

AFTERWORD: Understanding and Serving the Children of Immigrants

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To date, demographers, economists, and sociologists who focus almost exclusively on adults have dominated the agenda of immigration scholarship. Immigrant youth, however, are now the fastest growing sector of the child population (Landale & Oropesa, 1995). Today, one in five children in the United States is the child of immigrants, and it is projected that by 2040 one in three children will fit this description (Rong & Prissle, 1998). Given the numbers involved, how these children adapt and the educational pathways they take will clearly have profound implications for our society. Thus, there is an urgent need to expand our knowledge in this field.

Of particular importance is the question of how immigrant youth adapt to their new school environments. Schools are typically the first setting of sustained contact with the new culture for newcomer children. Furthermore, academic outcomes are a powerful barometer of current adaptation and of future psychosocial functioning (Mandel & Marcus, 1988; Steinberg, 1996). How immigrant children fare in our schools will in many cases forecast their contributions as members of our society. Although this has long been true, schooling is a particularly high-stakes process in the new economy (M. Suárez-Orozco, this volume).

All over the country, schools are being transformed by this dramatic new wave of immigration. Recently there has been a surge in new immigrant populations in areas that had rarely encountered immigrants. More children of immigrant origin are also entering suburban schools in many areas of the nation that have never served such children. These changes are taking school districts by surprise and are generating new challenges to which districts must respond.

School districts all over the country face unprecedented changes with few roadmaps. Who are these new immigrant children? What characteristics do they bring with them? What social, political, economic, and educational contexts are they entering? What are their strengths and their challenges? What educational strategies are effective for which kids in which contexts? What are the factors that both positively and negatively influence immigrant children's academic engagement and outcomes?

The new immigrants are remarkably diverse in terms of race and color, linguistic backgrounds, and socioeconomic characteristics (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Nearly 80 percent of the new immigrants are "people of color" arriving from Latin America, Asia, and the

Caribbean. Approximately 75 percent of immigrants are of Spanish-speaking origin, but children speaking over one hundred different languages are entering U.S. schools (OBLEMA, 2000). Some new immigrant children come from families of the most educated and affluent backgrounds of any era of immigration: over one-third of Silicon Valley businesses are owned by immigrants (Saxenian, 1999). Others have parents with limited education who are considered the “working poor.” Notably, many of these immigrant parents have undergone fewer years of formal education than their U.S.-born counterparts; nevertheless, today’s immigrants are significantly more educated than immigrants during the last great migration at the turn of the twentieth century.

Immigrant students defy easy characterization in terms of educational outcomes. Some outperform their U.S.-born peers. Children of immigrants are often the valedictorians of their classes and they tend to be overrepresented as the recipients of prestigious academic awards. In contrast, other immigrant children demonstrate disturbingly high dropout rates (Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2001). Many are “overlooked and underserved,” as characterized by a recent report released by the Urban Institute, particularly when they enter U.S. schools at the secondary level (Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2001).

The articles in this Special Issue of the Harvard Educational Review shed important light on the challenges schools are currently encountering. Representing a broad range of methodologies — from qualitative studies including student-focused, family-focused, and school-based ethnographies to quantitative analyses of Census data — the articles expand the focus beyond Latino youth and consider newer and less numerically significant newcomers, such as African-origin, Hmong, Chinese, and Yemeni youth. Several articles examine the differences between the educational experiences of first- and second-generation youth. Others focus on the long-overlooked role of gender in the immigrant educational experience. Still others explore how students navigate between the worlds of school and home. Finally, several articles explore how school structures and practices influence students’ engagement with school. Taken together, these articles challenge whether or not many of the traditional assumptions of education and social science are adequate for understanding the experience of immigrant children.

Implications for Educators

Gilberto Conchas and Stacey Lee document how school structures mediate school engagement and create or reinforce peer-group alliances. Their articles poignantly underscore the risks of “impersonal” and highly competitive schooling environments. Although their studies focus on different high schools and immigrant groups, they both demonstrate the essential role of

supportive relationships in school settings and emphasize the importance of creating learning communities. Conchas's school-based ethnography provides insight into how school programs "construct school failure and success" among its students. Focusing on low-income immigrant and native-born Latino secondary school students, Conchas deconstructs and contrasts the experience of students in school programs that are structured in ways that either replicate inequality or successfully support and foster success among students.

