



Received: 13 July 2016  
Accepted: 24 August 2016  
Published: 22 September 2016

\*Corresponding author: Jioanna Carjuzaa, Department of Education, Montana State University-Bozeman, Reid Hall #417, Bozeman 59717, MT, USA  
E-mail: [carjuzaa@montana.edu](mailto:carjuzaa@montana.edu)

Reviewing editor:  
Stephen Lamb, Victoria University, Australia

Additional information is available at the end of the article

## EDUCATION POLICY | REVIEW ARTICLE

# American Indian English Language Learners: Misunderstood and under-served

Jioanna Carjuzaa<sup>1\*</sup> and William G. Ruff<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** English Language Learners (ELLs) represent the fastest growing segment of pre-K-12 students in the United States. Currently, Montana has the highest percentage of ELLs who are American Indian/Alaska Native. Although there is tremendous linguistic diversity among students, more than 80% of ELLs in the US speak Spanish as their first language. This is not the case in Montana, where 80% of ELLs are American Indians who do not necessarily speak their heritage languages; yet, their academic English skills are inadequate to support content mastery. Students whose first language is an American Indian language and who are learning English as a second language (ESL) are easier to identify as ELLs. Students who do not speak a heritage language but have not acquired academic English proficiency are harder to identify. This unique group of ELLs had their English acquisition framed by parents/grandparents or guardians themselves who were ELLs who did not fully acquire Standard English and currently speak and model a non-standard or non-academically proficient variety of English. Recommendations for how to broaden policy perspectives to facilitate comprehensive educational support for the full range of culturally and linguistically diverse American Indians in all classrooms are highlighted.

**Subjects:** Area Studies; Education; Language Teaching & Learning

**Keywords:** American Indian English Language Learners; ELLs; Indian Education for All; culturally and linguistically diverse students; multicultural education

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Jioanna Carjuzaa and William Ruff are professors in the Department of Education at Montana State University (MSU) and lead the Center for Bilingual and Multicultural Education (CBME) as director and associate director, respectively. The CBME has been revitalized to support the MSU community and tribal nations across Montana by generating multiple funding streams and creating awareness in the following areas: “best practices” in the revitalization of Indigenous languages, facilitation of culturally responsive pedagogy in schools, the professional development of teachers and school administrators for the improvement of schools serving American Indian communities, as well as a variety of projects designed to promote social justice by increasing cultural sensitivity. This article calls attention to an invisible group of ELLs who are often misunderstood and inadequately supported in schools, and makes specific recommendations for how to broaden policy perspectives to facilitate comprehensive educational support for American Indian ELLs in all classrooms.

### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

English Language Learners (ELLs) represent the fastest growing segment of students in public schools in the US. Although people often think of ELLs as immigrants who have recently relocated to the US, American Indian students may also be ELLs when their English language skills are inadequate to successfully learn in the classroom. More than 80% of ELLs in the US speak Spanish as their first language. In Montana, 80% of ELLs are American Indians who do not necessarily speak another language. This unique group of ELLs had their English acquisition framed by parents/grandparents or guardians who currently speak and model a non-standard or non-academically proficient variety of English. This article calls attention to an invisible group of ELLs who are often misunderstood and inadequately supported in schools, and makes specific recommendations for how to broaden policy perspectives to facilitate comprehensive educational support for American Indian ELLs in all classrooms.

## 1. Introduction

English Language Learners (ELLs) represent the fastest growing segment of pre-K-12 students in the United States (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2005; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2015; Office of English Language Acquisition [OELA] Fast Facts, 2015; Thompson, 2016). Over five million students make up this diverse group which has increased steadily over the past 15 years. Specifically, during the 2011–2012 academic year, ELLs comprised 9% of all students nationwide (OELA Fast Facts, 2015). The percentage of ELLs is often greater in urban areas and the percentage of ELLs in six states tops 10%: Alaska, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, and Texas. In fact, in California, the 2012–2013 ELL enrollment was 22.8% (NCES, 2015). In addition to reports highlighting the growing numbers of ELLs, US citizens constantly hear from the popular media about the ever-widening achievement gap between students who speak English as their native tongue and ELLs.

Although there is tremendous linguistic diversity among students in the United States, some estimate more than 400 languages are spoken as the primary language by US students; more than 80% of ELLs speak Spanish as their first language. This is not the case in Montana, where nearly 80% of the ELLs are American Indians who do not necessarily speak their heritage languages; yet, their academic English skills are inadequate to support content mastery (Office of Public Instruction [OPI], 2014). School districts are charged to address the needs of the growing ELL population by improving the quality of classroom instruction for these students. Increased instructional quality for ELLs can only be accomplished by systematically developing and recognizing regular classroom teachers with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to effectively meet their needs.

