MOVING STORIES

Immigrant Youth Adapt to Change

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Abstract

In the first decade of the new millennium, a new cycle of public concern about the benefits and harms of immigration has erupted. The harsh spotlight on undocumented immigration and border controls has blinded us to many important facets of the problem. In this article, we focus on the experience and integration of the children of immigrants. These youth are the largest growing segment of the U.S. child population—now constituting 20% of our nation's children and projected by the year 2040 to make up one-third of our children. Immigrant-origin youth are extraordinarily diverse, and their experiences resist facile generalizations. The social and educational outcomes of immigrant youth will thus vary substantially depending upon the specific constellation of resources and the settlement context. Of critical importance is how immigrant youth fare academically, as this has long-term implications for their future, as well as our society's well-being. While some are successfully navigating the U.S. educational system, large numbers struggle academically, leaving school without having acquired the tools that will enable them to function in the highly competitive labor market and ever more complex society. Here we explore a variety of factors that shed light on the educational integration of the children of immigrants: educational background; poverty; segregation; undocumented status; English-language acquisition; promoting academic engagement; family relations; peer relationships; communities and community organizations; and mentoring relationships. We advocate a major new policy agenda to ease the transition of America's newest and littlest arrivals to their new home.

Keywords: Immigrant Youth, Education, Integration, Social Networks, Policy

INTRODUCTION

In the first decade of the new millennium a new cycle of public concern about the benefits and harms of immigration has erupted. In mid-2006, exactly twenty years

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after the last major U.S. immigration overhaul (the United States Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986), the quiescent public discourse regarding immigration began rumbling, eventually erupting into a full-throated national debate. Suddenly, immigration talk saturated the airwaves: popular television and radio commentators hyperventilated about "broken borders" and the "illegal-alien invasion," which some called the "Mexican *reconquista*." At about the same time, by the end of May 2006, millions of people—especially undocumented immigrants and significant numbers of children of immigrants—had taken to the streets of major U.S. cities, clamoring for the right to stay in the United States.

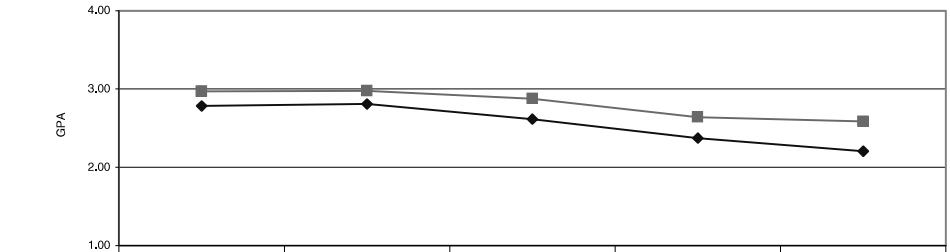
The harsh spotlight on border controls has blinded us to the broader picture, however. To a large extent, we have failed to consider how immigration is transforming our society—the children of immigrants represent a growing share of the American fabric. These immigrant-origin children and youth are the largest growing segment of the U.S. child population—now constituting 20% of our nation's children and projected by the year 2040 to make up one-third of our children (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco, 2007). Yet the United States has virtually no policy to smooth the integration of immigrant adults and their children into their new society. We need to develop an ambitious, workable, and humane approach to immigration that facilitates the integration of young people and addresses the realities of the twenty-first century.

Immigrants today are extraordinarily diverse, and their experiences resist facile generalizations.[1] They arrive from multiple points of origin and add new threads of cultural, linguistic, religious, and racial difference to the American tapestry. Some are the children of educated professional parents; others have parents who are illiterate. Some have received excellent schooling; others arrive from educational systems that are in shambles. Some are escaping political, religious, or ethnic persecution; others are motivated by the promise of better jobs and the hope for better educational opportunities. Some are documented migrants; others, estimated at 1.8 million, are unauthorized young migrants[2] (Bean and Lowell, 2007). Some settle in well-established communities with dense social support systems that ease the transition of youth into the new educational system; others move from one migrant setting to another, with students often forced to change schools. The social and educational outcomes of immigrant youth will thus vary substantially depending upon the specific constellation of resources and the settlement context (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001).

