

# Chapter 12

## Cross-Cultural Approaches to Mitigating the Immigrant Student Performance Disadvantage



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### Introduction

Certainly, human migration is not a new phenomenon; it has always been a part of the human experience. Migration patterns and times of diaspora have undoubtedly shaped the world in which we live (Goldin, Cameron, & Balarajan, 2011). Nevertheless, while not new, globalization, with its potential benefits and issues, has increasingly become a focus of attention since the end of World War II. Further, the exploration of the impact of globalization is an even more recent phenomenon. Perhaps surprisingly, at just under 3.0%, the global rate of migration has been quite stable over the past 60 years (Czaikia & De Haas, 2014). Nevertheless, this stable rate of migration hides important changes. Firstly, while the proportion of migration has been relatively consistent, with small increases over the past decade, the actual numbers of people migrating is increasing alongside our exponential global population growth. During this period, the number of countries having a net emigration has been increasing, while the number of countries with net immigration has been declining (Czaikia & De Haas, 2014). The majority of migrants (approximately 60%) are found in developed countries and are themselves originally from developing countries (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2016).

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In this diverse global context, migrant receiving countries, particularly popular Western receiving nations, are facing a multitude of challenges with regards to the consequences of international migration. The effects of migration on economic development, political dynamics, as well as social cohesion are acute concerns, and not surprisingly, are subject to continuous debate. How to provide good quality education to immigrant populations and addressing their performance gaps is inextricably linked to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) in education (SDG4), which is concerned with ensuring inclusive and quality education for all and the promotion of lifelong learning (see United Nations, [n.d.](#)). It is important to note that the entire cadre of SDG's were formally approved in 2015 by 193 countries around the world. Thus it seems that governments around the world have publicly signaled a willingness to tackle the dual challenges of quality and equity in education. It is within this global context that this book has attempted to promote greater understanding of the relationship between immigrant student achievement and educational policies across a range of educational and cultural contexts – each possessing unique school systems and challenges with immigrant student outcomes.

This chapter serves to provide a brief summary of the findings and experiences of the countries presented throughout the book. Certainly, it is not intended to fully duplicate the valuable summaries and analyses presented in each of the preceding chapters. While specific references are made to the previous chapters in order to provide an introduction to and overview of the various contexts, a fuller understanding of each context can only be obtained through a reading of these previous chapters. Our intention here is to use the cases presented from each chapter to identify commonalities and unique attributes within each education and societal system that may influence immigrant children's educational outcomes.

The countries highlighted in this book have been many of those most directly affected by the massive change in migration patterns. Historically, Europe was a net source of migrants to other nations. And countries such as Australia, Canada, and New Zealand (along with the USA) were the primary recipients of these European immigrants. This changed in the second half of the twentieth century. Alongside the formation of the European union, migration out of Europe has sharply declined. Currently, Europe is no longer a source of migrants, but rather is now a large recipient of migrants from increasingly diverse backgrounds (Czaika & De Haas, 2014). In place of the European diaspora that has dominated historical human migration, current migration patterns consist predominantly of a population of migrants from the diverse set of countries classified as being part of Asia. As one clear example of this shift, Asian (non-Western) migrants have largely replaced the historical European migrants in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, and they are also a large segment of the migrants in Europe itself. More recently, global events and crises have also resulted in a sudden increase in the number of refugees seeking asylum.

All of the authors in this book have noted the changing landscape of migration patterns within their countries, and their respective countries have largely been the recipients of increasing numbers of immigrants. The authors describe the changing

nature of immigration, highlighting the diversity of cultures and languages entering their countries (e.g., Harju-Luukkainen & McElvany, 2018; Poskitt, 2018; Scheerens & van der Werf, 2018). Some of these dramatic changes have been linked to the recent surge in refugees. As an example, Lundahl and Lindblad (2018) note that Sweden witnessed a sudden wave of refugee immigrants beginning in 2011 and culminating in 2015. Similarly, many of the authors within the preceding chapters describe a similar dramatic increase in refugee immigration (e.g., Teltemann & Rauch, 2018). Nevertheless, the increase in refugees is certainly not the only factor. Based on the global trends over the past decade and the numbers of second generation immigrants within these countries, the increase in cultural and language diversity has been occurring for some time.

