

Executive Summary



The successful integration of the children of immigrants is a key benchmark of success for social, education and migration policies.

The best way to measure how well immigrants are integrated into a society is arguably not by how their outcomes compare with those of their native-born peers, but rather by their children's outcomes. There are always reasons to explain why adult immigrants do not do as well as native-born individuals in the labour market. For example, they may not speak the language of their new country fluently, or their qualifications or work experience obtained abroad may not be recognised, or equivalent to domestic qualifications, or adapted to what is required in the destination country. However, one would not necessarily expect such reasons to apply to immigrants' children who were born in the country or who arrived when they were quite young and were fully, or almost fully, educated in the country of residence. This would particularly be the case if immigrant parents had the same educational attainment or, more generally, a similar socio-economic background as non-immigrant parents, on average.

In a number of countries, however, many immigrant parents have lower educational attainment than non-immigrant parents. They are also often employed in low-skilled occupations. The educational outcomes of their children have, in consequence, become a litmus test for how well education systems and indeed the broader society address social and educational disadvantage, especially for immigrant students born in the new country. Is it really possible that the fact of having immigrant parents has a stronger influence on how well someone does in life than being immersed from a very early age in a country's society and educational institutions?

This book looks at the educational attainment of immigrant children and how it could be improved, drawing on results from the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which measures the performance of students at the age of 15 across the OECD and a number of other countries.

Immigrant students underperform in PISA, but the performance gap between them and non-immigrant students varies considerably across countries, even after adjusting for socio-economic differences.

For the children of immigrants, the basic outcomes in reading are well-documented, thanks to the PISA surveys. There are only a few OECD countries where reading outcomes at age 15 are similar to those of non-immigrant students; these are countries such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand, which have practiced selective immigration policies for many years and where arriving immigrants tend to be highly educated. This is also the case in Israel, which in recent decades has seen an increase in the migration of educated Jewish people from around the world, especially from Russia, and in Singapore, which has favoured and encouraged skilled migration since the 1980s. In other countries where immigrants' children do well, the migration often occurred when these countries were part of larger states and/or had a different international status.

In most other countries, reading levels for immigrant students lag far behind those for non-immigrant students, even after controlling for parental education. As the previous PISA publication on immigrant outcomes demonstrated (OECD, 2006), it is difficult to link this empirical finding clearly to differences between countries in education policies concerning immigrant children. On the other hand, there have been significant improvements in reading outcomes in some countries since 2000, when reading was also the main assessment focus in PISA. The improvement is especially apparent in Belgium, Germany and Switzerland, and it appears to be related to changes in the composition of migration.

Language is an obstacle to school achievement for many immigrant students.

The most obvious challenge for many students with immigrant parents is adapting to a new language and a new learning environment. It is a commonly held view that young children have little difficulty in picking up a new language and one might therefore expect that this would not constitute an insurmountable or persistent barrier. However, PISA results suggest that the older a child is at arrival, the less well he or she does in reading at age 15. Also, at least as far as reading outcomes are concerned, there does not seem to be a critical age for language learning – in other words, there is no arrival age after which there is an abrupt fall-off in performance. Moreover, some of the decline with age does not appear to be related to the language barrier itself, but rather to the fact that some students have spent significant time in an education system in the origin country with different standards, curricula, and instructional characteristics. Immigration may thus mean not only learning a new language, but also adapting to a

more demanding education system.¹ The most vulnerable immigrant students would then be those who arrive at a late age, unable to speak the host country language, and from a country where education standards are weaker.² Such students would benefit from policies and programmes that take these multiple disadvantages into account. Ignoring them may result in the marginalisation of such students at a critical age and the acceptance of poor integration prospects.

The most effective way to tackle disadvantages related to age at arrival would be to favour the earlier arrival of immigrant children whenever possible. Of course this is not something that is entirely subject to policy influence or even a matter of immigrant choice, such as when immigrants and their families are fleeing persecution or life-threatening situations. However, the results concerning the impact of age at arrival on outcomes suggest that immigrants who intend to settle or are thinking of doing so should be encouraged to bring their families over as soon as they can. Most countries have policies in place that require certain immigrants to have adequate income and housing before they can bring over their families. Such policies, intended to ensure minimum living standards for immigrant families, may delay the arrival of immigrant children and thus have the unintended consequence of delaying the acquisition of the language of instruction or of falling behind in school for certain immigrant children.

Not understanding the language of the country of residence upon arrival is a disadvantage; but so too is little exposure to that language outside school. PISA results suggest that students who mostly speak a different language at home from that which is used in school have significantly lower reading scores than those who tend to use the test language at home most of the time. This effect is very strong, accounting for a difference of about 30 points in reading scores, on average, between those who mostly speak the test language at home and those who do not, in both OECD countries and elsewhere. The performance gap is still apparent even when comparing students of similar socio-economic backgrounds. This amounts to almost a full year of schooling.

