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Immigrant integration policy for future generations? A cross-national multilevel analysis of immigrant-background adolescents' sense of belonging at school

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined whether an immigrant integration policy effort that is geared toward the educational inclusion of all adolescents may actually work toward the reduction of the gap between immigrant-background and non-immigrant students in their sense of social belonging at school. This study posited that a relatively lower sense of belonging at school among immigrant-background adolescents may be a manifestation of systemic social exclusion that permeates the educational system of a given country, thus hypothesizing that a public policy approach may be effective as a systemic intervention. A series of hierarchical generalized linear modeling analyses of data from 52,446 children across 2,248 schools in 25 countries was conducted. The results suggested that government efforts to formulate and enforce educational policies for immigrant integration may have some positive effect on the social inclusion of immigrant-background adolescents in school settings. This study has substantial significance as it provides an evidentiary base on the tangible impact of multicultural policies.

Introduction

Globalization has made international migration an increasingly common phenomenon throughout the world. When people migrate to a new country, they often expect their children to build a brighter future by enjoying better educational opportunities. Such an expectation, however, is contrasted with the reality that many immigrant-background students struggle to surmount multiple obstacles to adjustment and success at school (Makarova & Birman, 2016; Zoido, 2012). Extensive research has shown that there is an educational gap between children with an immigrant background and non-immigrant children. The educational gap that has been the most studied is the gap in academic performance due to opportunity disparities that have persisted among different ethno-cultural groups (Levels & Dronkers, 2008; Schnepf, 2007). While academic performance gaps have been a common focus in educational research, other aspects of students' schooling experience have rarely been discussed, despite their likely contribution to such gaps.

The present study focuses on the educational gap between immigrant-background and non-immigrant groups in terms of students' sense of belonging at school. Some studies have already shown that students from immigrant families tend to have a lower sense of belonging at school – and a lower level of emotional engagement in general – compared to native students (Chiu, Pong, Mori, & Chow, 2012; Willms, 2003), while the "immigrant paradox" – i.e., the phenomenon that some immigrant-background youth outperform their non-immigrant peers despite socioeconomic disadvantages – is often observed in indicators of cognitive engagement and

academic performance (Chiu et al., 2012; Crosnoe & López Turley, 2011). Psychological studies emphasize that a low sense of belonging at school signifies a low level of academic motivation and emotional well-being (Goodenow, 1993; Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996). This issue also deserves close analytic attention from a youth welfare perspective because a lack of perceived belonging is often a precursor to academic disengagement and juvenile delinquency (Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997; Becker & Luthar, 2002).

Specifically, this study aims to empirically examine if an immigrant integration policy effort that is geared toward the educational inclusion of all children regardless of immigrant origin can help to close the gap in the sense of belonging at school between immigrant-background and non-immigrant adolescents. This study posits that a low sense of belonging among immigrant-background adolescents is not simply the result of certain individual-level attributes. Rather, we carefully examine the possibility that the gap between immigrant-background adolescents and their non-migrant peers in the sense of belonging at school may be related to the institutionalization of immigrant integration policies for educational inclusion. The socio-ecological model that explains adolescents' well-being suggests that the cause of a weak sense of belonging at school is not limited to individual-level factors, but rather that it extends across multiple layers within the social environment and does not exclude a country's policies (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; García-Coll & Szalacha, 2004). Nevertheless, the prior research on students' sense of belonging at school has neglected the effects of policies, while paying close attention to students' immediate environments such as family and school factors.[1] By revisiting the sense of belonging at the individual psychological level in light of systematic social inclusion/exclusion at the macro-societal level, the present study hopes to broaden our understanding of the socio-political construction and distribution of educational opportunities in an increasingly diverse and multicultural world.

The findings from this study will provide new knowledge about immigrant integration policies. In both scholarly and policy studies across many parts of the world, considerable attention has been given to the institutionalization of immigrant integration policies because it purports to promote social integration with the increased "valorization of humanity and diversity" (Ramirez, Bromley, & Russell, 2009, p. 29) in society. Despite the international diffusion of immigrant integration policies over the past several decades (Cha & Ham, 2014; Joppke, 2007), scant effort has been devoted to the evaluation of the policies in a systematic manner. The effects of such policies on immigrant-origin youths in particular have rarely been investigated from a policy evaluation perspective.[2] The current study is an exploratory effort toward addressing this research void by focusing on the effect of policies on immigrant-background adolescents' sense of belonging at school versus that of their non-immigrant peers.

Literature review and hypotheses

In this section, the literature is reviewed from multiple perspectives. First, the importance of children's sense of belonging at school is briefly discussed from an educational and youth welfare perspective. Then, two additional perspectives are introduced. One is a sociological perspective that understands a low sense of belonging as a manifestation of systemic social exclusion, and the other is a public policy perspective that conceives of an immigrant integration policy as an intervention toward social inclusion. Finally, based on these latter two perspectives, two interrelated hypotheses are advanced for this study.

Importance of the sense of belonging at school

The adequate and timely satisfaction of the need for belongingness has long been understood as an important and necessary condition for one's psychological and behavioral well-being. More than half a century ago, Maslow (1962) listed belonging as a basic human need that must be satisfied before the emergence of higher-level motives toward self-esteem and self-actualization can take place. Many emotional breakdowns, according to his theory, result from an unsatisfied need for belongingness and respect. Alderfer (1969) also noted that the desire to develop and maintain interpersonal relationships, which requires interaction with others to find satisfaction, constitutes an important category of human needs in organizational settings. Similarly, Baumeister and Leary (1995) developed and argued for "the belongingness hypothesis" in which "human beings [are understood to] have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships" (p. 497). This hypothesis has been supported by extensive empirical research (Chipuer, 2001; Mellor, Stokes, Firth, Hayashi, & Cummins, 2008; Watt & Badger, 2009).

Many studies suggest that the need to belong is one of the most important needs that must be met for students to function well in school and other learning environments. As Furrer and Skinner (2003) summarized, students "who feel unimportant or rejected … are more likely to become frustrated, bored, and alienated from learning activities, which in turn interferes with their academic progress" (p. 158). In this respect, Goodenow (1993) emphasized that the school environments that are not adequately responsive to students' need for belonging may result in a decrease in their academic motivation. "Although [academic] motivation is often approached by

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[1] See, e.g., Schachner et al. (2016). In their study, two types of school-level diversity policy were investigated: (a) fostering equality and inclusion and (b) acknowledging cultural pluralism. The results revealed that both types of policy would promote the psychological school adjustment of early adolescent immigrants. See also Makarova and Birman (2016) for a comprehensive review of qualitative research on the acculturation and psychological adjustment of minority students in the school context. While the focus of the current study is on assessing the effect of country-level policies, future research may benefit from examining the interaction and mediation effects between country-level policies and lower-level contextual variables including school-level characteristics.

[2] For an exception, see, e.g., Yang and Ham (2017). Their cross-national analysis shows that the extent to which a country has institutionalized anti-discrimination policies for immigrant integration attenuates the association between immigrant-background students and school truancy for both first- and second-generation immigrants.