



## *Nonstandard Dialect and Educational Achievement: Potential Implications for First Nations Students*



## *Les dialectes non-standards et le rendement scolaire : les répercussions potentielles pour les élèves des Premières Nations*

### KEY WORDS

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### Abstract

Students who speak a nonstandard variety (e.g., nonstandard dialect) of a language are at a disadvantage in classrooms that promote the standard. The struggles faced by such students are well documented on a global scale. Differences in pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and language use may be negatively related to school achievement. Teacher perspectives, inappropriate testing, and pedagogical strategies, can further negatively affect academic performance for students who speak nonstandard varieties. Canada is not immune to such issues. Indeed, they likely affect nonstandard speaking students in similar ways - in particular many First Nations students whose community language differs from the mainstream standard used in school. The intent of this article is to raise awareness about non-standard dialects and the challenges speakers, including many Canadian First Nations students, face in schools that promote the standard.

### Abrégé

Les élèves qui parlent une variante non-standard d'une langue (p. ex. un dialecte non-standard) sont désavantagés dans une salle de classe faisant la promotion d'une langue standard. Les difficultés vécues par ces élèves sont bien documentées à l'échelle mondiale. Les différences sur le plan de la prononciation, de la grammaire, du vocabulaire et de l'utilisation du langage peuvent être négativement reliées au rendement scolaire. Le point de vue de l'enseignant, les évaluations inappropriées et les stratégies pédagogiques peuvent affecter négativement les performances scolaires des élèves qui parlent une variante non-standard d'une langue. Le Canada n'est pas à l'abri de ces problèmes. En effet, ceux-ci affectent probablement de façon semblable les élèves qui parlent une langue non-standard, particulièrement les nombreux élèves des Premières Nations dont la langue utilisée dans la communauté diffère de la langue dominante utilisée à l'école. Le but de cet article est de conscientiser le lecteur aux dialectes non-standards et aux défis auxquels les locuteurs, incluant les nombreux élèves des Premières Nations canadiennes, doivent faire face dans les écoles qui font la promotion d'une langue standard.

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In Canada, there is a substantial gap in school achievement between First Nations students and mainstream students. For instance, in British Columbia (BC), 21% fewer First Nations students graduate from high school within 6 years of entering Grade 8 than mainstream students (British Columbia Ministry of Education [BC MoEd], 2015). Since high school graduation and advanced education are predictive of future employment (Statistics Canada, 2015), educators and many Aboriginal leaders wish to narrow this gap (BC MoEd, n.d., Enhancement Agreements). Factors found to exist among Aboriginal children (including First Nations students) that may affect school performance include colonialism and poverty (Ball, 2007; Mendelson, 2008; Speech-Language & Audiology Canada [SAC], 2010), negative intergenerational effects of residential school (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003) including trauma (Bombay, Matheson, & Anisman, 2009), and lack of culturally appropriate resources to promote literacy (Ball, 2007). Lack of success can also be related to differences between home and school methods of pedagogy and cultural practices (see, for instance, Marker, 2006; Williams & Tanaka, 2007).

While these social, health, cultural, pedagogical, and political problems are important, an additional yet less-well-understood factor is nonstandard dialect (Ball & Bernhardt, 2008; Ball, Bernhardt, & Deby, 2007; Campbell, 2011). Among scholars in the area of language variation, it is broadly accepted that children who speak a nonstandard version of a language (i.e., nonstandard dialect) in schools that promote the standard version of a language are at an educational disadvantage (see, for instance, Fletcher, 1983, for English as spoken by "American Indians"; Labov, 1982, 1995, 2003, on African American English [AAE]; Malcolm, 1995, on Australian Aboriginal English [AE]). In Canada, many First Nations students appear to be speaking a nonstandard dialect (or variety) of English (Ball & Bernhardt, 2008; Battisti, Friesen, & Krauth, 2014; Epstein & Xu, 2003; Eriks-Brophy, 2014; Heit & Blair, 1993; Kay-Raining Bird, 2014; Peltier, 2009; Sterzuk, 2011; Toohey, 1986; Wiltse, 2011). However, the idea that their nonstandard dialect is a contributing factor to their lower academic achievement appears to be less well accepted. As a practicing Speech-Language Pathologist (S-LP) in both an urban setting in BC where First Nations students are the minority, and a remote community in northern BC where the majority of students are of First Nations descent, I have observed that the issue is not well understood by many educators, including S-LPs, if it is appreciated at all.

In order to increase my own and others' understanding of the issue, in the present paper I review research on

nonstandard varieties, including those spoken by First Nations students, and the impact these may have on educational achievement. I will present evidence regarding ethnic nonstandard dialects used outside of Canada (e.g., AAE, AE), and where available, within Canada. Out of respect for Indigenous people's right to self-identify, I will use terms used by the author(s) I am citing, or by the Indigenous group (e.g., First Nations, Native Americans, American Indian, Alaskan Native, Aboriginal, etc.). I hope that this article will raise awareness about nonstandard dialects and the challenges speakers, including many Canadian First Nations students, face in schools that promote the standard. Also, it is hoped that educators and clinicians will be inspired to learn more about the First Nations Englishes being spoken by their students, and to collect data so that dialect-sensitive assessment and teaching practices can be implemented.

### What is a Nonstandard Language Variety/Dialect?

In my experience, there is confusion among educators, including S-LPs, as well as the general public, about the meaning of the terms *nonstandard variety* and *dialect*. Furthermore, there are different understandings of the meaning of the terms *language* and *standard language*. Before examining how nonstandard dialect may affect speakers in school, I will first attempt to clarify the meaning of these somewhat confusing terms.

