

# Shifting concepts of migrant educational (dis)advantage in Australia

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## Abstract

*Research on challenges of migration for Australian education has focused on the management of cultural difference under the umbrella of 'multiculturalism'. Equity for 'ethnic' migrant minorities is narrowly defined as the recognition of diversity in policy documents and the provision of English language classes for new arrivals. When participation and outcomes have been considered, some researchers have concluded students that of non-English speaking migrant background generally achieve well in Australian schools and in higher education. This 'ethnic success' thesis excludes key factors influencing success and is insensitive to differences between and within migrant groups. In this paper I discuss the approaches and explanatory models developed since the presence of large numbers of post-war migrants in Australian schools gained attention in the 1970s.*

## Introduction

Australia has a culturally diverse population, many of whom are migrants or the children of migrants. According to the 2001 census, of Australia's population of nineteen million, 23 per cent were born overseas and 43 per cent were either born overseas or had at least one parent born overseas. Twenty per cent of Australians speak a language other than English, with the most common being Italian, Greek, Cantonese, Arabic, Vietnamese and Mandarin. Christianity, Buddhism and Islam are the religions with the largest numbers of followers. An official policy framework of multiculturalism involves the recognition and support of some forms of cultural difference, and the collection of data on culturally and linguistically defined communities (for a discussion of multiculturalism see, for example, Henry and Lingard, 1982; Jakubowicz, 1984; Kalantzis and Cope, 1999; Knight et al., 1990).

The measure of 'ethnicity' most commonly retained in educational research is that of 'Non English Speaking Background', or NESB. This groups together students who regularly use a language other than English, or whose parents do.

In response to criticism of this term for identifying individuals solely based on a lack or deficiency in English, the term Language Background Other Than English (LBOTE) is now also widely used. A looser concept also gaining currency is that of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse background (CALD). This concept is less dependent on language use and can cover anyone who is not from the dominant 'Anglo-Saxon' background. The emergence of CALD is a sign that the social and economic participation of 'ethnic' minority groups, into the 'second' and subsequent generations when language is no longer a differentiating characteristic remains an issue.

However the largest recent study into migrant background students' educational achievement retains language as the principal distinguishing characteristic of migrant populations. The report *Second Generation Australians* concludes that with increasing English proficiency educational disadvantage is unlikely to arise from migrant background for the second generation (Khoo et al., 2002). This report points to social inequalities as the principal cause of educational inequalities into the second generation, however the educational indicators used include little detail, being based not on any educational data sources but the 1996 population census. These conclusions come after extended debate in the 1980s about the existence of 'ethnic' disadvantage (Kalantzis and Cope, 1988), subsequent to which government support for students of non-English speaking migrant background have been scaled back (Keceli and Cahill, 1998).

They also come as the nature of social inequalities is being transformed and intensified by economic restructuring and the development of a 'massified', and increasingly segmented, education system. We need therefore to re-examine the relationship between social inequality and migration.

Bellow I outline the context of migration to Australia before turning to an examination of competing conceptual frameworks and presenting some challenges for future research.

### Historical Context of Migration in Australia

European migration to Australia began in 1788 with the arrival of British settlers. Settlement was based on the legal fiction that Australia was *terra nullius*, or uninhabited. Indigenous populations were massacred and forced from their land as Australia became part of the British Empire. Immigration was unrestricted in the nineteenth century, with migrants from Asia and the Pacific arriving as workers or joining a series of gold rushes. An ethno-nationalist impulse towards the end of the century saw increasing concern for racial purity and cultural homogeneity as the basis for social cohesion. Indigenous populations were forced onto government controlled reserves and in 1901 the White Australia Act restricted all non-European immigration. This Act was used to further restrict migration to English speakers, as the political discourse positioned Australia as a culturally British nation at risk of being submerged by culturally and racially alien subjects. A cartoon from the *Bulletin* underlines this sense of cultural

vulnerability and the need for state institutions to reinforce an Anglo Australia (figure 1).