It is undoubtedly the case that current communication technologies make it substantially easier for immigrants and their families to maintain their knowledge of and familiarity with the language and culture of their country of origin much more so than used to be the case several decades ago when, for example, most television channels were in the national language and the Internet did not exist. There is thus a greater need to disseminate information to immigrant parents about the benefits of language exposure so that immigrant households do not always take the path of greater familiarity and least resistance. It is well known that the presence of reading materials in the home in the host-country language is strongly associated with better reading outcomes, and the PISA results confirm this, even when parental education and language have been taken into account.

Other lines of evidence also point to the importance of language exposure. Second-generation students in OECD countries, for example, benefit more from attending pre-primary education for at least one year than do non-immigrant students. Certain countries show nearly the same effects for both groups. Pooling results from OECD countries together suggests a sizeable additional benefit for those who speak another language at home of more than 20 points, and this also holds after taking into account the mother's educational attainment. For those who speak the test language at home, there is no such additional benefit.

Lower performance is more strongly associated with a higher concentration of socio-economic disadvantage than with a higher concentration of immigrants or foreign-language speakers.

PISA data also show a heavy concentration of immigrants in schools with students who mostly speak another language at home. On average across OECD countries, some 15% of immigrant students are in schools where more than 40% of students mostly speak another language at home, and some 40% are in schools where more than 20% of students mostly speak another language. If this does not necessarily imply that they speak another language among themselves at school, it nevertheless does place students whose reading performance is weakest together in the same schools, which is surely not a good basis for improving overall outcomes. This raises larger questions regarding the concentration of immigrants in schools, an issue that is considered further in this report.

Most education systems provide language learning and remedial reading classes for children of immigrants. No doubt these help to improve and accelerate language acquisition, but the scale of the remaining difference in outcomes among those who mostly speak another language at home compared with those who do not, suggests that current language and reading programmes may need to be reinforced, especially at earlier ages when their impact is greatest. Policy obviously cannot impose the use of the host-country language in the home environment, but it needs to ensure that the host-country language can better compete for the attention and interest of immigrant children. Parents clearly have a role to play in this and should be encouraged to expose their children to national-language publications and media at home.



Some education and social policies have different effects on immigrants and non-immigrants.

If high educational attainment among parents seems the most likely explanation for the favourable outcomes of immigrant children in the selective immigration countries noted above, poor parental education seems to be an inadequate explanation, by itself, for the unfavourable outcomes of immigrant students observed in many other countries. Indeed, adjusting for parental educational attainment seems to explain at best 25% of the difference between the outcomes of immigrant and non-immigrant students. Differences in parental education also fail to explain why, in some cases, second-generation students do not perform as well as first-generation students. Nonetheless, parental educational attainment is significant for student reading outcomes and is a factor that policy may not be able to change, but can at least mediate.

To a certain extent, all education systems depend upon or are characterised by parental assistance with schoolwork, which clearly places poorly educated families at a disadvantage that increases as the student progresses through the education system. The generally lower reading outcomes of students with poorly educated mothers are undoubtedly associated with less of an inclination and, for some, an inability to read to their children and assist them with reading tasks, whether associated with schoolwork or in general. While this is not an issue specific to immigrant students, it is magnified by the especially low attainment levels of some immigrant parents. Compensatory policies, such as tutoring and other out-of-class assistance, need to be introduced or reinforced. Policies targeted at parents, both to support them and enhance their engagement with schools, are also appropriate in this context.³

But parental attainment levels alone cannot explain immigrant students' outcomes, suggesting that something else is at play. In many countries, the impact of higher parental attainment levels is weaker among immigrant than among non-immigrant children. One simply does not observe the same level of positive association between reading achievement and parental attainment as one observes among non-immigrant children. This does not appear to be related to the language spoken at home, nor does it seem to reflect the educational qualifications of immigrant parents, which are effectively, if not formally, lower than those from domestic institutions.

What one does observe, however, is that immigrant children with highly-educated mothers – as well as those with mothers with lower levels of education – are over-represented in disadvantaged schools. In addition, the differences in reading performance between disadvantaged schools and the most advantaged schools are large in many countries, mostly cancelling out any gains that are associated with high parental attainment. Education policy and funding rarely compensate for this disadvantage, as formulas tend to be based on the number of students and programmes. Quality resources, such as highly educated teachers, tend to be concentrated in more socio-economically advantaged schools. Indeed, the concentration of immigrant students in disadvantaged schools is a more powerful explanatory factor for outcomes than either immigrant concentration in schools or the proportion of immigrant students who speak another language at home.

