

Over the next four issues, this page will be devoted to commentary from education journalists across the country.

## ESL: A Call for Research

The Atkinson Fellowship in Public Policy offers an unusual luxury for newspaper journalists: time. I was given a year to research my inquiry into the education of immigrants in Canada. And in all honesty, I thought I would have the series completed in eight or ten months, leaving me the summer to concentrate on an enduring pursuit of a golf score under 80. It didn't work out that way. What I thought were straightforward questions – How much do big city school boards spend on teaching immigrants English? How do ESL student fare academically when compared to Canadian-born students? What are best practices for teaching immigrants English? – turned out to be fraught with difficulty. I would golf once (badly) all summer.

My interest in the relationship between schools and immigrants originated with my work as the *Toronto Star's* education reporter in the mid-1990s. Toronto was being transformed by newcomers. I spent four months in one downtown high school, Jarvis Collegiate, and was compelled by the remarkable drive of a select group of immigrant students. The resulting series concentrated on the complexity of their lives, the strong fabric of their determination, and the moral force that was Jessie Porter, the school's ESL teacher.

I conceived of the Atkinson project as a more scientific inquiry into the relationship between schools and newcomers. Popular mythology held that immigrant students were more successful than Canadian-born students. I wanted to understand if that held true for ESL students, and whether the cuts to education that had visited many provinces in recent years had altered the picture.

The first surprise was how little evidence exists. Few school boards track their immigrant students to determine how they fare academically after leaving ESL programs. None of the provincial testing agencies track ESL students. Instead, they offer snapshots of how these students fare within the first few years of arriving in Canada. To no one's surprise, they do poorly. But the important question – how do these same ESL students fare later in their academic careers? – is not answered by the testing agencies.

The studies that have examined the academic achievement of ESL students are not encouraging. The University of Calgary's Hetty Roessingh and her colleague, David Watt, conducted one of the few Canadian longitudinal studies of ESL students, following all those who moved through the program in one high school between 1989 and 1997. Their study showed that ESL students suffered a drop-out rate of 74 per cent, about twice that of Canadian-born students. A subsequent study in Edmonton found that city's ESL population also suffered from a significantly higher drop-out rate than Canadian-born students.

Other studies added more complexity to this disturbing picture. In Vancouver, University of British Columbia pro-

fessor Lee Gunderson compared test scores in key subjects between thousands of immigrant and Canadian-born students. He discovered that immigrants suffered a 60 per cent "disappearance rate" (he did not call it a drop out rate because he could not identify students who simply transferred out of the system). Those students who came to Canada as refugees were most likely to "disappear" from the school system; a significant number of other students disappeared soon after they lost ESL supports.

Prof. Gunderson found that the problem was masked by the extraordinary academic performance of Mandarin-speakers in mathematics and science. These students, by outperforming Canadian-born students, raised the overall performance level of immigrant students.

Meanwhile, I also found that the Toronto School Board, despite playing host to more immigrants than any board in Canada, does not track the graduation rates of its ESL students. It does, however, regularly produce statistics that identify those high school students most at risk of failing to complete high school using "key indicators," such as credit accumulation and absenteeism.

Interestingly, after the Atkinson series was published, the Toronto board's statistics stirred the most controversy. Based on those statistics, I wrote that English-speaking Caribbean immigrants to Toronto (the researchers broke down the statistics for students by regions of birth) were those students most at risk. It re-ignited furious debates in Toronto about the underachievement of black students, the lack of specific action to improve their academic performance, and the merits of race-based education statistics.

The plight of ESL students did not generate nearly the same response. Few voiced concerns about ESL students even though the series raised serious questions about their academic achievement and pointed to the fact that money earmarked for ESL students did not always make it into ESL programs. To me, the dichotomous response highlights the galvanizing power of statistics. The statistical portrait of ESL achievement was incomplete and sometimes confusing. The portrait of black student underachievement was not.

Education, I realize, is a complex enterprise. Students are not widgets and often resist accurate measurement. Tests can be unfair and their results misinterpreted. But in a country that has embraced more than 3.3 million immigrants during the past 15 years, some clear and fundamental answers should be sought. How do ESL students fare when compared to other students? Are the ESL programs we have in place working? Are some better than others? Why?

A working group of ESL teachers is now lobbying the federal government to create national ESL standards and improve the resources available to immigrant students. But their demands are being made with the national mythology about immigrant success still firmly in place. It is, I believe, something that only clear and comprehensive statistical evidence will ever be able to change.

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