

K–12 Educational Outcomes of Immigrant Youth

Robert Crosnoe and Ruth N. López Turley

Summary

The children from immigrant families in the United States make up a historically diverse population, and they are demonstrating just as much diversity in their experiences in the K–12 educational system. Robert Crosnoe and Ruth López Turley summarize these K–12 patterns, paying special attention to differences in academic functioning across segments of the immigrant population defined by generational status, race and ethnicity, and national origin.

A good deal of evidence points to an immigrant advantage in multiple indicators of academic progress, meaning that many youths from immigrant families outperform their peers in school. This apparent advantage is often referred to as the immigrant paradox, in that it occurs despite higher-than-average rates of social and economic disadvantages in this population as a whole.

The immigrant paradox, however, is more pronounced among the children of Asian and African immigrants than other groups, and it is stronger for boys than for girls. Furthermore, evidence for the paradox is far more consistent in secondary school than in elementary school. Indeed, school readiness appears to be one area of potential risk for children from immigrant families, especially those of Mexican origin. For many groups, including those from Latin America, any evidence of the immigrant paradox usually emerges after researchers control for family socioeconomic circumstances and youths' English language skills. For others, including those from Asian countries, it is at least partially explained by the tendency for more socioeconomically advantaged residents of those regions to leave their home country for the United States. Bilingualism and strong family ties help to explain immigrant advantages in schooling; school, community, and other contextual disadvantages may suppress these advantages or lead to immigrant risks.

Crosnoe and Turley also discuss several policy efforts targeting young people from immigrant families, especially those of Latin American origin. One is the DREAM Act, proposed federal legislation to create a pathway to citizenship for undocumented youth who meet certain criteria. Another effort includes culturally grounded programs to support the college preparation of immigrant adolescents and the educational involvement of immigrant parents of young children.

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America's K–12 educational system has long been thought key to the ability of newly arriving immigrants to realize their dream of social mobility. Yet in reality the interplay of immigration, education, and social mobility in the United States is quite complicated.¹ Although some immigrant groups have used K–12 education to improve their social and economic prospects, others have faced disadvantage, discrimination, and other barriers in American schools that reinforce social stratification.² The U.S. educational system, in fact, can lead to intergenerational mobility for some immigrant families and to inequality and social stratification for others. We examine the role of K–12 education in the United States, focusing on specific stages of schooling and subsets of the immigrant population—those, for example, defined by generational status, region of origin, socioeconomic status, and gender. Our goal is to take a close look at overly broad characterizations of immigrants as being either consistently at-risk or consistently advantaged that have each gained footholds in social policy and public consciousness. First, we place the contemporary educational experiences of immigrants in the United States in historical context. We then summarize empirical patterns of student outcomes in secondary school and elementary school, respectively. We conclude by exploring the policy implications of research findings.

Historical Context

The connection between immigration and education in the United States has evolved over the years. A century ago, schools were viewed as prime settings for assimilating immigrants. More recently, they have often been seen as sites of immigration-related conflict and inequality. Neither perception has been entirely accurate.

During the nineteenth century, proponents of compulsory education believed that requiring all children to attend school would encourage social cohesion in an increasingly diverse population. As European immigrants poured into the United States during the early twentieth century, the nation—immigrants and nonimmigrants alike—expected public schools to help newcomers get ahead while also “Americanizing” them.³ Partly as a result, the primarily white immigrants of the early twentieth century were largely absorbed into the nation's major social and political institutions within a couple of generations and became upwardly mobile over time.⁴ The so-called linear model of assimilation derived from their experiences—gradual progress fueled, in part, by access to free education—became the dominant popular and research perspective on the connection between immigration and education in the United States.⁵ The empirical support for this model, however, has gradually eroded as a result of two converging historical trends.

The first trend is the large, diverse wave of immigration set in motion by the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which abolished the national origins quota system that had governed immigration since the 1920s.⁶ Because of that large influx of newcomers, children of immigrants now make up 23 percent of the U.S. school-age population.⁷ Latino and Asian American children—the vast majority of whom are foreign-born or have foreign-born parents—constitute 19 percent and 4 percent of American students, respectively, up from 6 percent and 1 percent in 1970.⁸

The recent wave of immigrants has been widely diverse—by race, ethnicity, region of origin, and socioeconomic status. Many, but by no means all, immigrant children are

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socioeconomically disadvantaged. Twenty-four percent, for example, have low-income families (compared with 15 percent of children with native-born parents), and 26 percent have no parent with a high school degree (8 percent for those with native-born parents). Half of Mexican immigrant children have no parent with a high school degree. In sharp contrast, most of their East Asian peers have college-educated parents.⁹

Not surprisingly, such group differences in socioeconomic status are linked with differences in educational outcomes. According to the immigrant “selectivity” perspective, academic disparities between immigrant groups likely reflect national differences in the kinds of people who “select” into emigrating from another country to the United States.¹⁰ For example, the better-than-expected academic success of the children of Asian and African immigrants in the United States is partly attributable to the fact that these immigrants tend to be more educated than Asians and Africans who do not emigrate.¹¹ Similarly, much of the widening white-Hispanic gap in academic outcomes is explained by the greater tendency for contemporary Hispanic youth to be the children of low-skilled Mexicans coming to the United States for

work.¹² In other words, given the power of socioeconomic status to stratify opportunities to learn in the United States, socioeconomic diversity in who selects into emigration from another country contributes to the diversity in outcomes among children of immigrants in this country.