### What is Language?

Language is complex and has thus been defined in multiple ways (Halliday, 1969). According to the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA, 1982), "Language is a complex and dynamic system of conventional symbols that is used in various modes for thought and communication" (Definition of Language, para 1). Modes can include speech, reading, and writing. In the field of speech-language pathology, language has often been described in terms of three domains, *content*, *form*, and *use* (Bloom & Lahey, 1978); a) *content* refers to the meaning or semantics conveyed by the words in a message, b) *form* refers to the structure of language, specifically phonology, morphology, and syntax and c) *use* is concerned with the pragmatic functions of language (i.e., the reasons people use language, discourse skills such as turn taking, topic maintenance, etc., and how speakers adjust their language depending on the communicative environment) (Paul, 2007, pp. 5,30). This way of thinking about language is still used by scholars (e.g., Paul, 2007) and will be the framework adopted in this article when discussing the impact the differences, between the standard and nonstandard varieties, have on speakers in school.

### What is a Standard Language Dialect?

The standard language is the version of the language that has been standardized and codified in dictionaries and grammar books (Trudgill, 1999). Influential people with perceived status, such as teachers and employers, determine what the acceptable standard is (Wolfram & Christian, 1989). However, linguists argue that the standard is actually a “myth” (Lippi-Green, 1997, p. 53) because variation is present, even among people who speak the so-called standard version of a country or region’s language. The standard in Canada, “*Canadian English* is a branch of North American English, sharing many of its accent and dialect features with northern United States varieties” (Chambers, 2009, p. 60).

Labov (1995) refers to the English that is expected in school as “standard classroom English” (p. 9). Also known as *school English*, the English that is expected at school largely conforms to the rules codified in grammar books (Charity Hudley & Mallinson, 2011), although there are differences between schools and regions (Charity Hudley & Mallinson, 2011) and from elementary to high school, as the classroom switches from emphasizing narrative to expository language (Miller, Andriacchi, & Nockerts, 2011). When speaking the standard, Charity Hudley and Mallinson (2011) suggest that students will likely be encouraged to articulate their words clearly, and avoid deleting final consonants when speaking, an articulatory pattern typical of many nonstandard varieties of English. Students will be encouraged to use the standard when speaking (e.g., use indefinite article *an* instead of *a* before a word beginning with a vowel) and writing, and use more literary language. In addition, English-speaking students will be required to use School English discourse. The style of classroom discourse may vary. Some teachers adopt, for instance, a dialogic approach, whereby students are encouraged to learn by ongoing interactive talking (Alexander, 2006). Other classrooms support more traditional forms of instruction such as teacher Initiation, student Response, and teacher Evaluation (IRE) (Cazden, 2001). Students who speak the nonstandard may not be familiar with classroom discourse, and the rules regarding classroom dialogue may not mesh with their cultural values or styles of language use (Cazden, 2001; Philips, 1983; Ward, 1990). To acknowledge that nonstandard speaking children are learning a foreign dialect in schools, other terms used when speaking of dialect use in educational settings include “Standard English as a Second Dialect (SESD)” (Sato, 1989) and “English as a Second Dialect (ESD)” (BC MoEd., 2013).

### What is a Nonstandard Variety/Dialect?

A technical definition of dialect is “any given variety

of a language shared by a group of speakers” (Wolfram & Christian, 1989, p. 1). Given this definition, no one variety of language is superior to another, and even the standard is a dialect. However, a more popular definition of dialect, applied to English, is “a particular social or geographical variety of English that is not the ‘standard’ one” (Wolfram & Christian, p. 2). One might, therefore, ask, “Why is a nonstandard variety singled out as being a dialect?” Lippi-Green (1997) argues that we use the term *dialect* as a vehicle of exclusion. Those who speak the standard single out the nonstandard variety to subordinate it and its speakers, because “we are forbidden, by law and social custom, and perhaps by a prevailing sense of what is morally and ethically right, from using race, ethnicity, homeland or economics more directly” (p. 64). Another reason “dialect” has taken on a negative connotation is because some scholars and researchers have regarded nonstandard dialects as restricted language codes, associated with verbal deprivation and decreased intelligence. Bernstein (1972), for instance, argued that the language of middle class children was characterized by a use of elaborated codes, whereas the language of working-class children, many of whom spoke nonstandard dialects, was characterized by restricted codes that restricted their ability to learn. However, linguists have demonstrated that dialects are not restricted; all varieties have a complete set of grammatical rules and conventions of use (Fought, 2006; Labov, 1982). In addition, the idea that speakers of nonstandard dialects are less intelligent than non-speakers has been utterly refuted (Campbell, Dollaghan, Needleman, & Janosky, 1997; Fletcher, 1983; Rodekohr & Haynes, 2001). Nonetheless, because of the stigma associated with the popular use of the term *dialect*, terms such as “language variety”, “language difference”, and “linguistic diversity” are often used when speaking about dialects (Wolfram & Christian, 1989, p. 2).

Nonstandard varieties can be associated with regions (Siegel, 2010), ethnicity (Benor, 2010; Siegel, 2010), gender (Mallinson, 2009), age (Wolfram & Christian, 1989), and social class or socioeconomic status (Holmes, 2008). Dialect can even be associated with “coolness”; Eckert (2008) found differences in the patterns of speech among cliques in schools in California, with students adopting the variety of speech patterns of the group with whom they identified. Siegel (2010) suggests that varieties can be indigenized, whereby a nonstandard variety is the lingua franca (or the common language) used by indigenous peoples (e.g., Fijian English), and the standard used in school is spoken in a foreign country (e.g., British English). Varieties can exist in diglossic settings, whereby the colloquial variety is used in informal settings (e.g., Cypriot Greek), with the standard used in more formal settings such as school (e.g.,

Standard Modern Greek) (Siegel, 2010). Creoles, Siegel explains, are also considered dialects and often arise in situations when the language of a colonizing power is taught in school. Ethnic dialects may derive from an ancestral language (see Leap, 1993, on the origins of Native American Englishes) or as a consequence of second language learning of a dominant language with no formal language instruction (Ball et al., 2007). Dialects may entrench and persist when speakers of the dialect become isolated geographically (Ball et al., 2007), economically (Labov & Harris, 1986; Rickford et al., 2015), or socially (Holmes, 2008). Benor (2010) further proposes that dialects persist when speakers adopt a particular repertoire of features to identify with a certain group. The decision to speak a certain way to maintain identity with a group can bind a community together, but can also become an obstacle to learning the standard that is expected in school (Siegel, 2010). Finally, since dialects are varieties of language, and language varies, there is variation in the way people speak a dialect. As Wolfram and Christian (1989) point out, “dialects simply do not come in neat, self-contained packages” (p. 6).