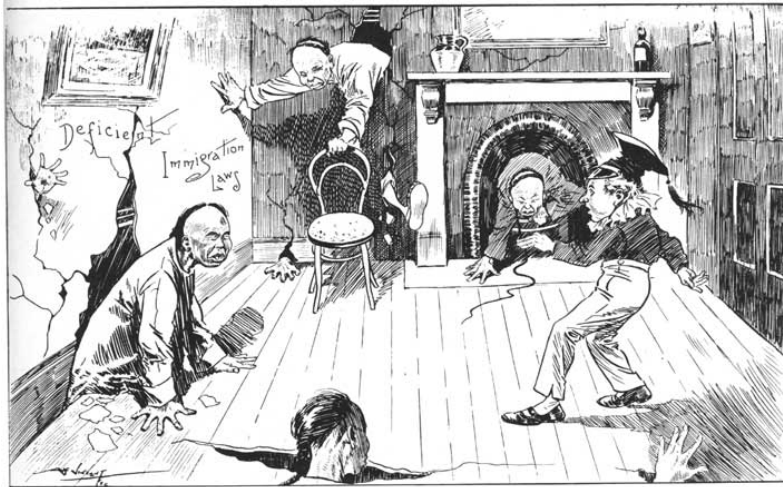


Figure 1 "The Prohibited Chow Pest" - Vincent *Bulletin* 1909. Source: *The Other Side of the Coin - A Cartoon History of Australia* Jonathon King 1976.

In the post-war years the Australian economy began to suffer from labour shortages and British migration was joined by large scale migration from Southern and Eastern Europe, and later from the Middle East. The White Australia policy was abandoned in 1966 and dominant discourse moved towards cultural assimilation in relation to both new migrants and indigenous populations. More culturally diverse migration brought particular challenges for education and the first 'Child Migrant Education Program' was introduced in 1971. Since the mid 1970s a new perspective of multiculturalism has informed immigration and education policy, and the first 'Multicultural Education Program' was formulated in 1981. From the early eighties labour migration started to dry up and refugees from Vietnam, Lebanon and other war-torn areas began to arrive. Currently a small refugee intake and a larger intake of skilled migrants make up the bulk of permanent settlers. In the last ten years resurgent racist political formations have presented cultural difference as a threat to social cohesion as part of an ethno-nationalist discourse. Current policy has tended to focus on promoting cultural integration rather than on social mobility.

### Access and Equity in Education

At the time when the children of the first post-war migrants were leaving the school system, researchers formulated the hypothesis of 'migrant disadvantage' but broadly concluded that on the contrary children of migrants are able to overcome the obstacles they face at school (Birrell, 1986; Birrell, 1994; Birrell et al., 1995; Birrell and Seitz, 1986; Bullivant, 1988; Meade et al., 1983; Mistilis, 1986; Sturman, 1985). This research does not always distinguish between groups, or adequately take account of socio-economic status. However attention has increasingly turned to social factors as the heterogeneity of Australia's migrant population makes analysis without a measure of socio-economic status

misleading. For some groups, economic mobility has taken place in the first generation. For other groups, such as Turkish migrants, the first generation has retained a strong occupational concentration in factory and unskilled work (Young, 1988; Keceli, 1998), although many have left the workforce completely, often as a result of workplace accidents: 44.1 percent of the 'second generation' aged 0-14 years live in households where neither parent is employed, compared to 19.1 percent of children whose parents were born in Australia (Khoo et al., 2002, p. 33).

Successive theoretical accounts of what aspects of migration and migration background could form the basis of disadvantage specific to this cohort have informed research in Australia.

*Initial shock:*

According to this account, disadvantage will fade with time, and arises from the initial shock of adjustment to an alien social and cultural environment. The greater the 'distance' of the culture language of origin from the dominant norms, the greater the difficulties faced until assimilation is achieved. Language difficulties are seen as inhibiting effective communication, preventing students from performing to the level of their 'ability' (De Lemos and Australian Council for Educational Research, 1975). Methodologically, this research compared the educational achievements of students from recent waves of migration and earlier waves of migration to see whether disadvantage fades over time. Comparing differences recorded in the early 1980s between the achievements of Greek and Italian students on one hand and Lebanese and Turkish students on the other, Young found that length of time spent in Australia is positively associated with

- mastery of English
- "sufficient schooling in Australia to have reached secondary level and to have gained an understanding of Australian society"
- access to sources of vocational information and support from parents, schools and bureaucracies (Young et al., 1983, p. 254).

