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Association of visual acuity with educational outcomes

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Title: Association of visual acuity with educational outcomes: a prospective cohort study

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Short title: Effect of visual acuity on educational outcomes.

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Synopsis/Precis:

In this school-based cohort study, better baseline presenting visual acuity, but not refractive error or spectacle wear, was a significant predictor of later academic performance, suggesting a significant association between vision and academic outcomes.

Abstract

Background/Aim: To quantify the impact of baseline presenting visual acuity (VA), refractive error, and spectacles wear on subsequent academic performance among Chinese middle school children.

Methods: A prospective, longitudinal, school-based study on grade 7 Chinese children (age, mean $\pm$ SD, 12.7 ± 0.5 years, range= 11.1, 15.9) at 4 randomly-selected middle schools in Anyang, China. Comprehensive eye examinations including cycloplegic autorefractometry were performed at baseline, and information on demographic characteristics, known risk factors for myopia, and spectacle wear was collected. Academic test scores for all subjects in the curriculum were obtained from the local Bureau of Education. Main outcome measure was total test scores for 5 subjects at the end of grade 9, adjusted for total score at the beginning of grade 7.

Results: Among 2363 eligible children, 73.1%(1728/2363) had 7th grade test scores available. 93.9%(1623/1728) completed eye examinations, and 98.5%(1599/1623) of these had 9th grade test scores. Adjusting only for baseline test score, the following were significantly associated with higher 9th grade scores: younger age, male sex, less time outdoors, better baseline presenting VA and higher parental education, myopia and income, but refractive error and spectacle wear were not. In the full multivariate model, baseline test score ($p<0.001$), presenting VA ($p=0.006$), age ($p<0.001$), quality of life ($p=0.036$), and parental education ($p<0.001$) and myopia (either: $p=0.03$; both: $p=0.03$) remained significantly associated with better 9th grade scores.

Conclusions: In this longitudinal study, better presenting VA, but not cycloplegic refractive error or spectacle wear, was a significant predictor of subsequent academic performance.

74 **Introduction**

75 Education is a basic human right.¹ Among the goals of the United Nation's Educational,
76 Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) Education for All program is "Ensuring that
77 the learning needs of all young people...are met through equitable access to appropriate
78 learning."² Poor vision is a major barrier to achieving a healthy and educationally-sustaining
79 school environment for children in many regions of the world today.³⁻⁸

80

81 Because of the complex, bidirectional relationship between refractive error and visual acuity
82 (VA) on the one hand and academic performance on the other, cause and effect inference is
83 generally difficult to draw with any certainty from cross-sectional studies.⁹ The complexity of
84 this topic is due largely to the fact that refractive errors in school going children, which in the
85 setting of China is largely due to myopia, is itself strongly associated with academic
86 outcomes: myopia and academic achievement appear to be linked, potentially with causality
87 proceeding in both directions. One approach to elucidate the nature of the association is
88 randomized trials of the impact of interventions designed to improve visual acuity on
89 academic outcomes. One such trial has demonstrated a statistically significant difference in
90 mathematic scores between children provided with free spectacles compared to those given
91 a prescription for glasses only (control group) .⁶ However, the effect may be diluted due to
92 poor compliance. Furthermore, mathematics score may not represent overall academic
93 performance. Another approach is prospective studies examining the association between
94 baseline VA and subsequent academic performance. Several longitudinal studies suggest
95 visual interventions such as spectacle provision can improve academic performance,
96 particularly in young, hyperopic children.^{5,7,10} However, these studies are either small
97 ($n < 100$)^{7,10} or focus on special populations of children,¹¹ and there are some conflicting
98 results.^{11,12} Moreover, no large, longitudinal studies have been carried out among children in
99 China, who account for half of all paediatric visual impairment due to uncorrected refractive
100 error worldwide.¹³

101

102 We performed a longitudinal, school-based study of a large cohort of children in a middle-
103 income Chinese city, Anyang (where middle school enrolment rate was over 99%), to
104 quantify the impact of baseline presenting VA, refractive error and spectacle wear on
105 subsequent academic performance in all five main subjects in the Chinese national standard
106 middle school curriculum. We hypothesised that better presenting VA at baseline would
107 predict better academic performance after three years of study among middle school
108 children.