Lee's article provides a window into how perceptions of school authorities can influence student outcomes. She found that, at the school she studied, the second-generation Hmong youth, who adopted many aspects of American urban popular culture, were perceived by their teachers as more likely to be troublemakers, while 1.5-generation youth, who tended to act in more traditional Hmong ways, were viewed through the lens of the "model minority" stereotype. Lee further observed that the children of the 1.5 generation received the supportive services of English as a Second Language and were more likely to thrive academically than their second-generation counterparts, who did not receive such supports.

One implication of these two studies is that effective school settings provide role models and mentors, and foster climates of cooperative learning and high expectations for all students. If educators intend to serve their students, they must strive to move away from large, impersonal, competitive institutions to smaller learning communities in which immigrant students are fully engaged in learning. The successful school program Conchas studied had several characteristics that are critical for educational success for all students, and most especially for low-income, minority, "at-risk" youth. In the model program, supportive relationships were fostered among students from a range of ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. A tangible, professional goal provided a clear sense of purpose. Role models were provided in the context of internship experiences and helped transform the professional goal from an abstract ideal to the attainable reality. As adults engaged in supportive relationships with their students, they concurrently maintained high expectations of them. Conchas's contribution to this volume effectively uses students' voices to shed light on potential foundations upon which to develop effective interventions.

Stacey Lee's and Loukia Sarroub's ethnographies illustrate some of the ways that the cultural values of immigrant families can be incongruent with the cultural expectations and practices encountered in schools. Moreover, their studies point to the fact that, in some communities, schools create the only acceptable setting for social engagement beyond the watchful gaze of parents — for immigrant girls in particular. Sarroub, for instance, explores how Yemeni American girls' behaviors are tightly controlled by intense community scrutiny and vigilance

both inside and outside school, in a suburb of Detroit. They are further controlled by the threat of an arranged marriage or of being returned to their country of origin.

In order to mediate the tensions between cultural values and school practices, schools should strive to make cultural concessions to their students. Some cultural practices may be fairly easy for schools to accommodate. For instance, the high school in Sarroub's study might have considered an alternate dress code for Yemeni girls in physical education classes, given their cultural and religious beliefs about covering the body. Other cultural practices, however, may not lend themselves readily to easy concessions. Lee and Sarroub note that both Hmong and Yemeni girls hide their married state from school authorities for fear of repercussions. Is early arranged marriage an acceptable custom in the new social context? As another example, corporal punishment is a cultural practice accepted in much of the world, so does spanking constitute a reportable form of abuse? Schools need to grapple with where the line is drawn — which cultural practices deserve concessions and which are simply unacceptable. There are, of course, no easy answers — this is the challenge of our multicultural democracy, and schools are at the forefront of such dilemmas (Shweder, Minow, & Markus, 2000).

Several articles in this Special Issue point to the need for schools to reconceptualize their notions of what constitutes parent involvement. Parent involvement has long been lauded as one of the most critical factors in determining students' success; however, this involvement is usually defined by middle-class standards — PTA involvement, volunteering in the classroom, attending parent-teacher conferences, fundraising, and the like. When parents do not demonstrate these traditionally sanctioned ways of being involved, they are all too often labeled as “not caring” about their children's education. Gerardo López's and Vivian Louie's articles explain that immigrant parents from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds place a high value on education, though the families demonstrate different ways of being involved in their children's education. López portrays the alternative ways that the migrant parents of a family of highly successful students are involved in their children's education. These parents systematically articulate the value of education, warn of the dangers of not engaging in educational opportunities, and take their children to the field to experience first hand the hard labor that can result from not completing an education.

In studying the Chinese community in New York, Louie finds similarly that immigrant parents use specific strategies to support their children's education and impart life lessons. Further, she makes an insightful distinction between the motivational forces of immigrant optimism — already delineated by a number of researchers in this area (among others, Kao & Tienda, 1995; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001) — and immigrant pessimism, which propels

parents to inculcate in their children the notion that education is a hedge against the discrimination they are likely to encounter.