The second trend that has called into question the old linear model of assimilation is the dramatic change in the U.S. economy in the past half-century. Until the middle of the twentieth century, the nation’s large manufacturing base provided the means for high school graduates to get secure well-paying jobs with benefits. With the shift over recent decades into a high-tech service economy, however, the supply of jobs that do not require some postsecondary education is drying up, pushing the economic returns of higher education to historic highs.¹³ The educational implications of this economic restructuring are particularly acute among immigrants. During the first half of the twentieth century, predominantly European immigrants were absorbed into manufacturing and retailing jobs that made possible the upward mobility of the next generation. By contrast, today’s predominantly non-European immigrants must struggle ever harder to provide the economic foundation their children need to pursue higher education, even as that education becomes increasingly important to their children’s futures.¹⁴

These two trends have converged to produce a large and diverse cohort of newcomers that must capitalize on public education if they are to become upwardly mobile. In this context, competitive tensions among immigrant groups within schools—over scarce resources and opportunities—are exacerbated by linked racial and ethnic, as well as socioeconomic, disparities. Some groups are at a competitive

advantage, others at a disadvantage. Asian immigrants' children, for example, benefit not only from the choice their educated parents made to emigrate to the United States, but also from the willingness of school personnel to make greater investments in children from immigrant groups that have been educationally successful. By contrast, Latin American immigrants' children are hampered not only by the greater socioeconomic disadvantages that characterize the Latin American immigration stream but also by related stereotypes that marginalize them in schools.¹⁵

The combination of increased diversity among young immigrants in schools and the rising long-term returns to education is having far-reaching effects. First, increased competition, exposure, interactions, and conflicts among different immigrant groups and between immigrant and native groups within schools have generated calls for multicultural education, which, in turn, have led to public concerns—especially among the white middle class—that the nation has rejected the traditional Americanizing role of schools and replaced it with efforts to preserve students' cultural differences. These concerns, however, fail to recognize immigrant families' historically consistent emphasis on schools as agents of social mobility rather than cultural separation.¹⁶ Second, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 requires schools to track academic disparities by disaggregating data on standardized test performance by various socioeconomic and demographic characteristics. Taken together, many of these characteristics, such as race and ethnicity, low English proficiency, and poverty, effectively identify immigrant groups, leading to more, albeit indirect, monitoring of the progress of immigrant youth in public schools.¹⁷ Third, as researchers continue to compare the school outcomes of the first, second, and higher

generations of immigrants and the outcomes of immigrants and natives, their findings are increasingly complex and variable. No longer do almost all immigrant children move successfully through school and slowly up the socioeconomic ladder; instead outcomes vary widely and in sometimes unpredictable ways. The varying outcomes of different subgroups in the U.S. educational system have led researchers to fashion theoretical perspectives emphasizing the diverse implications of assimilation. Segmented assimilation, first outlined by Alejandro Portes and Min Zhou, is one such perspective. It posits that the interplay between an immigrant group's human capital and the way that the group is received in American society (determined by reactions to race, ethnicity, and related factors) offers some immigrant youth the promise of upward social mobility but socially marginalizes and impedes the mobility of others. In other words, whether mobility is upward or downward depends not only on the resources immigrant youth bring with them but also on how they are received in destination communities.¹⁸

Against this historical backdrop, we turn to the K–12 educational outcomes of contemporary immigrant youth in the United States. Because secondary education is generally either the gateway to college matriculation or the end of the educational career, it is the most common focus of research on immigration-related disparities in education. Thus we look first at the outcomes of immigrants in high school and middle school. We then review the smaller body of research on immigrants in elementary school and examine the question of school readiness.

Secondary School

Academic success in secondary school is often the only way by which immigrant

Table 1. Predicted Math and Science Standardized Test Scores by Generation and Family Socioeconomic Status (SES)

Generation	Math		Science	
	Eighth grade	Tenth grade	Eighth grade	Tenth grade
No SES control				
First	37.30	45.10	18.59	21.69
Second	36.34	44.37	18.90	21.53
Third and higher	35.70	42.99	18.66	21.39
Controlling for SES				
First	38.22	46.58	19.04	22.20
Second	37.21	45.71	19.27	21.96
Third and higher	35.87	43.48	18.82	21.52

Source: National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988.

Note: Scores calculated based on multilevel modeling coefficients, weighted and adjusted for design effects.

youth can attain intergenerational socioeconomic mobility. Perhaps that is why, of all the articles on the educational experiences of immigrant youth published in the past decade in a large sample of influential journals, the overwhelming majority has focused on secondary schooling.¹⁹

The Immigrant Paradox

One theme in this large body of secondary school research is that immigrant youth are often academically successful compared with children with U.S.-born parents. In New York, for example, children of immigrants generally outperform their peers with native-born parents on achievement tests.²⁰ These patterns are evidence of an “immigrant paradox” in education—the paradox being that immigrant youth enjoy academic advantages in the relative absence of the socioeconomic advantages, such as high parental education and income, that are usually associated with school success. And the evidence is by no means confined to New York. As table 1 shows, analyses of the nationally representative National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) reveal that adolescents with

immigrant parents typically outperform those with U.S.-born parents on math and science tests (given in English) by 5 to 20 percent of a standard deviation. A study by Grace Kao reported that this pattern held in most regional and national origin groups in NELS, although evidence of the immigrant advantage was stronger and more consistent across subjects for youth from Asian immigrant families than for youth from Latin American (especially Mexican) immigrant families. Indeed, the children of Asian immigrants often outperformed all other student populations on standardized tests in secondary school, including the children of native whites.²¹ Similar patterns have also been found for other academic indicators, such as grades and graduation, in a number of data sets. Again, these patterns tend to be somewhat stronger and more consistent for youth from Asian immigrant families.²² Before discussing possible explanations for this general immigrant paradox pattern, we raise several caveats about the current state of evidence.