109

110 **Methods**

111 Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board of Beijing Tongren
112 Hospital, Capital Medical University (Beijing, China), and the study adhered to the tenets of
113 the Declaration of Helsinki. Informed written consent was obtained from at least one parent
114 of all participating children, and verbal assent was provided by each child.

115

116 **Study Population**

117 The current report is based on the Anyang Childhood Eye Study (ACES), which examined
118 refractive error, other ocular conditions, socioeconomic factors, and academic performance
119 in a school-based sample of grade 1 and grade 7 school children in urban Anyang, Henan
120 Province, Central China. The methods of ACES are reported elsewhere in detail, ¹⁴ and are
121 provided here for reference. Four schools were randomly selected from among all eleven
122 middle schools in Anyang city, with stratification based on quality of education evaluated by
123 the local government, in order to derive a representative sample of local schools. All of the
124 2363 eligible grade 7 students (expected age 12 to 16 years) attending these four schools
125 were invited to undergo screening. Among them, 1998 students (1998/2363, 84.6%) had
126 parental consent for releasing academic test scores and 1728 of these (1728/1998, 86.5%)
127 had test scores available at the local Bureau of Education of Anyang. (Figure 1)

This report examines the association between baseline (beginning of Grade 7) presenting VA and other potential determinants on the one hand and endline (end of Grade 9) academic test results on the other. The study thus covers the entire three-year period of Chinese middle school education (grades 7 through 9).

Examinations

All children underwent a comprehensive ocular examination at baseline (Grade 7), which was repeated using the identical protocol at the end of Grade 9. Distance presenting VA was measured separately for each eye, with and without spectacles, if worn, using a logarithm of the Minimum Angle of Resolution (logMAR) visual acuity chart (Precision Vision, La Salle, IL, USA) at a distance of 4m. The chart was retro-illuminated and had 5 tumbling “E” optotypes on each line. Children who could not read the largest line at 4 metres were tested sequentially as needed at 3 metres, 2 metres, 1 metre, and then for their ability to count fingers, recognize hand movements and perceive light.

For students with distance VA > 0.0 logMAR (Snellen <6/6) in either eye, subjective refraction was performed to obtain best-corrected VA. In such cases, one drop of topical anaesthetic agent (Alcaine, Alcon, Ft Worth, USA), two drops of 1% cyclopentolate (Alcon) followed by one drop of 0.5% tropicamide (Mydrin P, Santen, Japan) were administered twice at five-minute intervals. Cycloplegic autorefraction (HUVITZ, HRK-7000A, South Korea) was performed 30 minutes to 1 hour after the final drop, unless the pupillary light reflex was still present or the pupil size was < 6.0 mm, in which case a third drop of cyclopentolate was given. The mean of five measurements was computed and recorded as the refractive power for each eye. Spectacles wear was defined as wearing spectacles to school on the day of the examination, children having been instructed to do so the day prior.

Questionnaires

Questionnaires¹⁵ were administered to all eligible children by trained interviewers to collect information on parental education, income and myopia, and the child's weekly time spent outdoors, frequency of spectacle wear, age of myopia onset and age of first wearing and frequency of changing spectacles.

A previously-validated Chinese translation of the Paediatric Quality of Life Inventory version 4.0^{16,17} was administered to all eligible children. Each question described a possible situation, with potential responses ranging from 0-4, 0 indicating "never a problem" and 4 "almost always a problem."

Measures of academic performance

Test scores were requested for all eligible children from the local Bureau of Education. All students in our study took one set of municipal-level standardized examinations upon entrance to Grade 7, and another at the end of Grade 9. The examination content and syllabi for the 5 subjects did not differ between schools participating in the current study, all of which were public schools.