Within our current global context, the long-term impacts of migration are generally argued to be beneficial (e.g., Goldin et al., 2011). However, several short-term challenges have been identified, both real and perceived, largely related to increased stressors on the functioning of a given society. In recognition of the ongoing and even increasing levels of immigration, governments have initiated a variety of immigrant policies. While some of these policies are intended to curtail the levels of immigration (e.g., Swedish Migration Agency, 2017), the vast majority are intended to support migrant integration and intercultural recognition. While such policies are focused on the general population of immigrants, there has been very little in terms of explicit policy initiatives directed toward the education of immigrant youth. The Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX, 2015) identified education as the largest weakness with respect to policies for the integration of immigrants. As Volante, Klinger, Siegel, and Bilgili (2017) summarized from the MIPEX report, the “poor outcomes of immigrant pupils are often accompanied with many new, but weak targeted policies, which are not always well implemented or effective in practice” (p. 333).

## **Educational Attainment of First- and Second-Generation Immigrant Children**

While many may argue with the use of large-scale, international assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) as a measure of student achievement, these assessments provide a defensible measure of relative student performance across jurisdictions. Moreover, the design of these assessments also enable inter- and intra-national comparisons of sub-groups of students. Based on such assessments, and consistent with other measures of achievement within countries, immigrant children are at a significant disadvantage in terms of educational outcomes. Such findings are the foundation for this book. As described by the authors, with rare exceptions, immigrant students have lower levels of academic achievement than their non-immigrant peers. Not surprisingly, differences tend to be larger for language achievement for those immigrants whose first language differs

from the dominant language of the country in which they now reside. Children who enter a country earlier in their lives or who are second-generation immigrants have greater exposure to the native languages of their new home. Yet, even for second-generation immigrants, differences in language performance largely remain, and these age- and generation-related factors provide only a partial explanation. As the chapter authors universally acknowledge, the observed performance differences are the result of a complex set of interactions.

The achievement results for immigrant children in countries such as Australia, Canada, and New Zealand highlight the complexity of a simple classification of immigrant student performance (Cheng & Yan, 2018; Poskitt, 2018; Welch, 2018). For example, immigrant children from East and Southeast Asia have some of the highest levels of achievement across student groups in Australia. Based on PISA results, both first- and second-generation students in Canada generally have similar levels of performance to their Canadian peers; however, there are provincial variations. As Poskitt (2018) describes, “differences in performance appear to be more attributable to ethnic grouping than immigrant status, the two highest performing ethnic groupings in the New Zealand PISA and TIMSS data were Asian (immigrant grouping) and Pākeha/European (non-immigrant grouping).” In contrast, non-immigrant Māori and immigrant Pacifica students had the lowest levels of performance.

Australia, Canada, and New Zealand have commonly used a “points system” to attract skilled immigrants. As a result, the majority of immigrant families entering these countries have a history of economic and educational success, and higher levels of socio-economic status is linked to higher levels of educational performance for both immigrants and non-immigrants. Thus it would appear that the educational challenges for immigrant students could be attributed to socio-economic status, and that after accounting for socio-economic status, immigrant and non-immigrant educational outcomes would be similar (e.g., Lundahl & Lindblad, 2018). Once again, this seems to oversimplify the reality. Even after accounting for socio-economic status, immigrant student performance is often below average on PISA measures (see European Commission, 2016; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2015). Further, Darmody and Smyth (2018) illustrate that even though immigrants to Ireland are highly educated, their children do not tend to have equal levels of attainment as measured by PISA.

Finland represents the most unique educational context to examine the immigrant student disadvantage, largely due to the historically low levels of immigration into this country. Nevertheless, as Harju-Luukkainen and McElvany (2018) explain, there have been many societal changes in Finland over the past decade. Schools have seen a sharp increase in the numbers of immigrant children who come to school with different cultural and language backgrounds. A major challenge for Finland is that while its education system has been extensively featured due to high PISA scores, first- and second-generation immigrants, while small in number, fare quite poorly on the assessment. There is a recognition of this challenge and resources have been directed to support both early childhood and subsequent education for immigrant children, largely in terms of language support. Additionally, immigrant

children will receive free access to summer activities. Once again, highlighting the complexity of our efforts to support immigrant children, Harju-Luukkainen and McElvany note a rural–urban divide. Immigrant children in rural areas of the country have a much greater disadvantage, highlighting the differential access to resources, and a likely economic factor.