First, because cultural ties tend to weaken, and economic security tends to grow, as

immigrant families and children remain longer in the United States, analysts have debated whether the immigrant paradox is stronger among U.S.-born (second-generation) or foreign-born (first-generation) adolescents with immigrant parents and, within the first generation, whether it is stronger among adolescents who came to the United States early in their lives (1.5 generation) or later. Yet, the direction and size of generational and timing effects varies a great deal by group. In the aforementioned Kao analysis, for example, second-generation Asians and Latinos typically outdid first- and third-plus-generation youth of their same ethnic background on math tests, but first-generation whites and blacks did better than later-generation youth of their same ethnic background. These patterns were not always the same, however, for other academic indicators, such as reading tests and grades. Because of this variability among immigrant groups, definitive answers about which generation best illustrates the immigrant paradox remain elusive.²³

Second, the immigrant paradox is not solely a product of differences in socioeconomic status. In fact, accounting for socioeconomic status—that is, limiting the comparison to youth of similar status—can strengthen evidence of the paradox in many groups. Indeed, test score differences of first- and third-plus-generation youth in table 1 increased when socioeconomic status was controlled. As already mentioned, youth from Asian immigrant families tend to have more socioeconomic resources, such as parent education, than youth from other immigrant families. Thus, socioeconomic status can explain some portion of their apparent academic advantage, although not all of it.

Third, the immigrant paradox is stronger for boys than girls. As just one example, the difference between first- and third-plus-generation youth on middle school math tests in table 1 equaled 5 percent of a standard deviation for girls but 20 percent of a standard deviation for boys. Researchers cannot yet explain the source of this gendered pattern, but it may be related to and may fuel the higher educational attainment of girls than boys in the general population.²⁴

Explaining the Immigrant Paradox

Explanations for the observed immigrant paradox include circumstances relating to immigrants' lives after migrating, before migrating, and during the migration. Research has found that some factors operate differently across immigrant groups and that some seemingly relevant factors, such as school context, self-esteem, and peer influences, have, in fact, limited explanatory power.

Post- and Pre-Migration Conditions

Research examining the educational outcomes of immigrants in secondary school is dominated by studies of their post-migration circumstances. Whether children of immigrants use their native language as well as English is a prime topic. Evidence suggests that mastering both a native language and English gives adolescents access to an array of community and institutional networks. When youth are connected to adults and families are connected to each other, youth may be less oriented to potentially negative peer influences.²⁵ Such ties to community and institutional networks could also be a conduit for transmitting the high educational expectations of immigrants to children. Moreover, although some observers believe that immigrant youths' frequent use of languages other than English interferes with their English proficiency, in fact, proficiency in a student's

first language appears to support English maintenance, especially when instruction is bilingual, and to raise grades and test scores.²⁶ With support from families, schools, and communities, therefore, fluency in multiple languages has academic advantages that likely factor into the immigrant paradox.

Overall, strong family ties and parental attachment and support are resources for immigrant youth, providing the security and assistance they need to meet the challenges of school. In particular, researchers have examined parental involvement in education. In part because of language barriers, immigrant parents tend to engage less in the kinds of involvement, such as joining parent-teacher organizations, that are visible to schools and measurable in quantitative data sets.²⁷ Yet they are involved in other, often less obvious, but important ways. For example, Asian immigrant parents, including those with little income, generally have high educational expectations for their children, talk to them often about their progress toward their expectations, find ways to marshal supplemental resources to help them, such as by sending them to Chinese schools after school, on weekends, and during school breaks, and make concrete plans for the future, such as by saving for college. Although less pronounced, something similar occurs with Latin American immigrant parents, for whom the crucial component of their involvement in education is to prepare young people to be conscientious and responsible and to work hard.²⁸

Other social psychological aspects of youths' post-migration lives are clearly related to academic outcomes but may be less important than language use and parental involvement in explaining immigration-related outcome differences in secondary school. For example, much has been made of the possibility that

some immigrant youth, especially youth from Latin America, will be exposed to negative peer influences that discourage achievement. Such peer influences, however, do not seem unique to immigrant groups and exist more generally across the adolescent population.²⁹ As another example, although self-esteem and a strong sense of ethnic identity are positively associated with multiple indicators of school achievement and adjustment, the children of immigrants tend to have lower self-esteem than their peers and similar degrees of ethnic identification as their peers. Yet they tend to do better in school.³⁰

Two other important conditions of students' post-migration lives are their schools and neighborhoods. Partly as a result of high rates of Latino school segregation, adolescents from Latin American immigrant families tend to be concentrated in problematic schools, such as those characterized by more conflict, weaker academic norms, weaker ties between students and adults, and larger class sizes. Although these school disadvantages pose academic risks that could impair academic performance, such risks seem to affect these immigrant youth less than students with native-born parents, suggesting that they may be more resilient in problematic schools than their peers. Furthermore, this pattern of school disadvantage does not extend to adolescents from Asian immigrant families, most likely because of the greater socioeconomic resources in the Asian immigrant population. In addition, the "model minority" perception of Asian immigrant youth and the aforementioned steps their parents take to supplement their education provide more opportunities for them to move out of segregated schools.³¹