How immigrant youth fare academically has long-term implications for their future well-being. The global economy is largely unforgiving to those who do not achieve postsecondary education and beyond. More than ever, schooling processes and outcomes shape socioeconomic mobility: the average annual earnings of those without a high school diploma are $19,169, while the average college graduate earns $51,554, if he or she has a bachelor's degree, and $78,093 if he or she has an advanced degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006).

Immigrant-origin students demonstrate a variety of educational trajectories. Recent studies suggest that while some are successfully navigating the U.S. educational system, large numbers struggle academically, leaving schools without having acquired the tools that will enable them to function in the highly competitive labor market and ever more complex society (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco, 2002; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2007; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001).

Data from the Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation (LISA) study, which we codirected at Harvard (1997–2003), assessed the academic performance and engagement of approximately 400 recently arrived immigrant youth from Asia (born



	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3**	Year 4**	Year 5***
Male	2.78	2.81	2.61	2.37	2.20
Female	2.96	2.97	2.87	2.64	2.58

Note: Significance levels: ** = $p < .01$; *** = $p < .001$

Fig. 1. GPA Trends: Comparisons by Gender

in China), the Caribbean (born in the Dominican Republic or in Haiti), and Latin America (born in Mexico or in various Central American countries), examining changes over time.[3] Strikingly, over time, the achievement (including grade point average—GPA) of students coming from the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Mexico, and Central America, all declined in a statistically significant manner; while a similar trend emerged for the Chinese-origin students, the decline did not reach significance. The GPA of immigrant boys declined significantly more than did that of girls for all groups. For both girls and boys, their grades in the first two years were considerably higher than their grades in the last three years. The second year, both girls' and boys' GPAs peaked, and, from the third year on, both girls and boys experienced a steady decrease in their GPAs. Additionally, girls consistently had statistically significantly higher GPAs than did boys throughout the five-year period (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2007). See Figure 1.

CRITICAL FACTORS

The ten factors outlined below have the strongest implications for school performance and social adaptation of immigrant children.

Educational Background

Immigrant youth arrive in American neighborhoods and schools with varied educational skills. At one end of the spectrum, we find youth from upper-status urban backgrounds. They are typically highly literate and have well-developed study skills. Their more educated parents are well equipped to guide their children in how to study, and access and make meaning of data and information, and they can provide resources including additional books, a home computer, internet access, and tutors. In sharp contrast are those youngsters whose parents have little or no formal educational experience. Equally disadvantaged are the children who arrive from countries with compromised educational infrastructures who have missed critical years of classroom experience and often cannot read and write in their native language. Such varied experiences and backgrounds have profound implications for their transition to the U.S. setting. Unsurprisingly, those arriving with lower levels of education tend to decline academically more markedly once they settle in the United States (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2007).

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Poverty

Although some immigrant youth come from privileged backgrounds, large numbers of them must face the challenges associated with poverty. Immigrant children are more than four times as likely as native-born children to live in crowded housing conditions, and are three times as likely to be uninsured (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2007). Poverty frequently coexists with other factors that augment risks, such as single parenthood; residence in suboptimal neighborhoods; and schools that are segregated, overcrowded, and understaffed. Children raised in circumstances of poverty are more vulnerable to an array of psychological distresses including difficulties concentrating and sleeping, anxiety, and depression, as well as a heightened propensity for delinquency and violence, all of which have implications for educational outcomes.

Segregation

Where immigrant families settle shapes the immigrant journey and the experiences and the adaptations of children. Latino immigrants, in particular, tend to settle in segregated, deeply impoverished, urban settings. In such neighborhoods, with few opportunities in the formal economy, informal and underground activities tend to flourish. Immigrants of color who settle in predominantly minority neighborhoods have virtually no direct, systematic, and intimate contact with middle-class White Americans, which in turn affects a host of experiences, leading among other things to cultural and linguistic isolation from the mainstream. A pattern of triple segregation—by race, language, and poverty—shapes the lives of many new immigrants, especially those coming from Latin American and the Caribbean.