Looking back from the mid 1990s, Cahill drew similar conclusions (1996, p. 39). However, comparing the difficulties of newly arrived groups with the success of earlier arrivals to establish a direct link between length of time spent in Australia and social mobility remains problematic (as Cahill acknowledges). This reasoning assumes that circumstances affecting each group are broadly similar, and the structures of opportunity (e.g. access to housing, job security, wage levels) are consistent over time. The relationship between language maintenance, proficiency in English, and length of stay is also problematic. Table 1 illustrates this point by comparing two groups: the children of Turkish migrants, most of who arrived in the 1970s and early 1980s, and the children of more recently arrived Hong Kong migrants.

Table 1: English proficiency of second generation aged 15-24 by parents' or father's birthplace

Parents or father only born in:	Spoke English only at home	Spoke English well/very well	Total proficient
Turkey	9.9percent	87.9percent	97.8percent
Hong Kong	44.3percent	54.1percent	98.4percent

Source:(Khoo et al., 2002, p. 51).

In addition, the high academic achievement of recently arrived overseas students who have studied English as a foreign language in academic settings suggests that cultural and economic capital are more important than length of stay in determining success.

### *Cultural Deficit*

By the early 1990s improvements in retention were still not matched by improvements in attainment for groups such as the Turks (Inglis et al., 1992). Cultural practices, rather than transitional difficulties, increasingly became the locus of research. The deficiencies of ascribed cultural traits of migrant groups remain the primary focus in 'ethnicist' accounts (Brah, 1992), thereby placing together, for example, ethnic Chinese refugees from East Timor and economic migrants from Hong Kong. In this view cultural difference is understood as an impediment to academic success (Meade et al., 1983). Investigations from the 1980s focused on family lifestyles and 'deficits' of knowledge and language, rather than on the demands and operation of schools (Mackie and Dept. of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, 1983; Young et al., 1980), and so tended to leave the latter unscrutinised.

### *The second generation*

With many migrant background students now born in Australia, the success of the second generation becomes a test of the fairness of structures of opportunity and earlier policies. The potential basis for an after-shock in the second generation has been identified in parents' low SES and educational levels, lack of modelling of English in the home, the persistence of prejudice, and the psychological trauma of attempting to reconcile competing value systems at home and in broader society (Hartley, 1993; Kagitçibasi, 1988; Peköz, 1993; Smolicz and Wiseman, 1971). Inglis has convincingly argued for the importance for the educational opportunities of migrant background students of "material disadvantage, and family experience of limited English, and often limited formal education" (1992, p. ix).

### *Ethnic advantage: a reversal of the cultural deficit argument*

In formulating their criticism of the assumption of migrant cultural disadvantage, Martin and Meade suggested that the scholastic progress, albeit uneven, of migrant students, might be derived from shared group characteristics, such as greater motivation and parental ambition. In the time following their report,

researchers have consistently found an aggregate advantage for NESB students. For example Marks found that 84 percent of NESB students completed VCE compared to the average of 79 percent across Victoria (Marks and Australian Council for Educational Research, 2000, pp. 10, 67), concluding that higher aspirations and family support were able to compensate for linguistic and social disadvantage.

Bullivant, the most enthusiastic advocate of the powers of motivation and ambition, has termed this the 'ethnic success ethic' (1988). This 'ethic' putatively counter-balances the social factors which disadvantage NESB students. Work sharing this perspective implies that a focus on migrant background students is both unnecessary and unfair to other students whose competitiveness would be further reduced.

### Class and culture

Discussions about the extent to which 'ethnic' difference stood in for class divides in the period of mass migration came early in the debate (Jakubowicz, 1984; Jakubowicz and Castles, 1986; Meade et al., 1983). The current discussion of social class and migration background identifies the potential negative effects of a concentration of low SES migrants in areas where "the school systems are of poor quality" (Khoo et al., 2002). PISA studies have identified Australia as having relatively high correlations between social inequality and performance.

