

Title: Enclaves, peer effects and student learning outcomes in British Columbia

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Research Question: Does attending school with more peers from a student's own ethno-cultural background improve or hinder their academic progress?

Importance: The tendency for immigrants to settle in local enclaves means that their children often attend schools where a large proportion of their peers are from the same ethno-cultural group. If academic achievement is affected by the characteristics of school peers, this tendency may influence the academic success of immigrant children. These effects may be positive or negative. Acquisition of host country language skills may be slower in enclave schools. On the other hand, social and support networks may be stronger in more concentrated schools. Resources, social norms, and attitudes towards school may also vary among ethno-cultural groups, and influence peer outcomes.

Research Findings: We find that the characteristics of school/grade peers affect student achievement. Achievement is higher for students if they attend school with a larger proportion of Chinese home language peers, and is lower if they attend school with a larger proportion of Punjabi home language peers. These peer effects are the same regardless of a student's own home language, suggesting that linguistic or ethno-cultural similarity to peers does not in itself play a significant role in immigrant success. Rather, the human capital and cultural norms of peers appears to be what matters. Attending an enclave school provides minor benefits to Chinese home language students and major costs to Punjabi home language students.

Implications: The implications that can be drawn from this research are limited by the fact that our methodology exploits random variations in peer composition that are generally small. Effects that may come into play through "critical mass" mechanisms therefore are not captured in our estimates. In addition, our approach isolates peer effects associated with the characteristics of students in the same school and grade, and will provide no information about peer effects at a higher level of aggregation like the school or neighborhood. With these caveats in mind, our results imply that the challenges faced by immigrant children from communities with below-average levels of human capital may be magnified when those students are concentrated in ethnic enclaves. Additional resources may be required to ensure the academic success of children in these communities. School policies that increase the extent to which ethno-cultural groups are sorted across schools may magnify differences in average achievement between immigrants and non-immigrants, and between different immigrants groups.