In this essay, the authors discuss why and how policy perspectives need to be broadened to facilitate comprehensive educational support for the full range of culturally and linguistically diverse students including American Indians. The U.S. Department of Education defined *culturally and linguistically diverse students* (CLD students) as those individuals whose English skills create a barrier to content mastery and are inadequate to help students realize their academic potential. Students from homes and communities where English is not the primary means of communication also fall under this definition. Many of these CLD students are labeled as ELLs because, in addition to coming from non-English-speaking homes and backgrounds, they do not learn effectively in English without modified or specialized instruction. To help ELLs compete with their English-speaking counterparts, they are often enrolled in educational programs designed to rapidly advance their acquisition of academic English which are taught by English-as-a-second language (ESL) instructors. Yet, many rural school districts are unable to hire an ESL specialist because of school size and location. In Montana, where most ELLs are distributed among small and rural schools, it is cost prohibitive to recruit and hire ESL specialists. Although many of the small schools do belong to educational service cooperatives for special education and other services, the rural and isolated geographic locations of the schools severely constrain the availability of qualified ESL specialists.

The intractability of this issue extends beyond the ability small rural schools have in hiring and retaining ESL specialists. The fundamental issue is the invisibility of American Indian ELLs which results from misunderstanding. The contemporary understanding among many educators, even the most enlightened, is a narrow view focused on the ELL student as a recent immigrant who speaks a language other than English. American Indian students do not fit into this model as they are neither immigrants nor do they necessarily speak a language other than English. What qualifies these students for ESL services is that their academic English literacy skills are inadequate for them to successfully access the curriculum. Nonetheless, there remain instructional responsibilities, ethical commitments, and legal obligations to meet the needs of all students including American Indian ELLs in rural communities.

## 2. Policy and practice

In *Lau v. Nichols* (1974), the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that “there is no equal treatment merely by providing students with the same facilities, textbooks, teachers, and curriculum; for students who do not understand English are effectively foreclosed from any meaningful education.” However, the Court did not specify what the schools should do for culturally and linguistically diverse students. Such remedies have been the source of litigation for more than four decades. For example, in some cases, the courts have required bilingual education programs in schools (*Serna v. Poerales Municipal School*, 1974). In 1981, the U.S. 5th Circuit Court of Appeals set a legal standard in *Castañeda v. Picard* by creating a three-prong test to determine if schools are providing equal protection to students with limited English proficiency.

The first prong required that, while no specific instructional program or method needs to be followed by a school or school district, the program that is followed must be based on sound educational theory. Second, the school district must recruit and train teachers to lead the instruction [to support ELLs] in ... classrooms. And, finally, there should be a carefully conceived assessment program to find out whether or not the district’s program is achieving its goals. (Fischer, Schimmel, & Stellman, 2007, p. 381)

The rights of ELLs were further protected by the Equal Educational Opportunity Act which, in part, stated that “No state shall deny equal opportunity to an individual by ... the failure of an educational agency to take appropriate action to overcome language barriers that impede equal participation by its students in educational programs (Equal Educational Opportunity Act, 2003). This principle has been incorporated into the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Schools Act, also known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) under Title III, Language Instruction for English Learners and Immigrant Students. Under Title III, a wide discretion in programs and methods may be used to satisfy the requirements of the law as long as the focus of the educational program is on rapid acquisition of English by highly qualified teachers and annual assessments are used to evaluate program success.

In applying these policies to American Indian ELLs whose only language may be English, the authors are reminded of the importance of educators taking into account home and community language as was highlighted in a federal district court case in Michigan (*Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School v. Michigan Board of Education*, 1979). The court found that the educators’ lack of awareness and understanding of the home and community language (Ebonics) used by their African-American students was a contributing factor in the students’ failure to succeed academically. Furthermore, this lack of knowledge and awareness by the teachers effectively denied their students’ equal educational opportunities because their home and community language, Ebonics, constituted a barrier to their learning as instruction and the written materials used by the school were in Standard English.

Similarly, there has been a long history of culturally inappropriate services being inculcated on students in communities on or near American Indian reservations (Demmert, 2001). In 1928, The Meriam Report comprehensively conveyed the inadequacies of American Indian Education. Many of those inadequacies still exist in Indian Education today (Indian Education: A National Tragedy—A National Challenge, (aka The Kennedy Report), 1969; Executive Order 13096, American Indian and Alaska Native Education, 1998). During the 1930s, Ryan, who was a primary author of the Meriam Report, and Beatty, during their administrations as Directors of the Bureau of Indian Education, sought to address these inadequacies by meeting “the Indian child in his own milieu” (Szasz, 1999, p. 54).

Although there is no one proven formula for successful reform of Indian education, it is clear it must involve the entire school system, as well as American Indian leaders. “Individual teachers can do phenomenal things, but nothing (in education is going to change systematically) ... until power is shared,” says Julie Cajune (Salish), Director of American Indian Education for the Ronan Public

Schools on the Flathead Reservation. Montana is crafting a unique approach to school reform by recognizing tribal sovereignty, partnering with tribes, honoring self-determination, and promoting economic development (Boyer, 2006).

### 3. Montana context

Although Montana is the fourth largest state geographically in the United States, it has a population less than San Antonio. Montana is located in the high plains and Rocky Mountains of the West, and is classified as a Frontier State which translates into approximately six people per square mile and more cattle than humans statewide. In the entire state, there is only one community that qualifies as an urban center—Billings. To describe it differently, most communities in the state are located more than 150 miles from medical services or retail centers (National Rural Health Association Policy Position, 2008).

