

# Language may contribute to Indigenous disadvantage

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(Phys.org)—Poor schooling outcomes are a key factor driving Indigenous Australian disadvantage in life, and UQ's Dr Ilana Mushin wants to find out why.

Dr Mushin and her research partner, Associate Professor Rod Gardner, from Griffith University, are investigating whether the way students and teachers speak to each other could be part of the problem.

"We noticed that although most Indigenous children in Australia do not speak a traditional language, neither do they speak Standard Australian English in their homes and communities," Dr Mushin said.

"Teachers may assume that their children already know Standard Australian English, even if they are perceived to speak it 'badly', when in fact they are having to learn the [curriculum](#) through the medium of another dialect.

"Coupled with the already well documented challenges faced by Indigenous students, this can lead to real educational disadvantage."

Dr Mushin said she hoped to show that when Indigenous children started school, they had to learn English through the medium of a second [dialect](#), which impacted successful transmission of knowledge.

"At present, we are looking at how children try to get teachers' attention for feedback or [clarification](#), whether or not their strategies are

successful, and to what [extent](#) language differences may be a factor in what happens," Dr Mushin said.

"We have noticed that [Indigenous children](#) in early years schooling work hard to get a response, suggesting that they are highly engaged in learning, but may get less engaged over time because of the language differences.

"Often the teachers are from a non-Indigenous background and are not aware of the issues, which suggests the need for better [teacher education](#) in language differences and the explicit teaching of Standard Australian English.

"We will continue to work with the Queensland Department of Education, Training and Employment to run workshops and produce training guides and posters.

"We believe our findings can be applied to other culturally diverse school environments."

The research team is also producing a sociohistorical account of linguistic variation and development within some Queensland Indigenous communities, to show how such community vernacular languages are robust linguistic systems, and not simply "Broken English" or "Slang".

Provided by University of Queensland

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