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About ESL High School Students' Success**

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**Hidden Losses: How Demographics Can Encourage Incorrect
Assumptions About ESL High School Students' Success**

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Abstract: Data from ESL students' records in Vancouver are examined in light of the BC Ministry of Education's claim that ESL high school students are more successful than students whose first language is English. We argue that the academic achievement of well-to-do students whose parents are skilled workers or entrepreneurs may mask the completion rates of students who entered BC through the family and refugee classes. The latter students, like their counterparts throughout Canada, are disappearing through the cracks in the education system. We maintain that it is time for provincial ministries, school boards, post-secondary institutions and other stakeholders to work together to improve the current situation, which prevents many immigrant youths from achieving their educational aspirations.

Introduction

The education of young second language learners is a prominent concern in most western industrialized countries as school systems struggle to provide child L2 learners with appropriate language instruction (AERA, 2004; August & Hakuta, 1997; Cameron, 2002). In Canada, all educational matters, including the teaching of English as a second language (ESL) to children, are a provincial responsibility, with schools providing both language instruction and instruction in the provincial curricula. The number of ESL students in schools is growing rapidly. In British Columbia, for example, there were 34,176 ESL students enrolled in provincial schools in 1990 and 60,301 by 2002 (Government of British Columbia, nd). Overall, immigration to BC in 2005 stood at approximately 45,000 immigrants, with 40% of these identified as children and youth. Of the 45,000, 86% settled in the Greater Vancouver area. The projection is that 60-70,000 immigrants will arrive annually in BC over the next 5-10 years (Friesen, 2006). Like most other provinces, British Columbia's policy on ESL states that ESL instruction is designed to enable students to master the provincial curriculum:

ESL will be offered as a transitional [service] to ensure the successful integration of these students into regular classes as soon as possible. The goal of ESL education is to assist students to become proficient in English, to develop intellectually and as citizens and to enable them to achieve the expected learning outcomes of the provincial curriculum (Government of BC 1996, *passim*).

In this paper we investigate whether ESL students from several linguistic backgrounds in Vancouver achieve successful outcomes with regard to the provincial curriculum. We also investigate the extent to which students write provincial examinations in individual subjects, and their achievement in those subject areas. In a subset of our data, we compare students' outcomes on the provincial examinations with socioeconomic status (SES) to determine whether SES is related to their grades. Two of the four schools examined are situated in high SES areas of Vancouver, while the other two are in relatively low SES locations.

We begin with a research story that tells of our efforts to ascertain (what seemed at the outset to be a rather simple matter) the secondary school completion rates of students for whom English was a second language in British Columbia in the late 1990s and early 2000s. At a Metropolis Education domain conference at the meeting of the Congress of the Social Sciences and Humanities in 1998, Tracey Derwing presented research she and colleagues from the Edmonton Catholic Board had conducted indicating that 60% of ESL students enrolled in Edmonton Catholic schools did not

graduate with a high school diploma (Derwing, DeCorby, Ichikawa & Jamieson, 1999). Also in Alberta, a previous study by Watt and Roessingh (1994) had shown that 74% of ESL students enrolled in a single Calgary high school failed to graduate.

In the discussion period after Tracey presented her paper, Kelleen Toohey noted that, according to the BC Ministry of Education, ESL students graduated from BC schools at rates *higher* than English-speaking children. We wondered what BC might be doing so differently from Alberta to have these rates, and we wondered if the increased immigration throughout the 1990s of wealthy Asians to the Lower Mainland area of BC might be masking difficulties other ESL students were having. Subsequently, we came up with the straightforward (we thought) plan of comparing Lower Mainland ESL student secondary school graduation rates with Alberta rates, while also comparing schools within the Lower Mainland that enrolled primarily wealthy children with schools that enrolled children from less-privileged families.

In April 1999, we visited officials in the Data Management and Certification Branch of the BC Ministry of Education. We explained the research proposal, and asked if the Ministry collected data that would be helpful in making these comparisons. We were encouraged to hear from these officials that indeed, they could provide the information we were looking for—graduation rates of ESL students, the schools they had attended in BC, their genders, their first languages (L1s), and many other characteristics. In fact, the officials offered to do “the statistical runs” for us, and we left Victoria delighted with the beginning of what we thought would be the easiest research we had ever conducted.