The relationship between factors deemed cultural in nature and those deemed economic remains problematic. Existing data does not shed light on how residential polarisation affects what goes on in the classroom, nor why experiences differ, particularly in relation to gender outcomes: gender differences appear to be different in migrant populations than in the general population (Bottomley and De Lepervanche, 1984; Bottomley et al., 1991; Brookes, 1985; Cahill et al., 1996; Hartley, 1988; Inglis, 1988; Inglis et al., 1992; Myhill et al., 1994; Polesel, 1997; Tsolidis, 1986; Young, 1985; Young et al., 1980).

While many low socioeconomic status schools also have high proportions of NESB students (Teese and Polesel, 2003) Little fine-grained educational research on the combination of these characteristics exists. A comparison of the English study scores of the most disadvantaged students (table 2) shows differences between individual language groups. An analysis of these differences remains to be undertaken.

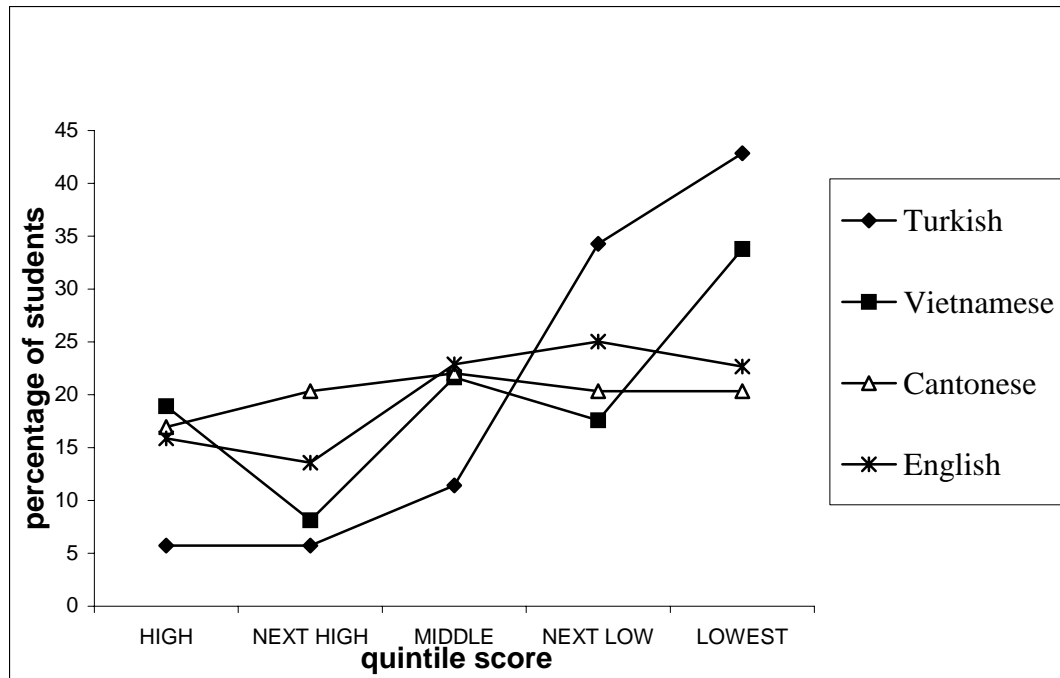


Figure 2: English Study Scores (out of 50) for Selected Language Backgrounds (students receiving Austudy (welfare benefits)).  
 Source: Unpublished data, Educational Outcomes Survey 1996, University of Melbourne.

One proposed solution to this confusion is the concept of ‘ethclass’(Bullivant, 1987; Gordon, 1964; Mackie and Dept. of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, 1983). The problem with ethclass, and implicit in many other explanations, is that it is essentially a cumulative model. The relative importance of and relationship between distinct factors is unaccounted for. Kalantzis and Cope, while acknowledging that they work together in complex ways, maintain a distinction in the attributes of ethnicity and class: while “certain aspects of ESB working-class culture, education and structural context, portend limited education”, “language learning context, racism, the particular non-commensurability of family culture and the culture of educational success” count amongst explanations peculiar to NESB students (1988, p. 55).

Marjoribanks suggests that certain factors may be contingent on other threshold factors, such as English proficiency (1978), which must exist at a minimum level before others start to have a positive effect. However, as Marjoribanks himself admits, the notion of a single model for success is misleading. In fact, there exist many ways to achieve the same ends (the acquisition of socially and academically powerful knowledge and dispositions) and some of the preconditions of the ‘ideal’ model may be absent in successful families. Language use and proficiency remains a key variable, but one whose impact cannot be isolated.