As found in many of the countries reported here, the socio-economic status of immigrant families, family location (rural vs. urban), and the age of entry of immigrant children can partially explain the observed immigrant achievement disadvantage. Nevertheless, the Irish example highlights these are far from sufficient predictors of immigrant performance. Thus the second important purpose of this book is particularly important to consider: What are the implicit and explicit educational policies that may exacerbate or ameliorate the educational achievement gaps found for immigrant children?

## **Educational Approaches and Policies That Impact Immigrant Children’s Education**

The Irish example provides an example of how educational structures may differentially impact immigrant families and their children’s education. As Darmody and Smyth (2018) explain, the Irish education system promotes school choice for parents. As a result, a large proportion of students do not attend their neighborhood school, especially at the secondary level. A school with excessive demand is able to implement internal practices to select students from the pool of those wishing to attend that school. The result is that “newly arrived immigrant families have experienced difficulties in accessing more popular schools and, as a result, have been over-represented in schools serving socio-economically disadvantaged populations” (Darmody & Smyth, 2018; see also Smyth, Darmody, McGinnity, & Byrne, 2009). It appears that the differential impact of this policy of school choice has negative implications for immigrant students and there are now efforts to create a more equitable system of school admission. Similarly, while the education system in the Netherlands differs from Ireland, the high level of school autonomy appears to have had a similar impact on immigrant children, albeit not in terms of school choice but rather in terms of differential policies, supports, and practices to support the education of immigrant children (Scheerens & van der Werf, 2018).

A form of school choice does in fact exist in the Netherlands in the form of secondary pathways (streams) and vocational programs (Scheerens & van der Werf, 2018). A more commonly reported model of this type of student educational system is found in Germany (Teltemann & Rauch, 2018), and as Catarci (2018) describes, Italy uses a similar model. Each of these authors notes that immigrant students, especially those from non-Western countries, are more likely to be in the less academic and vocational programs. While such programs have worthy intentions to enable students with different interests to select pathways that best meet their

learning needs and post-graduation plans, the reality is often different. Students in these contexts are often directed into these pathways early in their education, and movement upward between pathways is rare. As a result, these vocational programs have commonly been associated with lower levels of: (a) family affluence, (b) educational achievement, (c) graduation, (d) postsecondary education, and (e) employment success. Given the over-representation of immigrant students in these programs, there is clearly a greater likelihood for ongoing economic challenges for both first- and second-generation immigrant children.

Nordic countries such as Sweden have a modified model of education that provides “a 9-year comprehensive education without streaming and little separation of students” (Lundahl & Lindblad, 2018). While Sweden has very few specific policies directed towards immigrant students, other than those directed towards Swedish language instruction, it does appear to be one of the few jurisdictions to provide mother-tongue instruction until Grade 6, and this may even include a portion of instruction in other subject areas. This would suggest a very equitable system for immigrant children. Nevertheless, other educational policies in Sweden seem to serve to diminish these “immigrant-friendly” practices. As with the example in Ireland, privatization of schools and school choice have led to differential access to schools. The result is that immigrant families have less accessibility to more affluent schools and neighbourhoods.

The Dutch model illustrates the evolution of educational and immigrant policy, typically beginning with a focus on full integration into the dominant society, followed by an increasing focus on maintaining immigrant culture. Catarci (2018) highlights even more significant policy initiatives in Italy, a country in which first-generation immigrants have much lower levels of achievement, higher levels of vocational education, and higher levels of school leaving, in comparison to their second-generation immigrant or non-immigrant peers. These initiatives highlight an “intercultural approach in the educational context as a deliberate project to promote dialogue and cultural exchange for all” (Catarci, 2018). Subsequently, further policies have been implemented to provide educational guidelines for supporting the learning of immigrant students and implementing an intercultural approach to meeting the learning needs of immigrant students. Contrast this with the current trend in Australia to mainstream immigrant educational policies within the broader educational policy realm resulting in a system in which these policies have become “everybody’s business, but no-one’s job” (Welch, 2018).