Statistical methods

Statistical analysis was performed using Stata 14.0 (StataCorp, College Station, TX). Measures are presented as mean $\pm$ standard deviation (SD) for continuous variables and percentages for categorical variables. Refractive power was defined as spherical equivalent (SE, sphere power + cylinder power/2). The eye with the better presenting VA (corrected VA if the child presented to the exam with spectacles and uncorrected VA if the child came without spectacles) at the time of baseline examination was defined as the better-seeing eye. Only data from the better-seeing eye were analysed. Baseline characteristics for children who did and did not have follow-up data from Grade 9 were compared using the 2-tailed t-test for continuous variables, chi-square test for categorical variables, and Fisher's exact test for categorical variables if one or more cells had an expected frequency of ≤ 5 .

Associations between baseline predictor variables (presenting VA, refractive error and spectacles wear) and test scores in Grade 9 were investigated using simple and multiple regression models, adjusting for baseline (Grade 7) test score to account for children's inherent aptitude. This approach is preferable to calculating the difference between 7th and 9th grade scores by subtraction, as the latter method tends to give a non-normal distribution, contrary to the assumptions of regression modelling. Other baseline variables were investigated as predictors of Grade 9 test scores after adjusting for baseline score only. Then, all variables significant at the $P < 0.05$ level were included in the final multiple regression model. Regression coefficients and 95% confidence intervals (95% CI) were presented. All P values were two-sided and were considered statistically significant when < 0.05 .

Results

Among 2363 eligible Grade 7 children at baseline, test scores from the beginning of Grade 7 could be obtained for 1728 children (73.1%, 1728/2363; mean age 12.7 ± 0.47 years; 49% boys, 847/1728) from the local Bureau of Education. Among these, 1683 (97.4%, 71.2% of all eligible children) completed visual screening from which information on presenting VA and spectacle wear were obtained, and among these children, 1623 (96.4%, 68.7% of all eligible children) underwent cycloplegic autorefraction. (Figure 1)

Among these 1623 Grade 7 children, 98.5% (1599/1623, 67.7% of all eligible children) provided test scores after three years of study at the end of Grade 9, and among them 79.5% (1272/1599) had data on presenting VA. Lack of follow-up was due to unavailability of test scores from the local Bureau of Education, or as a result of having moved out of the area or failing to take the final examinations. Table 1 compares baseline characteristics of children with and without follow-up at the end of Grade 9. Children lacking follow-up data were significantly older, had lower baseline test scores, were less likely to have a parent with college education, had lower quality of life, were less myopic, less likely to have myopic

parent(s), and less likely to wear spectacles, whereas the following characteristics did not differ with follow-up status: gender, parental income, body mass index (BMI), waist circumference, outdoor time, and presenting VA.

At baseline, 345/1728 (20.0%) children had presenting VA $\leq 6/12$ ($\log\text{MAR} \geq 0.3$) in the better-seeing eye. Among the 1623 (1623/1728 or 93.9%) children who underwent cycloplegic autorefraction at baseline, mean spherical equivalent refractive error (SE) in the better-seeing eyes was $-1.50 \pm 2.02\text{D}$. Data for glasses wear (yes/no) at baseline were available for 1680 (1680/1728=97.2%) children, and among these, 40.7% (683/1680) wore spectacles. (Table 1).

Before adjusting for baseline test scores, children with moderate visual impairment had better grades than children with no visual impairment (Table 2). Adjusting only for baseline test score, younger age (95% CI= -13.2 to -5.43; $p < 0.001$), male sex (95% CI= 0.09 to 7.31; $p < 0.05$), less time outdoors (95% CI= -1.40 to -0.47; $p < 0.001$), better baseline presenting VA (95% CI= -20.1 to -2.34; $p = 0.01$), and higher parental education (95% CI= 8.46 to 15.9; $p < 0.001$) parental myopia (either parent: 95% CI= 3.04 to 11.6, $p = 0.001$; both parents: 95% CI= 5.62 to 19.9, $p < 0.001$) and income (95% CI= 0.94 to 8.21; $p = 0.01$) were significantly associated with higher 9th grade scores. (Smaller logMAR implies better VA, thus a negative regression coefficient here means that better vision is associated with better scores).