Segregated and poor neighborhoods are more likely to have dysfunctional schools characterized by ever-present fear of violence, distrust, low expectations, and institutional anomie. Lacking English skills, many immigrant students are enrolled in the least demanding classes, which eventually exclude them from courses needed for college preparation. Such settings undermine students' ability to sustain motivation and academic engagement. The least engaged students are most likely to decline in their academic performance over time (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2007).

Undocumented Status

Today there are approximately 1.8 million youth living in the United States without proper documentation—and an estimated 3.1 million are living in households headed by at least one undocumented immigrant (Passel 2006). Research suggests that undocumented youth and their families resemble other immigrant families in basic ways. Many waited patiently for years for their visas to be approved so that they could be reunited with family members already in the United States. Frustrated by the seemingly interminable waiting lists—over five years in many cases (another way our immigration policies are out of touch)—many immigrant youth finally venture forth without the required papers (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2007). LISA data suggest that undocumented students often arrive after multiple family separations and traumatic border crossings. Once settled, they may continue to experience fear and anxiety about being apprehended, being again separated from their parents, and being deported. Such psychological and emotional duress can take its toll on the academic experiences of undocumented youth. Undocumented students with dreams

of graduating from high school and going on to college find that their legal status stands in the way of their access to postsecondary education (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco, 2002).

English-Language Acquisition

Most immigrant children are second-language learners. English-language difficulties present particular challenges for optimal performance on high-stakes tests. Performance on tests such as the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), the Regents exams in New York, and the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) in Massachusetts has real implications for college access. Second-language acquisition issues can serve to mask actual skills and knowledge. Even when immigrant students are able to enter colleges while they are still refining their language skills, they may miss subtleties in lectures and discussions. They may read more slowly than native English speakers, and they may have difficulty expressing more complex thoughts on written assignments. This is likely to bring down their grades, in turn impacting access to graduate or professional schools.

In many schools, the separation and segregation between the immigrant English-language learners and their native-born peers is nearly complete. The hermetic *status quo* results in less exposure to the linguistic modeling that their U.S.-born peers could provide, and U.S. students, in need of knowledge about the world beyond our borders, also miss out. Conversely, the data show that immigrant youngsters who report having even one native English-speaking friend acquire English skills more quickly and proficiently (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2007).

Promoting Academic Engagement

Healthy social support networks are linked to better adjustment. Interpersonal relationships and social companionship serve to maintain and enhance self-esteem, acceptance, and approval. Instrumental social support provides individuals and their families with tangible aid (such as language tutoring), as well as guidance and advice (about good teachers and supportive counselors). Instrumental supports are particularly critical for disoriented immigrant newcomer youth. LISA data suggest that social supports also can play a role in moderating negative influences (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2007).

Family Relations

Family cohesion and the maintenance of a well-functioning system of supervision, authority, and mutuality are perhaps the most powerful factors in shaping the well-being and future outcomes of all children. Families can support children's schooling by establishing the value of education and promoting high expectations. They can also actively support children as they complete assignments. Immigrant parents who work long hours and may have limited schooling are at a distinct disadvantage in this regard. Immigrant parents are often unable to support their children in ways that are congruent with U.S. cultural models and expectations. Many come from traditions that revere school authorities and expect parents to keep a distance from the day-to-day workings of their child's education. This stands in sharp contrast to U.S. expectations of parental involvement.

Peer Relationships

Peers often play an important role that can sustain and support the development of significant social competencies in youth. Peers can specifically serve to support or detract from academic engagement. By valuing (or devaluing) certain academic outcomes, and by modeling specific academic behaviors, peers can establish the norms of academic engagement. Peers can tangibly support academic engagement by clarifying readings or lectures, helping one another in completing homework assignments, and exchanging information (about standardized tests, helpful tutors, volunteer positions, and other college-pathway knowledge). Because, however, immigrant youth often attend highly segregated, poor schools, they may have limited access to knowledgeable networks of peers beyond their immigrant group.