It was not until 2012 that the total population in Montana reached the million mark for the first time (World Population Review, 2016). Yet, the American Indian population in this sparsely populated state (6.5%) is substantially greater than the national average and the pre-k-12 American Indian student population at 13.7% is more than 10 times the national average for American Indian students attending public elementary and secondary schools (Office of Public Instruction (OPI), 2014). Today, 12 sovereign tribal nations on seven Indian Reservations call Montana home: Assiniboine, Blackfeet, Chippewa, Cree, Crow, Gros Ventre, Kootenai, Little Shell, Northern Cheyenne, Pend d'Oreille, Salish, and Sioux. Montana's Indian Reservations include: Flathead, Blackfeet, Rocky Boy, Ft. Belknap, Ft. Peck, Northern Cheyenne, and Crow. In addition, the estimated 4,500 Little Shell Band of Chippewa Indians, who are not federally recognized and therefore landless, reside in northern and central Montana.

Each reservation supports a tribal college and is involved in educational issues at all levels along the preschool to college pipeline. Tribal elders and school leaders have been instrumental in promoting the integration of culturally responsive pedagogy using Indian Education for All (IEFA), Montana's unprecedented educational reform effort, as a model (Montana Constitution, 1972). Efforts to boost American Indian students' self-esteem by integrating their cultures across the curriculum have been one of the main goals of IEFA. In addition to infusing Indigenous historical and cultural content across the curriculum, providing American Indian students with instruction in their heritage languages is critical since culture and language are so inextricably intertwined (Littlebear, 2003, 2014). Yet, many American Indian students are often unsuccessful in schools and a staggering 35% do not graduate from high school (OPI, 2014); however, graduation rates among American Indian students did increase from 50% to 65.4% from 2009 to 2013. Nevertheless, in regard to American Indian ELLs, 3404 took the English Language Proficiency (ELP) test during the School Year 2013–2014, but only 503 tested as proficient (14.8%). These facts demonstrate the need for an increase in focused instruction on language acquisition and literacy to supplement the culturally responsive pedagogy promoted by IEFA.

It's important to point out that IEFA is for all students, as Montana's Superintendent of Public Instruction, Denise Juneau (Mandan/Hidatsa), asserts: "This constitutional, ethical, and moral obligation, known as Indian Education for All, is not only for Indian students; in fact, its principal intent is that non-Indian students gain a richer understanding of our State's history and contemporary life" (Juneau, 2006, p. 3). Furthermore, Montana educators have an instructional commitment to teach all Montanans, Indians and non-Indians alike, about the unique histories and cultures of the state's first inhabitants. Statewide collaborations between Indians and non-Indians help educators fulfill that obligation. The IEFA Act (Montana Code Annotated, 2015) in Montana is a state constitutional mandate, which requires educators to integrate American Indian content in all instruction.

Research supports the belief that American Indian-inclusive content stands to reduce the cultural dissonance Indian students feel between home and school environments, easing their alienation and encouraging staying in as opposed to dropping out, and, in this way, affecting what has been a

persistent achievement gap (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002; Pewewardy & Hammer, 2003). The growing success of this unique legislation has depended on adequate funding, collaboration with tribal partners, active state leadership, and a long-term commitment to professional development. More important, though, is the willingness of educators to engage in the demanding, but often profound, endeavor of becoming culturally responsive. Neither a prescribed curriculum nor an add-on program, IEFA is a comprehensive approach to be infused in every aspect of education (Carjuzaa, Jetty, Munson, & Veltkamp, 2010). By challenging and confronting misconceptions, untruths, and stereotypes about American Indians, educators effect social change by making curriculum more inclusive of all groups (Banks, 1993).

#### 4. ELLs in Montana

Currently, there are only 53 teachers with an ESL Endorsement out of approximately 10,500 teachers in Montana (Office of Public Instruction (OPI), 2013). Many of these ESL endorsed teachers teach in Montana's larger school districts with few, if any, ELLs; they are not in schools on or near reservations with high concentrations of ELLs (OPI, 2014). Nonetheless, Montana does not have large numbers of ELLs in any one school; consequently, few school districts across the state employ ESL specialists. Therefore, it is necessary to prepare all teachers to integrate content and linguistic objectives so ELLs can achieve academically while simultaneously improving their academic English (Oesch, 1996; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). Higher level language proficiency is required for comprehension of classroom instructional content and is measured on standardized achievement tests. In order to gain access to the benefits of formal education, acquisition of academic language and especially the underlying components of academic literacy is essential (Hayes, Rueda, & Chilton, 2009; NEA Education Policy & Practice Department, 2008; The Mid-Continent Regional Educational Laboratory, 2004).

Few of Montana's general classroom teachers have the specific knowledge, skills, and dispositions to help ELLs achieve proficiency in the four domains of language acquisition: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Instead, ELLs all too often are left to fend for themselves in the classroom or they are pulled out of the classroom for general English instruction and miss out on essential content instruction (The Progress of Education Reform, 2013). Thus, the academic performance of ELLs falls well below that of their non-ELL counterparts and ELLs have excessively high dropout rates (NEA Education Policy & Practice Department, 2008; Office of Public Instruction (OPI), 2014; Zehr, 2010). Furthermore, there is difficulty in properly defining and classifying ELLs.