Similarly, immigrants tend to live in neighborhoods characterized by a diverse array of social and economic disadvantages, including

segregation.³² Evidence is mixed, however, on whether neighborhood disadvantages are related to race and ethnicity or to family nativity. On one hand, a New York study found that regardless of family nativity, African American and Latino households with children lived in more disadvantaged neighborhoods than immigrant or nonimmigrant white households with children, suggesting that the neighborhood disadvantages of immigrants are likely attributable to race and ethnicity.³³ On the other hand, a national study highlights nativity, reporting that Latin American immigrants tend to live in more disadvantaged neighborhoods than native-born blacks.³⁴ What is less clear is whether such neighborhood patterns factor into the immigrant paradox. Certainly, neighborhood disadvantage has been linked to educational outcomes, but this link has rarely been explored with a focus on immigrants. Moreover, research has generally not implicated neighborhood disadvantages in immigration-related educational patterns. Indeed, one study suggests that a commonly cited neighborhood disadvantage of immigrants—residential segregation—may not be problematic if it means that youth are embedded in enclave communities with strong intergenerational networks.³⁵ To the extent that immigrants are disadvantaged by their neighborhoods, those neighborhood disadvantages could only suppress the immigrant paradox, not explain it. Disadvantage should reduce the academic performance of immigrants, not increase it. At the same time, some neighborhood characteristics that appear to be disadvantages may in reality mask neighborhood advantages that could explain the immigrant paradox.

Researchers have also examined immigrants' experiences before leaving their countries of origin in relation to their school outcomes in

the United States. Some emphasize immigrant selectivity—as noted, the degree to which pre-migration circumstances affect the likelihood of migration in ways that create advantages or disadvantages for immigrants in the new country. One type of selectivity concerns the extent to which immigrants are more or less educated than their nonimmigrant counterparts left behind in their country of origin. Cynthia Feliciano has reported that for all but one (Puerto Rico) of thirty-two countries and territories, immigrants to the United States were more educated than their peers who remained in their country of origin. In turn, such educational selection of immigrants was associated with the educational attainment of their children in the United States.³⁶ Other characteristics of countries of origin and the people who leave them for the United States have been linked to the educational outcomes of immigrant youth but not always in expected ways. For example, political stability, but not economic development, in the country of origin is associated with the math performance of the children of immigrants in host Western countries.³⁷

In general, these studies suggest that some pre-migration conditions help to explain educational variation among immigrants. Most studies, however, rely on country-level data, so the pre-migration histories of immigrant families are proxied by the general characteristics of their home countries or of the migration stream from those countries. Yet aggregate measures, such as educational attainment in a country and average educational attainment of migrants from a country, might subsume a great deal of variability in educational attainment across regions or social strata in that country and not accurately tap the pre-migration characteristics of immigrants. One study shows

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variation within the home country by finding that Mexican-origin high school students in the United States who had received some schooling in Mexico reported higher grades than those who had received none.³⁸ But that study included no information about the type or quality of schooling in Mexico, an omission that is a significant data limit in itself. Overall, the study of pre-migration conditions is promising, but more work is needed to determine how much of the immigrant paradox is a function of what occurred before immigration rather than of what immigrants do once in the United States.

Migration and Other Transitions

The very act of migrating from one country to another likely is a shock sufficiently large to affect the educational outcomes of immigrants and thus the immigrant paradox. Studying this issue is challenging because it is hard to compare migrants with nonmigrants who, by definition, not only do not experience a move but also do not experience the schools of the destination country. Several studies, however, suggest that a change as small as moving from one school to another within the same country or even within the same school district can affect students' academic achievement. Regardless of whether the move takes place within or

between academic years, or voluntarily or not, switching schools can disrupt students' academic progress. Indeed, data from New York show that school transfer is among the biggest academic risks faced by immigrants.³⁹ Switching to an entirely new school system in a completely different country is likely to be harmful temporarily, even if the new educational context eventually leads to more favorable outcomes.

One type of school move is the transition between school levels. The transition from middle to high school, for example, contributes to racial and ethnic, as well as socioeconomic, disparities in academic indicators because the experience tends to be more disruptive in more marginalized groups. But analysts rarely explore this transition in relation to immigration. One NELS analysis reveals that discrepancies between middle school performance and high school course placement—specifically, being placed in high school courses at a level below what middle school performance suggests would be appropriate—were greater for students learning English than for others.⁴⁰ In other words, changing schools may create a period of vulnerability for immigrant youth greater than it does for native children.

Limitations and Future Directions of Research

Future work on generational, national-origin, linguistic, and socioeconomic differences in the connection between immigration and secondary schooling should address not only the data limitations already noted but also other data issues. For example, large-scale data sets often omit school dropouts and nonenrollees. Yet youth from many immigrant groups, such as Mexicans, have dropout rates higher than the general population, and some youth who come to the United States as teenagers

may not enroll in school at all.⁴¹ Such omissions would tend to raise measured school outcomes, potentially overstating the immigrant paradox in education. Compounding this bias, many data sets, such as the NELS, exclude English language learners. New data sets should track students, dropouts, and nonenrollees together and sample students with a range of language proficiencies, especially on the national level. In addition, many studies of immigrants in secondary school use data from large metropolitan areas, which have especially sizable and diverse immigrant populations. Researchers should explore whether the mechanisms that affect immigrants' educational outcomes in these cities differ from those shaping outcomes in other parts of the country. The need to do so has only been magnified by the unprecedented immigrant dispersal, which has had profound impacts on schools.