School administrators and teachers must develop realistic models of parental involvement (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). They need to recognize that the majority of immigrant parents do value highly the educational opportunities afforded their children, but several factors influence their active involvement in their children's schools. First, the American premise that "good" parents are active in advocating for their children in schools may run counter to the cultural values of many immigrant parents. In many places in the world, teachers are deeply respected and deferred to in matters of education. Though most immigrant parents value highly the educational opportunities offered to their children in the United States (López, this volume; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001), the majority of low-income immigrant parents do not have the flexibility of work hours required to attend meetings at their children's schools. Furthermore, many immigrant homes often do not have the resources that are required for many complex homework assignments — computers, Internet access, parental English skills, and even parents' time. Schools and teachers must learn to appreciate the alternative ways that immigrant parents involve themselves in their children's education and not penalize their immigrant students by either disparaging their parents or giving unrealistic homework assignments.

Schools must also recognize that the expectations for children at different age levels vary significantly from one cultural context to another. These expectations may be further intensified by the necessities generated by migration. In her three-year ethnography of a poor "first-stop" immigrant community, Marjorie Faulstich Orellana richly demonstrates how these constructions contrast sharply with the current "mainstream," U.S. middle-class notions of children as relatively helpless dependents. Her research suggests that immigrant children often contribute to their families in a variety of tangible ways — by babysitting, translating, and completing piecework that supplements the family income. Frequently, poor immigrant children become the family expert on the ways of the new society. They act as linguistic and cultural translators upon whom their parents become highly dependent. Orellana vividly demonstrates how immigrant children bring these helpful behaviors into their school contexts by acting as "classroom helpers." Such activities seemed to benefit not only the classroom teachers but also the volunteers themselves by garnering favor, engaging them in a focused activity, warding off boredom, and exposing them to relationships and activities they otherwise might not have encountered. The volume of requests, particularly by girls, for such "acts of giving" led school authorities at Orellana's ethnographic site to implement official policies to promote such activities.

Several articles in this Special Issue highlight the impact of gender on immigrant students' experiences. Lee's and Sarroub's work sheds further light on the cultural practices that may contribute to patterns of gender differences. There is emerging evidence that immigrant girls are outperforming immigrant boys in their academic achievement as measured by such indicators as grades, dropout rates, and college enrollment (C. Suárez-Orozco, in press). This is a pattern that holds true historically (Olneck & Lazerson, 1974), but to date there is limited research to explain why this may consistently occur. Several potential explanations are possible. As was evident in Lee's and Sarroub's ethnographies, immigrant girls are often expected to help in the day-to-day management of running a family — cooking, child care, translating, and the like. While on some level this may be onerous and distract from education, girls may be developing “soft skills” that are useful in furthering educational outcomes — fostering a sense of responsibility, negotiation, multitasking, and so forth (Smith, 1999). Although the close vigilance practiced by some immigrant communities may be experienced as burdensome by the girls, community vigilance can help to protect girls from the lure of the streets and other distractions from education (Earls, 1997). Carol Gilligan (personal communication, 2000) offers an additional explanation for gender differences in immigrant adaptation — that immigrant girls may be more relationally attuned than boys and therefore better able to adapt to the expectations of school settings in new cultural contexts. Clearly we need further research in this area, and educators should take into consideration the particular challenges girls and boys encounter in negotiating a successful education.

Some of the studies in this Special Issue highlight the need to distinguish between the experiences of different immigrant generations. At a macro level, Xue Lan Rong and Frank Brown analyze a stratified subsample of 1990 U.S. Census data and clarify the educational attainments of an understudied population — 15- to 24-year-olds of Caribbean origin and African origin. In particular, they consider the effect of immigrant generation by comparing U.S.-born children to children of immigrants. They find a familiar pattern, as other studies have suggested — U.S.-born children of both Caribbean Black and European White immigrants outperform their peers who were born abroad or who are the children of U.S.-born parents. For those of African origin, in contrast, educational attainment levels are highest for the first generation and then decline thereafter. Rong and Brown suggest that researchers need to search for a nuanced understanding of the realities of those of African descent, rather than assume an all-encompassing Black reality. Researchers must take into account immigration status, nationality, socioeconomic background, gender, and other significant contributors to experience in their analyses. Stacey Lee does exactly this in her analysis of generational differences in her qualitative study of Hmong American youth.

