

► **Non-Standard English Dialects and the Effect of Supplementary Funding on Educational Achievement**

► **Les dialectes non courants de l'anglais et l'incidence de fonds supplémentaires sur les résultats scolaires**

Michele Battisti
Mark Campbell
Jane Friesen
Brian Krauth

KEY WORDS

NON-STANDARD DIALECTS

LITERACY

EDUCATION FUNDING

Michele Battisti, M.Sc.,
Centre for Education
Research and Policy,
Simon Fraser University,
Burnaby, B.C.,
Canada

Mark Campbell, M.P.P.,
Centre for Education
Research and Policy,
Simon Fraser University,
Burnaby, B.C.,
Canada

Jane Friesen, Ph.D.,
Department of Economics
and Centre for Education
Research and Policy,
Simon Fraser University,
Burnaby, B.C.,
Canada

Brian Krauth, Ph.D.,
Department of Economics
and Centre for Education
Research and Policy,
Simon Fraser University,
Burnaby, B.C.,
Canada

Abstract

British Columbia provides school districts with supplementary funding to support the language development of students who speak a non-standard English dialect. Many of the students who attract this supplement are Aboriginal. We describe this policy, and record a striking increase in uptake of the funds on behalf of Aboriginal students over the last decade. We describe the results of an evaluation study that measured the effects of supplementary funding on test score gains between grades 4 and 7. The study found that the funding supplement substantially improved the reading scores of the average Aboriginal student.

Abrégé

La Colombie-Britannique offre un financement supplémentaire aux arrondissements scolaires pour favoriser le développement langagier d'élèves parlant un dialecte non courant de l'anglais. Bon nombre d'élèves qui bénéficient de ces fonds sont autochtones. Nous décrivons cette politique et soulignons la croissance remarquable de la part de ces fonds affectés à des Autochtones au cours de la dernière décennie. Nous présentons les résultats d'une étude qui a mesuré l'incidence de ces fonds supplémentaires sur l'amélioration des résultats de la 4^e à la 7^e années. L'étude révèle que ces fonds ont considérablement amélioré les résultats en lecture de l'élève autochtone moyen.

INTRODUCTION

School may be particularly challenging for students from communities that speak non-standard forms of the language spoken at school, such as African American Vernacular English in the United States, Aboriginal English in Australia, and First Nations English in Canada. When dialects spoken by some students differ from the English used for classroom instruction, the instruction may be less effective. In some cases, students who speak a non-standard dialect are misdiagnosed with language impairment and inappropriately placed in remedial education programs (Wolfram, 1993). Teachers may confuse some dialects with weaker intellectual ability or low educational aspirations, and students in turn may lower their own academic expectations (Adger, Wolfram & Christian, 2007). Children and youth who are criticized and corrected for speaking in their own dialect may develop oppositional attitudes towards school (Delpit, 2006) or to the majority culture (Ogbu, 1999).

Some sociolinguists and educators have argued that educational programs could support language development by drawing the student's attention to differences between their own dialect and the standard school dialect (e.g., using 'contrastive analysis'), helping them to recognize situations in which each dialect is appropriate, and providing opportunities for them to learn the grammar and phonology of the standard dialect (Baugh, 1995, 1999; Rickford, 1999; Ball, Bernhardt & Deby, 2006).

However, while the educational challenges surrounding dialect diversity have been recognized for some time, policy responses have been slow to develop. The Canadian province of British Columbia began funding specialized services for speakers of non-standard English in the 1980's (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1985, 2009), followed by Australia in the 1990's (Eades & Siegel, 1999). In the United States, program development has been hampered by funding limitations.¹

A growing literature surveys the implications for educational and speech-language pathology practice of First Nations English dialects (Ball & Bernhardt, 2008; Peltier, 2009), and the potential role of dialects in Aboriginal education (Epstein & Xu, 2003). However, despite the critical importance of improving the literacy skills of under-achieving students, the potential value of offering specialized services to speakers of non-standard dialects, and the controversy that sometimes surrounds attempts to do so, we are not aware of any systematic evaluations of such policies.