Variables without significant association (refractive power, spectacle wear) were excluded from the multi-variable analysis. In the full multivariable model, baseline test score (coefficient=0.854, 95% CI=0.83 to 0.88; $p < 0.001$), presenting VA (coefficient=-12.6, 95% CI= -21.5 to -3.67; $p = 0.006$), age (coefficient=-7.18, 95% CI= -11.2 to -3.19; $p < 0.001$), quality of life (coefficient=-3.68, 95% CI= -7.12 to -0.24; $p = 0.04$), parental education (coefficient=8.04, 95% CI, 4.02 to 12.1; $p < 0.001$), and parental myopia (either: coefficient=4.76, 95% CI= 0.35 to 9.16; $p = 0.03$; both: coefficient=8.19, 95% CI= 0.71 to 15.7; $p = 0.03$) remained significantly associated with better 9th grade scores (Table 3).

232

233 **Discussion**

234 Our results suggest that presenting VA may be at least as important a predictor of academic
235 performance as parental education and income. This relationship was only clear when
236 adjusting for baseline test scores as an index of children's innate ability, as is commonly
237 done in educational research. The prospective nature of the study is also important in
238 elucidating the nature of the association between vision and test performance, as
239 confounding of this relationship by myopia may occur in cross-sectional studies. Previous
240 research has showed that myopia is linked with higher level of education,¹⁸⁻²⁰ better
241 academic performance²¹⁻²³ and even intelligence.^{24,25} However, the prospective nature of
242 the current study provides evidence that baseline good vision may lead to subsequent better
243 academic performance. Being able to see clearly at distance is essential for children to
244 learn, particularly as all of the classrooms in participating schools in our study used
245 blackboards as the main tool of instruction, as in many secondary schools in China.

246 This is the first study that directly examines the relationship between vision and academic
247 performance in Chinese children. Our results are supported by a published randomised,
248 controlled trial in China on spectacle provision, which found that provision of spectacles,
249 compared to giving prescriptions only, led to improved mathematics scores.⁶ Randomised
250 trials provide the strongest possible evidence of causal association, but are expensive and
251 require deferred provision of eyeglasses to control group children, which may be problematic
252 in rural Chinese settings. Spectacle ownership and wear as used in Ma et al 2014 are
253 indirect indications of VA, as they depend on compliance with glasses wear and accuracy of
254 the spectacle lenses themselves. Our study directly used VA as the independent variable.
255 Furthermore, test scores across all subjects (instead of a mathematic only) in the middle
256 school curriculum offers a better representation of students' academic ability. Improved
257 academic performance in a set of tests administered by the governmental education bureau
258 confers a practical benefit because it gives the child a better chance to enter a more

259 competitive high school.

260

261 We found no significant association between children's spectacle wear and academic
262 performance when adjusting for baseline test scores in the current study. This lack of
263 association may in part have been due to the relatively low rates of spectacle wear in this
264 setting, or that children's having brought spectacles to the baseline examination when
265 directed may not have been indicative of actual patterns of daily wear.

266 Findings from our study also corroborated conclusions from studies in different populations.
267 A study in US schools showed that failing vision screening was predictive of being in the
268 lowest quartile of academic performance.⁵ A longitudinal study in a group of UK children also
269 found that early developing literacy was directly correlated with the level of VA.²⁶ In contrast,
270 another longitudinal study in Singaporean children showed that VA was not a significant
271 predictor of academic performance.¹² However, that study did not adjust for baseline test
272 score in their regression models, a shortcoming as noted above.

273 Parental education was found to be a strong predictor of children's academic performance.
274 This was possibly the result of parents with higher education being more likely to understand
275 the importance of schooling, and being better-equipped to provide their children with
276 necessary resources to perform well. This finding is consistent with results from Chinese²⁶
277 and other populations.^{27,28}

278 Strengths of this study include a large sample size drawn from randomly-selected Chinese
279 schools, a prospective design with long period of follow-up, use of a broad-based index of
280 academic performance (including all 5 major courses in the standardized Chinese
281 curriculum), and relatively high rates of follow-up and data completeness. However, this was
282 not a randomized controlled trial, allowing for the possibility of uncontrolled confounding
283 factors, though we took careful precaution to control for many known risk factors of myopia.