Communities and Community Organizations

Because no family is an island, family cohesion and functioning are enhanced when the family is part of a larger cohesive community. Culturally constituted patterns of community cohesion and supervision can support immigrant youth when they encounter the more socially toxic elements in their new settings. Youth-serving community-based organizations—much like churches, some ethnic-owned businesses, and extended family networks—can enrich immigrant communities and foster healthy development among their youth through the support they provide to parents and families. Such urban sanctuaries—often affiliated with neighborhood churches, nonprofit organizations, and schools—provide youth with out-of-school time that is not spent in isolation, unsupervised, or on the streets with their peers. Community program staff can serve as "culture brokers" for youth, bridging the disparate norms in place in children's homes and those in place at school. Adults who work in community programs can provide tutoring, educational guidance, advice about the college application process, and job-search assistance—information which is often inaccessible to immigrant youth whose parents have not navigated the academic system in the United States, and to those who attend schools with few guidance counselors.

Mentoring Relationships

In nearly every story of immigrant success there is a caring adult who took an interest in the child and became actively engaged in her life. Connections with nonparent adults—a community leader, a teacher, a member of the church, a coach—are important in the academic and social adaptation of immigrant adolescents. These children are often undergoing profound shifts in their sense of self and are struggling to negotiate changing circumstances in relationships with their parents and peers. Protective relationships with nonparental adults can provide immigrant youth with compensatory attachments, safe contexts for learning new cultural norms and practices, and information that is vital to success in schools (Rhodes 2002).

Mentoring relationships may have special implications for immigrant youths. During the course of migration, loved ones are often separated from one another, and significant attachments are ruptured. LISA data reveal that approximately 80% of immigrant youth were separated from one or both parents during the migration process to the United States (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2007). Mentoring relationships can give immigrant youth an opportunity to be involved in reparative relationships that engender new significant attachments. Since immigrant parents may be unavailable due to long work hours or emotional distress, the guidance and affection of a mentor may help to fill the void created by parental absence. The mentor can

provide information about and exposure to U.S. cultural and educational institutions, and help as the adolescent negotiates developmental transitions. If the mentor is bicultural, he or she can interpret the rules of engagement of the new culture for parents and, hence, help to attenuate cultural rigidities. Bicultural mentors can serve as role models in the challenging process of developing a bicultural identity, exemplifying the ways in which elements of the ethnic identity can be preserved and celebrated, even as features of the more mainstream culture of the United States are incorporated into youths' lives.

Taken together, these networks of supports can make a significant difference in immigrant children's lives. They can help immigrant youth to develop healthy bicultural identities, and they can engender motivation and provide specific information about how to navigate schooling pathways. When successful, these relationships help immigrant youth and their families to overcome some of the barriers associated with poverty and discrimination that prevent full participation in the new country's economic and cultural life.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Major policy reforms must address two critical areas: the status of undocumented immigrants and the suitability of the structure of our nation's schools to ease the transition of their children into the labor market as well as into civic participation in their new country. But recent policy initiatives have proven ineffectual in the short term and thus irrelevant to the modern realities of migration in the longer term. Indeed, the most recent U.S. immigration initiative, approved by Congress on September 29, 2006, and subsequently signed into law by President Bush (on October 26, 2006), turned out to be neither a broad new immigration bill nor a systematic overhaul of our rustic immigration infrastructure. Nothing in the new bill addressed the fate of the undocumented immigrants already in the United States[4] or the need for more visas for those patiently waiting to reunite with family members already in the United States, nor the possibility of a new guest-worker program. In June 2007, another would-be comprehensive immigration reform bill imploded when the Senate failed to compromise on, *inter alia*, the matter of undocumented immigrants in the United States. In the absence of guidance from the federal level, local communities have introduced a myriad of immigration-related band-aid solutions (many of which are in violation of federal law).