### Some current methodological difficulties

The work directed by Birrell using census data shows rapid intergenerational mobility, with far greater social mobility than in the general population. (1995). Using migrant parents' educational levels as a measure of intergenerational mobility faces the notorious difficulty of comparability. Educational opportunities in parents' countries of origin are generally not comparable with those in Australia for the same period; therefore parents' educational levels carry a different social meaning. The comparability of parents' educational levels, at least as a marker of social status, is dubious in these circumstances. Australian born parents with higher levels of education may still be relatively lower in an academic and social hierarchy, and in addition transmit a negative relationship to formal education to their children. A migrant parent with little formal schooling may be able to offer encouragement and support unburdened by negative experiences with that system. Familiarity with the education system may therefore carry both positive and negative value. Occupational status faces similar difficulties, as migrants enter the labour market from a different angle to non-migrant parents, and this affects their subsequent trajectories.

A second difficulty is the aggregation of different migrant groups together. A dichotomous 'Migration Status' is sometimes used to group all students who are migrants or the children of migrants together. This is a measure recorded in the PISA study, and is of limited value as the largest group of migrants to Australia is from the United Kingdom, where language and educational norms are similar. A second dichotomous variable is English Speaking Background, Non English Speaking Background. Not only can these mask inter- and intra-group differences, but they can result in gross generalisations. More detail is added in Marks' study by grouping students into broad regions such as 'Asia' or 'Middle East & North Africa' based on their fathers' birthplace. An analysis of the LSAY data revealed that performance in literacy and numeracy varies widely among students from language backgrounds other than English. When ethnic background was measured by nine categories relating to father's country of birth, some categories performed better than those whose fathers were born in Australia, while the performance of others was worse (Marks and McMillan 2000). However these groupings can also be somewhat misleading as different kinds of migrants with different cultural backgrounds and speaking different languages are put together.

Table 2: Mean numeracy test scores by country of birth of mother (9 category indicator), Year 9 students, 1998. (source: Marks and McMillan 2000).

Country of birth of mother	Mean test score
Australia	12.4
Other English speaking country	12.5
Southern Europe	11.3
Other Europe	12.9
Asia	13.2
Middle East and North Africa	10.5
Other Africa	13.0
Central and South America	11.1
Pacific	10.2

Nevertheless, the point is made that when NESB is broken down its positive impact appears less certain. In early research Meade found greater variation between NESB groups than between NESB and ESB students, (1983, pp. 109-110), and recent data has continued to show wide variation between groups (Birrell, 1986; Birrell, 1994; Birrell et al., 1995; Cahill et al., 1996; Dobson et al., 1996; Marks and Australian Council for Educational Research., 2000). This suggests the salience of factors associated with the history of migration, specific cultural background, or evolving economic and political climates as differentiating factors. Persistent disparities between and within groups suggest that the categories NESB, migrant or 'ethnic' have no unified meaning outside of these factors and their interplay with specific contexts and structures of schooling, the specific conditions of arrival and subsequent social trajectories of migrants. Simplistic links between motivation and success liquidate intervening processes and obstacles contributing to success and failure, leaving ethnic motivation as a sufficient or overriding characteristic.

Finally, the measures of achievement and participation used are often too insensitive to pick up important differences. Retention is frequently relied upon (Birrell et al., 1995; Meade et al., 1983; Williams and Australian Council for Educational Research., 1980), but does not capture the importance of results for future opportunities. As students are not academically selected into the final years of schooling, it is possible for weak students to complete their leaving certificate with poor grades, and limited future opportunities. The average score achieved by Turkish background students is more than 12 points lower than that of their peers, a significant difference (Mann-Whitney test  $p=0.004$ ). The size of the 'effect' of ethnicity is small to medium ( $ES=0.48$ ), but greater than that of gender, for example (0.034). Similarly, the indicator 'participation in higher education', combines university and vocational institutions. These sectors set students on significantly different social and economic pathways. Continuation on to higher education for the Melbourne schools with the highest numbers of migrant background students may look better than at some other schools, but university enrolments account for as little as 13 percent of the total number continuing on to higher education (compared to a state-wide figure of 60 per

cent) (Department of Education and Training, 2003). The most recent detailed analyses of educational inequalities have not focused on migration background (Teese, 2000; Teese and Polesel, 2003).