### Students Who Speak Nonstandard Dialects and Educational Achievement

Many students who speak a nonstandard dialect, have lower educational achievement than peers that speak the standard. For instance, Biddle (2013) reported that Australian Aboriginal students, the majority of whom speak AE (Eades, 2013), failed to reach the same level of academic achievement as students who speak Standard Australian English, even when controlling for socioeconomic status (SES), school sector (Government, Catholic, or other Independent schools), and geography. In 2015, in Arizona, US, only 66% of Native Americans graduated, the lowest rate among ethnic groups in the state (Arizona Department of Education, 2016). According to Leap (1993), American Indian English is the first language learned by two thirds of Native American youth. Differences in content (vocabulary and meaning), form (pronunciation and grammar), and language use have been shown to affect school performance.

#### Content

The words that nonstandard dialect speakers use may differ from those used by speakers of the standard (Wolfram & Christian, 1989). Charity Hudley and Mallinson (2011) argue that speakers of nonstandard dialects may have fewer “academic” and “literary” standard English (SE) words, or may not know that the vocabulary they use in day-to-day situations differs from what is expected at school (p. 26). Having fewer Mainstream American English

(MAE) words in one’s lexicon has been found to interfere with comprehension. Edwards et al. (2014), in their study of the relationship between dialect and lexical comprehension among AAE-speaking children aged 4 to 8 years, found that children with fewer MAE words had more difficulty with comprehension of such words in school, and higher use of AAE was also associated with greater difficulty. However, in the case of vocabulary, low SES may also be a factor for children. In their study of White and African-American dialect-speaking children in Grade 1, Terry, Connor, Thomas-Tate, and Love (2010) found that for children attending schools of low SES (measured by the percentage of children who qualified for the Free And Reduced Price Lunch Program [FARL]), the relationship was negative and linear. Since poverty has been found to be associated with lower vocabulary achievement (Hart & Risley, 2003), the authors suggest that home learning environment may be a more critical factor for vocabulary development for children from low SES homes than dialect per se.

In Canada, vocabulary differences may cause similar difficulties for First Nations students. First of all, First Nations students may not know as many SE words. Phillion and Galloway (1969) found that children of First Nations ancestry in BC obtained lower scores on tests of reading vocabulary than their non-First Nations peers, which they suggested were due to differences in the First Nation students’ world knowledge and experience. A vocabulary gap may put students at a disadvantage in schools that promote the standard since vocabulary knowledge is predictive of literacy acquisition (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008) and later school achievement (Hart & Risley, 2003). Secondly, First Nations students who speak nonstandard varieties may not know meanings of words that are important for learning in school. For instance, Colleen Bovaird Wawrykow, a Canadian S-LP who has experience working with First Nations children in Central Vancouver Island and is a member of the Skuppah Band of the Nlaka’pamux First Nation B.C., has observed that First Nations kindergarten students seem to have difficulty with school readiness concepts (letters, shapes, colors, and comparisons), as well as vocabulary for time, direction, position, quantity, and sequence (Wawrykow, 2011).

#### Form

##### Phonology, phonological awareness, and literacy.

The sound systems of nonstandard dialects usually differ somewhat from the standard. For example, in AAE, cluster (or blend) reduction is common (Charity Hudley & Mallinson, 2011; Wolfram & Christian, 1989); *walked* may be pronounced as *walk* and *best* pronounced as *bes*. In

the case of *walked*, the loss of the *ed* also results in a loss of a SE morphological marker of past tense. Final voiced consonants such as /b/, /d/, and /g/ can become devoiced (produced without voice) and pronounced as [p], [t], and [k] (Charity Hudley & Mallinson, 2011). Differences in pronunciation are also characteristic of speakers of Native American Englishes (Leap, 1993). For instance, speakers may delete, devoice, or modify their production of word-final consonants and consonant clusters (Fletcher, 1983; Leap, 1993), similar to what is observed in AAE.

Differences between sound systems of nonstandard and standard dialects may lead to difficulties in acquisition of literacy skills for nonstandard speakers. Labov (2003) argued, for example, that if a student who speaks AAE normally produces [uw] instead of allophone [ɪ] in word-final position of the word “*people*”, then the student may not be able to rationalize the use of < l > in this position in the written word (p. 130). The idea that mismatches between the pronunciation of words in nonstandard dialect and in SE may cause spelling problems is supported by research. Cronnel (1984) found that African American children from a predominantly AAE-speaking school tended to omit the final consonant when writing words in Standard American English, being influenced, they argued, by AAE speech (e.g., “*left*” is pronounced as “*lef*” [p. 234]). Similarly, in their research, Treiman and Bowman (2015) found that students who spoke AAE had more difficulty spelling words with final *d* and were likely to substitute a *t*, related, they argued, to the AAE dialectal feature of final obstruent devoicing (i.e., the final consonant of a word is pronounced without voice, as in *pad* is pronounced as *pat*). I, and the teachers with whom I work, have observed similar spelling errors among children in northern BC. Students who do not pronounce final consonants may leave them off when writing (e.g., *I walked* [pronounced as *walk* by nonstandard speakers] *to the store* is written as *I walk to the store*). As is mentioned above, the loss of the *ed* also results in a loss of a SE morphological marker of past tense. Brown et al. (2015) also found evidence that nonstandard dialect causes difficulty for children required to read in the standard dialect. They found that AAE-speaking children had more difficulty reading out loud. They concluded that children who speak a nonstandard dialect have more difficulty learning to read because their dialect affects their ability to map sounds to letters, making the task complexity greater than it is for students who speak the standard.

