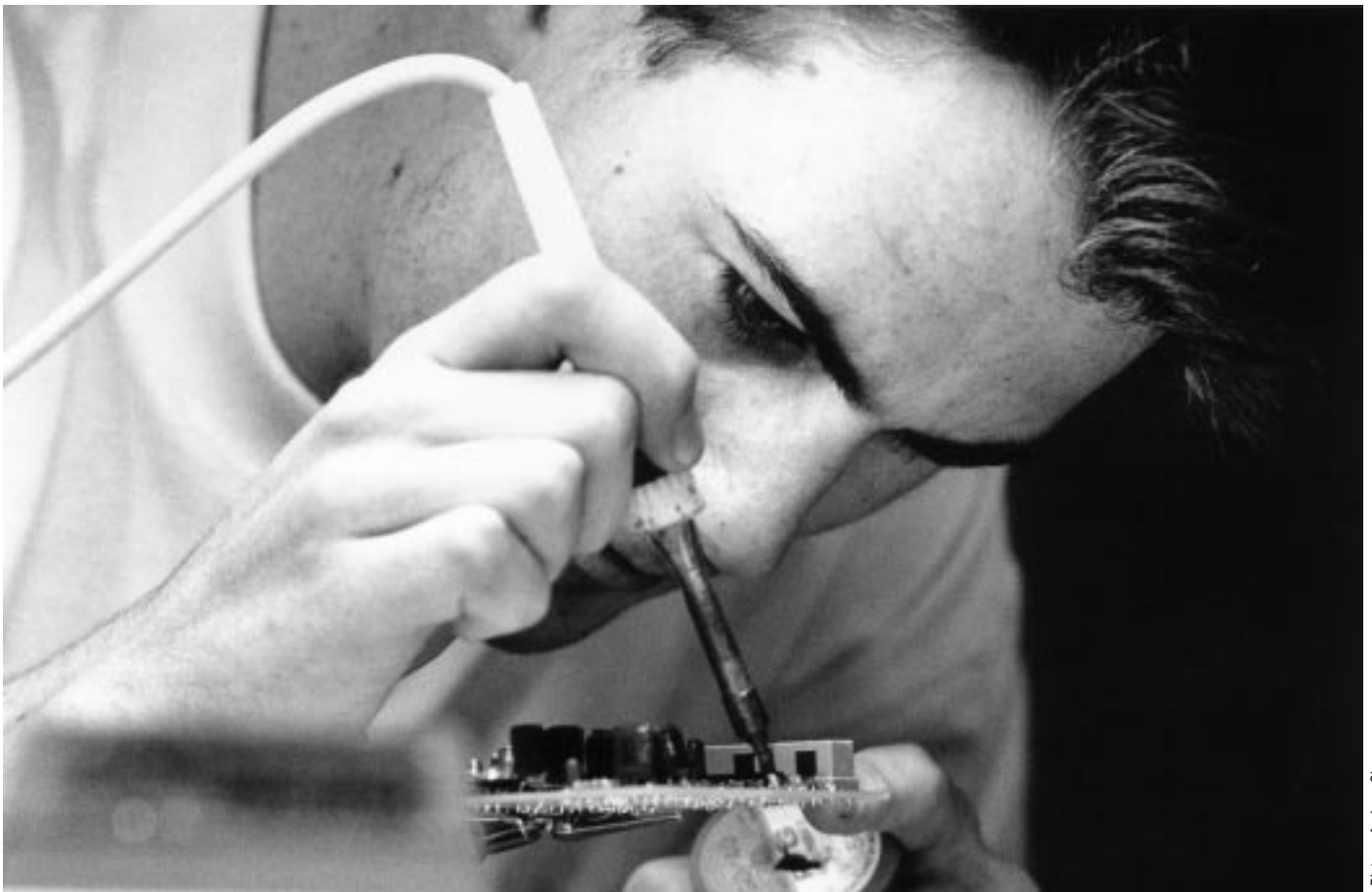
In families where only English was spoken, higher educational aspirations were most likely to be held by parents and young people in upper white collar families, and least likely to be held by those in blue collar families (Figure 3).

