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Rachel Diharce

University of New Hampshire, Durham

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Interpersonal Relationships and the Effects of Immigrant Status on Educational Attainment of Immigrant Youth in the U.S.

Rachel Diharce

ABSTRACT

This literature review looks at the effects of immigrant status on educational achievement among immigrant youth in the United States. The massive influx of families immigrating to the United States in the past decade has brought an increasing amount of immigrant youth coming into US public schools. Educational achievement is one of the biggest predictors of life long success. Social class, race/ethnicity, cultural orientations and quality of schooling before and after migration are all factors that influence immigrant youths' educational outcomes. However, the foundational influencer of immigrant youth's educational outcomes are interpersonal relationships that immigrant youth have with their family, peers and teachers. Therefore, educational achievement among immigrant youth has little to do with individual integrity or inherent intelligence and more to do with the people in their social world.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I will examine the effect of immigrant status on educational achievement among immigrant youth in the United States. The first thirty years of the twentieth century witnessed a massive influx of immigrant families coming to America. Through the twenty first century this trend has been consistently accelerating (Bozick et al. 2016) . In the 1990s more immigrants came to America than in any other previous decade, an estimated 16 million. As of the year 2000, the U.S. Bureau of Statistics estimated that 31 million foreign-born people resided in the United States, amounting to 11 percent of the population at large. Many people

immigrating were families with children, making the school-age population of foreign-born youth increase by 1 million in 1900, and by 2000, 6 percent of the United States' school born children were born in another country (Fry 2007). In more recent years, immigrant populations in the United States have been continuously increasing. The Pew Research Center reported that in 2016, a record high of 43.7 million foreign born resided in the United States, making up 13.5 percent of the U.S. population (2018). In 2015, between one fourth and one third of students in public schools were foreign-born (Center for Immigration Studies 2017).

The extensive literature done on immigrant youth and educational achievement have identified a myriad of factors that influence educational outcomes among immigrant youth in the United States. From race/ ethnicity to family dynamics, cultural values and quality of schooling before migrating, there are a substantial amount of factors influencing educational outcomes of immigrant youth. However, across the literature, interpersonal relationships immigrant youth have with their family, peers, and teachers, tend to be the key influencer on educational outcomes among immigrant youth. I hypothesize that immigrant youth with strong, supportive and positive interpersonal relationships will have more educational success than those who do not.

Before exploring these multiple factors, I will review a couple definitions. For the purpose of this paper, immigrant youth are defined as any adolescent who is foreign born. In respect to educational achievement, there are many ways of defining it, but for the purpose of this paper I will be defining educational achievement as academic success (good grades, planning on graduating high school and attaining a higher degree), engagement and motivation in high school.

My topic is sociologically relevant because education is one of the biggest predictors of life long success and well-being. This is not to say that low educational achievement, like dropping out of high school, means unemployment but the likelihood of unemployment and experiencing poverty is much higher among those who did not finish high school than those who do (Tyler and Magstrom 2009). According to the literature and the Pew Research Center, in general, immigrants as a whole in the United States have a lower level of education than native born. In 2016, immigrant youth were three times as likely as native-born youth to have completed high school, 29 percent vs. 9 percent (Pew Research Center 2018).

THE IMMIGRANT PARADOX

There is debate over if immigrant youth are all vulnerable to poorer educational outcomes than their native born peers, and speculation over how, despite having lower socio-economic status they still succeeds academically, whereas low SES status of native born is correlated with poor educational outcomes (Van Geel et al. 2011). Some social scientists argue that having immigrant status actually improves the likelihood of academic success, and fare better academically than peers who were born in the United States. This phenomenon is known in the literature as the *immigrant paradox* (Suarez-Orozco et. al. 2009). The immigrant paradox suggests that immigrant youth outperform their native born youth because among immigrants there is a strong sense of family obligation. For instance their families leave their home country to come to the United States for a better life, this ensues in adolescents a feeling of responsibility and or obligation to do well in school (Van Geel et. al. 2011). There is a wide spectrum of educational achievement among immigrant youth that supports and refutes the immigrant paradox.

TEACHERS AND THE SCHOOL STAFF

Carola Suarez Orozco, Jean Rhodes and Michael Milburn (2009) analyze the validity of the immigrant paradox in their peer reviewed journal article titled, “Unraveling the Immigrant Paradox.” Orozco and colleagues conducted a five-year longitudinal research study that analyzed the patterns of adaption of 408 recently arrived immigrant youth from a variety of selected countries over a five-year period. At the end of the five years, researchers found that the immigrant paradox is only true within the first year of U.S. residence. Their data suggests that immigrant youth’s academic performance started to decline within the second and third year, dropping sharply in the fourth and fifth.

However, they found that immigrant youth who had a positive relationship and were engaged with their teachers and or school staff, experienced much greater educational outcomes. Strong and supportive personal relationships in the school were found to help bridge the gap between home and school cultures, providing strong feelings of safety and opportunities for academic success. Orozco and colleagues point out that all youth (native and foreign born), tend to demonstrate declines in relational and educational engagement as they progress throughout their academic careers. However, relational and educational engagement is especially important in the academic experience of immigrant youth because they are an important for an already socially vulnerable population (2009: 176-178).