Educators working with first-generation immigrant youth should recognize their particular challenges — coming to terms with the losses of migration, language challenges, and potential Immigration and Naturalization Service documentation problems, among others (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001.) The second generation and those beyond, on the other hand, are not inoculated with immigrant “optimism” (or “pessimism” — see Louie, this volume), which exacerbates encounters with discrimination and climates of low expectations for minority youth (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995).

Future Research

Research with immigrant populations calls for multimodal methodological approaches. The tools of anthropology, sociology, demography, psychology, and educational research all can illuminate the immigrant experience. No single strategy is likely to explain the nuanced interplay of factors at work in immigrant youths’ life experiences. Qualitative and quantitative approaches together lead to a closer approximation of truth than would be possible using only one of these methodologies. Youth must be studied in a variety of contexts, including their neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, and homes. Although cross-sectional research is often the only affordable approach in terms of both financial and time investment, it remains inherently limited. As Andrew Fuligni argues in this issue, longitudinal research is an essential research strategy if we are to understand the assimilation patterns of immigrant youth. Yet, to date, only a handful of such studies have been (or are being) conducted (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001; Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, & Waters, 2001). Fuligni offers a methodological plea for longitudinal research that follows the same children as they encounter and negotiate differences in the cultural traditions of the motherland and the new society. He notes that a series of cross-sectional studies established a seemingly “disconcerting effect of acculturation” (p. 568). These studies have led many to conclude that the longer youth of immigrant origin are in the new context, the worse they seem to perform academically. Fuligni eloquently delineates the limitations of cross-sectional research with this population, and concludes that only with longitudinal research can acculturative changes be separated from normative developmental shifts. As researchers, theoreticians, and practitioners, we are challenged to synthesize findings that employ a variety of disciplinary strategies and that consider individuals from a myriad of cultural backgrounds.

There is a clear need for comparative research that provides nuanced understanding in context. Are there universals (or perhaps, more accurately, near-universals) in the immigrant experience — such as disorientation, family role reversals, tensions about old values and new, and so forth? How do the experiences of various groups of origin differ? When differences

exist, how can we account for them? What is the role of variance in structural dimensions in both the motherland (financial resources, parental education, premigration trauma, etc.) and the new society (poverty, community supports, housing quality, neighborhood safety, school characteristics, documented status, etc.)? In particular, what is the community that the immigrants under consideration are most exposed to? Is it “mainstream” America or is it “inner-city” America (Portes & Zhou, 1993)? What is the role of cultural values, and are they congruent or incongruent with the values of the surrounding community? How do xenophobia, discrimination, negative social mirroring, and low teacher expectations affect student outcomes (C. Suárez-Orozco, 2000)? What is the role of gender in experience, expectations, and outcomes? And how do we make sense of the enormous number of individuals — an estimated seven million (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000) — who identify multiracially, not fitting into a single racial or country-of-origin category?

In making comparisons, it is essential to avoid facile assumptions that “cultural differences” or individual agency single-handedly can account for differences in outcomes. Much can be learned from the narratives of highly successful immigrant youth. The danger to be avoided in such work, of course, is to engage in interpretations that “blame the victim” among less successful immigrant youth. In conducting research with this population, one must always consider the multiplicity of factors that contribute to differential outcomes — structural, cultural, familial, and individual.

Conclusion

Clearly, schools all over the country face a variety of challenges. Resources are stretched thin as many of the poorest districts face the greatest infusion of new immigrant children. New immigrants tend to settle in urban neighborhoods with high concentrations of poverty and its accompanying social ills (Orfield & Yun, 1999; Wilson, 1997). Schools in such districts typically have insufficient classroom materials designed for its English-language learners. Further, in a nationwide teacher shortage crisis, there is a dearth of certified teachers adequately trained to address the unique needs of immigrant children (Menken & Look, 2000; Rong & Prissle, 1998). Talented, certified teachers have choices of where to work, and many do not choose to work for sustained periods of time in high-burnout sites. Consequently, immigrant children often attend schools where teacher and principal turnover rates are staggeringly high (Orfield, 1998).