284 Additionally, children owning glasses were instructed to wear their glasses for baseline
285 ocular examination in order to assess presenting visual acuity. This may have caused some
286 underestimation of presenting VA due to under-correction of myopia among children wearing
287 glasses.²⁹ On the other hand, over-estimation of presenting VA was also possible,
288 particularly among children who did not routinely wear their glasses, but brought them for
289 testing as instructed. Children not wearing their glasses have generally been found to have
290 lower levels of myopia³⁰, so resulting inaccuracies would tend to be modest. It is most likely
291 that inaccuracy in the characterization of children's usual visual acuity would tend to
292 weaken, rather than strengthen, the observed association between test scores and visual
293 acuity, though this cannot be known for certain.

294
295 Despite its limitations, the current report provides suggestive evidence that better vision may
296 lead to enhanced academic outcomes for middle school children. We hope it will provide
297 additional impetus for concerted efforts from government ministries, schools, parents, and
298 health-care professionals to ensure that no child in China is denied access to a good
299 education due to poor vision.

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Table 1. Baseline Characteristics of middle school children participating in a study of the impact of vision and other factors on academic performance in Anyang, China.

Characteristics	All (n=1728)	Missing data n (%)	With follow-up (n=1599, 92.5%),	Without follow-up (n=129, 7.5%)	P-value comparing children with and without follow-up
Total Test Score, mean (SD)	369 (76.7)	0 (0)	375 (72.2)	292 (88.4)	<.001†
Age (years), Mean (SD)	12.7 (.473)	1 (.06)	12.7 (.452)	12.8 (.678)	.010†
Male, n (%)	846 (49.0)	0 (.0)	778 (48.7)	68 (52.7%)	.375‡
At least one parent with some college education, n (%)	567 (32.9)	6 (.3)	543 (34.0)	24 (18.6%)	<.001‡
Family income above national average, n (%)	1,102(63.8)	0 (0)	1,015 (63.5)	87 (67.4%)	.367‡
Body Mass Index (kg/m²), Mean (SD)	19.8 (3.63)	0 (.0)	19.8 (3.61)	19.7 (3.92)	.847†
Waist circumference (cm), Mean (SD)	70.4 (9.27)	22 (1.3)	70.4 (9.22)	70.4 (9.89)	.972†
Time outdoors (hours/week), Mean (SD)	14.3 (20.7)	0	14.1 (18.0)	17.2 (41.7)	.095†
Paediatric Quality of Life Score, Mean (SD)*	.84 (.52)	24 (1.4)	.829 (.519)	.989 (.554)	.001†
Spherical equivalent refractive error in better- seeing eye (Diopters), Mean (SD)	-1.50 (2.02)	105 (6.1)	-1.54 (2.04)	-1.04 (1.67)	.009†
Presenting visual acuity $\geq$ 0.3 (logMAR units) in the better-seeing eye, n (%)	345 (20.0)	45 (2.6)	363 (22.7)	27 (20.9%)	.643‡
Parental myopia, n (%)		0 (.0)			.003§
None	1248, (72.2)		1,140 (71.3)	108 (83.7%)	
Either	372 (21.5)		353 (22.1)	19 (14.7%)	
Both	108 (6.3)		106 (6.63)	2 (1.55%)	
Child wearing glasses, n (%)	683 (40.7)	48 (2.78)	648 (40.5)	35 (27.1%)	.001‡

*Paediatric quality of Life Inventory version 4.0 Scores: 0-4 scale, the lower the score the better the quality of life.

†Two-sample t test was used for the comparison.

‡Chi-square test was used for the comparison.

§Fisher-exact test was used for the comparison.

Table 2. Association of presenting visual acuity in the better-seeing eye at the beginning of Grade 7 (entrance to middle school) and academic performance in various subjects on tests administered at the end of Grade 9 (graduation exam of middle school) (Graded from 0-100).

