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The relationship between socioeconomic status, bilingualism and working memory in school beginners

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Abstract

Children from low socioeconomic backgrounds are argued to be at a disadvantage since standardized cognitive tests tend to be biased in favour of high socioeconomic status children. Standardised tests measure the kind of crystallised knowledge that children from high socioeconomic status backgrounds are more likely to be exposed to. It is argued that assessments should truly measure the child's basic learning abilities rather than only reflecting the individual's knowledge or prior experience. Accordingly, this study explored whether measures of working memory, which are often described as being less biased than crystallised measures, are fairer for children from a low socioeconomic status. In South Africa, SES is closely related to mother tongue, since those most disadvantaged by apartheid were second language English speakers. English is not the mother tongue of the majority of South African children, yet it is the medium of education in most schools. Research suggests that bilingualism can positively influence the development of cognitive abilities, yet very little is known about the relationship between bilingualism and working memory in children. Therefore, this study explored the association between bilingualism and working memory in children from high and low socioeconomic status backgrounds. A sample of 120 students between the ages of six and eight were assessed using both crystallised and working memory measures of verbal abilities. It was found that high socioeconomic status monolingual children were greatly advantaged and outperformed the low SES children on almost all measures. The suggestion that working memory tests are unaffected by SES and that bilingualism positively influences children's working memory was not fully supported by the results of this study. However, bilingualism was seen to offer a kind of buffer against the negative influence of SES. These findings require further research, utilizing a larger sample and fewer schools, before any definitive conclusions can be drawn.