FAMILY

Consistent with the literature, strong and supportive interpersonal relationships are found to be one of the most prominent contributors to positive educational outcomes among immigrant youth. Orozco and colleagues’ paper focuses on strong and supportive teacher-student

relationships, while Grace Kao's (2004) journal article explores the importance of strong and supportive parental-child relationships. Kao's research focused on three dimensions of parent-child relationships: family decision-making, closeness of parental child ties and the extent of parent-child discussions about academics and higher education (2004: 427-430).

Kao's data suggests that there is a positive relationship between parent-child relationships and academic success among immigrant children. Kao discusses that children of immigrant families tend to out perform their native born peers because in immigrant families children are more apt to feel responsible or obligated to meet their parent's aspirations. In addition to immigrant parents being more likely to want to be involved or emphasize the importance of doing well in school. For example, one of the most prominent differences in Kao's findings was that immigrant families talked to their children about college more than native-born families. Kao's data also suggests that there is a degree of optimism that exists between parents and children that promotes educational goals and achievement (2004: 446-447).

Parental influence is a strong predictor of educational success among adolescents and immigrant youth are no exception. A study conducted by Joan Aldous, a sociology professor at the University of Notre Dame, found that immigrant families social class played a role in educational outcomes of their children. Aldous' (2016) study found that immigrant children whose parents talked to their children about academics and careers were more likely to experience higher standardized test scores, higher reading comprehension scores, and as a result higher standardized test scores. Aldous' research also found that families' social class had a substantial effect on educational outcomes. Aldous discusses how lower social class can cause stress on family ties, causing a sense of well-being within the family to decline. Immigrant family's well-being directly affects immigrant youth's educational outcomes. This is partly due

to the fact that when immigrant families are struggling economically, they have less time to talk to their kids about school, and in turn offer them less support, hindering their academic success (2016:1662).

Along with having strong interpersonal relationships with teachers and parents, researchers have also found varying trends in educational outcomes across different ethnic and racial backgrounds. While it is not the inherent race or ethnicity, it is rather the cultural values and beliefs connected to a particular race or ethnicity that are passed down to youth by their parents creating the educational achievement disparities among different racial and ethnic groups (Feliciano 2006: 281). Mexican immigrant youth tend to fare poorly in educational achievement and have the lowest high school completion rates when compared to all other racial and ethnic immigrant groups (Roche et al. 2012: 920). However, even among different racial and ethnic groups, interpersonal relationships are the consistent predictor of immigrant youth's educational outcomes.

Looking at the role interpersonal relationships play in immigrant youth's educational attainment, we can better understand this correlation through acculturation. Acculturation is the process that unfolds over time and entails individuals modifying values, beliefs and practices with interactions with new cultural groups (Berry 2000). Immigrants tend to experience acculturation when migrating to another country, but at the same time they retain some cultural traditions of their home country. This theory is known as selective assimilation theory.

Much research has been done on immigrants' assimilation to American culture and to what extent assimilation has on educational achievement. Sociologist Kathleen M. Roche and colleagues conducted a study in 2012 that looked to see whether Mexican immigrant youth's assimilation to American cultural influences educational attainment. Researchers found that the

parents of immigrant youth's ability to assimilate to American culture was a strong predictor of their children's educational outcomes. Results from the research suggested that Mexican immigrant youth held more educational attainment if they had a higher degree of Mexican cultural orientations. The strongest Mexican cultural orientations that predicted positive educational outcomes were a high value on familialism (Roche et al. 2012: 927-928).

According to Kathleen Roche and colleagues, (2012) familialism can be referred to as family attachment, loyalty and solidarity in addition to the shared responsibilities and cooperation. It has been found by scholars that Latino/a families tend to prioritize social obligations and collective responsibilities within the family structure than European and American families. But while having a strong cultural orientation on familialism improves Mexican immigrant youth's educational outcomes, this strong emphasis on familial responsibility can also hinder Mexican immigrant youth's educational outcomes. Since Latino/a culture emphasizes interdependence and collective responsibility in the family, immigrant youth from Latino/a families are more likely to put others (their family) before themselves. This can contribute to poorer educational outcomes among Mexican immigrant youth. For example, if their family is struggling to pay bills, it is likely that their child will feel obligated to help provide for their family. This obligation will take time away from thinking about and working on academics, which in turn effects GPA and poorer educational outcomes (Roche et al. 2012).

PEERS

In addition to familial relationships, peer relationships have been found to influence immigrant youth's educational outcomes. Cynthia Feliciano's journal article (2016) "Beyond the Family", suggests that immigrants previous and post migration group statuses (socio-economic status, national origin/ethnicity) influences second generations' individual educational

expectations and aspirations. Feliciano's findings suggest that group level characteristics, especially national origin, are influential in predicting educational achievement. She explains that national origin pre migration educational status creates a collective identity among group members. Group member's reputations shape educational outcomes among the second generation. Feliciano explains that identities of highly educated immigrant groups have mainstream success in the United States because the U.S. society's reputation of them influences their educational outcomes. This explains the differing educational achievement among different minority groups (2006: 295-296).