Dialect may also influence phonological awareness, a skill found to be predictive of literacy acquisition (NELP, 2008). Terry, Connor, et al. (2010) found a negative relationship between density of dialect use and phonological awareness

among typically developing first graders who spoke a variety of English that differed from MAE. This negative relationship occurred for both White and African American students who spoke what the authors referred to as Non-Mainstream American English [NMAE], regardless of the SES level of the school they attended. Continuing her investigation of the relationship between phonological awareness, dialect, and reading, Terry (2014) again found a negative relationship between dialect use and reading, even though NMAE speakers demonstrated they had phonological knowledge of both NMAE and MAE dialects. However, when phonological awareness was added as a factor, dialect was mediated by phonological awareness. She proposed that the multiple representations the NMAE-speaking children have as bidialectal speakers causes them confusion when reading. Children who have reduced awareness about the need to manipulate language flexibly, a skill that is measured by tests of phonological awareness, may be particularly affected.

In summary, then, studies indicate that speakers of nonstandard dialects have difficulties with spelling and decoding. Their difficulties may be due to the mismatch between the sound systems of their dialect and the standard and/or their lack of awareness of the need to switch between the two dialects.

**Grammar/Morphosyntax.** Nonstandard dialects often have grammars that are very different from the standard. Miller et al. (2011, p. 123) list numerous features of AAE such as: a) deletion of the copula (e.g., “*she hungry*”, p. 118) and auxiliary (e.g., “*they \_\_\_\_ cathin’ a bus*”); b) differences in subject-verb agreement (e.g., “*they was sittin’ down*”); c) use of undifferentiated pronoun case (e.g., “*them pullin’ them up the hill*”); d) non-use of past tense (e.g., “*then he fix the food*”); e) non-use of “to” in the infinitive (e.g., “*he waitin’ for the rain \_\_\_\_ go*”); f) use of appositive pronoun (e.g., “*the other ones, they didn’t have nothin’*”); g) multiple negation (e.g., “*you don’t want nobody to put none*”) and so on, and one or more features may be present in up to 50% of utterances (Miller et al., 2011, p. 115). Grammatical differences between Native American Englishes and Standard American English can also be considerable (Bayles & Harris, 1982; Fletcher, 1983; Leap, 1993). Leap (1993, pp. 53-78) lists many features distinguishing Native American English from the standard, including: a) more more infrequent use of the plural and possessive /s/ and /z/; b) addition of a plural marker for count nouns (e.g., “*furnitures*”) or deletion of the plural marker where it is required; c) differences in article and demonstrative use, such as omissions (e.g., “*He asked shopkeeper for sheep*”); d) differences in pronouns such as inconsistent use of SE

gender distinction for third person singular (*“he, she, it”*, or a tendency to omit pronouns, particularly for subject markers (e.g., *“[ ] was playing”*); e) differences in verb tense and aspect (e.g., *“The girl run up to me and she said”*); f) use of adverbs to clarify or provide additional perspective on tense and aspect, (e.g., *“They had a Kiva, made out of rocks, yet”*) where *yet* indicates the statement is factual; f) use of *get* as an auxiliary (e.g., *“he got voted in”*); g) copula and auxiliary deletion, (e.g., *“She a red corn people”*); g) subject-verb agreement (e.g., *“I were looking for deer”*). Bayles and Harris (1982) also note regularization of irregular verbs (e.g., *He blowed that balloon*) and use of topicalization (e.g., *That boy, he...*). Other differences occur at the sentence level. For instance, the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (2014) indicates that speakers of AE find it challenging to understand and use complex sentences.

In Canada, information about the grammatical features of First Nations English dialects is scant (Ball et al., 2007). However, published manuscripts and anecdotal reports indicate that the way many First Nations people in Canada speak English can be very different from the way mainstream Canadians speak English. Using a manuscript written in the 1950's, essays and exercises written by Blackfoot university students from 2008 – 2009, and their own observations, Genee and Stigter (2010, pp. 65-77) reported morphosyntactic differences such as: a) verbs uninflected for tense (e.g., *“after he eat, it was dark”*); uninflected participles (e.g., *“he was badly scratch and biting”*); omission of “to” in the infinitive (e.g., *“they started [to] dig under their bed”*); omission of auxiliary “to be” (e.g., *“they [are] gonna say no”*); differences in number marking (e.g., such as absence of the plural (e.g., *“See these wire”*); differences in mass nouns (e.g., *“We look for stuff that are very similar”*); omission of personal pronouns (e.g., *“when she got up [she] went outside”*); neutralization of gender (e.g., *“So this old crow woman said to himself...”*); use of nonstandard possessive determiners (e.g., *“w[h]ere is all you stuff?”*); and omission, redundant use, or substitution of articles (e.g., *“this hill had [a] lot of trees”*, *“The theme to this story is the colonialism”*, *“he put him in a shade by a big tree”*). Grammatical features reported by participants at a First Nations English dialect forum, sponsored by The University of British Columbia and the University of Victoria, included differences in pronoun use, use of tags such as *“init”* for *‘isn’t it’*, and the tendency to “string together phrases without the use of conjunctions such as *and*” (Ball & Bernhardt, 2008, pp. 578-579). Bennett (2008) reported that differences in word order may be present; Leap (1993) suggests word order differences may have their origin in the ancestral language. In northern BC, I have observed that

