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Immigrant Children in New York City Public Schools: Equity, Performance and Policy

Thank you for inviting me to speak today regarding immigrant children and public schools. While the *Newest New Yorkers 2000* uses decennial census data to paint a rich portrait of New York's immigrant population as a whole, there is relatively little information that specifically focuses on school-aged children, and their school experience and academic performance in particular. This is not surprising because the census data does not provide the appropriate data to address such questions. My research uses administrative data on New York City public school children to provide some answers to three kinds of questions with regard to immigrant children: (1) Who are our immigrant children? What are they like and how do they differ from the native born in their own characteristics, in the schools they attend? (2) Are immigrant children treated equitably by the school system? (3) Is the education of immigrant children *effective*, that is, are they performing as well as other similar children or is there a persistent disparity between immigrant and native-born children? In answering these questions, my colleagues at NYU and I have examined a variety of issues regarding immigrant children. Most relevant for policy, perhaps, are two particular studies. One focuses on the relationship between the distribution of resources and the representation of immigrant children and the other on the disparity in academic performance between immigrant and native-born children in elementary and middle school.

Immigrant Children at School

New York City's immigrant children are astonishing in their diversity, hailing from nearly 200 different countries and speaking a wide array of languages and dialects (over 160), the foreign born differ from native-born students in a variety of ways. As of 1999-2000, roughly 16% of the city's elementary and middle school students were foreign born, with nearly one fifth—that is, nearly 20,000 students—originating in the Dominican Republic. Another 18,000 hail from Latin America, and roughly one fifth from the Caribbean and South America. Of course, there are also large groups of students that originate in China, the Former Soviet Union and many other countries around the world.

Immigrants are more likely to be poor, as measured by free lunch eligibility. And, in contrast to the native-born, roughly one quarter of immigrants are Asian, one fifth black, but are almost equally likely to be Hispanic and white. Not surprisingly, immigrants are far more likely to come from homes in which the language spoken is other than English, more likely to take the Language Assessment Battery (LAB), a test given by the Department of Education to determine English proficiency and among those assessed, to score lower on the LAB and to score below the criterion determining eligibility for ESL and/or Bilingual education services. It is important, however, to remember that many of New York's native-born students live in immigrant communities themselves, in families in which English is not the primary language spoken at home, and who come to school with limited proficiency in the English language.

As described in the *Newest New Yorkers*, immigrants are clustered in immigrant communities around the City and so, too, does our data reveal clustering of immigrant

students within the schools. That said, foreign-born students as an aggregate group are not especially segregated from native-born students compared, for example, to the segregation between whites and non-whites, or between poor and middle income students. And, while there are some differences in the types of schools attended by immigrant and native-born student, these differences are relatively mild – there is little clear evidence that immigrants as a whole experience sizable effects on school quality from segregation.

There are, however, notable differences in the schools attended by particular immigrant groups. Students from the former Soviet Union and China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, for example, are significantly segregated and the schools attended by these students are strikingly dissimilar. At one extreme, the typical Soviet immigrant student attends a school where students are far less likely to be poor or non-white, have stronger English skills and perform better than average on citywide tests. Teachers have more experience and are better educated. In contrast, Dominican immigrant attend schools with students who are virtually all poor, virtually all black or Hispanic, more likely to be limited English proficient and perform below average on citywide tests. Further, their teachers are less experienced and educated. Interestingly, spending is highest in these schools, reflecting, perhaps a compensating increase in the number of teachers or disproportionately high non-classroom spending.

Immigrants and the Distribution of Resources

Perhaps the largest area of concern about immigrants concerns equity. While immigrant advocates may worry about inequitable treatment of immigrant students,

others worry that immigrants drain resources from native-born students. What happens to schools when immigrants join the student body? In our research, we have examined the variation in schools resources – including spending per pupil and teachers – and the relationship to the representation of immigrant students

To begin, it is important to note that few resources are specifically legislated for immigrant students. One exception is the small amount of federal funding provided through the Emergency Immigrant Education Program to assist schools serving recent immigrants (that is, immigrants who have enrolled within the last three years). More generally, there is little in the way of policies or legislation specifying the provision of supplemental programs or resources for immigrant children *per se*. Why, then, might resources be different in schools with many (or few) immigrants? One explanation looks to the differences in the education needs of immigrants – differences in English language skills, in poverty, in educational disabilities. Another, somewhat different, view looks to differences in political power of immigrant families – if immigrants are less likely to vote, for example, then they may be less effective in convincing politicians to direct resources to their children’s schools.