Thus, in June 1999, we were surprised and dismayed to receive a letter from the BC Government Information and Privacy Director who wrote that he “regret[ted] to inform [us] that the Ministry of Education does not have all of the data... requested”, and that he was “sorry that the Ministry of Education [was] not able to assist [us] with this project.” He suggested that we contact the Freedom of Information Coordinators of School Boards to enquire whether they would individually enter into research agreements with us.

Undaunted, we took this suggestion and approached the Vancouver School Board (VSB) for permission to gather data through their ESL reception centre, an agency that keeps records on ESL students. With VSB permission and the generous cooperation of the manager of the centre, we began to go through student records from two “west-side” secondary schools, and two “east-side” schools, where many ESL students were enrolled. The difference between east- and west-side schools in Vancouver is similar to differences in many other Canadian cities: east-side schools mainly enroll children of working class parents, and west-side schools mainly enroll children of parents who are

professionals or upper middle class. What may be different in Vancouver from other Canadian cities is that some immigrants, largely professionals and entrepreneurs, live in large numbers on the west side of the city. As well, the VSB permits parents to enroll their children in any city school they wish, as long as the children of that catchment area are already served, and as long as there are vacancies for extra children. “Tagging” students with the characteristics of the residential environment around the school thus contains some amount of statistical imprecision. However, few recent immigrant parents ask for “cross-boundary” placements, and are more likely to enroll their children in neighbourhood schools.

The VSB data indicated country of origin, immigration status (independent—the majority of west-side parents, family class or refugee—the majority of east-side parents), graduation dates, and so on. We assembled these data for the four schools somewhat laboriously, and eventually, problems began to appear. Clearly there had been human errors in recording the data. We realized (and our suspicions were corroborated by the manager) that the data were incomplete, and were flawed in such ways that we could not have confidence in them.

In 2003, we revisited the study because there had been a change in the provincial government, and we hoped the new Ministry of Education would be more amenable to our project. Our original ethics approvals having expired, we set about securing university approval and setting up a Research Agreement with the Ministry of Education. This time, the data were released to us. After reviewing relevant research below, we report on what we found in the data provided.

ESL students and schooling outcomes

School achievement of Canadian ESL students has become a topic of interest in the last two decades. Many Canadian researchers have suggested that schools do not serve ESL students well, as measured by dropout rates, disappearance from specific academic courses, failure, and low achievement (Ashworth, 2000; Derwing et al., 1999; Early, 2001; Kouritzin & Mathews, 2002; Latimer, 2000; Roessingh, 2004; Watt & Roessingh, 2001; and many others). Kouritzin and Mathews (2002) examined policies that affect ESL instruction in Manitoba, arguing that the poor outcomes of ESL students from secondary schools may even be in violation of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Annotations to section 15 (1) of the Charter (which states that discrimination is not permitted) state that

[D]iscrimination exists where a distinction whether intentional or not but based on grounds related to personal characteristics of the individual or group, has the effect of imposing burdens, obligations or disadvantages not imposed on others, or withholding or limiting access to opportunities, benefits and advantages available to other members of society (Kouritzin & Mathews 2002, np).

In light of the high dropout rate and disappearance of ESL students from academic subject courses, several coalitions of immigrant-serving agencies, ethnocultural groups, academics and other concerned individuals have arisen. In Calgary, Alberta, the Coalition for Equal Access to Education has been active for approximately five years. Members of the Coalition held roundtable discussions with stakeholders across the province and have met twice with the Alberta Standing Committee on Education, on which the Minister of Education serves. The Coalition has made a comprehensive list of 66 recommendations to improve the effectiveness of ESL education and services, based on both current research of best practice and a clear understanding of the contextual factors that have led to the dismal completion rates of ESL high school students (Coalition for Equal Access to Education, 2003).