These data issues aside, research on immigrants in secondary school does suggest an immigrant advantage arising from some mixture of pre- and post-migration conditions. The extent of this advantage, however, varies across segments of the immigrant population, with those from Asian countries the most advantaged and those from Latin American countries the least advantaged. This variation likely reflects mechanisms that differ across each group or that function differently for each group. For Latin American immigrants, the mechanisms that seem to hold the most promise for explaining the immigrant paradox include strong family and community ties that protect from potentially negative peer orientations and support resilience within disadvantaged schools and neighborhoods. For Asian immigrants, the ways in which parents proactively take steps to manage their children's journey through school and seek out supplemental

educational opportunities and supports for their children are likely important to understanding the stronger immigrant paradox in this population. In both cases, immigrant selectivity is also likely a key factor, although in different ways. Asian immigrants tend to be of higher socioeconomic status than other immigrants in the United States or others from their home countries. The same is not true of Latin American immigrants, but they might be selective in other ways—in terms of motivation, efficacy, health, or other qualities—that do contribute to the immigrant paradox. Despite years of research on the immigrant paradox, however, group-specific mechanisms are still not well understood and need to be studied more closely.

Elementary School

As noted, research on immigrant youth in secondary school dwarfs that on elementary school. This lack of balance is problematic for several reasons. First, the greater returns to investment in early education compared with later stages of schooling make elementary school, especially the primary grades, a critical point of intervention. Thus, the relative lack of interest in elementary school means that researchers have not paid enough attention to what may be a key period for immigrants.⁴² Second, the immigrant population is growing younger, making it all the more important to shift research attention to elementary schools.⁴³ Third, the immigration bias already noted in secondary school data means that early schooling data may be more representative of the immigrant population. As we explain shortly, elementary school data do have limitations, but their improvement on immigration bias is a clear strength. Fourth, given the cumulative nature of instruction and learning, a fuller understanding of secondary school patterns can be

achieved by examining their potential origins in elementary school.⁴⁴

One reason for this imbalance in scholarly attention is undoubtedly data availability. Although national data collections on secondary education are common, those on elementary education were, until recently, either nonexistent or poorly suited to studying children from immigrant families. State and local studies have followed immigrant children in elementary school, but these samples often lack within-group racial and ethnic, socioeconomic, and geographic heterogeneity.⁴⁵ Thus, the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K), a nationally representative sample of 1998 kindergarteners, is a valuable resource. Despite some limitations (for example, ECLS-K excludes English language learners from reading, but not other, tests), analysis of ECLS-K has illuminated early disparities related to immigration.⁴⁶ Along with information from other data, ECLS-K has revealed trends in immigrants' elementary school trajectories different from their secondary school trajectories. Specifically, immigrant advantages seem to be weaker, at least at the very start of elementary school. Below, we discuss this evidence of and explanations for this weaker immigrant advantage in elementary school.

School Readiness and Subsequent Achievement

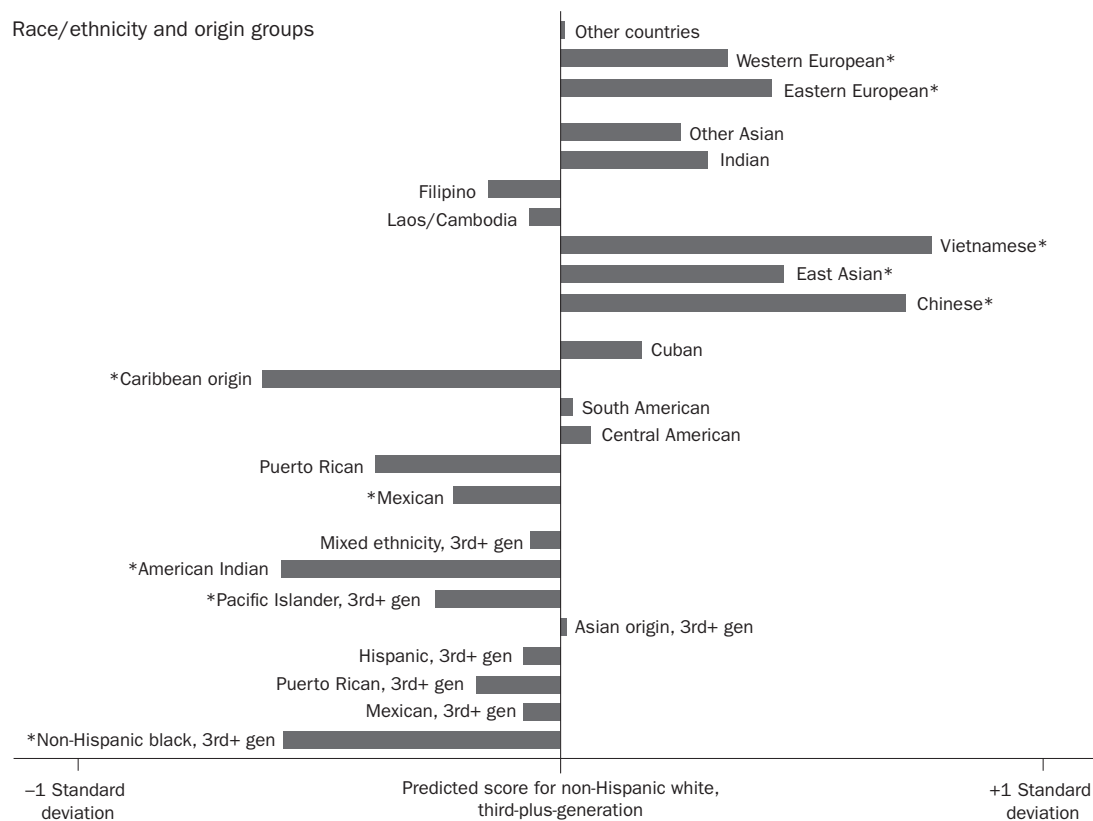
One important focus for researchers examining the school performance of young immigrant children is school readiness—the degree to which very young children are prepared to actively and independently meet the academic and social demands of school.