children produce word-level differences in verb derivation (e.g., *He kickeded the ball.*), prepositions (e.g., *The girl got along/out of the way.*), pronouns (e.g., *Her/he gave him a ball.*), negation (e.g., *I not know.*), and determiners (e.g., *The girl is tryin’ to get [ ] apple.*). Words expected in Standard Canadian English may be omitted, and simple sentence construction is preferred (e.g., child says, *“Done. Left.”* rather than, *“When they were done, they left.”*). Students may use different word order than is typically used in SE. For instance, use of topicalization is common, such that the topic is stated first and then elaborated upon (e.g., *That bull, he was mad.*). Students may also use “here” instead of the conjunction “then” when telling stories (e.g., *“and here she ran”* rather than *“and then she ran”*); to my knowledge, this is a previously unreported feature. The use of dialect can be widespread; upon school entry, I have observed that up to 60% of a child’s utterances in an oral narrative language sample may contain differences.

Substantial differences in grammar noted between nonstandard varieties and the standard can cause difficulties in school for nonstandard speakers. When Labov demonstrated that AAE has a regular structure and its own set of rules during the *Black English Trial*, the judge ruled that the AAE-speaking students’ use of this variety of English was interfering with their success in school (Baugh, 1995). Several recent studies support this proposition, showing a negative relationship between density of dialect use and reading achievement (Charity, Scarborough, & Griffin, 2004; Craig & Washington, 2004; Terry, Connor, Petscher, & Conlin, 2012). Furthermore, if elementary students shift to using MAE as they progress through the grades, their literacy achievement increases (Craig & Washington, 2004; Terry et al., 2012). Density of dialect has even been found to have an independent, negative relationship to reading when controlling for SES. Craig, Zhang, Hensel, and Quinn (2009) found that density of dialect in written narratives had a significant negative direct effect on reading achievement among elementary school students who spoke AAE; density of dialect in oral narratives had a negative indirect effect that was mediated by language comprehension. Their model, which also included a measure of SES (i.e., the Hollingshead Index [HI]), was found to explain 40% of the variance in reading. The HI uses caregiver education, caregiver occupation, gender, and marital status, to determine social status. In this model, SES had no significant predictive relationship. As for reading comprehension, Labov and Baker (2010), in their study of struggling readers, found that AAE children’s use of dialectal features in their speech when reading orally had less of an effect on sentence comprehension than it did for children who spoke Latino English (LE) who had learned

to read in Spanish first. For instance, while both AAE and LE speakers might omit the final consonant when reading the past tense (e.g., “*opened*” pronounced as “*open*”, p. 753), the LE speakers had more difficulty understanding the meaning of the remainder of the sentence. They argued that AAE speakers had knowledge of MAE, so even though they did not always speak MAE, they were able to comprehend a good deal of what they were reading. On the other hand, Hispanic speakers did not. This study suggests that dialect negatively affects reading, but the degree of effect on reading comprehension varies depending on the nonstandard dialect being spoken.

As it was for vocabulary, morphosyntactic differences may cause difficulties in mathematics. Terry, Hendrick, Evangelou, and Smith (2010) studied how students who speak AAE performed when they were required to solve MAE mathematical reasoning problems that contained a morphemic mismatch between MAE and AAE (e.g., present 3<sup>rd</sup> singular–s, as in “*Jill eats a lot of ice-cream*”, [p. 2465], that may be articulated as “*Jill eat a lot of ice-cream*” in AAE). They found that the presence of such features negatively impacted the AAE-speaking student’s ability to solve word problems in MAE. They suggested that this was due to the extra cognitive load required to codeswitch between the two dialects. Given the difficulty grammar differences cause speakers of AAE with literacy acquisition and with mathematics, it is reasonable to expect that speakers of other ethnic varieties, such as First Nations students, encounter similar difficulties.

### Language Use

Students who speak a nonstandard variety may have different rules and expectations about the way language is used and the style of delivery that is appropriate. Misunderstandings between students and teachers can occur if differences are not known, impeding student success.

**Questions.** Differences in the cultural expectations concerning questioning may cause misunderstandings and resultant difficulties at school. Wolfram, Adger, and Detwyler (1993) suggest that direct questions may or may not be appropriate among students who speak Standard English as a Second Dialect, even though questioning is a commonly used teaching approach in schools (Cazden, 2001). Compared with White students, Philips (1983) reported that Indigenous students in Warm Springs Oregon were more likely to answer a teacher’s questions when in a one-on-one situation with the teacher, than in the presence of other students in a group. Philips concluded that individual

sessions with the teacher allowed students greater control over their learning and avoided the possibility of being seen as boastful or attention-seeking, characteristics viewed negatively in their culture. Neha (2003), a Navajo S-LP, reports that a Navajo speaker does not see the point of asking questions to which the answer is already known. Among Athabaskan people, asking a lot of questions is discouraged (Scollon & Scollon, 1981). Sharla Peltier, a S-LP and member of Rama (Mnjikaning) First Nation, Ontario, shared that questions are taken very seriously in her culture, and an answer is not given lightly; therefore, it may take a long time for a First Nations student to respond (Ball et al., 2007).