However, such aspirations did not vary significantly with occupational status for those in sound-English and limited-English families. For each occupational status (upper white; lower white; blue collar) shown in Figure 3, parents in sound-English families stand out as being the most likely to hope that their adolescent children will undertake a full-time tertiary education. (It should, however, be noted that there were only 23 students in upper white, limited-English families, so 'trends' apparent for this group should be interpreted with caution.)

Of students in blue collar families, similar proportions in sound-English and limited-English families aspired to higher education. These two groups were at least 1.5 times more likely than those in English-only families to aspire to higher education.

For some families, occupational status and level of education do not tally in expected ways, so it is useful to consider both these aspects of socio-economic status. For example, while fathers or sole mothers of most secondary school





Picture: Andrew Chapman

While aspirations can have a powerful influence in shaping careers, not all those with high aspirations will have the ability and external resources to achieve desired outcomes

students in limited-English families held blue collar jobs, 11 per cent of this latter group of parents had tertiary education. Of the small group (N = 23) in limited-English families with upper white collar jobs, 48 per cent (N = 11) had no more than Year 10 of schooling.

Typically, parents' aspirations for higher education for their children were most

likely in families where the father or sole mother had tertiary education, and least likely when he or she had no more than year 10 of schooling (Figure 4). However, the groups most likely to indicate these aspirations were parents in sound-English families.

Unlike their parents, young people in limited-English families were more likely

than those in the other language groups to hope for higher education. This comparison was only possible for those whose parents did not have tertiary qualifications. (The majority of young people in limited-English families had parents with no more than Year 10 of schooling.)

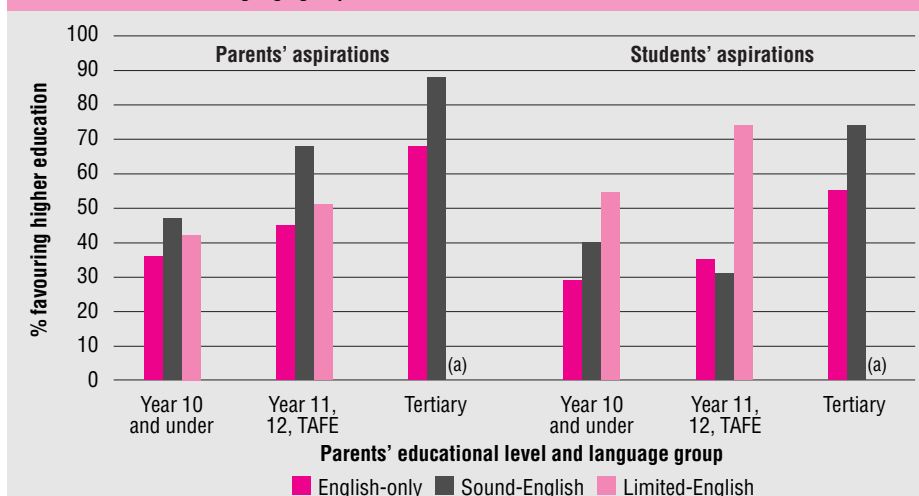
School leavers

While aspirations can have a powerful influence in shaping careers, not all those with high aspirations will have the ability and external resources to achieve desired outcomes. Indeed, those who feel they are unlikely to meet their parents' aspirations may experience a great deal of distress – an issue that is not explored in this analysis.

The following analysis compares the educational circumstances of school leavers in the three language groups. However, the results are based on only 27 young people in limited-English families and 46 in sound-English families (as well as 583 in English-only families). Similarities or differences between groups that emerge in this analysis are by no means definitive but may be suggestive of issues for research.

Outcomes for school leavers varied according to language status: only around half of those in English-only families and approximately two-thirds of those in the other two groups had successfully completed Year 12. At the time of the survey, the school leavers in English-only families were the least likely to be engaged in further study or training (51 per cent), followed by those in limited-English families (62 per cent). Of those in sound-English families, 75 per cent were enrolled in a

Figure 4 Aspirations of higher education* for secondary school students, by parents' educational level and language group



*i.e. full-time university or CAE course

(a) only 15 respondents

Source: Australian Living Standards Study (ALSS) 1991–92, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

course or training, and of all students undertaking a course or training, those in the English-only group were least likely to be enrolled at a university or CAE (51 per cent versus 63 to 67 per cent of the other language groups).