In the summer of 2005, a national coalition was established in recognition of the fact that ESL student dropout rates are extremely high all across Canada (with the exception of BC, where, as already mentioned, the Ministry of Education has indicated that ESL students outperform students whose first language is English). The founders of the Canadian Coalition for Immigrant Children and Youth reasoned that a national focus might push forward what is constitutionally a provincial agenda by unifying concerned stakeholders, politicizing the issues, and sharing information across provincial boundaries. In Toronto, for example, (where roughly 50% of all immigrants to Canada settle), of the schools that report having ESL students, only 57% had an ESL program in 2004-2005 as compared to 80% in 1999-2000 (Toronto Parent Network, 2005). Support is declining at the same time that the ESL student population is becoming increasingly in need of additional educational assistance. Not only are sheer numbers of ESL students on the rise, but changes to the Immigrant and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA) have resulted in many more newcomers entering Canada with limited or no education or literacy skills in their first language (L1). Often these individuals have been through traumatic circumstances that interfere with learning (MacKay & Tavares, 2005). In a survey of Manitoba schools, MacKay and Tavares determined that 54% of responding schools “rated current programming supports as being ‘weak’ or ‘somewhat weak’” (p. 43), while 88% of schools indicated that limited literacy skills are a major challenge for refugee students. The Government of Manitoba is in the process of implementing a pilot program to address the needs of these high-risk students.

With respect to BC ESL students, researchers at the University of British Columbia reported in 1998 that instead of improving over the past 15 years, immigrant students’ dropout rates had increased and their achievement had declined (Gunderson & Clarke, 1998). More recently, Gunderson (2004) published a comprehensive study of 24,890 immigrant secondary school students enrolled in Vancouver public schools between 1991 and 2001. Using school grades as indicators of

success, Gunderson found dramatic differences in the secondary school achievement of various ethnic groups. Mandarin-speaking students, for example, “scored significantly higher than Canadian-born students, with math averages phenomenally high”(p. 13). Gunderson contrasted this finding with the situation of Vietnamese students:

None in the sample of 221 Vietnamese students took grade 12 Social Studies or English. These results suggest that, as a group, the Vietnamese speakers were educationally at risk in this English-only school system if success was indicated by enrollment in examinable [academic] courses (p. 14).

Gunderson also noted that the number of ESL students in provincially-examinable courses decreased significantly from Grades 8-12. He observed wide variation from school to school, with the ESL disappearance rate varying from 35% to nearly 100%; that is, ESL students were not registering in the courses that would lead them to post-secondary school career options or they were dropping out of school altogether. Gunderson found that in schools that enroll children of less affluent parents, the disappearance rate of ESL students (after ESL support from the school district was finished) was particularly high. He noted that students whose families employed multiple tutors persisted in academic subjects at much higher rates. He concluded:

In sum, students who drop out of school are likely to be from socio-economically disadvantaged circumstances. And, as indicated by the study reported here of Vancouver immigrant students, the more subtle measure of enrollment in “academic stream courses,” courses students must take to be admissible to a university or college, confirmed that immigrant students were “disappearing” from such courses as well, reducing their chances for higher education and all the benefits that come from such. (Gunderson, 2004, p.18)

In another BC study, Duff (2001) conducted observations in two mainstream Grade 10 Social Studies classes and interviewed the teachers and the students (half of whom were former ESL students, half had English as their L1). She found that teachers had limited time to work with ESL students and made no particular adjustments to their teaching for them. The ESL students were disadvantaged by their lack of the linguistic, cultural and geographical knowledge required to interpret written texts; they had missed earlier grades where the same topics were covered at a more superficial level, and their own cultural, academic and background knowledge was not included in the curriculum. Duff observed that in many classroom activities, the L1 English students dominated, and, while the ESL students might have had contributions to make, the pace of classroom discussion was too fast for them to do so. In addition, the ESL students were handicapped by their unfamiliarity with North American teen pop culture. Duff concluded, “Therefore, to learn effectively in this context and to become an active member of the classroom discourse community, students’ ‘social’

communication, interaction skills, and cultural knowledge seemed to be as important as their ‘academic’ proficiency” (p. 118).

In view of the experiences elsewhere, and the results of the Gunderson (2004) and Duff (2001) studies, we were curious to find out why the performance of ESL students in BC as reported by the Ministry of Education appears to be different from those in other provinces. We have focused on the Vancouver School District because it has the highest enrollment of ESL funded students in the province.

Research Questions

1. What are the graduation rates of ESL students registered in the Vancouver School District from 1997–2002 and how do they compare with the academic achievement of ESL high school students in Alberta?
2. How do the grades on provincially examinable subjects compare across ESL graduates and non-graduates?
3. Does SES predict graduation rates of ESL students?
4. Does first language background predict graduation rates of ESL students?

