



Educational attitudes, school peer context, and the “immigrant paradox” in education

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ABSTRACT

Previous research has been unable to explain declines in educational outcomes across immigrant generations. This study uses data on Mexican and Asian-origin youth from Add Health to test educational attitudes and behaviors as mechanisms linking immigrant generation to four educational outcomes. First, it assesses whether generational changes in attitudes and behaviors correspond to generational differences in educational outcomes. Second, it tests whether generational changes in immigrant children's attitudes depend on the school peer context in which they acculturate. Findings show that educational attitudes and behaviors do decline across immigrant generations, but that these changes in attitudes account for little of the generational variation in educational outcomes. The relationship between immigrant generation and attitudes is strongest in schools with more negative peer cultures.

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1. Introduction

The educational success of children in immigrant families is of paramount importance to the national interest. One-fifth of U.S. school children now come from immigrant families, and this number is projected to grow. Whether these children succeed in school will be critical to their ability to become effective workers, parents, and community members. An emerging literature in sociology and education aims to identify the unique educational advantages and disadvantages of immigrants' children. A common finding is that educational outcomes of first- or second-generation immigrant children tend to be better than those of otherwise comparable later-generation children. This is known as the “immigrant paradox” in education (Palacios et al., 2008).

Previous research has found that immigrants' children have very positive attitudes and behaviors toward education, including higher educational aspirations (Kao and Tienda, 1995) and greater effort expended on schoolwork (Rumbaut, 1997) than children of natives. Noting these initial positive orientations, the sociological literature has often attributed declines in children's educational outcomes across immigrant generations to the negative effects of acculturation (which is assumed to increase across immigrant generations) on children's educational attitudes and behaviors (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001; Rumbaut, 1997; Steinberg, 1996). However, with the exception of educational aspirations, there have been few empirical studies directly examining patterns of generational change in educational attitudes and behaviors. With only one exception (Rosenbaum and Rochford, 2008), nor has there been a large-scale study based on national data that explicitly links such generational change to either acculturation or educational outcomes. This paper tests empirically whether educational attitudes and behaviors do indeed serve as a concrete mechanism linking generation to educational outcomes, including grades, course-taking patterns, high school graduation, and college enrollment.

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Furthermore, current theoretical perspectives suggest that the context in which immigrants' children acculturate will shape the consequences of acculturation (Portes and Zhou, 1993; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001; Xie and Greenman, 2011). There may not be a uniform relationship between generation and educational attitudes; instead, the relationship may depend on the particular cultural models to which immigrants' children are exposed in the local context. Immigrants surrounded by natives who have more negative attitudes toward education should, all else equal, experience greater deterioration in their own attitudes over time and/or across generations. This paper tests the relationship between peer cultures regarding education and attitudinal change among immigrants' children.

In sum, this paper will provide two key tests of the relationships among immigrant generation, educational attitudes and behaviors, and educational outcomes by (a) assessing to what extent generational differences in educational outcomes, including grades, course-taking patterns, high school graduation, and college enrollment, are attributable to generational differences in attitudes and behaviors; and (b) examining whether local peer cultures influence temporal and generational changes in immigrants' attitudes and behaviors. A strength of the analysis is that it uses longitudinal data, allowing estimation of the association between earlier attitudes and behaviors and later educational outcomes. Clarifying the role of educational attitudes and behaviors in the educational outcomes of immigrants' children will allow educators and policymakers to better help these children maintain their initial educational advantages.

2. The “Immigrant Paradox” in education

2.1. Generational patterns in educational outcomes

Many studies have demonstrated that immigrants' children perform unusually well in school. Research has demonstrated a fairly consistent pattern in which either first-generation children, second-generation children, or both outperform their third-and-higher (henceforth “native”) generation peers. For example, several studies have shown that after taking into account family SES, children of Mexican (Landale et al., 1998), Hispanic (Driscoll, 1999; Perreira et al., 2006), and Asian (Perreira et al., 2006) immigrants are less likely than either same-race or White native peers to drop out of high school. Other studies have shown that immigrants' children outperform native peers in test scores (Harris et al., 2008; Kao and Tienda, 1995; White and Glick, 2009) and GPA (Kao and Tienda, 1995; Pong et al., 2005; Rumbaut, 1997; Steinberg, 1996). This apparent educational advantage of immigrants' children, who might be thought at first glance to be educationally disadvantaged due to weaker English skills and lesser familiarity with American culture, has been termed the “immigrant paradox” in education (Palacios et al., 2008).

These findings suggest a pattern of generational declines in the school performance of immigrants' children. For immigrant groups who have relatively high average education and income levels, such as many Asian groups, the advantage of immigrants' children is readily observable by comparing average generational differences in educational outcomes such as grades and test scores. For less socioeconomically advantaged groups, such as Mexican immigrants, this generational advantage frequently becomes apparent only after controlling for family income and parental education. In this case, the key finding is that immigrants' children tend to have better educational outcomes than children of natives with similar socioeconomic disadvantages. White and Glick (2009) term this pattern, in which being the child of an immigrant confers a net advantage in educational outcomes, “superachievement.” For socioeconomically disadvantaged immigrant groups, outcomes such as high school graduation rates may actually improve on average across generations, but not enough to achieve parity with native whites and not as much as would be expected based on the improvement in socioeconomic conditions (particularly parental education, for Hispanics) that also tends to occur across generations.

After controlling for generational improvements in socioeconomic status, very few studies have found evidence of generational improvements in educational outcomes. Exceptions include Fischer (2010), who found that high school nonenrollment was higher for foreign-born than native born youth, and Glick and White (2003), who found that in 1980 native-generation children had higher reading and math scores than first or second-generation children; however, they also found that in 1990 the pattern was reversed, with first- and second-generation children having the highest scores. Thus the literature shows a pervasive pattern in which, all else equal, immigrant generation is inversely related to educational outcomes.

2.2. Theoretical perspectives

What could account for this educational advantage among immigrants' children? Classical assimilation perspectives would predict generational improvement, not decline, in the average educational outcomes of immigrant groups. In particular, *straight-line assimilation theory* (Gans, 1973) predicts a relatively linear pattern of socioeconomic improvements across generations. The empirical patterns noted above constitute an anomaly from the perspective of straight-line theory. Modern perspectives on immigrant assimilation, by contrast, posit a more complex relationship between immigrant generation and educational outcomes. In particular, several variants of modern assimilation theories suggest that acculturation may be negatively related to educational outcomes for immigrants' children.

2.2.1. The immigrant optimism perspective: the importance of attitudes and behaviors

The *immigrant optimism hypothesis* (Kao and Tienda, 1995) argues that immigrant parents come to the U.S. with very high levels of motivation to succeed and optimism about their children's life chances, which they pass onto their children.

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