The effects of overall education funding levels on academic achievement have been much discussed in the literature (e.g. Guryan, 2001). The research reported

here focuses on supplementary funding intended to benefit a specific group of students, an area that is yet to receive attention from quantitative researchers. Literature in economics evaluates the effects of specific programs or pedagogical practices (e.g. Angrist & Lavy, 2001; Hanushek, Kain & Rivkin, 2002; Lavy & Schlosser, 2005; Machin & McNally, 2008). However, the research reported here evaluates a funding policy that has enabled or stimulated a variety of specific programs and practices, rather than evaluating those programs and practices individually or directly.

Students who speak Standard English as a second dialect exhibit relatively poor Standard English language skills on average, and although factors other than dialect are doubtlessly implicated, several studies suggest that the failure to specifically address dialect diversity may be contributing to their underachievement (Labov, 1972; Eades, 1995; Leap, 1993). Evidence from a number of programs in Australia and the United States indicates that when specific 'English as a Second Dialect' (ESD) support and services are provided, these students do appear to improve their reading ability in Standard English (Ball, Bernhardt & Deby, 2006, pp. 24-39). Although the specific supports and services provided as a result of B.C.'s English as a second language policy are not directly evaluated in our study, an examination of the policy's effects is motivated by this literature.

ENGLISH AS A SECOND DIALECT POLICY IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

B.C. has a longstanding policy, under its English as a Second Language (ESL) policy framework, of allocating supplementary funding to support students who "speak variations of English that differ significantly from the English used in the broader Canadian society and in school" (B.C. Ministry of Education, 1999). This policy currently adds \$1,340 to the per capita base grant for every student who is designated as eligible by their school district. This supplement is subject to a five-year limit. It is separate from and additional to an Aboriginal education supplement allocated to school districts for every student self-reporting as Aboriginal. Students can be designated at any stage in their school careers.

It is not possible, in the data available, to identify with any confidence those non-standard dialect speakers who actually have ESL designations, with the exception of Aboriginal students. Non-Aboriginal students with an ESL flag who are also described in the data as speaking English at home may well be non-standard dialect speakers, but not necessarily – home language and first language do not always correspond. When Aboriginal students have an ESL flag in the data, however, they can safely be identified

as 'English as a Second Dialect' (ESD) learners.

Districts receiving funding for ESD students have substantial discretion in terms of the services to be provided, subject to meeting several broad criteria (B.C. Ministry of Education, 1999). For each designated student, districts are required to conduct an annual assessment of proficiency in Standard English, and to design an annual instruction plan that lists specific services the student will receive in order to improve that proficiency. An ESL specialist must be involved in service planning and delivery, and districts are encouraged to use culturally relevant resources to provide services (B.C. Ministry of Education 1999). The Ministry does not specify which services must be provided, and there is no requirement that the funding be dedicated exclusively to services for the designated student.

This flexibility allows districts to use these funds in a variety of ways. Examples include supporting the use of specific pedagogical strategies for vocabulary development (Nechako Lakes, 2006), hiring specialist teachers that provide support to classroom teachers and develop program materials (Cariboo-Chilcotin, 2009), offering specialized oral language instruction on a weekly pull-out basis and acquiring reading materials with Aboriginal content (Vancouver Island North, 2008), and integrating strategies for oral language development into regular literacy programs (Haida Gwaii/Queen Charlotte, 2008).

Given this sort of latitude on the implementation side, it is inevitable that the mandate will be interpreted in different ways by local administrators. The rationale for the supplementary funding policy – that dialect diversity per se may constitute a specific academic barrier to some students – does not necessarily guide and inform the design of the services to be delivered. Indeed, we understand that in some districts 'ESD' is used to denote 'English Skills Development', indicating that the ostensible rationale for the policy is much less salient for some local programmers than the general objective of improving language skills among vulnerable students. In many cases, educators do draw upon English as a Second Dialect theory and resources, but in some cases it is likely that these play no substantial role.

The relatively low academic attainment of Aboriginal students in Canadian K-12 systems is a source of serious concern to educators and policy makers. In the 2006 Census, for example, 40 per cent of Canadian Aboriginal people aged 20-24 were without a high school certificate, compared to 13 per cent of others. In B.C., where self-reported Aboriginal students comprise around ten per cent of the public school population, their graduation rate is below 50 per cent, compared to over 80 per cent for non-Aboriginal students (B.C. Ministry of Education

2007). Understanding the effectiveness of policies and programs that are intended to improve these outcomes is critical to overcoming these gaps.