**Silence.** Silence, used as a form of respect (Ball et al., 2007), is reported as being a pragmatic language feature of many North American nonstandard Indian (Scollon & Scollon, 1981) and First Nations (Ball et al., 2007) dialects. Use of talking as a way of learning may be discouraged in lieu of listening, observing, and actively participating in activities (Ball & Lewis, 2005). Use of silence as a pragmatic dialectal feature may cause difficulties for students who use this feature. If a teacher is unaware of a student’s use of silence, then the teacher might assume that the child has not understood or has nothing to say to contribute to the discussion. However, silence is not generalizable as a feature of all Indigenous nonstandard dialects nor expected in all circumstances. When interviewing First Nations parents and Elders, Ball and Lewis (2014) found that Elders preferred that children be both talkative and quiet. Many Elders expressed that children need to talk to learn, but also need to be quiet when Elders, teachers, adults, or visitors are talking or during ceremonies, prayers, or feasts. Flanigan (1987) suggests children are only silent when speaking with a White adult or authority figure. Anecdotal reports from other educational professionals and my personal observations indicate that silence is not always used among First Nations students in Northern BC, even with White authority figures. This variation in the use of silence among Aboriginal people points to the importance of verifying what local features are, before making generalizations.

**Narrative.** Michaels (1981) argued that many students who speak a nonstandard dialect prefer to tell a story in a topic-associating style (i.e., elements of the story are told in a non-linear way) rather than a topic-centred style (i.e., the story has a single plot, that is told in a linear fashion) in schools that promote the standard. Among certain American Indian speakers, stories may be reorganized, or particular elements might be altered for the sake of the audience (Leap, 1993). Scollon and Scollon (1981) suggest that Athabaskan speakers prefer stories to be brief.

Differences in the way students who speak nonstandard dialects tell stories at home, and the way they are expected to do so at school, may lead to some difficulties with their success in writing (Epstein & Xu, 2003). Students may have to learn new patterns of storytelling, providing yet another obstacle to overcome. Peltier's (2014) research confirmed that what is valued in story telling may differ between First Nations culture and SE school. In her study, she asked children of the Nipissing First Nation, Ontario, to tell stories using culturally appropriate storytelling methods (e.g., children told their stories while seated in a circle, a talking stone was used to remind children to listen respectfully and speak from the heart and so on). She scored the children's stories using western-oriented Narrative Scoring Scheme (NSS) of the Systematic Analysis of Language Transcripts (SALT, Miller & Chapman, 2008). She then asked Elders to rate the stories. She found some overlap in the assessment of what constituted a good story between the NSS and Elder ratings. However, she also found differences. For instance, Elders valued stories that encouraged the listener to think about how to interpret a story, or valued stories that had to do with family and community relationships. Other elements that appeared to be important to Elders included use of humour, attention-getting devices, vivid language to create an image in the listener's mind, use of an animated voice, expression of emotion, dialogue, and presence of a stated ending. The length of the story did not determine its value. Peltier discussed the need for western styled schools to become bicultural and teach story-telling styles of First Nations cultures, in addition to western ways of telling stories (Peltier, 2014).

**Eye contact.** Expectations regarding the use of eye contact may be different among Indigenous children. For instance, Philips (1983) noted that Native American children look away from the teacher more often than White children do and spend more time looking at each other. Participants in the First Nations Englishes forum also reported noticing that First Nations children may not make eye contact when listening to an authority figure as a form of respect. They were concerned that a non-First Nations person might mistakenly think that the child was not listening (Ball et al., 2007) if they were not aware of this pragmatic feature of their nonstandard dialect. Sharla Peltier reports that she first looks her communicative partner in the eye but then looks away to visualize what they are saying (Ball et al., 2007). Peltier has observed over-pathologization because of the difference in expectation regarding eye gaze. She reported that she has received referrals from medical professionals, who suspected a First Nations student had autism, because of the child's diminished eye contact.

**Other differences in use and style.** Wolfram et al. (1993, see pp. 20-32) list additional differences to consider when working with students who speak a nonstandard variety, such as: a) differences in intonation, b) whether small talk is required, c) differences in greetings, d) discourse openers and conversational closures, e) physical proximity, f) degree of directness, and g) rules for addressing the communicative partner. He also mentions pragmatic features such as turn taking, offering and accepting apologies, refusing, protesting, and directing as potential areas of confusion. If the student's conventions of language use in these areas are different from what is expected at school, misunderstandings can result.

#### **Additional Factors that can Interfere with School Success**

**Educator's perspective.** An educator's perspective toward their student's dialect may negatively affect the student's academic achievement in the classroom (Siegel, 2007). If teachers are unaware that their students are speaking a nonstandard dialect and do not adopt appropriate pedagogical practices, then they may negatively affect the student's learning. Maroney, Thomas, Lawrence, and Salcedo (as cited in Rickford & Rickford, 1995) found that children who were constantly being corrected for *errors* that were in fact *differences* related to their dialect became intimidated and participated less often in class. Epstein and Xu (2003) reported that some students also become resistant to learning to read and write. A student's speaking style may have other negative effects. Ford (1984) found that speaking style influenced how a teacher assessed a student's writing. For instance, Ford found that teachers evaluated written work associated with students who spoke Spanish-influenced English less favorably than those writing samples associated with Standard American speaking students, even though the writing samples had been previously evaluated as being equivalent by other teacher raters. Experience or teacher ethnicity had no effect on the results. The use of nonstandard variety can also influence a teacher's perception of a student's behavior. For example, Haig and Oliver (2003) found that teachers in low-income schools associated "their students' use of variants as indicative of poor language skills and this, in turn, with poor behaviour" (p. 275).

