



Links between immigration and social inequality in education: A comparison among five European countries

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Abstract

Empirical studies indicate that immigrant students are disadvantaged in most educational systems, but also that the international variation in their relative situation is remarkable. However, little is known about the processes that lead to their disadvantage and to corresponding international differences. This paper explores the role of specific national contexts that determine the educational situation of migrants. The main assumption is that the relative performance of migrants in education can be attributed not only to individual characteristics, but also to macro-level conditions in particular societies. Analyzed are selected relationships between immigration, immigrant and educational policies; patterns of migration; and the performance of migrants within the national education systems. This study covers five European cases that show considerable variation in the major explanatory variables: France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. Regarding the empirical consequences of these determinants for educational performance, the analyses draw upon comparative micro-level data from the large-scale assessment studies PIRLS 2001 and PISA 2006. These allow conducting multivariate comparisons while controlling for differences in group-level composition. In all countries, a major part of the relative disadvantage can be explained by the social composition of migrants in combination with general patterns of social inequality in education; however, in some cases significant differences remain even when controlling for such group differences. Institutions and policies of immigration, integration and education obviously interact when determining the situation of migrants in education.

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1. Introduction

The situation of migrants in education has received major public attention in recent years (OECD, 2010a). Empirical studies indicate not only that migrants are often disadvantaged regarding their educational attainment, but also that the international variation in their

relative situation is remarkable. However, little is known about the causes and processes that lead to the patterns of relative disadvantage in specific countries. Starting from existing evidence on the situation of migrants in education, this paper explores these causes on the basis of comparative empirical analyses. The main assumption is that the relative position of migrants in education can be attributed not only to individual and family-related characteristics, but also to macro-level conditions in particular societies. It seems obvious that the institutional structures of educational systems and the availability of

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group-specific support play a role for the development of students. However, other institutions are important as well which have an impact on both the selectivity of the population of immigrants and on their behavior.

This paper has three aims: first, to describe the relative performance of migrant students in the educational systems of selected Western countries; second, to assess the contribution of both the social composition of the migrant population and social inequality in education for these outcomes; and third, to explain selected patterns of relative performance by tracing them back to the specific institutional contexts of immigration, integration, and education. Hence, the paper discusses relationships between patterns of immigration, immigrant and educational policies, and the performance of international migrants within educational systems.

This study covers five European cases that show considerable variation in the major explanatory variables. Among them are countries with a relatively long history of immigration (the Netherlands, France) and those with a rather short tradition (United Kingdom, Germany, Sweden). The countries also differ in their official strategies of migrant integration. All of the countries have followed specific developments which will be described in greater detail. Regarding the empirical consequences of this macro-level variation for the education of immigrants and natives, the analyses look at individual reading performance during elementary and secondary school. This competency is central for academic achievement as well as the successful social integration of migrants. The analyses draw upon comparative micro-level data from the large-scale studies PIRLS and PISA, which allow conducting multivariate comparisons while controlling for differences in group-level composition.

2. Theoretical considerations

2.1. Results from prior research

This paper focuses on contemporary populations of immigrant school students. It builds upon previous findings from migration and education research, but adds a number of specifications. As the focus is on the relative academic performance of immigrants, the paper is not primarily concerned with the explanation of migration processes themselves. However, the situation of migrants in education cannot be separated from preceding processes of immigration and social integration. Similarly, education and the acquisition of qualifications are of central importance for successfully integrating migrants into society (Alba & Nee, 1999).

A broad spectrum of theories has focused on international migration (Haug, 2000; Massey et al., 1993; Portes, 1995). While macro-level theories conceptualize migration processes as inter-systemic adaptation and exchange, micro-level theories focus in particular on individual decisions related to migration. Theories about intermediary processes – in particular social networks and ethnic communities – intend to link these analytical levels. Similar distinctions can be made with regard to the integration of immigrants. Esser (1980) distinguishes between system integration – i.e. the retention of the basic functional capacities of a society experiencing immigration – and social integration – i.e. the social inclusion of individual actors. While societies may in principle function also without social integration, performance in education, the topic of this paper, is a central element of social integration. With regard to education, “transnational” multiple inclusion of immigrants in sending and receiving countries as well as their ethnic community proves to be difficult, so that at least a moderate level of assimilation and social integration is likely to be a necessary condition for success in the educational system of the receiving country. There is a smooth transition between systematic theories of migration and generalizations of empirical findings. Many studies have shown that migration is typically selective with regard to various demographic and socio-economic characteristics (age, sex, social class etc.). In most receiving countries, immigration tends to originate from a rather limited number of countries (OECD, 2010b). These patterns tend to vary from nation to nation, and they are directly influenced by specific immigration policies and national histories. The relative status of migrants depends on the major causes of migration. Unqualified labor migrations are typically at the bottom of the social order, but other groups among the immigrants may well be better off than the average. In any case, observed differences in relevant outcome variables between immigrants and non-immigrants tend to be significantly reduced when *social selectivity* is controlled. Moreover, integration is a *generational* process.¹ Members of the “first generation”, i.e. people who have migrated themselves, start a process of integration into the host society. The descendants of immigrants (“second generation” and following generations) are typically better integrated than their parents (Heath & Cheung, 2007), though there may be

¹ The term “immigration generation” is, however, an analytical category which might not be exogenous to individual decisions; for example, fertility decisions may be made deliberately before or after migration, and given their different place of birth, the children will be classified as different immigrant generations.

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