Studies have shown that minority groups with poorer educational outcomes are as such because high educational achievement does not fit their collective identity. This is why length of residence in the host country is a strong influencer of immigrant youth's educational outcomes. Grace Kao and Marta Tienda test three assimilation theories in their journal article "Optimism and Achievement". One assimilation theory that they test, accommodation without assimilation theory, predicts that recently arrived immigrant youth are best positioned to perform well academically because they have not been tainted by native peer culture (1995: 5).

Kao and Tienda's findings suggest that students' immigration and generational status have important consequences for academic performance, as first generation immigrant youth perform better academically than second or third generation. This is illustrated by the results of Kao and Tienda's study, by which after two years in the United States immigrant youth's educational achievement was at or below their native born peers. Immigrants from Asia, have higher achievement scores across different racial and ethnic groups due to Asian parents attaching a lot of value and emphasis on academic success. However, Kao and Tienda's research shows that after a year of Asian immigrant youth's time in the United States, their grades and test

scores were no longer above native born peers test scores, but rather more equal to. In regards to black and Hispanic immigrant youth, their test scores went down significantly due to their experience of acculturation, because of the stereotypes that exists in American cultures about black and Hispanic ethnicities performing poorly when compared to other racial and ethnic populations (1995:16-17).

Although black immigrants tend to have lower educational outcomes across different racial and ethnic groups, Kevin Thomas, a professor at Pennsylvania State University, argues that black immigrant youth are still at an advantage. In Thomas' research article "Migration Processes and Familial Characteristics", he examines the relationship between immigrant families and high school drop out rates among blacks. Thomas' findings suggest that immigrant black youth are less likely than native born blacks to drop out of school because they are less likely to have familial characteristics that adversely affect schooling (such as siblings who have dropped out, single parent households, etc.) (2012: 493). Thomas' findings are further evidence that immigrant youth's interpersonal relationships are a powerful influence in educational outcomes.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I hypothesized that immigrant youth with strong and supportive interpersonal relationships will have better educational outcomes than immigrant youth who do not. The literature largely supports my hypothesis; parental support is an important factor in educational outcomes as well as peer interpersonal relationships. Immigrant youth's educational outcomes seem to be less about individual integrity and intelligence and more about the people in their social world, especially parents, family, and peers. It is possible that after migration

families, will acculturate to their environment, sometimes transforming cultural or familial values, beliefs and traditions.

Interpersonal relationships' effect on immigrant youths' educational outcomes is consistent through all definitions of educational achievement. This includes GPA's, high school graduation rates; standardized test scores, and self reported feedback from various studies on degrees of academic related aspirations, expectations and optimism.

Across the sociological literature, researchers tend to agree that segmented assimilation is the best predictor of educational outcomes of immigrant youth. Segmented assimilation is a type of assimilation theory that involves immigrants' adaptation of some facets of American culture, such as language, and a certain degree of keeping their native cultural traditions. However, certain cultural traditions, such as a strong cultural value on familism in respect to Mexican immigrant youth, can cause positive effects on educational outcomes but also have negative repercussions.

Addressing the issues of interpersonal relationships on educational outcomes among immigrant youth in the United States is crucial because the achievement gap among different racial and ethnic immigrant groups can be mended by breaking down stereotypes that exist among black and Hispanic youth. Breaking down negative stereotypes that exist for certain racial and ethnic identities allows for immigrant youth to have a better chance of positive educational outcomes because they will be less likely to assimilate to negative cultural norms.

In addition to finding ways to break down racial stereotypes, an area for further research of my topic could also be conducting in-depth analyses of programs provided to immigrant families to help their children succeed academically. Another area of further research would be

to consider language and how being multilingual can impact immigrant student's success and to what extent can our schools provide support and guidance for ESL learners. In the past, the United States education system lacked good programs for immigrant students. In the 1970's US schools started to implement better education programs for immigrant students to succeed academically, although this is a huge step forward, there is still progress to be made. A big aspect of what US schools can do is use students multiculturalism as a tool as success rather than an inhibitor. Researching how schools can implement programs that achieve this would be really interesting and extremely beneficial based on the knowledge the literature provides about assimilation and acculturation.

Although there was a strong collection of high quality literature reviews on immigrant youth and educational outcomes, I did find some limitations in my research. One such limitation was that a lot of the research was published fifteen to twenty years ago. More updated research might provide a more accurate picture of immigrant youth and educational outcomes today and how they are performing academically.

Another limitation in the research I found was the lack of information regarding Middle Eastern and African immigrant youth and educational outcomes. A majority of the research focused on immigrant youth coming from Latino and Asian countries, as these are regions where the majority of recent immigrants are migrating from. However, there are still substantial amounts of families coming from African and Middle Eastern countries. I think it would be beneficial to have more literature focusing on these racial/ethnic groups' immigrant youth's educational outcomes.

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