**Assessment.** Students who speak a nonstandard dialect may be at a disadvantage if they are assessed with tests standardized on students who speak the standard. They may be perceived as being less intelligent (Charity Hudley & Mallinson, 2011) or as having a language delay or disorder (Ball & Bernhardt, 2008). They may be



marginalized because of the misdiagnosis, and receive a lesser quality of education as a result (Hibel, Faircloth, & Farkas, 2008). The pathologization of Standard English as a Second Dialect students was another issue that came to the forefront in the Black English trial when S-LPs were found to be incorrectly diagnosing AAE speakers as having learning disabilities because they were assessing differences due to nonstandard dialect as errors (Baugh, 1995). Over-pathologization is also a concern for speakers of Native American Englishes. For instance, Bayles and Harris (1982) cited Nicholais and Joyner who reported very high percentages of Navajo children diagnosed as having language problems (up to 67%) and discussed the need for S-LPs to improve their ability to sort out the difference between dialect and disorder. Wolfram and Christian (1989) pointed out the potential bias of standardized reading tests, arguing that students who speak nonstandard varieties may obtain lower scores because of differences in pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. Rickford and Rickford (1995) discussed the work linguists have carried out to expose the cultural bias in IQ tests. Pearce and Williams (2013) found evidence of cultural bias in the Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals - Fourth Edition (CELF-4, Australian Edition, Semel, Wiig, & Secord, 2006b), a test widely used by S-LPs to assess school-aged children. I have observed a well-meaning clinician, unaware of local dialectal features, initially assign a lower score to a child on the Formulated Sentences subtest of the CELF-4 (Semel, Wiig, & Secord, 2006a) than perhaps was warranted. In this particular task, the child is instructed to create sentences about pictures with target words. Sentences that are complete and grammatically correct earn more points than those with grammatical "errors". Once the clinician became aware that she may have been penalizing children for grammatical dialectal differences, and that the effects may have been cumulative according to the scoring procedures of the CELF-4, she supplemented standardized assessment tools with child-centred approaches to assessment.

Research regarding the potential negative consequences of using tests not standardized on children who speak Native American Englishes comes from Hibel et al. (2008). They investigated the reported over-placement of American Indian/Alaskan Native (AI/AN) students in special education classes relative to non-ethnic and other ethnic students. They reported that AI/AN children were twice as likely to be placed in special education classes in Grade 3 than non-Hispanic white children. However, performing multi-level regression analysis, and controlling for other factors such as SES, behavioral readiness, gender, and tests scores on standardized tests of kindergarten

readiness in literacy and numeracy, showed that AI/AN children were no more likely to be placed in special education classes than non-Hispanic white children. For AI/AN children, as it was for all the minority children included in the study, a significant predictive factor of Grade 3 special education placement was kindergarten readiness test scores in reading and math. While at first it may appear as though the Native children's lack of school readiness upon school entry leads to placement in Special Education in Grade 3, there may be other explanations. It may be that children's abilities are being underestimated by their lower scores on tests that Hibel et al. say are culturally biased. As Siegel (2010) discussed, underestimation becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Alternatively, it may mean that students cannot keep pace with their SE peers because they enter school speaking a different variety of English, and this difference, rather than learning ability, is what is being measured by SE tests of school readiness.

ASHA (1983) and SAC (1997) have advised against using tests that have been standardized for use with SE speaking students when assessing nonstandard dialect speakers. To overcome cultural bias, researchers and scholars recommend the use of language sampling as an authentic way to assess language (Heilmann, Nockerts, & Miller, 2010; Pearson, Jackson, & Wu, 2014). Wolfram et al. (1993) suggest modifying tests, taking the features of the nonstandard dialect into consideration. Eriks-Brophy (2014) and Wolfram et al. (1993), however, remind clinicians that changing test protocols invalidates norms. Eriks-Brophy suggests combining standardized assessment with other types of assessment, such as child centred approaches that take into consideration the child's language in different contexts and culture. Bayles and Harris (1982) give suggestions as to how to create community norms. Dynamic Assessment is also recommended (Kramer, Mallett, Schneider, & Hayward, 2009; Laing & Kamhi, 2003). It uses a test/treatment/retest model and an assessment of rapidity of response to intervention, to distinguish error versus difference. The Diagnostic Evaluation of Language Variation (DELV, Seymour, Roeper, & de Villiers, 2003), a test designed to sort out language disorder versus difference, is standardized with American speakers of mainstream and non-mainstream varieties of English. Therefore, it is not known if can be used with Canadian speakers.

**Inability to hear the difference between the standard and the variety.** Siegel (2010) suggests that the inability to discriminate the difference between the home language and standard language is another obstacle to learning in school. For instance, Geiger and Greenberg (1976) found this to be the case for children who spoke AAE in inner

city schools in Washington, D.C. Students who had been trained to discriminate informal AAE from formal SE using pairs of sentences that differed lexically, were not able to discriminate when sentences differed syntactically. Older children (e.g., 10-year-olds) performed better than younger children (e.g., 6-year-olds) and some syntactic forms were discriminated more easily than others (i.e., children were better able to discriminate between forms of the copula but less able to discriminate the possessive). Nevertheless, this study supports the notion that children who speak the nonstandard dialect may have difficulty discriminating the vernacular from the standard. This might also explain why a technique known as contrastive analysis, whereby the teacher systematically teaches the points of contrast between the home variety and the standard, is so effective (Wheeler & Swords, 2004). Similarly, this could explain the effectiveness of teaching codeswitching, whereby children are taught when to use what variety of language (Devereaux, 2014). I have also observed that children in northern BC may have difficulty discriminating the difference between the community variety of English from formal SE unless the differences are explicitly pointed out.

### Summary and a Call for Engagement

There is a body of evidence that supports the position that the academic achievement of students who speak a nonstandard language variety is lower than it is for those who speak the standard (e.g., Biddle, 2011; BC MoEd, 2015), and that their use of nonstandard variety is a contributing factor to their lower achievement (e.g., Labov, 2003; Rickford, Sweetland, & Rickford, 2004). Differences in pronunciation (Labov, 2003), grammar (Siegel, 2010), and vocabulary (Charity Hudley & Mallinson, 2011) can affect literacy development, and learning in math and science (Terry, Hendrick, et al., 2010). Differences in use of language can lead to misunderstandings and resultant changes in teacher perspectives about students (Rickford et al., 2004; Siegel, 2010). The use of inappropriate assessment tools can result in unnecessary pathologization and inappropriate pedagogical approaches (ASHA, 1983; Baugh, 1995; Laing, & Kamhi, 2003; SAC, 1997).

