



# Human capital background and the educational attainment of second-generation immigrants in France<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, we study the impact of parental human capital background on ethnic educational gaps between second-generation immigrants using a large data set conducted in France in 2003. Estimates from censored random effect ordered Probit regressions show that the skills of immigrants explain in the most part, the ethnic educational gap between their children. Fluency in French and the length of their parents' stay in France also matter. The impact of the immigrants' education on the educational attainment of their children further depends on their country of origin, their place of schooling, and their proficiency in French.

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## 1. Introduction

In France, 42% of the young men and 27% of the young women whose parents are Northwest Africans leave school without any diploma. Among the children whose parents are natives or Southern Europeans, this proportion is about two times lower among men and nearly three

times lower among women (Lainé & Okba, 2005). In many countries, significant differences are also observed in the educational achievements of children from different origins (OECD, 2006). What can explain such inequalities? As emphasized in the Chiswick's seminal paper (1988), three main hypotheses may explain why different ethnic groups achieve different levels of educational attainment.

Firstly, some communities are likely to have a greater preference for schooling, which may be due to cultural, religious or historical factors. This particular taste for schooling can lead members of these communities to invest more in the human capital of their descendants. Secondly, ethnic differences in educational attainment may arise from discrimination. During their studies, children from some communities may be discriminated against with regard to access to schooling, quality of schooling, grade retention or tracking decisions (Losen & Orfield, 2002). During their working life, they can face less favorable job conditions. As the returns of their investment in human capital are lower, they would then be less motivated to invest in skills (Coate & Loury, 1993). Thirdly, some ethnic communities

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may be over-represented in the most disadvantaged socio-economic groups. Following the human capital theory, immigrants of these communities would then invest less in the education of their children.

Do we have to promote special educational programs in favor of some second-generation youths? Do we have to assist immigrants themselves in their educative mission? Are anti-discriminatory policies which encourage anonymous applications able to narrow the educational gaps? To evaluate the relative efficiency of such policies, it is necessary to rigorously identify the determinants of the educational attainment gaps. In this paper, we investigate how differences in human capital background among immigrant communities explain the educational attainments gaps among their descendants using a data set on immigrants living in France in 2003. We extend the growing literature which intends to understand the role of the family socio-economic background on the educational attainment of the second-generation immigrants in the following ways.

On the one hand, our contribution is the first study to focus on this issue using French data. Previous empirical studies have dealt with Anglo-Saxon countries, Germany (Gang & Zimmermann, 2000) and the Netherlands (Van Ours & Veenman, 2003). It is not obvious that these results can be readily extrapolated to the situation of immigrants living in other countries. Institutional differences in immigration policies and education systems between Anglo-Saxon and European countries could affect the educational achievement of children of immigrants. On the other hand, the quality of the data allows us to better take the migratory history of the parents of second-generation immigrants into account. For instance, our regressions control for their fluency in the host country's language, their length of stay in France or their place of study.

We show that skills of immigrants explain, in the most part, the ethnic educational gap between their descendants in France. French fluency and the length of stay in France of parents also matter. The impact of the immigrants' education on the educational attainment of their children further depends on their country of origin, their place of schooling and their proficiency in French. The remainder of our paper is organized as follows. In Section 2, we briefly review the literature on human capital background and educational attainment of second-generation immigrants. We describe the French data used for our empirical analysis in Section 3 and provide some descriptive statistics in Section 4. We present our econometric strategy in Section 5 and discuss our results in Section 6. Finally, Section 7 concludes.

## 2. Background on the educational attainment of second-generation immigrants

According to the Programme for International Students Assessment (OECD, 2006), in many OECD countries the second-generation students defined as those who are born in the host country and those who have arrived as children before school age perform at a lower level with respect to mathematical literacy, reading literacy and scientific literacy than their native peers. Understanding the determinants of this achievement gap is a key challenge.

According to previous studies, the educational attainment of parents, language spoken at home and the age at immigration of children significantly influence the educational achievement of the second generation.

As pointed out in Haveman and Wolfe (1995), the main determinant of the educational attainment of children is the educational attainment of their parents. The PISA surveys show that in OECD countries the parents of first-generation and second-generation students have, on average, completed fewer years of schooling than the parents of native students. A simple explanation of the educational gap between second-generation immigrants and their native-parentage peers is hence that parents of the former group are on average less skilled than those of the latter.

Following (Chiswick, 1988) seminal contribution, Borjas (1995) finds a positive correlation between parental skills and the skills of children in the US, but this correlation is not sufficiently high to remove ethnic skill differentials. This result is also confirmed by Card, DiNardo, and Estes (1998). Nevertheless, both studies are based on data that do not directly link the skills of a given child with the skills of its own parents. They only exhibit correlations between the average skills of a cohort of immigrants and the average skills of a cohort of immigrants' children with respect to groups of different national origins and do not distinguish between second-generation immigrants by country of origin.

Focusing on the largest groups of immigrants living in Germany (Turkish, Yugoslav, Greek, Italian, Spanish), Gang and Zimmermann (2000) showed that Turkish and Yugoslav pupils obtain less favorable results than German pupils. Parental schooling plays no role in the educational attainment of foreign born children, whereas it has a major role in the educational attainment of the native parentage children. In the Netherlands, Van Ours and Veenman (2003) found that differences in parental education explain differences in educational attainment between ethnic groups. Turkish, Moroccan and Antillean pupils perform worse than Dutch pupils, but there is no difference between the school attendance of second-generation immigrants (whatever their ethnic origin) and natives once the educational level of parents is taken into account.

So, the intergenerational transferability of skills may differ not only between natives and immigrants, but also between various ethnic communities. Several studies have further stressed that the returns to foreign experience and education were lower than those obtained domestically (Chiswick & Miller, 1985; Kossoudji, 1989; Schaafsma & Sweetman, 2001). As long as immigrants are unable to completely transfer the human capital accumulated in their home country to the labor market of the host country, it is also plausible that the impact of their skills on the educational attainment of their children depends on the place where these skills have been acquired. This suggests that the effect of the human capital of immigrants on the educational achievement of their children should further be affected by the immigrants' place of schooling as well as by their length of stay in the host country.

Language spoken at home should also affect the educational achievement of children of foreign origin. Taking

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