Although supplementary ESL funding for non-standard dialect speakers was available to school districts beginning in the 1980s, few took advantage of it until the late 1990s. The early 2000s then witnessed a considerable increase in uptake. The proportion of Aboriginal students in B.C. public schools who were designated for ESL funding tripled between 1999 and 2004 – from about five to about fifteen per cent of Grade 4 Aboriginal students, and from about three to about eleven per cent of Grade 7 Aboriginal students (Authors' calculations from B.C. Ministry of Education data).

In 1999, four out of 59 public school districts were identifying at least 5 per cent of grade 4 Aboriginal students as eligible for ESL funding. By 2004, this number had expanded to 16. Of the twelve districts that crossed the 5% threshold during this period, nine saw jumps from fewer than 5% to more than 20% in a single year. In Nisga'a and Stikine, the proportion leapt from fewer than 5% to over 60% from one year to the next. In Nisga'a, designation rates proceeded to range between 45-60% of all Grade 7 Aboriginal students. Gold Trail designated virtually no students until 2004, when it designated over 40% of Aboriginal students as ESL.

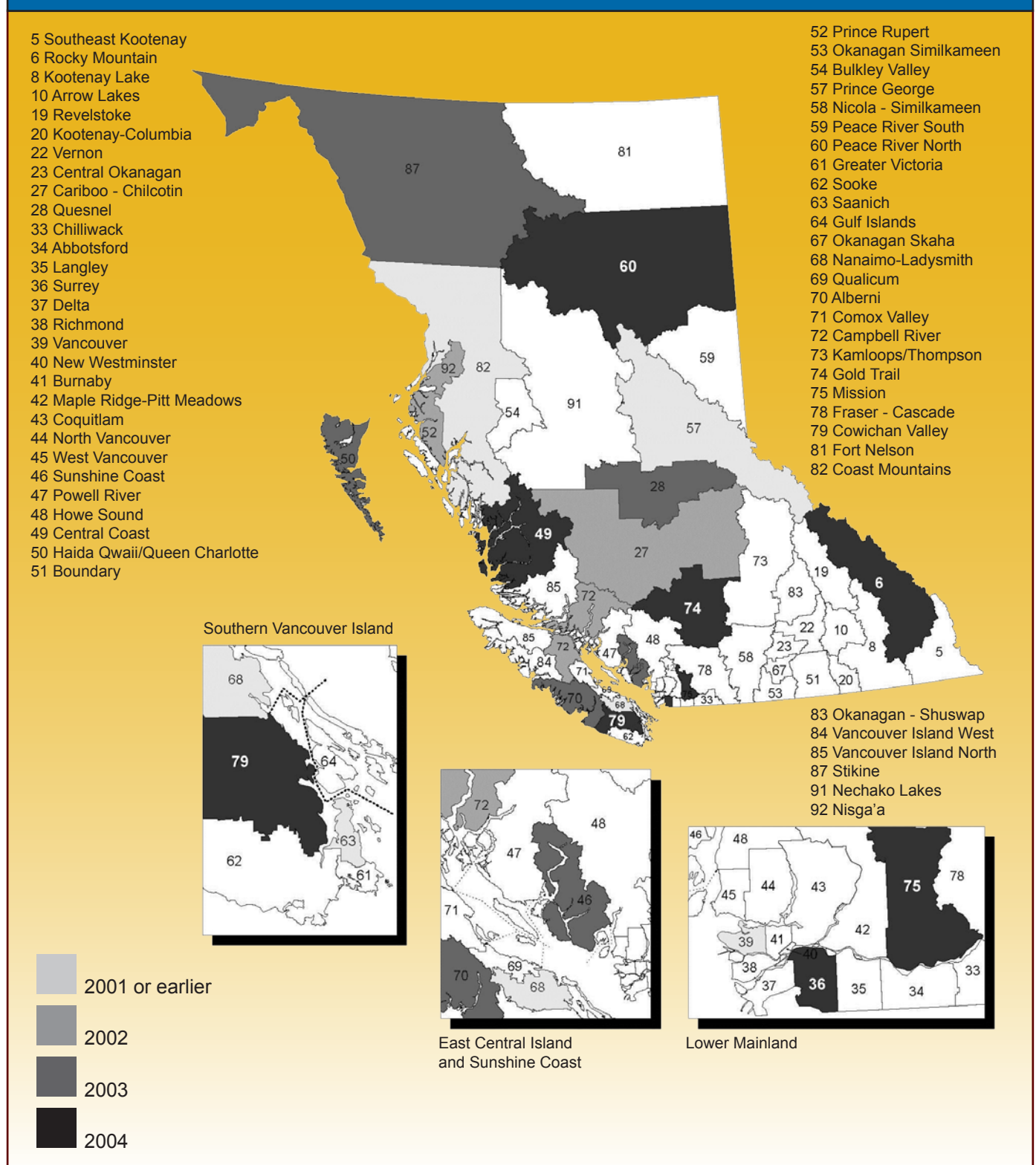
Even in districts with more established programs, considerable year-to-year variation is evident. Vancouver was one of the four districts already designating over 5 per cent of Aboriginal students in 1999. It designated between 10 to 20 per cent of Grade 7 Aboriginal students for ESL in each year of the period 1999 to 2004, but with some sharp year-to-year jumps within those limits, and exhibiting no clear trend.

