



Gatekeepers of the American Dream: How teachers' perceptions shape the academic outcomes of immigrant and language-minority students



Sarah Blanchard*, Chandra Muller

Population Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin, United States

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ABSTRACT

High school teachers evaluate and offer guidance to students as they approach the transition to college based in part on their perceptions of the student's hard work and potential to succeed in college. Their perceptions may be especially crucial for immigrant and language-minority students navigating the U.S. educational system. Using the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS:2002), we consider how the intersection of nativity and language-minority status may (1) inform teachers' perceptions of students' effort and college potential, and (2) shape the link between teachers' perceptions and students' academic progress towards college (grades and likelihood of advancing to more demanding math courses). We find that teachers perceive immigrant language-minority students as hard workers, and that their grades reflect that perception. However, these same students are less likely than others to advance in math between the sophomore and junior years, a critical point for preparing for college. Language-minority students born in the U.S. are more likely to be negatively perceived. Yet, when their teachers see them as hard workers, they advance in math at the same rates as nonimmigrant native English speaking peers. Our results demonstrate the importance of considering both language-minority and immigrant status as social dimensions of students' background that moderate the way that high school teachers' perceptions shape students' preparation for college.

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1. Introduction

Teachers' perceptions of their students' academic effort and potential are crucial for shaping students' academic outcomes. However, teachers' views of their students may be limited by their ability to understand who their students are and to connect with them. This process may be more complicated for the growing population of newcomers to U.S. schools. Many immigrant parents cite opportunities for their children in U.S. schools as a central part of their "American Dream," but teachers may have less familiarity with students whose backgrounds are culturally or linguistically different (Hagelskamp et al., 2010; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008). If teachers' perceptions of whether

* Corresponding author at: Population Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin, 305 E. 23rd Street, Stop G1800, Austin, TX 78712-1699, United States.

E-mail address: sfblanchard@utexas.edu (S. Blanchard).

students have what it takes to succeed in U.S. schools are influenced by their status as language-minority or as immigrants, then these students' opportunities may be different from those of their peers.¹ As greater numbers of these students approach the critical moment of the transition to college, relational aspects of schooling between immigrant and language-minority students and influential others are increasingly relevant to conversations about postsecondary opportunity. This paper addresses when and how teachers may act as gatekeepers of the American Dream for immigrant and language-minority students by examining how teachers' perceptions of these students shape their grades and chances of course advancement compared with nonimmigrant native English speakers. By understanding how teachers' perceptions affect outcomes for immigrants and language-minority students, we further our understanding of how interpersonal classroom dynamics affect student outcomes for a rapidly growing segment of our population at an important milestone.

Although immigrant students often have more ambitious educational goals and greater optimism about their futures than their native-born peers, they experience mixed academic outcomes (Alba and Nee, 2003; Glick and White, 2004; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001; White and Glick, 2009; Zhou, 1997). The disjuncture between goals and outcomes for some language-minority and immigrant students reveals the challenges that schools face as they try to help these students translate their ambitions into academic success. Language-minority and immigrant status are two dimensions by which these students may be socially distinct from their classmates that teachers may implicitly or explicitly consider when thinking about students or advising them (Hachfeld et al., 2010). Teachers may reward students they view as promising and hardworking with higher grades and guidance toward demanding college-preparatory coursework (Kelly, 2008; Lleras, 2008; Muller et al., 1999; Rosenbaum, 2001). In turn, students may respond to positive perceptions with increased engagement and higher aspirations (Carbonaro, 2005; Jussim and Harber, 2005; Weinstein, 2002). As newcomers to the U.S., immigrant and language-minority students may be especially likely to rely on teachers' and other in-school authority figures' perceptions of them as they navigate the American educational system (Green et al., 2008; Kao and Tienda, 1995; Pong et al., 2005; Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch, 1995; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2009; Valenzuela, 1999). Teachers' perceptions of immigrant and language-minority students may help explain why these students are less successful than others at transforming their high ambitions into high achievement.

With this study, we consider the intersection of language-minority and immigrant status and analyze how teachers' perceptions shape students' academic outcomes just before the transition to college. Students' academic opportunities and experiences as sophomores help define their ultimate level of college preparation by determining, for example, whether they will complete critical courses such as Algebra 2 (Schneider et al., 1998; Sutton et al., 2013). By contrasting different students' grades and likelihood of advancing to more demanding college preparatory coursework, we analyze how teachers' evaluations of whether or not students have what it takes to succeed in college correspond with students' accumulation of the credentials necessary to not only get through courses but also to get ahead and move on to college. Further, we consider not only how nativity and language-minority status inform teachers' perceptions of their students but also how the intersection of these social dimensions may shape processes that link teachers' perceptions to students' academic achievement. This approach pushes our analysis past identifying differences in the implications of perceptions between students based on their nativity and native language and toward understanding how and why these students' academic outcomes may be particularly shaped by teachers' views. In doing so, it informs perspectives on the role of teachers in the transition to college more broadly.

2. Background

Immigrants and language-minority students each comprise about one fifth of the U.S. student population, figures that are expected to increase in coming decades (Aud et al., 2010; Klein et al., 2004; Rong and Preissle, 2008). However, as Tillman and others have argued, exclusive focus on academic indicators such as attainment or achievement for immigrants "mask[s] important differences in the processes through which immigrant and nonimmigrant children navigate the educational system," (Tillman et al., 2006, p. 130; Watkins and Melde, 2010). The same may be true of language-minority students, the majority of whom have immigrant parents (85%) and were born in the U.S. (63%) (Klein et al., 2004). Despite strong evidence that supportive teachers facilitate academic success for immigrant and language-minority students, there is mixed evidence about how teachers perceive them.

2.1. Teachers' perceptions of immigrant and language-minority students

The existing research suggests that teachers perceive students from immigrant households as having positive attitudes toward school as well as more self discipline and respect for their teachers, compared with other students (Dabach, 2011; Matute-Bianchi, 1986). However, teachers expect these qualities to decline and they hold more pessimistic expectations for their educational attainment (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008, p. 134). Further, teachers may view these newcomers as less academically capable since they are often placed into lower-level courses taught by less experienced teachers with lower

¹ We define language-minority students as those who first learned a language other than English, regardless of their English proficiency, placement in English as a second language (ESL) courses, or designation as an English Language Learner (ELL) or as Limited English Proficient by their schools (Callahan et al., 2010).

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