According to McCarty (2014), "there are most likely inaccuracies in accounting for speakers of diverse American Indian Englishes, creoles, and pidgins" (p. 256). How a student demonstrates English proficiency and which assessments are used to evaluate their progress vary greatly from state to state. In 2008–2009, the Education Commission of the States reported that of the 5,274 ELLs in Montana, 64% were American Indian (The Progress of Education Reform, 2013). Since 2007, the Montana Office of Public Instruction (OPI) has collected data on ELLs' language proficiency. From 2007–2012, the English language Proficiency (ELP) Test was used and from 2012 on, the WIDA (W-APT) and ACCESS for ELLs 2.0 instruments have been administered. In 2014, OPI reported that there were only 3,443 LEPs in Montana; 75.9% were American Indian (OPI, 2014). In 2015, OPI reported a decline in the overall number of ELLs and reported that the American Indian ELL percentage dropped to 69%; still they make up the majority of ELLs in Montana. Educators across the state are concerned that this decline does not accurately reflect the number of ELLs, but rather the challenges in identifying American Indian ELLs (Personal Communication with school district Title III administrator, 2016).

Currently, Montana is the state with the highest percentage of ELLs who are American Indian/Alaska Native (OELA, 2015). Since there have been concerted efforts to wipe out Indigenous peoples' languages, cultures, and identities, ELL labeling has to be broached with sensitivity and humility. As mentioned earlier, in Montana, American Indian students have comprised 75.9% of the ELL population (OPI, 2014). American Indian students are very heterogeneous, yet educators label students

into one of only two categories. Students whose first language is an American Indian language and who are learning English as-a-second language (ESL) are easier to identify as ELLs. On the other hand, the majority of American Indian ELLs who do not speak a heritage language but have not acquired academic English proficiency are harder to identify. This unique group of ELLs had their English acquisition framed by parents and/or grandparents or guardians themselves who were ELLs who did not fully acquire Standard English and currently speak and model for the children in their care a non-standard or non-academically proficient variety of English (Holbrook, 2011).

When the US Government began in the late 1800s to force children into Indian Boarding Schools, these children were often beaten for speaking their native languages and sent home ashamed of their languages and cultures. This practice of forced assimilation continued into the 1970s. Although American Indian boarding school students were required to learn English, they did not have access to an adequate model of academic Standard English since much of their education consisted of rudimentary language lessons and performing tasks in preparation as menial domestic and/or industrial laborers.

Thus, today, numerous Indigenous languages are critically endangered and yet many American Indian youth speak a non-standard variety of English (Holbrook, 2011; Leap, 1993). Leap (1993) presents a convincing case for the fundamental influence of ancestral American Indian languages and cultures on spoken and written expression on contemporary Indian English codes. In *American Indian English*, he documents the diversity of English in American Indian speech communities. According to Leap, two-thirds of today's American Indian youth learn Indian English as their first language. Even in cases when a speaker is not fluent in his/her ancestral language, he/she is influenced by the grammar rules and discourse associated with ancestral language traditions. Speaking Indian English can impact educational success and employment opportunities (Leap, 1993).

### **5. The challenges American Indian ELLs face today**

Students need to become fluent readers of academic English if they are to decode and comprehend content and be successful in school. Many American Indian ELLs are already speakers of the English language, but they need an adapted curriculum that addresses their unique needs and supports them in the four domains of speaking, listening, reading, and writing in Standard English in order to improve their academic literacy (August, Goldenberg, & Rueda, 2006; Bilagody, 2014). These students may not speak another language other than English, but the lack of family and community literacy in Standard English can negatively impact an American Indian student's English proficiency due to parents' and caretakers' capacity to provide support at home (Education Commission of the States (ECS) & The Progress of Education Reform, 2013). This is not only the case in Montana, but extends to American Indian communities throughout the United States and Indigenous communities around the globe, who likely face the same challenges.

Instead of adhering to a *deficit perspective*, it is important that teachers recognize the *funds of knowledge* that students bring to the classroom (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Moll, Amanti, & Gonzalez, 1992; Reyhner, 2001). English Language Learners benefit from opportunities to learn academic content in their native languages as well. As part of a school's overall effort to promote cultural pluralism and confidence in the student's ability to learn, American Indian students' heritage languages and cultures need to be honored. Therefore, the school should not make recommendations to the students' parents, families, or guardians to use only English in the home setting, as the use of the native language at home does not debilitate the student's ability to learn English and efforts by parents or guardians who are not themselves proficient in English may diminish the quality of family communication and interactions (OPI, 2013). The non-standard form of English some American Indian ELLs speak must be valued and teachers need to allow for students to use this non-standard form of English in the classroom whenever possible because it serves as an acknowledgment of their culture, history, and identity.