A report recently released by the Urban Institute (Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2001) reveals that increasingly high percentages of immigrant students are entering schools at the secondary level, and yet the majority of programs designed to help English-language learners tend to be

concentrated at the elementary school level. While 76 percent of limited-English-proficient students attending elementary schools receive specialized services in English-language acquisition, less than half of their counterparts in high school receive such services (Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2001). These children are particularly at risk of dropping out. Some of these students arrive with interrupted schooling or schooling that has not prepared them well for the new setting. Others may have received adequate or even superior educations, but often find that they encounter resistance from guidance counselors to award them credit for high school coursework done abroad. Hence, immigrant students at the high school level find themselves having to acquire English-language skills while concurrently accruing the necessary credits for graduation. In these circumstances, they are at high risk of giving up on education and dropping out (Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2001).

Further complicating matters, these dramatic demographic shifts are taking place concurrently with a national school reform movement. These reform efforts are being designed with little or no consideration of immigrant children's specific needs. In fact, a number of these efforts have potentially catastrophic consequences for many immigrant children (Gándara, 1994). The high-stakes testing movement is likely to dramatically inflate dropout rates. In 2000, the failure rate for Latino students in Massachusetts, which has recently implemented the high-stakes Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), was 66 percent for the English portion and 79 percent for the math portion. In some districts in Massachusetts that have high densities of Latino immigrant students, failure rates for the MCAS range from 70 to 95 percent (Upshur et al., 2001). Eradication of bilingual education in California and Arizona — and potentially in New York and Massachusetts as well — are likely to have significant consequences on immigrant student outcomes. Even well-intentioned efforts to reduce class size (as recently mandated in California) result in students being at greater risk of being taught by uncertified teachers not trained for the specific needs of immigrant students.

As a nation we must prepare teachers to address immigrant students' distinctive needs. Teacher education programs and school districts should develop curriculum and professional development programs that recognize the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse immigrant students and the challenges teachers confront in instructing these diverse students. These particular challenges are unlikely to be addressed in a one-time-only training session. Efforts should be made to provide mentoring supports to teachers new to this population by linking them with seasoned teachers as they acquire these new skills. Further, in order to reflect the populations being served and enhance their learning experiences, recruitment efforts should focus on diversifying the teaching force.

Special efforts must be made to adequately, fairly, and systematically assess the specific

learning strengths and challenges of individual incoming immigrant students. What are the students' native-language verbal abilities? What are their math skills as they enter the United States? All too often, students are placed in classes where they repeat material they covered in their homeland. Has the new student undergone interruptions to their education during the process of migration? An estimated 10 to 20 percent of immigrant students have had interruptions in their schooling of up to two years (Arensonn, 2000). This has clear implications for literacy skills. In addition, some English-language learners who do not have a learning disability are referred incorrectly for special education assessments because of grammar, accent, or other issues related to second language acquisition. In other cases, immigrant children with learning disabilities go unreferred for a special education assessment because it is assumed that their learning challenges are related to their process of learning English. Efforts must be made to develop better diagnostic strategies to correctly identify special education needs so that target services can then be provided (Stefanakis, 2000).

The challenge for schools serving immigrant students is that of providing engaging curriculum while children are in the process of acquiring English-language skills. Information must be provided multimodally in order to scaffold the children's available linguistic and cultural resources. Schoolwide and classroom cultures must strive to foster robust learning environments that maintain high expectations. To be successful, this environment must take place in the context of supportive relationships between teachers and their students, between teachers and parents, and among students from a variety of backgrounds. Healthy learning communities must recognize diversity as a resource for learning rather than as a problem to be eliminated. Every effort must be made to embrace immigrant students' high hopes and energies. In such environments, immigrant students will thrive and become productive members of their new society.

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