Notable disparities in school readiness exist among young immigrant children. Children of Latin American immigrants, for example,

tend to have lower levels of school readiness than other groups of immigrant and nonimmigrant children.⁴⁷ The average child of Mexican immigrant parents in ECLS-K scored eight points lower on a standardized kindergarten math test than the average white child (a difference equaling nearly one-quarter of a standard deviation) and three points lower than the average child of U.S.-born Latinos.⁴⁸ Similar patterns for Mexican-origin children have been found in many community samples, and children with Central American parents tend to look more similar to Mexican-origin children than to those whose parents emigrated from other parts of Latin America.⁴⁹ By contrast, the children of Asian immigrants tend to score higher on academic school readiness. On average, their measured school readiness was similar to or better than that of the children of native-born whites in ECLS-K. The children of black immigrants, whether from Africa, the West Indies, or other regions, fell somewhere between these two other larger segments of the immigrant population.⁵⁰ Relative socioeconomic status plays a part, but not a definitive part, in these differences. Comparing youth of similar socioeconomic status reduces but does not eliminate these disparities in school readiness.⁵¹

Although many children from immigrant families are at risk in terms of academic skills on entering school, they have potentially counterbalancing advantages in socioemotional school readiness, such as interpersonal competence. Indeed, ECLS-K teachers rated the children of both Hispanic and Asian immigrants as better adjusted than children of U.S.-born white, Asian, Hispanic, and black parents. Although children of Mexican immigrants scored lower on math tests in kindergarten than children of native-born whites, teachers rated their work habits

Figure 1. Predicted Third-Grade Math Achievement for the Children of Immigrants and Third-Plus-Generation Children, by Race and Ethnicity and by Nation and Region of Origin



Source: Jennifer Glick and Bryndl Hohmann-Marriott, "Academic Performance of Young Children in Immigrant Families," *International Migration Review* 41, no. 2 (2007).

Note: Data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Cohort, weighted and adjusted for design effects.

*Predicted value is significantly different from non-Hispanic white, third-plus-generation.

as being 10 percent of a standard deviation higher than those of native white peers of similar socioeconomic status.⁵² Thus, the academic disadvantage of Mexican-origin children coexisted with a behavioral advantage. Interestingly, black immigrant children in ECLS-K did not demonstrate this pattern of immigrant advantages in teacher-rated socioemotional school readiness, suggesting that the well-documented tendency for teachers to view black children's behavior in school as problematic may trump the more positive views they tend to have of immigrant children.⁵³ Children of Asian immigrants are an exception to the general pattern, in that

they often demonstrate advantages across all domains of school readiness.

Generally speaking, educational research shows that deficiencies in school readiness lead to poorer educational outcomes. Inadequate entry-level skills influence class placements and teacher and peer expectations that then affect subsequent skill development, which then affects future placements, and so on.⁵⁴ Yet this general pattern does not hold up for immigrant youth. Although the children of Latin American immigrants often enter school with less developed academic skills, they make up

ground over time.⁵⁵ For example, the average difference in math scores between children of Mexican immigrants and third-plus-generation whites in ECLS-K decreased by 40 percent between kindergarten and third grade.⁵⁶ By contrast, the gains in skills made by children of Asian immigrants, especially those from East Asia and India, are not as pronounced over time despite their relatively advantaged starting positions. This pattern among East Asians could reflect ceiling effects in testing or the fact that they have less to gain in the early years of school that concentrate instruction on foundational skills they already have. Notably, the children of Southeast Asian immigrants tend to be more similar to the children of Latin American immigrants.⁵⁷

One comprehensive study of elementary school disparities related to immigration was conducted by Jennifer Glick and Bryndal Hohmann Marriott using ECLS-K.⁵⁸ Figure 1 presents their results for third-grade math scores, broken down by regional and national origin for the children of immigrants and by race and ethnicity for third-plus-generation children and controlling for, among other things, socioeconomic status, language proficiency, and previous math scores. In this figure, third-plus-generation whites are the reference group for comparison. As such, their predicted test score is represented by the vertical line in the middle of the figure. Bars extending to the right (for example, Western European immigrants) indicate test scores greater than third-plus-generation whites, and bars extending to the left (for example, Caribbean-origin immigrants) indicate test scores lower than third-plus-generation whites.

Scoring lowest was a collection of mostly nonimmigrant groups (for example,

third-plus-generation blacks and American Indians) along with the children of Caribbean immigrants. Children from Mexican immigrant families tended to score roughly the same as many other Hispanic groups, both immigrant and nonimmigrant. Thus, these children caught up to, and possibly even surpassed, their third-plus-generation Mexican American peers of similar socioeconomic status. Children with South or Central American or Cuban immigrant parents scored on par with third-plus-generation whites. Finally, a diverse set of immigrant groups—Chinese, East Asian, Vietnamese, European—scored at the high end, outperforming third-plus-generation white and Asian American children of similar starting points and socioeconomic status. Although black and Hispanic groups generally cluster on the left side of this figure and white and Asian groups generally on the right, there are deviations in this pattern. Moreover, children of immigrants generally outperformed their peers of the same race and ethnicity with U.S.-born parents. This evidence of a within-race and ethnic group immigrant advantage, however, emerged primarily after socioeconomic status and language proficiency were taken into account. Although this analysis gives a comprehensive accounting of the early educational patterns of many different groups at the same time, it does not say much about the mechanisms underlying group differences. We discuss those mechanisms shortly.

After young children of immigrants enter school, therefore, many academic risks appear to decrease. Indeed, in some cases, their disadvantage may even become an advantage. Furthermore, the socioemotional advantages demonstrated by many immigrant groups at school entry are stable or even widen over time.

