

Bilingual kids could lead in ocean environmental action

January 13 2023, by Laura Oleniacz



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Participation in environmental education programs can motivate children across diverse language groups to act responsibly toward the environment, a recent study from North Carolina State University

researchers suggests.

In the study, researchers surveyed 644 [elementary school children](#) about how motivated they were to act in ways that would help the environment—such as by using a reusable water bottle at home or refusing to use plastic straws in restaurants—before and after participating in an [environmental education](#) program.

The program, developed by the Duke University Marine Lab, focuses on trash in oceans and other waterways, and includes lessons on how long different types of trash persist in waterways, a trash clean-up, and hands-on investigations of challenges related to marine debris. After the program, students scored higher on average on the survey gauging their motivation to act for the environment. Bilingual or multilingual students saw bigger gains on average compared to students who spoke English primarily at home—a finding researchers say is promising, and needs to be investigated further.

"What we saw was that in aggregate, the programs seemed to encourage environmentally friendly actions among everybody, but when we dug down, most of the program's effect was explained by the response from linguistically diverse children," said study co-author Kathryn Stevenson, associate professor of parks, recreation and tourism management at NC State. "This is encouraging, as linguistically diverse children are making up more and more of the U.S. population, and we want our programs to resonate with everyone. It also highlights how [young people](#) with different backgrounds can make important contributions. It also makes us wonder: Are students bringing these lessons home?"

The study is part of a research series looking at how environmental education can impact children, their families and their communities. In a previous study, researchers found parents' climate change concern increases after their children are educated. In another study, they found

that local leaders' as well as voters' views shifted after watching children's presentations on an environmental issue.

"We've been interested in the mechanisms of inter-generational learning," Stevenson said. "We saw this program can impact all children involved, but this suggests it might work differently for [children](#) who speak more than one language. For kids who act as translators for their family, they might be even more practiced at translating on many levels—linguistically or culturally—and we want to know how that might impact inter-generational learning about the environment."

More information: Jenna M. Hartley et al, How a marine debris environmental education program plays to strengths of linguistically diverse learners, *Frontiers in Education* (2023). [DOI: 10.3389/feduc.2022.1058864](#)

Provided by North Carolina State University

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