Founded in 2001, WIDA is a consortium of 36 US states working to advance academic language development and academic achievement for linguistically diverse students. In 2014, the WIDA Board interviewed Dr. Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy and David O'Connor and released a bulletin to help educators make connections and provide contexts to deepen an awareness of how diverse and complex American Indian students are. The four guiding principles included: (1) teaching in terms of "place"; (2) listening to, as well as hearing, the needs of students and the community; (3) building bridges to students and to the community; and (4) recognizing the relational aspect of teaching (WIDA, 2014). Many American Indians see their tribal languages as the core influence on their identity and these principles support the maintenance of tribal languages as well as the enhancement of academic English.

To be successful in school, language learners need to develop a sophisticated, advanced level of academic language proficiency. Many American Indian ELLs may not have exposure to highly literate peers and adults in their home and school environments who model academic discourse styles. Cummins (2008) made the distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS), referred to as playground English, which students may develop in under a year's time, and the Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), sophisticated, content-specific language ELLs need in order to be successful in school. It is estimated that this academic literacy takes seven + years to reach. This concept of high literacy "is reflected in students' ability to engage in thoughtful reading, writing, and discussion about content in the classroom, to put their knowledge and skills to use in new situations and to perform well on reading and writing assessments including high stakes testing" (Langer, 2001, p. 838).

As mentioned earlier, in Montana, currently, no ELL services or programs are designed specifically to address the needs of American Indian ELLs. Therefore, the best practices to effectively bridge these students from a non-standard variety of English to Standard English by increasing their foundation in academic English needs to be explored. According to Hayes et al. (2009) content-based instruction that makes academic language connections between students' heritage language(s) and English provides the scaffolding support students need to achieve academically.

As referenced earlier, in the landmark Supreme Court decision, *Lau v. Nichols* (1974), it was ruled that it is unconstitutional to expect students who are not proficient in English to be subjected to English-only instruction and to compete with their English-speaking counterparts. Therefore, under federal law, all school districts are required to identify students who are eligible for language assistance and provide that assistance (No Child Left Behind Act, Pub. L. 107-110, 2002). Identification of ELLs in Montana includes: gathering data on languages spoken at home through a Home Language Survey, completing a language observation, administering the WIDA ACCESS-Placement Test (W-APT), interpreting the W-APT screener evaluation, and, if the student does not meet Montana's minimum criteria for proficiency, supplementing Montana's minimum criteria for proficiency with other assessment data before that student is labeled as ELL. Once other academic achievement data are reviewed, if the student is labeled ELL, program and placement options are considered (OPI, 2013). While hiring a full-time ESL specialist teacher or offering dual language immersion programs is not feasible in many Montana school districts due to small size and geographic isolation, this is especially applicable to schools on or near Indian reservations. These schools are, nonetheless, responsible for providing language development services to all ELLs (No Child Left Behind Act, Pub. L. 107-110, 2002).

## 6. Recommendations going forward

It is important that culturally and linguistically diverse students receive equitable educational opportunities. This can be particularly challenging when ELLs are invisible and/or misunderstood. In this essay, the authors have described the historical trauma that has resulted in American Indian communities' loss of ancestral languages and their inadequate acquisition of Standard English. By examining the most pressing issues facing American Indian ELLs in rural, isolated schools across Montana, five conclusive themes emerged: (1) the academic success of ELLs is embedded in

statutory and judicial law and is the responsibility of all educators; (2) it is necessary to broaden the definition of ELLs used in schools today to include invisible groups such as American Indians who may not speak a heritage language but may not be proficient in academic English; (3) knowing one's students and nurturing supportive teacher–student relationships and authentic home–school partnerships provide a framework for ELLs' success; (4) providing comprehensive, ongoing professional development opportunities for pre-service and in-service teachers and administrators that address the learning needs of all ELLs and highlighting best practices in effectively promoting linguistic proficiency and content mastery are important; and (5) a better process for the identification, testing, and placement for ELLs needs to be created and adopted. These themes raised here may resonate with educators worldwide as many educational systems grapple with the language learning needs of Indigenous learners.

The legal infrastructure to meet the needs of ELLs exists in judicial and statutory law as described in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) under Title III, Language Instruction for English Learners and Immigrant Students and as evidenced in the *Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary School versus Michigan Board of Education* (1979) federal district court case which determined that the educators' lack of awareness and understanding of their students' linguistic competency contributed to the students' academic failure. Yet, so many policies and practices do not adequately capture or meet the needs of American Indian ELLs since the policies and laws are operating in a gray area. They are not being articulated clearly in school policy and administrative procedures; there is no consistent application by school districts to protect the interests of American Indian and other ELLs who do not speak their heritage language. Specific plans on how best to meet the needs of American Indian ELLs should be spelled out in school districts' five-year and other long-range strategic plans.

Furthermore, helping ELLs succeed academically and reach their social potential is the shared responsibility of all educators. To effectively educate American Indian ELLs, educators must first broaden the working definition of ELLs to make it more inclusive. All ELLs are not recent arrivals or immigrants; some ELLs belong to groups who have been here for generations. Some American Indian ELLs do not speak a language other than English. To ensure that educators understand how students who do not speak a language other than English and whose families and ancestors may have always lived in what is known as the United States today qualify as ELLs, educators need to share an accurate account of American history and the linguistic and cultural oppression many American Indians endured (Holbrook, 2011). Educators also need to explore the difference between BICS and CALP and describe the important role academic English proficiency plays in the mastery of content (Cummins, 2008).