Method

The data described here are for the Vancouver School District from the BC Ministry of Education reporting information for ESL students for the period 1997-2002. The data include the grades in which the students were enrolled (grades 10-12, to make the study comparable with the Alberta studies); their start date; the highest grade achieved; the number of years spent in grades 10 – 12; the number of ESL students enrolled in individual schools; scores on nine provincial examinations (Biology, Chemistry, Communications, English, French, Geography, History, Mathematics, and Physics); and the number of graduates in each school in the District. It should be noted that non-graduates are individuals who left the Vancouver School District without graduating; thus this category includes non-completers, dropouts, and transfers out of the district. However, it is clear from the figures that many of the students who did not graduate did write at least one provincial examination in grade 12.

To address the first research question regarding graduation rates, we eliminated any students from the files who would not be able to graduate by 2002 because they were in grade 10 or 11 in the school year 2001-2002. We also eliminated the records of students from the total when it was clear that there were errors in the information, such as students who were recorded as being in grades 10, 11 or 12 in a given year and then in grade 6 the following year. Eleven of the students in our sample

entered the system for the first time as Grade 12 ESL students in 2001, and only two of these graduated in 2002. The average number of years spent in grade 12 for the whole group was 1.5 years, so it is conceivable that the nine non-graduates who entered the system in Grade 12 may have graduated in the following year. The overall success rates reported here would not be significantly altered with the addition of these nine students, however.

We were left with 1,554 students in the sample. Of those, 933 students or 60% graduated and 621 students did not graduate. It should be noted that high school graduation regulations at the time of the study stipulated that students had to complete a specified number of credits in particular courses, but the only required grade 12 course was either English or Communications 12. In total, 82.6% of all students were in grade 12 for at least one year, which suggests that a sizeable number of students were unsuccessful because, despite their enrollment in the final grade of secondary school, they did not graduate.

Another measure of high school success is performance on provincial Grade 12 examinations. We collapsed the exam scores on nine examinable subjects (listed above) and conducted an independent *t*-test comparing ESL students who graduated, and those who wrote the examinations but who did not graduate from the Vancouver School District. The mean percentage score across all nine subjects for graduates was 68.28, and for non-graduates it was 53.00. This difference was significant ($t = 4.961, p \leq .0001$).

When we took a closer look at the mean percentage scores for each of the examinable subjects for those students who graduated, we found that the scores for English were the lowest (see Table 1). Chemistry, Physics and Mathematics, the subjects in which students performed best, are less reliant on language than the remaining subjects.

Table 1. Mean Scores on Grade 12 Provincial Examinations for ESL Graduates

Subject Area	Mean Percentage Score	Range of Scores
Chemistry	75.56	15 - 100
Physics	75.20	17 - 100
Mathematics	75.05	18 - 100
French	72.47	26 - 95
Biology	71.09	18 - 99
Geography	66.24	8 - 92
History	63.91	12 - 92
Communications	59.07	24 - 86
English	56.01	19 - 95

There were patterns in terms of the courses for which graduates and non-graduates elected to write examinations. In French, a subject area that is almost entirely linguistically based, there was a general avoidance on the part of all students; only 15 graduates wrote the French exam, and only one non-graduate did so. Approximately twice as many students wrote the Geography examination as the History examination. As might be expected given the graduation requirements, more graduates wrote the English examination than any other subject, while among the non-graduates, more students wrote Mathematics than English or Communications (see Table 2).

Table 2. Number of Students Who Wrote Specific Provincial Examinations

Subject Area	# of Graduates who took an exam at least once	# of Non-Graduates who took an exam at least once
English	784	84
Mathematics	738	143
Chemistry	569	64
Physics	328	31
Biology	239	28
Communications	168	57
Geography	143	14
History	57	7
French	15	1

To answer the third research question, does SES predict high school completion of ESL students, we compared the results of four individual high schools. Using location as an approximation of SES, we chose two schools from east-side Vancouver and two from west-side Vancouver. These particular schools were chosen a priori on the basis of the relatively high number of ESL students in each of them. The percentage of ESL graduates appears in Table 3.