The social and economic phenomena that lead to the concentration of disadvantage in certain geographic areas, which include private housing prices, thus have a powerful effect on reading outcomes, for both immigrant and non-immigrant students. With immigrant populations, which are more skewed towards disadvantage than non-immigrant populations in many countries, the concentration effect for immigrants is magnified. What is unexpected, however, is the presence of so many immigrant children of highly educated mothers in disadvantaged schools. This seems to be correlated with the fact that they come from families with low-status occupations and lower incomes, despite high maternal educational attainment. Low occupational status may result when qualifications or work experience are not recognised or considered equivalent, because of a language barrier, or because of discrimination in the hiring process, which is found in practically all countries to a greater or lesser extent. Technical occupations, such as teaching, nursing or healthcare, where women are generally over-represented compared to men, are also professions where accreditation is a factor for immigrant mothers. It seems unlikely that the high concentration of immigrant students in disadvantaged schools, particularly of those whose parents are highly educated, is a consequence of parental choice alone.

Countries whose education systems tend to have a stronger concentration of disadvantaged students, where low-cost housing is segregated and immigrant populations are generally less educated would appear to be part of a social dynamic that generally, if not inexorably, leads to poor outcomes for immigrant children. Some countries seem to be able to avoid this, among them the United Kingdom and the United States, but the reasons are not obvious.

Focus on language, concentration of disadvantage and the concerns specific to immigrant families.

What can reverse or attenuate these poor outcomes for immigrant children? The first thing to note is that although there are success stories among immigrant students coming from disadvantaged schools, the average outcomes are generally unsatisfactory. The problem is difficult to tackle, because it appears to be as much structural as a consequence of weak or less-than-adequate policies.



Short of making large-scale changes in housing policies that would ensure a better social mix in schools, the less-favourable outcomes of many immigrant students need to be addressed through education policies.

The three key elements stand out:

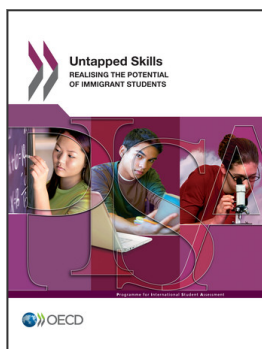
- **Language-learning policies need to be reinforced, both for very young immigrant children and for those students who arrive later with little knowledge of the host-country language.** Relying too heavily on the “natural” language-learning ability of young children or on the assumption that a basic level of language proficiency is sufficient will not yield satisfactory results. Children may learn quickly, but not to the level required to progress adequately in school. The language skills of parents, particularly of mothers, may not be sufficient to allow them to assist their children in their schoolwork. The objective needs to be more exposure to the host-country language, both in and out of school. This is especially the case in the Internet age when media in the language of the country of origin are more present in immigrant households than they ever used to be. Parents need to be sensitised to this so that the home environment contributes to improving outcomes.
- **The adverse effects of the concentration of disadvantage need to be reduced.** The policy choices here are difficult. There is the option of investing more heavily in disadvantaged schools, without attempting to change the extent of concentration. The expectation is that education policy measures, whether in the form of better teachers, smaller classes or more remedial help, can indeed improve outcomes, even under unfavourable conditions. But this is a costly option. A different policy choice would involve attempting to reduce the degree of concentration through housing or school-choice policies, options that are likely, however, to be more difficult and controversial to implement. All things being equal, a more balanced social mix in schools would go a long way towards improving outcomes for both immigrant and non-immigrant students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The first to benefit would be the numerous immigrant students with highly educated parents in disadvantaged schools whose performance is much poorer compared to their peers in schools where there is less concentration of disadvantage. All of these policies would need to be implemented early on in the school trajectory, before immigrant children fall too far behind.
- **Social phenomena and education policies may have specific effects on immigrants beyond those observed among non-immigrants.** The impact of the concentration of disadvantage, for example, seems to be more severe among immigrant students than non-immigrant students. The weaker relationship between reading performance and parental education levels, and the greater benefits of attending pre-school for immigrant students who largely speak another language at home, compared with those who do not, are two more examples. This suggests that analyses of immigrant-related phenomena must not only adjust for differences in characteristics between immigrant and non-immigrant students, but must also focus on differences in the impact of social phenomena or policies. Integration means that everyone has the opportunity to achieve his or her potential. It would appear that, in some cases, the route taken is not always the same, a difference that policy makers need to consider more closely.

Notes

1. In some cases, migration may be from a country where standards are higher, which would imply a late-arrival premium rather than a penalty.
2. Both educational standards and student performance tend to rise with economic development.
3. A new PISA Thematic Report to be published in 2012 focusing on parental involvement will explore these issues in more depth.

References

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