Explaining Observed Elementary School Patterns

As noted, differences in socioeconomic status explain a portion of immigration-related differences in children's elementary school outcomes. Thus some combination of the way different kinds of parents select into migration to the United States and the racial and ethnic stratification of socioeconomic opportunities in the United States produces observed differences between immigrant and nonimmigrant children.⁵⁹ For example, Mexican immigrants typically enter the United States with fewer socioeconomic resources, after which a variety of factors related to their race, ethnicity, and immigrant status, such as discrimination, segregation, and political scapegoating, reduce their opportunities for improving their socioeconomic circumstances, thereby putting their children at a disadvantage. Importantly, however, socioeconomic status is not the sole factor at work in immigration-related disparities in elementary education.

As with secondary school students, the high level of school transitions and segregation of Latin American immigrants tends to coexist with many elementary school disadvantages, including teacher turnover and disorganized curricula, but such disadvantages account for only a small portion of observed academic disparities.⁶⁰ The relatively small contribution of school inequalities to immigration-related disparities in academic achievement in elementary school likely reflects the critical role of school readiness in these disparities. For the most part, school factors have a bigger impact on educational disparities in later stages of schooling than in early stages, given the relative lack of exposure to school factors in the early stages.⁶¹ Other contexts must be contributing to skill gaps during this period, especially at school entry.

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to differences in preschool attendance and early child-care use between immigrant and nonimmigrant groups. The article in this issue by Lynn Karoly and Gabriella Gonzalez covers this topic in detail, but the bottom line is that immigrant children tend to have less exposure to preschool and center care than the children of U.S.-born parents, even when the children are of the same race or ethnicity and socioeconomic status.⁶² Given the generally strong links that researchers find between preschool attendance and school readiness, this pattern suggests a likely explanation for (or suppressor of) the school readiness disparities described above.⁶³

On a related note, family factors, including aspects of parenting and home environment, tend to be more closely related to educational and cognitive disparities in early childhood and elementary school, reflecting the role of the home as the primary context of children's lives and their lack of exposure to other institutional settings.⁶⁴ Immigrants' parenting behaviors, although appropriate to their home culture, do not always align with what is demanded and rewarded by American schools. For example, *educación* is a parenting style among many Mexican immigrants that instills obedience and respect for authority in children and recognizes the complementary roles of families and schools.⁶⁵ That parenting style could explain why teachers rate the young children of Mexican immigrants more positively in behavioral domains, and also why—given the ample evidence that a sense of entitlement on the part of children tends to be rewarded in American schools—these children encounter greater academic problems early in their schooling.⁶⁶ Similarly, the *chiao shun* parenting style among Chinese immigrants, which emphasizes the teacher-apprentice aspects of the parent-child

relationship, may be viewed by teachers as overly controlling.⁶⁷ Because the children of Chinese immigrants typically perform well in elementary school, this difference in perspective of parents and teachers would be a suppressor—meaning that, if it occurs, it reduces the size of the Chinese immigrant advantage. As noted, the children of Chinese immigrants tend to start school with well-developed academic skills but do not demonstrate higher rates of gains in the early years of elementary school than children from other immigrant groups. The possibility that the mismatch between *chiao shun* parenting and elementary schools could contribute to this pattern needs to be explored.

Other factors are also clearly at work. For example, the health disparities between the children of Latin American immigrants and their peers in early childhood—the former tend to have more physical health problems—appear to contribute to differences in school readiness, interfering as they do with learning activities and preschool and school attendance.⁶⁸ In all likelihood, however, a constellation of factors explains why the children of immigrants from a variety of regions tend to enter school with less developed skills and then gain ground over time and why the children of Asian immigrants start school in a better position but lose some of this advantage over time.

Policy and Programs

In general, the empirical evidence suggests that immigrant youth are doing well in school. The children of Latin American immigrants seem to be one segment of the immigrant population who may be at heightened academic risk. As a result, policy and programs targeting immigrants have generally focused on compensatory efforts aimed at Latinos. The evidence base, however,

does not clearly point to immigrant status per se as the driving force behind this risk. Socioeconomic status is important, as is language proficiency. The Latin American immigrant population is one group in which these factors come together, with the added effects of ethnic discrimination against Latinos and the rising anti-immigrant sentiment that focuses on Latinos specifically. Thus, targeting this population is one way for policy makers to address numerous kinds of educational disparities. Moreover, given the many community and family strengths of Latin American immigrants, this population has potential to respond positively to interventions targeting these related disparities.

One policy effort specifically about immigrant status includes laws targeting the education of children who are undocumented or have undocumented parents (about 7 percent of the U.S. school population).⁶⁹ The controversy has been particularly acute in Texas. Beginning in 1975, public school districts in that state were allowed to charge tuition to undocumented students. The majority of districts, including the largest (Houston), indicated they might pursue this possibility, although few did so in the end.⁷⁰ That practice was struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1982 in *Plyler v. Doe*.⁷¹ In that ruling, the court allowed the unfettered enrollment of undocumented children in public schools, saying that the Texas tuition plan was a state action violating federal authority, that it would hurt children who can contribute socially and politically to the United States, and that such aims would help to create a subclass of individuals vulnerable to unemployment and crime.⁷²

After *Plyler v. Doe*, debate turned to whether undocumented students of college age should be admitted to college, establish residency,

and pay in-state tuition.⁷³ A 1996 federal law, the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA), contained provisions that restricted benefits associated with postsecondary education, such as grants and loans, for undocumented students.⁷⁴ It did not, however, preclude states from enacting residency statutes that granted undocumented youth state residency and its associated benefits. For example, several states, including Texas, have passed tuition eligibility requirements allowing undocumented students to pay in-state tuition. Such policies appear to be boosting the college enrollment of foreign-born noncitizen Latinos (who are the most likely to be undocumented).⁷⁵ Furthermore, federal legislation to repeal IIRIRA was reintroduced in 2003 as the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act. It has not yet been passed by Congress. It would, if approved, allow undocumented college students who entered the United States before the age of sixteen, lived continuously in the United States for at least five years, and completed two years of college or military service to begin the process of legalization. It would also protect from deportation students over the age of twelve who have not yet graduated from high school.⁷⁶ The intent of DREAM, versions of which have been enacted in several states, is to promote the social and economic benefits of immigration while reducing the costs of a poorly educated population.