The educational success suggested here of those who speak a language other than English at home is consistent with previous research. Dobson, Birrell and Rapson (1996), for example, reported that young people who spoke a language other than English at home were more likely to participate in higher education than English language users. However, these authors noted that outcomes varied according to country of birth, with Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean and Eastern European language groups having participation rates twice as high as those for English-language speakers and around four times higher than Arabic, Italian, Khmer and Turkish speakers. (English language proficiency of parents could not be assessed in that study.)

Dobson and colleagues argue that differences in socio-economic status between language groups play an important role in these trends. (This conclusion was based on the socio-economic status of the area in which the students lived, because no data were available regarding parents' occupations.) The Vietnamese groups, however, appeared to form an exception. Despite their relatively high participation rates in tertiary education, disproportionate numbers of these students lived in 'low socio-economic' postcodes.

To quote Dobson and colleagues (1996, p.53): 'The explanation for the Vietnamese achievement probably derives from aspects of their position as recently-arrived migrants. They are repeating the classic migrant success story in which the parental drive to succeed is successfully transferred to the younger generation in such a way that they overcome class and other handicaps which other less motivated groups find to be impassable obstacles. But this progress could not have occurred without the educational opportunity provided by Australia's publicly financed state secondary and tertiary education system.'

Study Implications

These results for secondary school children and school leavers suggest that many children of migrants who speak a language other than English at home are on the road to educational success, thereby increasing their chances of occupational and financial success. Such trends are stronger for those in sound-English than limited-English families:

- Parents and secondary school students in sound-English families were the most likely of the three language groups to share the hope that the student would undertake full-time higher education, particularly where the student was 16 years or older.

- For parents, the disproportionately high number in sound-English families holding these aspirations applied to all socio-economic status groups examined, while for students, this trend was restricted to those in families with relatively high socio-economic status (measured in terms of educational level and occupational status of father or sole mother).

- School leavers in sound-English families were more likely than at least one of the other groups to have successfully completed Year 12 and to be engaged in higher education.

While there was an over-representation of limited-English families with low socio-economic status, young people in

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such families seemed to be positioning themselves well as potential members of the labour force.

- Where parents had no more than Year 10 of schooling, disproportionate numbers of young people in the limited-English families hoped for higher education.
- Of the small number of school leavers in limited-English families, most had successfully completed Year 12 and were engaged in some course or study, typically at a university or CAE.

One reason for these trends concerns the selectivity of the migrant population. This is influenced not only by Government selection programs but also by the type of person who chooses to apply. The extremes of poverty apparent in their country of origin, coupled with the opportunities that education provides in their new country, may also inspire parents to do all they can to instil in their children a strong motivation to succeed academically.

Such trends have important implications for the current migration debate. While the shorter term prospect is that a disproportionate number of migrants with limited-English skills rely on welfare, the educational aspirations and apparent progress of the second generation suggests that many of these young people will position themselves to contribute to the Australian economy in positive ways.

However, not all school leavers from migrant families had completed Year 12, and not all migrant parents and their secondary school children had hopes for higher education. Attention needs to be given to *all* young people whose

opportunities for gaining higher education qualifications are limited by factors other than ability.

Overall, educational prospects for those in English-only families with low socio-economic status seemed the poorest:

- Parents and students in these families were the least likely to hope for higher education for the student.
- School leavers in English-only families were the least likely to have successfully completed Year 12 and to be undertaking some course or study at the time of the survey.

Such socio-economic based inequities may become more pronounced under the current 'user-pays' climate.

The results highlight the importance of taking into account parents' English language skills when undertaking research into families with non-English-speaking backgrounds. These groups are very different in terms of parents' educational levels and the outcomes for parents and children in several areas. Failure to recognise these differences in research may result in failure to identify and address some of the special needs of families with limited English skills.

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