Table 3. SES and Graduation Rates

School/SES	Number of ESL Students	Percentage Graduated
East Side 1/Low	276	48.2%
East Side 2/Low	305	65.2%
West Side 1/High	165	77.0%
West Side 2/High	211	65.9%

The relationship is not straightforward in that one low SES and one high SES school have similar numbers of graduates; however, the lowest graduation rate reported is from a low SES school and the highest graduation rate is from a high SES school.

We looked at examinations written across the four schools to determine whether there were different patterns in choice of subjects. The rank order of the number of examinations written varied little across the graduates in each of the high schools, and in fact, was identical in three schools:

English was written more often than any other exam, followed by Math, Chemistry, Physics, Biology, Geography, History, Communications and French. The graduates in east-side school 2 showed a slightly different pattern, in that Math was the top-ranking subject among graduates, and Communications was second, followed by English. The rest of the examinations written by graduates followed the same pattern as the other schools. The non-graduates in the two west-side schools were more likely to write examinations in Math, Chemistry, Biology and Physics than in English or Communications, whereas the number one ranked exam for non-graduates at the two east-side schools was Communications.

To address research question number 4, we examined the first languages of the ESL students in comparison with graduation rates (see Table 4).

Table 4. First language and academic success

First Language	Percentage Graduated	Immigration Class
Japanese	81.25%	Independent
Chinese (Mandarin & Cantonese)	70.29%	Independent/Family
Korean	68.09%	Independent
Russian	65.00%	Independent
Tagalog	42.95%	Family
Vietnamese	40.45%	Family
Spanish	36.07%	Family/Refugee
Indo-Punjabi	34.69%	Family

There are distinct differences in graduation rates across first languages. When these languages are grouped generally according to immigration class (based on Citizenship and Immigration Canada's information regarding recent source countries and immigration categories), it becomes apparent that those individuals whose parents came to Vancouver in the independent category (skilled workers, professionals, entrepreneurs) graduate at a far higher rate than those who enter with family class or refugee status.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that approximately 60% of the ESL students in the Vancouver School District graduated from high school. This does not mean that fully 40% failed to complete high school, because included in the non-graduates are individuals who transferred from the Vancouver School District to another jurisdiction; however, it is clear that many of the individuals in the non-graduate group were in Grade 12 in their last year of school, and a subset of those wrote at least one provincial examination. This graduation rate, although somewhat higher than the rates in Alberta, is considerably lower than the Ministry's reported data that "80% of public school students

who received ESL services completed their Dogwood diploma, compared with 78% of non-ESL students” (BC Ministry of Education, 2004). Our sample was taken from the Vancouver School District only, which has a high percentage of ESL students; the Ministry data is for the whole province. There may well be a preponderance of high performing, high SES ESL students in other areas (e.g., Richmond) whose numbers mask what is happening to lower SES students. Another factor which may partially explain the discrepancy is the fact that included in the Ministry’s figures are students who received ESL services at any time in the six-year period of their Secondary school study. Thus, individuals who started receiving ESL support in Grade 4 and had their last year of support in Grade 8 were included, because BC provides ESL for a maximum of five years, whereas our study was limited to individuals who were still classified as ESL students in grades 10 – 12. Other provincial studies (Alberta Education, 1992) show that students who receive ESL in the early years are as likely to graduate from high school as students who have English as their first language. Students who are still ESL-fundable at high school age are less likely to master both the new language and the content of the curriculum in the limited time available. In the current study, even the students who successfully graduated from high school still struggled with English, as witnessed by the grades on the examinable subjects.

Three other factors limit the comparability of the Ministry study with ours. First, as we mentioned earlier, determining SES on the basis of school geographic location is not entirely accurate, partly because it is possible that some students attended schools outside their own neighbourhoods, and because there are bound to be some instances of crossover in terms of area of residence and SES. Second, we did not have access to data that showed graduation rates and grades for the non-ESL students in the schools we examined. Third, the Ministry figures may be based on a liberal definition of “ESL” student; one of the registration forms for BC students asks if students first learned a language other than English before school entry, and if a language other than English is spoken at home. Thus, the Ministry figures for ESL students may include students whose families have been resident in Canada for many years and who are fluently bilingual.