#### *Areas to focus on emerging from the Australian literature*

- family and community structure and practices
- Residential and educational segregation
- language and literacy practices
- conditions (economic and institutional) under which cultural traits are transformed into different forms of disadvantage
- The impact of prejudice and stereotypes on students.
- students' perceptions of how they are viewed

#### Challenges for future research

In testing the impact of 'ethnicity' on educational achievement Australian researchers have found little to be concerned about. Many studies lack a complex understanding of either school processes or the use of 'ethnicity' as a social category. The vastly differing school experiences of Australia's current heterogeneous mix of labour migrants, refugees, fee-paying overseas students, skilled professionals, and business migrants, demand future research attention to specific conditions of arrival and differential demands made by educational systems.

With the growth of mass secondary education through to the twenty-first century, we must look beyond demonstrating strong representation of migrant background students in educational institutions to an investigation of the segregations and relegations operating within and between educational sectors. Ultimately, this must be based upon a sociologically sound understanding of why and how mapping patterns in participation through categories such as gender, class and ethnicity can contribute to the improvement of education for all.

There is a need for data which includes more sensitive indicators of educational inequalities as new hierarchies and markers of distinction have emerged in recent years. The locations of educational disadvantage have been displaced due to rapid growth in retention rates across the board and the emergence of a 'capitalised' educational dynamic in which competition is intensified and resources mobilised according to market logic.

The increasing marketisation of education in Australia has seen the strengthening of divisions between school sectors and within the public sector. Geographical location and mobility are increasingly important. This process has opened up space for the emergence of community-run and low-cost private schools which cater to specific ethnic or religious communities. The impact of this development on student outcomes has yet to be evaluated, although there are indications that these new schools are under-resourced and produce poor outcomes. There are questions about the quality of education offered and in many instances there is little regulation of the teaching by the Government

outside of the state system. Research shows migrant parental concern that the type of schools their children attend will limit their potential (Donohoue Clyne, 2003; Hartley et al., 1988). Their fears are confirmed in the 'Ontrack' data for the Victorian government schools which accommodate most working-class migrant students. These show that only eight to fourteen percent of graduating students made it to University in 2003, compared to 41 percent state-wide (Department of Education and Training, 2003).

Finally, further research needs to better theorise language use and proficiency. The question of language proficiency remains confused with the cultural and cognitive literacies demanded by school. Socio-linguists provide a distinction which can complicate our understandings. Cummins argues that the linguistic skills required for cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) are not easily available outside of school. Unlike basic interpersonal communication, CALP requires a knowledge of discourse conventions and specialised vocabulary, syntax and concepts (2000). Beyond language acquisition, attention also needs to be turned to the existence of inter-linguistic and inter-cultural cognitive patterns, dispositions and practices that are a feature of both middle-class life and education systems in many countries.

#### Possibilities for Future Research

A number of pre-existing data sets have the potential to deepen our understandings (Table 3). Data sets collected specifically for educational research often only have proxy indicators for social class. For example postcode can be used as a measure of socioeconomic status for VTAC data sets. Aspects of migration background can be similarly reached. Recent arrivals can be identified if they are enrolled in English Language classes for EURO and VTAC data sets. Only the LSAY data sets include length of time in Australia. Access to VTAC and other government data sets may be difficult to negotiate.

The drawback of the census, as previously discussed, is the insensitivity of data relating to education. The Australian Bureau of statistics does however provide the most comprehensive set of background indicators and has produced a set of *Standards for Statistics on Cultural and Language Diversity*. With this the ABS advocates moving away from the use of dichotomous LBOTE/NESB indicators which group people from diverse country/language backgrounds into one category. It recommends the following indicators for data collection:

- Country of Birth of Person;
- Main Language Other Than English Spoken at Home;
- Proficiency in Spoken English (for those who speak a language other than English); and
- Indigenous Status.

Further to these core indicators, it recommends collecting data on:

- Ancestry;
- Country of Birth of Father;
- Country of Birth of Mother;

- First Language Spoken;
- Languages Spoken at Home;
- Main Language Spoken at Home;
- Religious Affiliation; and
- Year of Arrival in Australia.