The college-going of immigrant youth is an issue that extends beyond the undocumented. As detailed in the article in this volume by Sandy Baum and Stella Flores, some immigrant groups, such as the children of Latin American immigrants, lag behind the general population in college enrollment and graduation. Partly, this situation reflects financial

constraints, but it also may be related to inadequate academic preparedness as well as limited knowledge about applying for college, partly because of youths' immigration status itself. For example, high-level coursework in high school, such as Advanced Placement courses and calculus, improves standardized test performance, makes students more attractive to colleges, and decreases the likelihood of remediation in college. Yet because such coursework is often optional, a "scarce" resource, and controlled by institutional gatekeepers, children of immigrants who try to enroll may be at a competitive disadvantage because of their families' race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, limited English, or lack of inside knowledge.⁷⁷ Indeed, among the children of Latino immigrants who have academic achievement problems in high school, low-level coursework seems to be a more important factor than low English proficiency.⁷⁸

Thus, efforts by policy makers to promote college-going among immigrant youth must focus on coursework as well as on other areas of college preparation that require inside knowledge, such as knowing how to apply for aid. Publicly supported educational interventions, such as Upward Bound on the federal level, aim to improve academic preparedness through supplemental instruction and to remedy gaps in instrumental resources, such as practical knowledge and guidance about the curricular and extracurricular steps necessary to getting into college, by matching youth from at-risk groups with college-educated mentors. A number of community-based programs are tailored to Latino youth by, for example, drawing mentors from the Latino community and encouraging supplemental coursework emphasizing Latino culture.⁷⁹ The need for such tailoring in this and other programs is motivated by

the special circumstances of Latino youth, especially those who are immigrants. For example, Latin American immigrant parents often have little experience in U.S.-style formal education. In addition, cultural values and strong intergenerational ties seem to discourage Latino youth from moving away from home to attend college, thus working somewhat counter to the policy goal of promoting college-going.⁸⁰

Another policy issue concerns parental involvement in education. Because a lack of contact between immigrant families and schools might contribute to immigrant risks and undercut immigrant advantages, efforts to open dialogue between the two could be valuable. For example, fewer English language learners are placed in lower-level courses at the start of high school when middle school personnel serve as liaisons between their students' parents and future high school counselors.⁸¹ School-directed efforts, however, have to be grounded in the lives of families. Gerardo López and his colleagues have documented how some schools serving migrant communities increased parental involvement by having flexible definitions of what involvement could entail and by working around parents' schedules and language barriers.⁸² Culturally grounded community-based programs to increase the involvement of Latin American immigrants, such as "Abriendo Puertas" and "Lee y Serás," also have promise. Such programs typically seek to demystify the American educational process and help parents become home teachers for their children and learn how to communicate with school personnel. Another possibility is to invest directly in the human capital of immigrant parents themselves, such as through continuing education, so that they can more effectively manage their children's education, a strategy that has been adopted

by many child-focused educational interventions targeting Latinos in general.⁸³

Conclusion

Social and behavioral research on education over the past twenty years has revealed that educational disparities vary across the immigrant population. In general, evidence points to an immigrant advantage in many indicators of academic progress and educational attainment. This apparent advantage, however, is more pronounced among the children of Asian and African immigrants than other groups. It is also more consistent in secondary school than in elementary school, at least early in elementary school, which could reflect disparities in early childhood education and cognitive development as well as potential immigration-related sampling biases in secondary school education. Moreover, for some groups, it is often observed only after family socioeconomic circumstances and language use are controlled. For others, it is at least partially explained by the socioeconomic selectivity of immigration. In view of these findings, researchers have replaced the traditional linear model of assimilation with a model that recognizes a more complex mix of immigrant advantages and risks and that stresses the socioeconomic, racial and ethnic, and other disparities that are related to immigrant status and could produce different patterns across diverse segments of the immigrant population. Moreover, policy action tends to focus on the subset of immigrants who seem to be more at risk, especially young children of Latin American immigrants, because of the clustering of disparities related to their immigration status or that their immigration status proxies.

A future challenge for researchers is to make sense of what this diversity means. For example, are immigrant selectivity and assimilation

models synergistic rather than competing explanations? Can different outcomes across immigrant groups reflect a similar underlying theoretical process? Furthermore, recent evidence suggests that native-born internal migrants, such as native blacks who move from one part of the country to another, demonstrate economic advantages over otherwise similar native-born nonmigrants that are similar to the immigrant paradox. As a result, comparing immigrants' and migrants'

educational experiences across racial and ethnic groups may lead to a broader perspective on migration and education of which immigrant advantages and risks are simply a subset.⁸⁴ These avenues represent future opportunities for refining theoretical understanding of the connection between immigration and education and for crafting a more cohesive policy approach to serving the growing population of immigrant youth in the United States.

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