Nevertheless, we argue that even though the Ministry’s figures for the whole of the province may be accurate, they are misleading. Although a higher percentage of ESL students in BC graduate than their English-speaking peers, many ESL students write few provincial examinations in examinable subjects. Similar to Gunderson’s (2004) findings, we determined that most students, graduates and non-graduates, steered clear of examinable subjects that had a heavy language component. English 12 was the examination written more often than any other in most schools but this may be because teachers and students alike were aware that it is a requirement for graduation and

for admittance to most post-secondary institutions, while courses such as French and History are not. Most of the students in our study were far more likely to write examinations in subjects that have a strong visual or hands-on component, such as Math and Chemistry. It is particularly unfortunate that so few students selected history, because it could have given them valuable insights about the country in which they live. Even when the curriculum covers topics beyond Canada, it is taught from a Canadian perspective – a perspective that is critically helpful in encouraging understanding of and participation in Canadian society.

Our data from four Vancouver schools also show that those located in the prosperous west side of the city graduate more ESL students on average than schools located on the east side of the city. Our data are not unambiguous, however, as one west-side school and an east-side school graduated students at similar rates. We have not engaged in any detailed estimates of income and other types of capital possessed by the families of the children enrolled in each school, but such analysis might strengthen the claim that SES can predict graduation rates of ESL students, a phenomenon which has been repeatedly shown for high school students in general (Ma, 2000). The difference between the two east-side schools should be investigated further. The more successful of the two showed a different rate of participation in Communications 12 than in any of the other schools. (The curriculum for Communications 12 contains less English literature and more emphasis on technical/professional uses of language than English 12.) This suggests that the school may have been accommodating the ESL students' needs to a greater degree.

When we grouped students according to first language background, we noted that there was a strong relationship between language and immigration status. Citizenship and Immigration Canada reports far fewer refugee families settle in BC than some other parts of Canada, and that proportionally, BC attracts more immigrants of the independent class, particularly skilled workers and entrepreneurs (CIC, 2004). Refugee families are generally poorer, and their children are more likely to have interrupted or no schooling; they are also likely to have suffered trauma of various sorts before their arrival in Canada. Providing education for such children is considerably more complex than it is for immigrant children from educated, financially and residentially stable backgrounds. Along with the issue of masking, BC's history of accepting very few refugees in favour of professionals and entrepreneurs may go some way to explaining the somewhat higher number of ESL secondary school graduations than those reported in other parts of Canada. Our data show there are distinct differences in graduation rates across first languages. These data illustrate the generally dismal picture of educational experiences for certain Tagalog, Vietnamese, Spanish and Indo-Punjabi language groups and suggest that social/educational policies might target these students. Similarly,

Gunderson (2004) noted that many of the successful Mandarin-speaking students in his study had the services of multiple tutors, and were thus able to be successful in provincially-examinable subjects whereas the lower SES students in his study rarely enrolled in these subjects.

Recommendations

Although the immigration profile in British Columbia is distinct, it is clear from our data and other studies conducted in BC that at least some ESL students share the disadvantages faced by their counterparts in other regions of Canada, despite the high overall graduation rates reported by the BC Ministry of Education. A national study of visible minority and immigrant youth has shown that their educational aspirations far exceed those of non visible minority Canadian-born students, which leads us to believe that the failure of many ESL students to succeed is not because of a lack of motivation (Krahn & Taylor, 2005). Wyatt-Beynon, Ilieva, Toohey and LaRocque (2001) investigated a BC secondary school program for ESL students that gave them work experience. In interviews with parents and ESL students alike, they also found that aspirations were high, but that respondents believed that the school system put barriers in the way. The students wanted to participate in “regular” classes with other Canadian students:

“Regular classes are where I learn things most important to me... If you are in a regular class with English-speaking students, you are forced to speak English. There is no point to an ESL English class -- it’s a waste of time” ... “Miss X doesn’t ask you if you think you are capable in this subject, she just looks at your face and says, ‘No, you can’t take these subjects’ [regular subjects]. She just sees that our English speaking skills are not so good, but we can still read, write and listen to English and are we any less than other students? They should give us a chance” (p. 410).