Table 3: Data sets including indicators of background and educational achievement

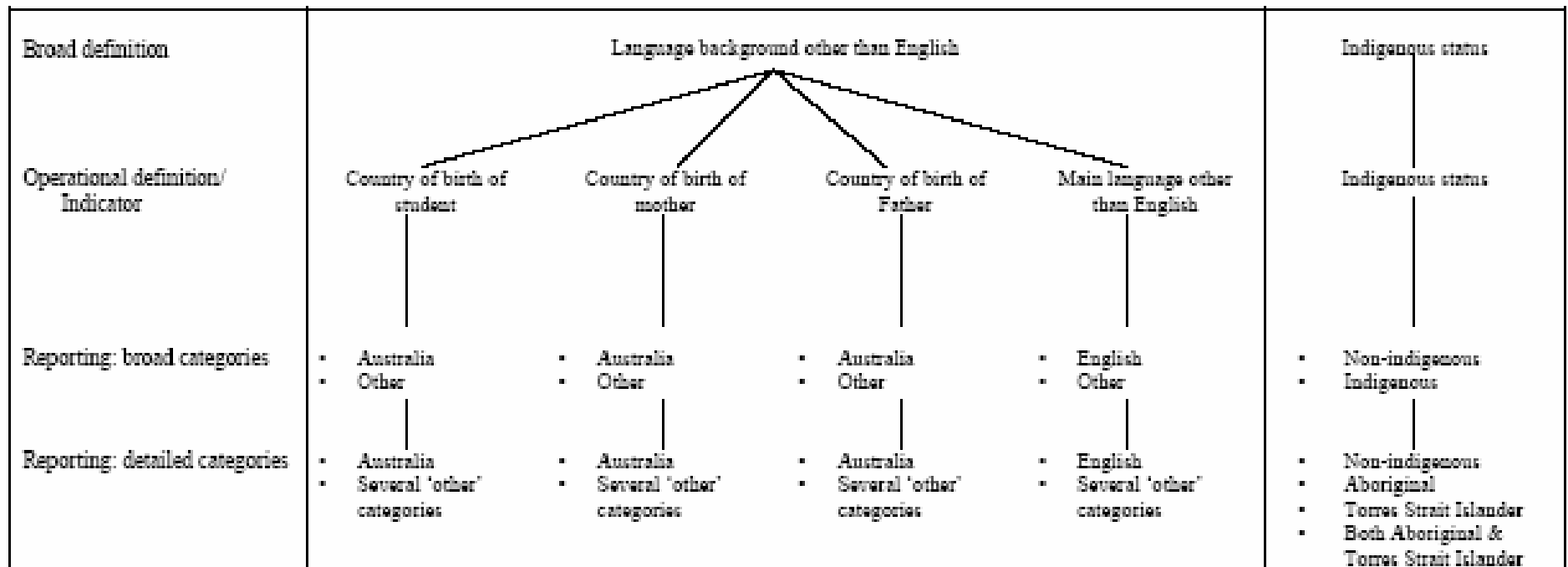
<b>Data set</b>	Australian Census	Educational Outcomes Research Unit studies	Victorian Tertiary Admissions Corporation data	Government Education Departments	PISA	TIMSS	Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth
<b>Migration characteristics</b>							
Binary migration				x	x		
Detailed migration	x					x	x
Binary language		x	x		x		
Detailed language	x	x		x		x	x
<b>Social characteristics</b>							
Detailed	x	x			x	x	x
Limited			x	x			
<b>Educational characteristics</b>							
Detailed		x	x	x	x	x	x
Limited	x						

A recent government report advocated the retention of the concept 'Language Background Other than English'. This was defined as:

Either born in a non-English speaking country, or in Australia with one or both parents born in a non-English speaking country, or are Indigenous students for whom English is a second or other language (MCEETYA 1997:78).

Figure 3 presents a more detailed picture of research options using this concept.

Figure 3: Link between broad definitions, operational definitions and categories for reporting.  
 (source: Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, The Measurement of Language Background, Culture and Ethnicity for the Reporting of Nationally Comparable Outcomes of Schooling Melbourne: ACER.)



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