VA (4m, logMAR units)*	GRADE 7 (BASELINE) (out of 1728 with available academic scores, 1683 completed vision screening)							GRADE 9 (ENDLINE) (out of 1599 with available academic scores, 1272 completed vision screening)						
	n screened, (%)	Chinese Mean (SD)	Maths, Mean (SD)	English, Mean (SD)	Politics, Mean (SD)	History, Mean (SD)	Total score, Mean (SD)	n screened, (%)	Chinese, Mean (SD)	Maths, Mean (SD)	English, Mean (SD)	Politics, Mean (SD)	History, Mean (SD)	Total score, Mean (SD)
No VI (VA ≤ 0.1)	1117 (66.4)	76.0 (11.0)	83.1 (18.7)	67.7 (23.1)	69.8 (18.2)	69.8 (21.2)	366.0 (76.5)	741 (58.3)	82.7 (12.8)	72.6 (23.9)	69.2 (28.6)	50.1 (8.70)	31.2 (7.39)	305.8 (72.8)
Mild VI (0.1<VA≤ 0.48)	479 (28.5)	77.8 (10.7)	84.1 (19.2)	69.8 (22.4)	72.2 (18.4)	71.4 (22.0)	375.0 (77.8)	431 (33.9)	84.1 (12.0)	73.5 (21.9)	71.3 (26.0)	50.5 (8.28)	31.7 (7.12)	311.1 (66.5)
Moderate & severe VI (VA>0.48)	87 (5.17)	76.5 (10.0)	85.0 (16.1)	67.6 (21.4)	71.2 (17.6)	70.7 (19.9)	371.0 (69.6)	100 (7.86)	82.3 (12.4)	70.8 (21.6)	67.2 (26.2)	49.6 (8.34)	30.4 (7.39)	301.0 (66.5)
Total	1683	76.5 (10.9)	83.5 (18.7)	68.3 (22.8)	70.5 (18.3)	70.3 (21.4)	369.1 (76.6)	1272	83.2 (12.5)	72.8 (23.0)	69.8 (27.6)	50.2 (8.53)	31.3 (7.30)	307.3 (72.2)

VI = Vision Impairment, VA = Presenting Visual Acuity in the better-seeing eye, SD = Standard deviation

* VA for Grade 7 was the baseline VA whereas VA for Grade 9 was the endline VA.

Table 3. Linear regression model of potential predictors of total Grade 9 test score for middle school children in Anyang, China.

Variable	Simple regression adjusting for baseline test score only			Multiple regression*		
	Regression coefficient (95%CI)	Beta	P-value	Regression coefficient (95%CI)	Beta	P-value
Baseline Test score (Total)	.868 (.844, .892)	.869	<.001	.854 (.828, .880)	.854	<.001
Age (years)	-9.29 (-13.2, -5.43)	-.0581	<.001	-7.18 (-11.2, -3.19)	-.0445	<.001
Male sex	3.70 (.090, 7.31)	.0256	.045	2.39 (-1.25, 6.04)	.0166	.198
At least one parent with some college education	12.2 (8.46, 15.9)	.0801	<.001	8.04 (4.02, 12.1)	.0530	<.001
Above national average family income	4.58 (.940, 8.21)	.0305	.014	2.32 (-1.33, 5.96)	.0156	.212
Body mass index	.272 (-.215, .758)	.0136	.274	-	-	-
Waist circumference(cm)	-.017 (-.209, .174)	-.00220	.860	-	-	-
Time outdoors (hours/week)	-.934 (-1.40, -.467)	.0103	<.001	.044 (-.054, .142)	.0111	.375
Paediatric Quality of Life Score	-4.52 (-7.97, -1.08)	-.0326	.010	-3.68 (-7.12, -.244)	-.0266	.036
Spherical equivalent refractive error in better-seeing eye (Diopters)	.014 (-.875, .904)	.000411	.975	-	-	-
Presenting visual acuity in the better-seeing eye (logMAR)	-11.2 (-20.1, -2.34)	-.0309	.013	-12.6 (-21.5, -3.67)	-.0347	.006
Parental myopia						
None	Reference	Reference	Reference	Reference	Reference	Reference
Either	7.32 (3.04, 11.6)	.0421	.001	4.76 (.354, 9.16)	.0275	.034
Both	12.8 (5.62, 19.9)	.0441	<.001	8.19 (.713, 15.7)	.0283	.032
Child wearing glasses	3.46 (-.145, 7.07)	.0237	.060	-	-	-

* All variables with $P < .05$ in the simple regression adjusting for baseline score were included in the multiple regression.

CI=Confidence Interval