The dynamics that drove the rather sudden expansion of these designations – both for districts that had not previously availed themselves of the opportunity, and within districts with longstanding designation practices – remain obscure to us. Figure 1 illustrates the absence of any particular geographic pattern. The motivation to pursue ESL supplements for Aboriginal students did not spread from a district to neighbouring districts, for example. Anecdotally, it appears that both word-of-mouth networking between educator interest groups and the availability and local acceptability of diagnostic tools may have had a share of influence. It is also possible that different districts pursued different language skills development strategies due to different perceived populations, priorities, or capacities, or that differences in dialects across B.C. may affect the process by which dialect characteristics are documented and recognized. The reasons why some districts became enthusiastic about

this source of funding, and why other districts have not taken it up, merit further study. Similarly, we are unclear about the diagnostic techniques and assessment processes deployed by those districts that began to identify students in this category. A better understanding of this topic would be useful.

However, the large and abrupt variations in uptake do permit one important question to be explored. Has the ESD funding supplement produced any positive effect on educational outcomes? In what follows, we summarize the method and findings of an econometric investigation of this question (Battisti, Friesen & Krauth, 2009).

Figure 1: Year when B.C. school districts first designated $\geq 5\%$ of grade 7 Aboriginal students for ESL



MATERIALS AND METHODS

To discover what difference the supplementary funding policy has been making, it does not help to compare designated students with non-designated students. Students tend to be designated because of the educational challenges they face, and therefore will differ from other students in terms of the educational outcomes one would expect to observe. Focusing on the progress students make, in the form of test score gains across time, can help abstract from the differences between different groups of students at the starting point. However, different groups of students tend to have different educational trajectories, as well as different starting points. One should expect to observe different patterns of progress, other things equal.

During the period reviewed, Aboriginal students in ESL scored almost 1 standard deviation lower in grade 7 reading Foundation Skills Assessment tests (see below) than non-Aboriginal students, and over 0.4 standard deviations lower than other Aboriginal students. They also fell further behind other students between grades 4 and 7. The “value-added” gap with non-Aboriginal students was 0.13 standard deviations, and with other Aboriginal students it was 0.05 standard deviations. Because designation is not random, these comparisons cannot reveal anything about the effect of the policy. The question is whether the gaps would have been even wider had the supplementary funding not been received.

Although different districts introduced or escalated ESL designations for Aboriginal students at different times, a simple comparison of how students achieved in different districts would be prone to bias. Districts often serve quite different populations; in such a comparison, the effect of the policy could not be reliably distinguished from pre-existing differences between students in different districts.

Our solution was to calculate how year-to-year changes in the size of ESL enrolment of Aboriginal students within school districts affected achievement. This approach avoids comparing different districts to one another, and instead compares districts to themselves, with only the frequency of ESL designations varying. It separates the effect of the supplementary funding from other things that can affect achievement, and that may vary across districts.

B.C. administers Foundation Skills Assessments (FSAs) in reading and numeracy to all students in Grades 4 and 7. The Ministry of Education’s FSA database records the student’s score on each test, with flags indicating whether the student was excused from test participation. Its enrolment database records the student’s current grade, school and district identifiers, year, gender, self-reported

Aboriginal identity, enrolment in language or special needs programs, and self-reported language spoken at home. Encrypted identification numbers were used to link these databases, and a longitudinal data set was constructed covering every student who was in grade 7 from 2002 through 2004 and in grade 4 three years earlier.