In our work, we have attempted to disentangle these explanations by examining the extent to which differences in expenditures across schools are explained by differences in student educational needs, attempting to isolate the separate impact of immigrant status or nativity.

Our results are, generally, encouraging. We find that, while schools with more immigrants seem to have fewer resources, this pattern largely reflects differences in the educational needs of immigrant students – as an example, immigrants students are less

likely to participate in special education programs, which are relatively costly. The implication is that the treatment of immigrants is, to a large extent, consistent with broad notions of equity – they draw neither more nor less resources than similar native born students. That said, it is clear that part of the story is still untold: why does special education utilization differ between native born and immigrant students? Is it due to selective immigration – that is, because families with disabled children are less likely to immigrate – or is because immigrant parents resist special education for their children, fearing negative effects of stigma, say? Clearly, more research is needed here.

Immigrants and Academic Achievement: Is there a ‘Nativity Gap’?

As noted earlier, while some immigrant students perform at relatively high levels in New York City’s schools, others do not, perhaps due to substantial challenges including limited English proficiency, poverty, and inadequate preparation. There has been, however, relatively little quantitative research in this area, reflecting, in part, the limited samples of foreign-born students in national databases that also include information on student performance. While previous work has examined differences in attainment (as in the *Newest New Yorkers*) or in labor market success, we know little about how students perform on standardized tests, even as they become more important to academic success, and have had little specific insight into whether the apparent differences between immigrant and native-born students reflects differences in their socioeconomic and demographic characteristics, their schools, or in some other ‘immigrant advantage’.

In our research, we have examined the answers to two related questions. First, is

there a gap in academic performance between native-born and foreign-born students, either as a whole or within specific communities? Second, to what extent are the differences explained by differences in the characteristics of the students (such as poverty or special education status) or their schools?

Our analysis has been quite comprehensive. We have measured disparities in performance on reading and math tests both in terms of levels (that is, by comparing their test scores), and in terms of ‘value added’ (that is, adjusting for prior academic performance or by comparing gains across years).

Our results are interesting and important. While a comparison of raw test scores provides mixed evidence about the performance of immigrants, once we account for differences in the characteristics of students (including their prior academic performance, language proficiency, and sociodemographics) and control for differences in the schools they attend, we consistently find an immigrant advantage – immigrants gain more over a school year than native-born students. The amount of the ‘immigrant advantage’, however, is relatively small. In the end, nativity per se seems to matter little for academic performance.

Similarly, while a comparison of test scores suggests significant disparities between groups from different regions of the world – where, for example, students from the former Soviet Union do comparatively well and Dominican students comparatively poorly – the magnitudes of these disparities shrink considerably once a full set of controls is introduced. The implication is that most of the difference between the native-born and the foreign-born and between immigrants from different world regions is due to differences in their underlying characteristics such as poverty and language skills.

Conclusions

Taken together, the results of my research paint a relatively positive story about immigrant children in New York City public schools. Mirroring the findings in *Newest New Yorkers*, there are many foreign born students in public schools and the diversity within the immigrant student body is profound. Our examination of the distribution of resources and its relationship to the presence of immigrants provides no evidence that immigrants are treated unfairly. Instead, it suggests that immigrants draw resources to their schools in the same way that native born students do – based upon educational needs in special education, English language learning, and poverty, for example. Further, our examination of disparities in academic performance suggests that immigrants are not so different from native-born students. Differences in academic performance between the two groups are driven by the same factors that explain differences in performance within the two groups – poverty, special needs, gender, and the like. Of course, there many reasons to believe that the New York City public schools should do better for all of its students – both native born and foreign born. Our results suggest that the most effective way to do so would be to continue to focus on educational needs, rather than nativity per se.

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