Next, in Indian country, relationality is key (Demmert, 2001; Pewewardy & Hammer, 2003; Wilson, 2008). Creating and nurturing strong relationships combats the *cultural* discontinuity that may exist between *home and school environments*. Highlighting the diversity among ELLs and understanding who these students are and what their needs consist of must take place. By valuing ELLs' cultural heritages and validating their life experiences, educators can establish nurturing teacher–student relationships and create home–school partnerships in meaningful ways (Pewewardy & Hammer, 2003). When the home and school cultures seem very different, this can be challenging, but strong relationships can be accomplished when educators value the *funds of knowledge* culturally and linguistically diverse students bring to classrooms and schools (Moll et al., 1992). ELLs should not be invisible in classrooms; they should not be segregated and isolated. They need to be involved, connected, and engaged, as do their families.

In addition, comprehensive, ongoing professional development opportunities need to be offered so all pre-service and in-service teachers and school administrators learn how to meet the needs of ELLs since all educators are responsible for their academic success (Scanlan, Kim, Burns, & Vuilleumier, 2016; Scanlan & López, 2014). Administrators need to know what barriers the school system imposes on culturally and linguistically diverse students and work to eradicate them. Teachers need to know the research on second language acquisition and proven instructional

strategies so that they can work toward closing the achievement gap between ELLs and their English-speaking counterparts. All regular classroom teachers who have ELLs in their classrooms need to learn how to write measurable language objectives and integrate them with their content instructional objectives. Educators need to understand that mastering English is a vehicle to learning content. Teachers need to make lessons relevant to their students' lives by supplementing textbooks with appropriate materials.

Addressing the critical questions and developing proper procedures surrounding the identification, testing, placement, instruction, and assessment of ELLs merit attention. Teachers need to consider alternative means to measure success where content mastery and English language proficiency are concerned. Teachers need to support ELLs' academic English proficiency in all four language domains (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), not just the receptive skills. They can accomplish this by exposing their ELLs to what Krashen (1982) called *comprehensible input* and Vygotsky (1978) referred to as the *zone of proximal development*. Dumbing down the curriculum should be avoided and instead teachers need to think of creative, alternative ways for students to demonstrate what they have learned or what they can do. Holding high expectations for all ELLs and providing them with English-speaking models are essential (Bilagody, 2014; Demmert, 2001).

Tackling the issues described here will help American Indian ELLs get the necessary support they need to be successful in their classrooms and schools. If one understands the relationship between language and culture and the cultural identity conflict becoming a Standard English speaker may result in, one can promote and respect linguistic diversity—embrace and celebrate it, not see it as divisive but as powerful and positive. After all, there is strength in diversity. Educators need to have realistic expectations about the time, effort, and skills necessary to learn and master a language at a level of proficiency to be able to compete with native English speakers in challenging content courses. Educators need to increase the tolerance and appreciation for the challenging task these American Indian ELLs are confronted with—learning challenging content in a “foreign” tongue while simultaneously mastering academic English.

#### Funding

The authors received no direct funding for this research.

#### Author details

Jioanna Carjuzaa<sup>1</sup>

E-mail: [carjuzaa@montana.edu](mailto:carjuzaa@montana.edu)

William G. Ruff<sup>1</sup>

E-mail: [wruuff@montana.edu](mailto:wruuff@montana.edu)

<sup>1</sup> Department of Education, Montana State University-Bozeman, Reid Hall #417, Bozeman 59717, MT, USA.

#### Citation information

Cite this article as: American Indian English Language Learners: Misunderstood and under-served, Jioanna Carjuzaa & William G. Ruff, *Cogent Education* (2016), 3: 1229897.