We compared the grade-4-to-grade-7 test score change of the average Aboriginal student in a given district to that of the average Aboriginal student in the same district who is in grade 7 in a different year – when more or fewer Aboriginal students had ESL designations. As successive cohorts reach the end of grade 7 and take the FSA, each will show a different average test score gain, representing the progress students have been making through grades 5, 6 and 7. Meanwhile, each cohort was exposed to a different average rate of ESL designations in those grades, representing the resource inputs created by the supplementary funding policy. Therefore we can compare the test score gains of different cohorts as a function of district average ESL rates among Aboriginal students. Because district-level changes in designation rates were large and abrupt, they cannot be correlated with changes in student characteristics, which evolve much more gradually. Changes in the characteristics of designated versus undesignated students therefore cannot explain any effect that may be detected.

We repeated this process for every district, and averaged across districts (weighted by district size). We used the large variation in uptake across districts to abstract from anything that may be changing at provincial level from year to year, such as background trends in test scores. Each district’s change in enrolment differed from that of every other district in any given year.

It is possible that undesignated students may have benefitted from the policy indirectly. Indirect effects could take the form of general resource spillovers (since districts receive additional funds for each ESL student), program spillovers (since district ESD programming may include development of new learning materials that benefit all students), or peer effects (since academic improvements by high-risk students may improve the classroom learning environment). The overall effect of the policy is therefore best evaluated by looking at the outcomes of all Aboriginal students, rather than only of those with the ESL designation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results suggest that ESL funding for Aboriginal students who speak non-standard English has been used in B.C. to support services that are notably effective. The supplementary funding policy has produced significant benefits for the literacy development of B.C.’s Aboriginal

students. The reading test score gain of the average Aboriginal student was greater when the district received ESL funding for a greater proportion of its Aboriginal students, all other things being equal.

The estimated effect was quite substantial. If a district designated 22 per cent of its Aboriginal students for ESL funding, the average rate across districts over the time period studied, it would have increased the reading test score gain of Aboriginal students by around 0.11 standard deviations compared to a district with no students designated. This corresponds to 18 per cent of B.C.'s grade 7 reading gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students.

An additional step was to investigate the effects of ESL funding across the distribution of test score gains of Aboriginal students. Specifically, since the policy is intended to support students with weaker Standard English skills, one might expect the documented improvements in reading outcomes to appear primarily in the lower end of the outcome distribution. We used quantile regression, which measures effects at different percentiles of achievement, to develop some evidence on this question. The results suggest that the effects on reading skills were strongest at the bottom of the reading test score gain distribution. The improvement for the bottom 25 per cent of students appears to have been almost twice as large as the improvement for the top 25 per cent. Since ESL-designated Aboriginal students are concentrated at the lower end of the achievement distribution, this may shed some light on the question of how much of the improvement has accrued directly to ESL-designated Aboriginal students, and how much to other Aboriginal students as a result of beneficial spillovers. However, our quantile regressions do not identify causal effects, so differences in the effect size across the test score distribution should be interpreted as suggestive, rather than definitive.

Since the policy is intended to support language development, its effects on reading outcomes present the central focus of investigation. There is much less reason to expect any positive effects on numeracy, which is also tested by Foundation Skills Assessments. However, some components of the numeracy test do make demands on students' reading comprehension. The problem-solving component is frequently cited in this context. We therefore investigated whether the policy produced any change in numeracy attainment. We found no effect of district Aboriginal ESL-designation rate on numeracy test score gains.

Without access to item-level test score data, which might provide a basis for an in-depth analysis of performance on different components, the absence of an effect on numeracy is open to different interpretations.

We argue that this finding corroborates the main findings. If the ESL rate change had been accompanied within districts by other, simultaneous policy or population changes that tended to raise test scores, this would have been expected to show up in numeracy scores, as well as in reading scores. The fact that it did not indicate that the relationship between targeted funding input and reading improvement is authentic. The fact that no relationship was found between ESL designation rates among Aboriginal students and the achievement of non-Aboriginal students may be taken as additional confirmation.