Children who speak a nonstandard language variety are at a disadvantage in classrooms that favour the standard language of the dominant culture. It is reasonable to assume that issues that prevent success in classrooms for other speakers of ethnic varieties also affect many First Nations students in Canada in similar ways. It is likely that their nonstandard dialect is a contributing factor to their lack of school success, a situation many Aboriginal communities desire to change (Assembly of First Nations, 2015).

As has been recommended in the literature, reform is needed in many areas (Ball et al., 2007). Scholars argue that First Nations English dialects must be accepted as a legitimate rule-governed variety (Sterzuk, 2011); to hold the standard as “correct”, and other varieties as “incorrect” is a form of colonial assimilationism and linguistic discrimination (Lippi-Green, 1997; Sterzuk, 2011). This stance has led some S-LPs to consider whether we should revise our objective of standard English proficiency as a key to success in school and in life (Campbell, 2011). Others argue for a bidialectal approach, whereby classrooms legitimate the value of both the community dialect and the standard, by teaching children to communicate in both dialects (Malcolm, 1995), using effective yet culturally sensitive approaches such as contrastive analysis and codeswitching (Sterzuk, 2011; Wheeler & Swords, 2004). If successful, this approach would ensure that dialect-speaking children have a “firm foot in both worlds”, a wish that has been expressed to me by community members and Elders. While I believe that both perspectives are valid, I also believe the decision is not mine to make. If I made that decision without consulting the community, then I would be perpetuating a colonial perspective, which presumes that “I know what is best” for dialect-speaking communities. Rather I see my role as someone who should present all perspectives that are based on current knowledge, which unfortunately is limited. Community members, not scholars nor teachers nor S-LPs, need to have an opportunity to debate the issue and decide.

Whether a community decides to argue for acceptance of their dialect in schools as a legitimate form of English, or adopt a bidialectal approach, we need to learn more about nonstandard dialects and improve our pedagogical and clinical practice. We need to raise educator awareness, develop culturally appropriate assessment tools and procedures, and reexamine curriculum and government policy (Ball et al., 2007; Eriks-Brophy, 2014). However, before any of these areas can be adequately addressed, it is crucial that we first determine the dialectal features: what they are, where they are variable, and what the rules or constraints on use are. At the moment, we are severely limited in our knowledge. For instance, are we certain vocabulary differences always exist in comparison to other non-First Nation students? If First Nations communities want their children to be proficient in the standard, we need to know if vocabulary is an area that needs targeting. If First Nations communities would rather have their students' dialect be accepted in the classroom, then we still need to know more about their lexicon, so we can determine which children are developing vocabulary according to community standards,

and which children are in need of specialized help. As for our knowledge of phonological and grammatical features, at the moment we must be guided by very limited empirical data and informal observations (Ball & Bernhardt, 2008). In BC, the Ministry of Education will provide funding to schools that have students designated as ESD so that students can be given additional help to become proficient in the standard (BC MoEd, 2016). How can we designate a student if we do not know what the community dialectal features are? In our assessments, how can we sort out disorder from difference if we cannot identify the differences? How can we avoid misunderstandings with students if we are not aware of the different ways language is used in their community? Additionally, if one of our objectives is to improve pedagogical practice in helping children achieve proficiency in SE, we need to learn more about how students acquire the standard in classroom settings. The research that I have been able to find on second dialect acquisition required knowledge of dialectal features (see, for instance, Isaacs, 1996; Charity et al., 2004; Craig & Washington, 2004; Craig et al., 2009; Terry et al., 2012). If another equally important objective is to support the nonstandard variant, then we must learn what dialectal features are in need of support. Currently, there is a paucity of research on First Nations Englishes in Canada (Ball & Bernhardt, 2008) and much of the research may be outdated (Eriks-Brophy, 2014). Research is crucial if we want to improve our practice. For instance, in his longitudinal study, Isaacs (1996) found that use of dialectal features among AAE-speakers declined over grades, but certain features persisted at high rates, even after exposure to SE (e.g., in Grade 3, 91% of speakers used copula deletion; by Grade 7, 74% of speakers were still deleting the copula). If a teacher was aware of which features are likely to persist, and the community desired that their children become proficient in the standard, then the teacher might decide that students needed additional instruction for these specific features. Again, we cannot use these techniques if we do not know what to contrast and what features to switch.

As Cazden (2001) suggested, we can and should become ethnographers. I give this suggestion only after careful consideration because I am aware of the time and commitment required to conduct research that is meaningful and respectful of Aboriginal culture and community. Cazden agrees that it is unlikely that teachers have the resources to conduct intensive ethnography. However, if each one of us who are experienced in working with First Nations students *obtained community permission* to study and share our observations about the differences in the way English is understood, spoken, and used in our communities, then we would begin to

create a pool of data for use when assessing and teaching children. Resources exist to guide us. Wolfram et al. (1993) published a manual that laid out steps for S-LPs in Baltimore to follow when documenting AAE. Their manual could be used when documenting First Nations English. Cazden also includes suggestions for teachers, including inviting students to collect data on the local ways of talking and conventions of language use. We should use these resources in collaboration with community members and researchers in post-secondary settings, to ensure we conduct our investigations using culturally sensitive research methodologies. We may not have Indigenous ancestry, but we can be *Indigenists* and take steps to improve our practice with First Nations students. "Speech and language pathologists [and educators] seem to have an unprecedented socio-educational opportunity, if not an incumbent moral obligation" "to acquire, apply, and disseminate reliable information and valid perspectives about language variation throughout society" (Wolfram et al., 1993, p. 108).

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