#### References

- August, D., Goldenberg, C., & Rueda, R. (2006). Native American children and youth: Culture, language, and literacy. *The Journal of American Indian Education*, 45, 24–37.
- Banks, J. A. (1993). Integrating the curriculum with ethnic content: Approaches and guidelines. In J. A. Banks C. A., & McGee, Banks (Eds.), *Multicultural education: Issues and perspectives* (pp. 189–207). Boston, MA: Allyn \* Bacon.
- Bilagody, M. J. (2014). *The perceptions of parents, teachers, and principals of American Indian English language learners and teaching strategies that address ELL learning needs: A multi-vocal qualitative study*. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and theses database. (ISBN: 9781321147711).
- Boyer, P. (2006). It takes a Native community: Educators reform schools in an era of standards. *Tribal College Journal of American Indian Higher Education*, 17, 14–19.
- Castañeda v. Pickard. (1981). 648 F2d 989 (5th Cir).
- Carjuzaa, J., Jetty, M., Munson, M., & Veltkamp, T. (2010). Montana's Indian Education for All: Applying multicultural education theory. *Multicultural Perspectives*, 12, 192–198.
- Cummins, J. (2008). BICS and CALP: Empirical and theoretical status of the distinction. In B. Street & N. H. Hornberger (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of language and education* (2nd ed., Vol. 2: Literacy, pp. 71–83). New York, NY: Springer Science + Business Media LLC.
- Demmert, W. (2001). *Improving academic performance among Native American students. A review of the literature*. Charleston, WV: ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED463917).
- Education Commission of the States (ECS), The Progress of Education Reform. (2013). *English language learners: A growing-yet, underserved-student population*. Retrieved from <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/10/20/11020.pdf>
- Equal Educational Opportunity Act. (2003). 20 USC Section 1703(f).
- Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). (2015). 20 USC 6301. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/documents/essa-act-of-1965.pdf>
- Executive Order 13096—American and Alaska Native Education. (1998). Washington, DC: White House.
- Fischer, L., Schimmel, D., & Stelman, L. R. (2007). *Teachers and the Law* (7th ed.). New York, NY: Pearson.
- Genesee, F., Lindholm-Leary, K., Saunders, W., & Christian, D. (2005). English language learners in Y. S. Schools: An overview of research findings. *Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk*, 10, 363–385.

