We should not be concerned about the growing proportion of children in England’s primary schools for whom languages other than English are their mother tongue. That is the conclusion of new research from the Centre for Economic Performance (CEP), funded by the Nuffield Foundation.

The study by Dr Sandra McNally and colleagues finds that an increased presence of children who do not speak English as their first language is not detrimental to the educational attainment of native English speakers.

Indeed, evidence from Catholic schools attended by the children of Polish immigrants suggests that the presence of non-native English speakers might – in some cases, at least – have a positive effect on natives’ results.

The proportion of non-native English speakers in primary schools in England has increased by a third to around 12% over the past 10 years. This has led some commentators to fear a detrimental impact on native English speakers as teachers’ time is taken up helping children who do not speak English as a first language.

Yet several studies have shown that first and second generation immigrants are, on average, better educated than the native population. This suggests that there might be things about the children of immigrants – such as having better educated parents – that can compensate for any lack of language fluency at an early age. In that case, native English speakers would not necessarily suffer from having such children as their peers.

The new research analyses a census of all children in schools in England (the National Pupil Database) to explore the association between the proportion of non-native English speakers in a year group and the educational attainment of native English speakers at the end of primary school. It finds that:

- There is modest negative correlation in the raw data between the educational attainment of native English speakers and the proportion of non-native speakers in their year group. This correlation is halved once the demographic characteristics of native English speakers have been controlled for. It disappears altogether once the type of school attended by non-native English speakers has been controlled for.

- This means that the negative correlation in the raw data reflects the fact that non-native English speakers typically attend schools with more disadvantaged native speakers. Once this fact shows has been taken into account, there is zero association between their presence in greater numbers and the educational attainment of their native English-speaking peers.

- These results also hold true for younger cohorts (age 7 instead of age 11) and when looking at the number of languages spoken in the year group instead of the percentage of non-native English speakers.

- The analysis strongly suggests that negative causal effects of non-native English speakers on the educational attainment of native English speakers can be ruled out.
The number of white non-native English speakers grew dramatically after the European Union’s eastern enlargement in 2005. Since many of the new immigrants were Polish (and likely to be Catholic), there was a big rise in the demand for Catholic schooling.

The much larger increase in the percentage of white non-native English speakers in (state) Catholic schools after 2005 compared with other schools provides a ‘natural experiment’ to see if there were consequences for the relative educational attainment of native English speakers in Catholic schools.

The results for reading and writing are unclear, but there is some evidence for a small, positive effect in the case of maths. In other words, native English speakers at Catholic schools that saw a strong relative increase in white non-native speakers benefited to a small extent in their maths results.

Possible reasons for this result include the fact that immigrants from East European countries are better educated and more attached to the labour market than the native population. The children of such immigrants may be a welcome influence in the schools they attend.

Sandra McNally comments on her findings:

‘The growing proportion of non-native English speakers in primary schools should not be a cause for concern: this is not detrimental to the educational attainment of native English speakers.’

Josh Hillman, Education Director at the Nuffield Foundation, adds:

‘There has been a lot of debate, some of it alarmist, about the increase in non-native English speaking children in schools, but little evidence about the impact this has on children’s learning and development.

‘The Nuffield Foundation was pleased to support Dr McNally’s research, which has addressed this gap and will enable the debate to move on.’

ENDS

Notes for Editors:

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