A richer range of indicators could have yielded more sensitive and productive insights into the effects of the supplementary funding policy. However, the present study was limited to FSA scores in terms of the outcomes that could be evaluated province-wide. The exception is the effect on test participation itself. Test participation may reveal something about the academic engagement and school attachment of students, or about their educators' impressions of their general academic progress and capability. Aboriginal students are much less likely to take the FSA test than non-Aboriginal students, and Aboriginal students with ESL designations are much less likely to take the FSA test than the average Aboriginal student.

We replaced test score growth with test participation as the outcome of interest in the empirical model. Higher district ESL designation rates among Aboriginal students were found to have produced no statistically significant change in the probability that Aboriginal students participate in grade 7 exams, with the exception of students who had not participated in the grade 4 numeracy exam, whose participation in the grade 7 numeracy exam actually increased (by 0.28 standard deviations, $p < 0.1$).

This result is useful from another perspective. A potential problem with the use of test scores to measure achievement is that it restricts attention to students who participate in the tests. If the change in ESL designations coincided with changes in patterns of test participation, the credibility of our findings might be undermined. For example, if there was a tendency to excuse designated students from participation, which intensified as ESL designations grew, this might partly explain the observed effect of the ESL funding, rather than any genuine improvements in academic achievement.

Since we observed an increase, and not a decrease, in Aboriginal participation when the ESL designation rate was higher, we can rule out the possibility that designated students were systematically discouraged from taking tests. This indicates that the positive effect of the supplementary funding policy was not an artifact of changes in exam participation patterns.

CONCLUSION

Funding supplements provided through the ESL funding policy have produced impressive benefits for the literacy development of B.C.'s Aboriginal students. In their absence, the reading achievement gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students would be larger than it is at present. The findings should be of considerable interest to policy makers in any jurisdiction who are concerned with improving the educational outcomes of vulnerable groups of students, particularly those from communities that speak non-standard English dialects.

The impressive size of the positive effect compares well to the effects associated with other ambitious educational interventions. For example, the Head Start program in the US produces an average effect size of about 0.2 standard deviations on measures of literacy development during the first year of treatment (US Department of Health and Social Services, 2010); reducing class size by about a third produces an effect size for test scores estimated at around 0.25 standard deviations (Finn & Achilles, 1990). Indeed, academic analyses of the overall effect of increasing education funding levels have sometimes reached quite pessimistic conclusions (e.g. Betts, 1995; Hanushek, Rivkin & Taylor, 1996; Hanushek, 2002). However, these have typically been based on data from the United States. Canadian K-12 education institutions, and the populations they serve, differ from those in the United States in many important ways, and this study is a reminder that it is vital for Canadian educators and policymakers to have access to research based on Canadian data. It is also essential to study the effects of specific, targeted funding programs as well as overall funding levels.

Several further questions are raised by this research. What drove the increase in take-up of this funding, and why it is utilized more by some districts than by others? Why have several districts, including some with sizeable Aboriginal populations, not availed themselves of this funding stream at all? In districts that do designate Aboriginal students for the ESL supplement, how are the assessments being made?

ESL designations for Aboriginal students have not been without controversy, and it is worth noting that the actual practices enabled by ESL funding may be consistent with a variety of philosophies regarding how best to support Aboriginal learning (Ball and Bernhardt (2008) convey some of the difficult issues surrounding Canadian First Nations English dialects). While our method produces a clear result with respect to the success of the policy, it does not reveal the mechanism through which that success is achieved. We cannot identify all the different local strategies implemented thanks to ESL funding, or distinguish between their effects. Our

results therefore provide little guidance to educators who are developing specific programs and services for non-standard dialect speakers. This is another area that calls for further investigation. It would be valuable to know more about how the resources released by this policy have been employed by educators.

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ENDNOTE

¹In the US, African Americans have normally been excluded from receiving funding for language minority students because English is their native language (Baugh, 1995). An attempt by the Oakland Unified School District to access federal funds by recognizing African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) as a distinct language (Oakland Unified School District, 1997) failed spectacularly while sparking the acrimonious “Ebonics debate” in the late 1990’s (see Ramirez et al., 2005). Several districts have developed programs without federal support, the leading example being the Los Angeles Unified School District’s Academic English Mastery program (http://www.lausd.k12.ca.us/95th_Street_EL/aemp.html).

AUTHOR’S NOTE

Correspondence should be sent to Jane Friesen, Department of Economics, 8888 University Drive, Burnaby, B.C., V5A 1S6, Canada. ►