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Schooling location and economic, occupational and cognitive success among immigrants and their children: The case of Los Angeles ☆

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ABSTRACT

Large numbers of foreign-born residents in the United States mean that many people receive at least part of their education abroad. Despite this fact, our understanding of nativity differences in the success of adults and their children is based on research that does not empirically consider variation in the benefits to schooling depending on where it is received. We use data from the Los Angeles Family and Neighborhood Survey (L.A. FANS) to examine: (a) whether the socioeconomic and cognitive returns to education depend on whether it is received in the U.S. or abroad; and (b) whether schooling location partially accounts for nativity differences in these returns. We find that the returns to schooling are generally largest for adults who receive at least some of their highest level of education in the U.S. The beneficial effects of U.S. schooling are more pronounced at higher levels of educational attainment. Schooling location accounts for a sizeable fraction of the lower socioeconomic and cognitive returns of the foreign-born, relative to natives; some meaningful differences remain, however. In addition, the higher cognitive skills of the children of foreign-born adults remain unexplained. Although we cannot distinguish among the possible pathways underlying these associations (e.g., school quality, transferability of credentials, the timing of immigration) our findings suggest the importance of considering factors related to schooling location as predictors of socioeconomic and cognitive success in the United States.

1. Introduction

We use data on schooling location, socioeconomic attainment and cognitive skills to consider the extent to which the returns to schooling depend on its location. Large numbers of foreign-born residents in the United States mean that many people receive at least part of their education abroad. As a result, our understanding of the influence of educational attainment on the social and economic well being of this group, as well as any consequences for the next generation, is potentially complicated by factors related to schooling location. The social, economic and cognitive benefits of educational attainment may depend on the environment in which education is received. Using data from the Los Angeles Family and Neighborhood Survey (L.A. FANS), we consider this issue for a diverse and representative sample of adults and children. Specifically, we ask three questions. First, do the economic, occupational and cognitive returns to adults' education differ depending on where

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schooling is attained? Secondly, do differences in schooling location play a role in explaining nativity differences in these returns? Third, do the cognitive returns to adults' schooling location extend to the next generation?

2. Background

2.1. The social, economic and cognitive returns to schooling

Education is an important marker of social status and a crucial component in processes of social mobility and reproduction (Blau and Duncan, 1967; Bielby et al., 1977; Featherman and Hauser, 1978). Although social background remains an important determinant of status attainment, education is a dominant mechanism for social mobility and a well-known predictor of occupational and financial success, in early adulthood and subsequently. Less tangible benefits also accrue from education in the form of prestige, social networks, knowledge and information. High levels of education afford access to social and cultural resources, or "capital" (Coleman, 1988; DiMaggio and Mohr, 1985). These resources include peer networks that provide access to desirable labor market positions, marital partners with high levels of education or financial capital, high quality information, and cultural events (DiMaggio and Mohr, 1985; Lin, 1999; Petersen et al., 2000). The benefits of education also extend to future generations: children from homes and/or schools with high levels of social and cultural capital have more resources to draw from and are more likely to attain high levels of education themselves (DiMaggio, 1982; Parcel and Dufur, 2000).

Cognitive skills are also related to educational attainment; higher levels of education empower people with fundamental knowledge, reasoning and problem-solving skills. Finally, it is worth pointing out that education is also more strongly related to physical and mental health than are other markers of social status (e.g., Smith, 2004). Strong educational gradients in health exist in most groups in industrialized nations, with those at successively higher levels experiencing better health than those below them (Case et al., 2002; Marmot, 2001). Not only are social, economic, cultural and health-related factors affected by educational attainment, but they also affect the educational attainment of future generations (e.g., Case et al., 2005; Jackson, 2009). Cumulatively, they therefore play an important direct and indirect role in social mobility processes.

2.2. Nativity differences in the returns to education

Although the benefits of education are plentiful, their distribution across subgroups of the population is unequal. Our focus is on differences in benefits due to schooling location and nativity. The 2000 U.S. Census indicates that about 11% of the population is foreign-born. Migration to the U.S. often brings short and long-term improvements in quality of life, particularly among those of low social position in their native countries (Chiswick, 1978; Jasso et al., 2004; Massey, 1981; Schoeni, 1997). Classic assimilation theory predicts a smooth and linear process of integration across many dimensions, including language and cultural practices, social networks, residential context and social status (Gordon, 1964). Evidence shows, however, that the process of assimilation is not uniform across all foreign-born groups, but depends on levels of education, the reasons for migration, the context of reception, and skin color (Alba and Nee, 2003; Waters, 1999).

Research examining immigrant integration has focused primarily on earnings among Mexicans, the largest immigrant group in the United States. Foreign-born Mexican men and women earn less than U.S.-born Mexican-Americans and non-Hispanic whites (Allensworth, 1997; Verdugo and Verdugo, 1985). Part of this differential is explained by differences related to the immigration process, such as English language skill and social networks within the labor market (Borjas, 1983; Morales and Ong, 1993). Like Mexicans, Central and South Americans also gain less financially from education than their native-born peers (Tienda, 1983). These patterns changed little during the period between 1970 and 1990 (Snipp and Hirschman, 2005). Asian immigrants are clustered at both the top and bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy, depending on ethnicity and national origin (Zeng and Xie, 2004). On average, however, Asians are more successful than Hispanics in converting education into economic and occupational success (Iceland, 1999; Neidert and Farley, 1985).

2.3. The importance of schooling location

Most literature on nativity differences in adults' and children's success fails to consider explicitly whether educational attainment confers equal benefits, regardless of where it is received. We extend previous work by describing nativity differences in the association between education and adults' economic and occupational success, and adults' and children's cognitive achievement. Our data do not allow us to test hypotheses about the reasons for differential returns to education by schooling location. We aim instead to add to existing work by documenting differentials in the returns to education among adults and their children by place of education. We also examine the role of schooling location in accounting for observed nativity differences in the returns to education. To motivate our analysis, we consider the potential importance of schooling location below.

2.3.1. School quality

Educational systems vary significantly across nations in instructional quality, content, and access to financial and technological resources. Whereas graduation from a U.S. secondary school generally implies a basic level of math, verbal