We agree: all these students (like other students) should be given a chance to graduate from secondary school. We know from long experience as university educators of ESL teachers and through research, that while ESL students’ parents, their ESL teachers, some classroom teachers and academics have advocated on their behalf for many years, all mainstream “regular” teachers, administrators and government officials will need to concern themselves with the success rates of these students as well if significant changes are to come about. As indicated by Toohey and Beynon (2005):

[A]lthough teacher educators, student teachers, and classroom teachers continue to come up with unique and creative ways to combat social inequity, it appears to us that mainstream public policy groups are not doing the same--that is, they are not holding up their end. Instead they are continuing to block committed educational social activists at every turn by introducing high-stakes testing; pulling funding from immigrants and the poor... (p. xx)

Our main recommendation thus has to do with coordination, collaboration and concerted efforts to address the learning needs of secondary school ESL students. We see these goals as necessary at many levels: at the classroom level as specialist and regular teachers work together; at the school level as administrators pay close attention to teachers, students and their families to provide appropriate learning opportunities; at the provincial government level to collaborate with teachers, administrators and school boards to provide educational leadership and fund programs adequately; and at the federal government level to enter into collaborative relationships with provinces to support curricular, research and other services. In a meta-analysis of many studies of ESL education in Canada, Roessingh (2004) wrote:

We see a national role to be played in responding to the learning needs of immigrant children...policy reform in areas such as funding and accreditation of programs, curriculum development, admission criteria for university entrance and scholarship eligibility. (p. 631-632)

She also recommended the following:

We urge collaboration at the level of school jurisdictions, provincial ministries of education, and the federal government to commit resources for ESL program design and development and the professional development of the teachers; to conduct large-scale longitudinal studies to track outcomes and to link these outcomes to the factors that might make a difference at both macro and micro levels. (p. 632-633)

We believe this recommendation cannot be reiterated too often: the educational experiences of a segment of the Canadian population, namely children who enter secondary school with ESL needs, must be closely examined, and coordinated plans must be made to address difficulties they encounter.

A related issue is the training of the teachers who will instruct many of these students. Current university teacher education programs in BC have no required courses in teaching ESL. Although universities provide courses both for specialist ESL teachers and classroom teachers who anticipate working with second language learners, there are no provincial ESL requirements for public school teachers. The provincial professional organization, BC Teachers of English as an Additional Language, has created standards for certification that are applied, in the main, to teachers of adults. But in schools, many ESL learners are now taught by teachers who have no training at all in second language education techniques and approaches. This is an untenable situation that should be addressed immediately.

The data we have presented and most educators' intuitive sense is that ESL students have particular trouble with courses that depend a great deal on literacy such as English and history. As

noted earlier, Duff (2001) observed that ESL students had difficulty with textually-based course materials because of their unfamiliarity with the linguistic, cultural and geographical knowledge required to interpret them. She also observed that students had either not been in Canadian schools at lower levels where secondary school topics had been taught at a more rudimentary level, or they had not been able to benefit from such instruction because of their limited English proficiencies. Our data show that such students avoid textually-based courses, or they fail them, or they do worse in secondary school examinations in those areas than in other subjects. We believe this evidence points to the importance of appropriate ESL literacy instruction for students beginning long before secondary school. This recommendation has been made by many: in education generally, it has been noticed that when school's literacy demands increase (at about Grade 4), many children begin to experience difficulty, and ESL students in particular experience problems (Cummins, 2000; Gunderson, 2003). Many scholars have noted the paucity of research on ESL students' literacy development and have called for studies to examine how pedagogical interventions affect L2 learners' literacy learning (Bernhardt, 2000; Carrasquillo, Kucer & Abrams, 2004; Fitzgerald, 1995; Hawkins, 2005). In a recent review of L2 learning research, Hawkins (2004) observed that the field lacks "a close identification of the multiple forms of language and literacy practices in classrooms, a comprehensive look at how [English language learners] do and/or don't engage in these practices, and what successful scaffolding and supportive environments might look like" (p. 14). Clearly, more attention should be paid to the English literacy learning needs of ESL students at all levels of their education.

In conclusion, we note that there is currently a major effort in many regions of the country to attract immigrants. It is widely recognized that newcomers not only fill gaps in the labour force, but enrich Canadian society with their diversity of culture and languages. Newcomers choose Canada because they want a better life for themselves and their children. To satisfy the aspirations of the country and immigrants alike, immigrant children deserve a good education that highlights their strengths and addresses their challenges. Students' first languages and their cultural knowledge are resources that are too often squandered by schools. Rather than most of the adjustments being made by immigrant students and their families, educational institutions must make significant changes. If they do not, we will continue to lose children through the cracks.

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