- Gonzalez, N., Moll, L., & Amanti, C. (2005). *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities and classrooms*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Hayes, K., Rueda, R., & Chilton, S. (2009). Scaffolding language, literacy, and academic content in English and Spanish: The linguistic highway from Mesoamerica to Southern California. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, 8, 137–166.
- HeavyRunner, I., & DeCelles, R. (2002). Family education model: Meeting the student retention challenge. *Journal of American Indian Education*, 41, 29–37.
- Holbrook, D. (2011). *Native American ELL students, Indian English and the Title III Formula Grant*. Paper presented at the meeting of the National Association for Bilingual Education, Annual Bilingual/Multicultural Education Conference, Native American and Alaska Native Pre-Conference Institute, New Orleans, LA. Retrieved from [http://www.ncela.us/files/uploads/7/Holbrook\\_NABE2011.pdf](http://www.ncela.us/files/uploads/7/Holbrook_NABE2011.pdf)
- Juneau, D. (2006). *Montana's agenda: Issues shaping our state, Indian Education for All*. Missoula, MT: The University of Montana Press.
- Kennedy Report (A national tragedy—a national challenge). (1969). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs.
- Krashen, S. D. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- Langer, J. (2001). Beating the odds: Teaching middle and high school students to read and write well. *American Educational Research Journal*, 38, 837–880. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3102/00028312038004837>
- Lau v. Nichols. (1974). 414 U.S. 56.
- Leap, W. L. (1993). *American Indian English*. Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press.
- Littlebear, R. (2003). Chief Dull Knife community is strengthening the Northern Cheyenne language and culture. *Journal of American Indian Education*, 42, 74–85.
- Littlebear, R. (2014). Montana takes the lead in Indian education. *Indians.com* Retrieved from <http://www.indians.com/News/2014/014444.asp>
- Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School v Michigan Board of Education. (1979) 473F. Supp 1371 E.D.Mich.
- McCarty, T. (2014). Negotiating sociolinguistic borderlands—Native youth language practices in space, time, and place. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, 13, 254–267. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2014.939031>
- Moll, L., Amanti, C., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory Into Practice*, 31, 132–141. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00405849209543534>
- Montana Constitution. (1972). Article X, Section 1(2) *Educational Goals and Duties*.
- Montana Code Annotated. (2015). Title 20, Chapter 7, Part 14 *Cultural Integrity Commitment Act*.
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). (2015). *Fast Facts: English Language Learners*. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=96>
- National Rural Health Association Policy Position. (2008). *Definition of frontier*. Retrieved from [http://lr.search.yahoo.com/\\_ylt=AwrBTzcef2FXj.0AKcVXNy0A;\\_ylu=X3oDMTEyZ281MDdsBGNvbG8DYmYxBHBvcwM4BHZ0aWQDQjE4NzlfMQRzZWMDc3I-/RV=2/RE=1466036127/RO=10/RU=http%3a%2f%2fwww.ruralhealthweb.org%2findex.cfm%3fobjectid%3d0DDA1ACC-3048-651A-FEF0BD1F339AB0C1/RK=0/RS=6Z.iPCuIPR79NKZH7vyI2.atL2k-](http://lr.search.yahoo.com/_ylt=AwrBTzcef2FXj.0AKcVXNy0A;_ylu=X3oDMTEyZ281MDdsBGNvbG8DYmYxBHBvcwM4BHZ0aWQDQjE4NzlfMQRzZWMDc3I-/RV=2/RE=1466036127/RO=10/RU=http%3a%2f%2fwww.ruralhealthweb.org%2findex.cfm%3fobjectid%3d0DDA1ACC-3048-651A-FEF0BD1F339AB0C1/RK=0/RS=6Z.iPCuIPR79NKZH7vyI2.atL2k-)
- NEA Education Policy and Practice Department. (2008). *English Language Learners face unique challenges (Policy Brief 05)*. Washington, D C: Author. Retrieved from [http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/HE/ELL\\_Policy\\_Brief\\_Fall\\_08\\_%282%29.pdf](http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/HE/ELL_Policy_Brief_Fall_08_%282%29.pdf)
- No Child Left Behind Act, Pub. L. 107-110. (2002). Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/index.html>
- Oesch, D. (1996). Accommodating difference: Native American English education—Reexamining past assumptions and recognizing socio-political influences. Paper presented at the meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Milwaukee, WI.
- Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA) Fast Facts. (2015). *Profiles of English Learners (ELs)*. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oela/fast-facts/pel.pdf>
- Office of Public Instruction (OPI). (2013). *Montana's English language learners: Guidance for school districts*. Retrieved from [http://opi.mt.gov/pdf/Bilingual/13\\_MT\\_ELL\\_Guidance.pdf](http://opi.mt.gov/pdf/Bilingual/13_MT_ELL_Guidance.pdf)
- Office of Public Instruction (OPI). (2014). *Montana American Indian Student Achievement Data Report*. Indian Education Division. Retrieved from <http://leg.mt.gov/content/Publications/services/2014-agency-reports/OPI-Montana-American-Indian-Student-Achievement-Report-2014.pdf>
- Pewewardy, C., & Hammer, P. (2003). Culturally responsive teaching for American Indian students. *ERIC Digest*, No. ED 482 325.
- Reyhner, J. (2001). Teaching reading to American Indian/Alaska Native students. *ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools*. Retrieved on June 18, 2005 from <http://www.ericdigests.org/2002-3/reading.htm>
- Scanlan, M., & López, F. (2014). *Leadership for culturally and linguistically responsive schools*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Scanlan, M., Kim, M., Burns, M. B., & Vuilleumier, C. (2016). Poco a Poco: Leadership practices supporting productive communities of practice in schools serving the new mainstream. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 52, 3–44. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0013161X15615390>
- Serma v. Poerale Municipal School. (1974). 499 F2d 1147 (10th Cir).
- Short, D., & Fitzsimmons, S. (2007). Double the work: Challenges and solutions to acquiring language and academic literacy for adolescent English Language learners. *A report commissioned by the Carnegie Corporation of New York*. Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education. Retrieved from [https://www.carnegie.org/media/filer\\_public/bd/d8/bdd80ac7-fb48-4b97-b082-df8c49320acb/ccny\\_report\\_2007\\_double.pdf](https://www.carnegie.org/media/filer_public/bd/d8/bdd80ac7-fb48-4b97-b082-df8c49320acb/ccny_report_2007_double.pdf)
- Szasz, C. (1999). *Education and the American Indian: The road to self-determination since 1928*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press.
- The Mid-Continent Regional Educational Laboratory. (2004). *English language learner resource guide: A guide for rural districts with a low incidence of ELLs*. Retrieved from [http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/files/rcd/BE024219/Rural\\_Education.pdf](http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/files/rcd/BE024219/Rural_Education.pdf)
- The Progress of Education Reform. (2013). *English language learners: A growing - yet, underserved - student population*. Retrieved from <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/10/20/11020.pdf>
- Thompson, G. (2016). U.S. Education market snapshot: English language learners (ELLs). *Curriculum World Languages*. Retrieved from <https://www.victoryprd.com/blog/?p=2540>
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). Interaction between learning and development. *Mind and Society*, 79–91, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- WIDA. (2014). *American Indian English Language Learners*. Retrieved from [https://www.wida.us/resources/focus/WIDA\\_Focus\\_on\\_AIELL.pdf](https://www.wida.us/resources/focus/WIDA_Focus_on_AIELL.pdf)
- Wilson, S. (2008). *Research is ceremony: Indigenous research methods*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing.
- World Population Review. (2016). *Montana population 2016*. Retrieved from <http://worldpopulationreview.com/states/montana-population/>
- Zehr, M. A. (2010). Study: Language is an issue with some Native American dropouts. *Education Week*. Retrieved from [http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/learning-the-language/2010/02/study\\_language\\_is\\_an\\_issue\\_wit.html?\\_ga=1.140820210.19722892.1454533460](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/learning-the-language/2010/02/study_language_is_an_issue_wit.html?_ga=1.140820210.19722892.1454533460)



© 2016 The Author(s). This open access article is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) 4.0 license.

You are free to:

Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format

Adapt — remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially.

The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms.

Under the following terms:

Attribution — You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made.

You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.

No additional restrictions

You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits.



**Cogent Education (ISSN: 2331-186X) is published by Cogent OA, part of Taylor & Francis Group.**

**Publishing with Cogent OA ensures:**

- Immediate, universal access to your article on publication
- High visibility and discoverability via the Cogent OA website as well as Taylor & Francis Online
- Download and citation statistics for your article
- Rapid online publication
- Input from, and dialog with, expert editors and editorial boards
- Retention of full copyright of your article
- Guaranteed legacy preservation of your article
- Discounts and waivers for authors in developing regions

**Submit your manuscript to a Cogent OA journal at [www.CogentOA.com](http://www.CogentOA.com)**