Educational reform, likewise, is sadly wanting. Policies that push newly arrived immigrant children into the high-stakes world of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) are shortsighted about the realities of immigration for children. Premature high-stakes testing of newcomer immigrant students is in no way a valid indicator of their academic potential. Indeed, testing children before they have the time to develop their English-language skills is likely to lead to frustration and academic disengagement for many students. Nowhere in any of these policies is there any discussion of how to help the children of immigrants to become integrated and well-functioning members of our society.

We must develop a formula to regularize the status of undocumented immigrants. Without a clear policy, it will be impossible to develop any comprehensive policies to better the welfare of immigrant children. Regardless of precisely what the formula for regularizing status entails, the effects on access to opportunities for undocumented immigrant youth will be significant. Research suggests that undocumented immigrant youth, as well as youth growing up in households headed by

undocumented parents, will most likely remain in the United States, rather than return to their countries of origin. So long as these millions of children are not incorporated into mainstream society, they will be condemned to live in the shadows. The nation will be forced to bear the social cost of driving these youth deep into the world of illegality. Federal financial aid for higher education is not available to undocumented immigrants, and this produces ripple effects. Not only are employment opportunities limited for those with only a high school diploma, but, in addition, some undocumented immigrant youth begin to disengage from high school, knowing that there would be no realistic way for them to pursue a college education. Some of these immigrant youngsters are making a premature transition to the labor market (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2007). Solving the problem of undocumented immigrants is a first and necessary step.

The current proposals in several states that would require newly arrived immigrant students to be subject to high-stakes testing after just one year in the United States would have very negative results. The research data suggest that the vast majority of immigrant children cannot possibly be expected to master the complex intricacies of academic English in only one year of study, particularly in the highly dysfunctional schools where huge numbers of newly arrived immigrant students are concentrated. Submitting newly arrived immigrant youth to the regular testing regimes required under NCLB would push more youngsters toward premature disengagement from school. Rather than requiring immediate integration into the testing regime, we need policies that will facilitate the acquisition of English and school cultures such that immigrant and native students can integrate and learn from each other. This is the best way to keep children in school and support the development of English-language skills. It is important to remember, however, that, in our globalized economy, multilingualism is an asset. Immigrant bilingualism and its accompanying linguistic diversity are cultural resources to be nourished. We should make normative multilingualism an educational objective for all youth—immigrant and native alike—growing up in the global era.

Immigrants arrive sharing an optimism about and hope for the future that must be cultivated and harnessed—almost universally, they recognize that schooling is the key to a better tomorrow. Unfortunately, over time, many immigrant youth—especially those enrolled in highly impoverished and deeply segregated schools—face negative odds and uncertain prospects. Too many leave our schools without developing and mastering the kinds of higher-order skills needed in today's global economy and society. The future of our country will be tied in no small measure to the fortunes of these new young Americans. We need a major new policy agenda to ease the transition of America's newest and littlest arrivals to their new home.

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NOTES

1. In this article, we define *immigrants* as the foreign-born population of the United States—now estimated at approximately 36 million people. If we add the generation born in the United States to immigrant parents, there are now over 70 million people in the United States who are either immigrants, usually termed the *first generation*, and the offspring of immigrants, usually termed the *second generation*.
2. The total unauthorized immigrant-origin population of the United States is estimated to be between 11 and 12 million.

3. The children participating in the LISA study were all immigrants—foreign-born—and had spent approximately two-thirds of their lives in the country of their birth before migrating and settling in the United States.
4. The U.S. House of Representatives' December 2005 immigration bill, HR 4437, addressed the issue of undocumented immigrants by proposing to criminalize and deport millions of undocumented immigrants and harshly penalize anyone aiding them. The effects of this proposal—turning 11.5 to 12 million undocumented immigrants into felons overnight—would have been staggering.

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