While the efforts in the Netherlands and Italy highlight explicit examples of educational policies and efforts to ameliorate immigrant student achievement, accompanying societal policies may provide even further benefits and may be even more effective. Collectively, the chapter authors have highlighted the complexity of integration and inclusion for immigrants not just in terms of education but also in terms of social integration and inclusion. There is a long-standing belief, supported through correlational PISA evidence, that centralized systems with appropriate provisions to address unique contextual issues, are better able to support the educational needs of children. Perhaps such similar centralized approaches have the potential to better support immigrant families. As an example, Canada has one of the

highest proportions of immigration. In spite of this, Canadian immigrant students also have relatively comparative levels of achievement as their non-migrant peers. Educational policies in Canada commonly focus on language and cultural development along with dedicated efforts to enhance equity and inclusion (Volante et al., 2017). As Cheng and Yan (2018) further highlight, federal immigration policies have often been modified “with the key goal of improving the overall economic performance of new immigrants” while also “reuniting families and protecting refugees.”

Overall, the chapters in this book provide little evidence supporting or refuting the premise that centralized efforts are more effective. As an example, England and Finland highlight how structural differences within each country are still resulting in similar efforts to address the achievement disadvantage of immigrant children. As Jerrim (2018) acknowledges, there are no centralized educational policies in England directly related to supporting immigrants. Nevertheless, Jerrim highlights a series of initiatives and interventions to enhance immigrant children’s educational outcomes. In contrast, Finland, a country with a history of low levels of immigration, is striving to live up to its education mission of equality of education for all students. The Finnish constitution, includes a separate Non-Discrimination Act focused on education. As part of the Act, educational institutions must assess the effectiveness of their efforts to meet the intentions of the act, and ensure that interventions and supports are both “effective and appropriate” (Harju-Luukkainen & McElvany, 2018). Alongside the policies directed towards specific providers, centralized immigrant initiatives in Finland are focused on research, teacher education, and accessibility with respect to immigrant children.

Not surprisingly, and given the changing landscape of immigration across the countries highlighted in this book, the predominant approach to immigrant education has focused largely on language acquisition and the supports and resources required to accelerate the attainment of “language” within the new country of residence. In some cases, explicit supports are provided for the maintenance of first languages, on the premise that first-language literacy can benefit second-language acquisition. While these policies should benefit first-generation immigrants, it is not as clear that such policies will sufficiently benefit second-generation immigrants. The country chapters highlight very different educational outcomes for second-generation immigrants. Perhaps the complementary policies and practices that attempt to address issues of social integration and cultural acceptance, both for immigrants and non-immigrants, will have promise here.

## Moving Forward

Consistent across the chapters has been an acknowledgement of the lack of firm evidence regarding the effectiveness of policies and efforts to not only support immigrant students and their families but also to ameliorate the immigrant student disadvantage (e.g., Harju-Luukkainen & McElvany, 2018; Jerrim, 2018; Teltemann

& Rauch, 2018). While there may be a lack of firm evidence, there are signs of progress. First and foremost, dedicated language supports are common for immigrants who do not have the language skills for their new country of residence (e.g., Jerrim, 2018; Teltemann & Rauch, 2018). While causal links to current educational policies are not possible at this time, the chapter authors have noted that the immigrant disadvantage appears to be shrinking, albeit slowly. And this is in the presence of increasing numbers of immigrants. In addition, there has been a fundamental shift in the conception of what integration means. Scheerens and van der Werf (2018) report that the improvement in educational attainment for immigrant children in the Netherlands, after accounting for parental education, represents a significant change. The gaps are declining and immigrant students are increasingly selecting academic pathways.

There is also an open recognition that language acquisition is not sufficient for educational and economic success of immigrants. The authors have identified a series of both specific and broad efforts already in place or soon to be enacted to address the broader issues of language acquisition and social and cultural integration. Countries such as Finland and Germany are funding both research and initiatives to support language education of immigrants. Specific training for teachers is described with respect to immigrant children, and more recently, refugees (e.g., Canada, Finland). Countries are also revisiting their long-standing practices. As an example, policy developments in Ireland are revisiting the admissions criteria to “make access to education more transparent and equitable to all families and their children” (Darmody & Smyth, 2018).

Interestingly, these experiences related to educational access and cultural integration have led us to think about Ogbu once again. When one considers the research highlighted in this book with respect to the educational experiences and achievement of immigrant children across jurisdictions, it seems that Ogbu’s previous research (1974, 1978, 1987; Ogbu & Simons, 1998) continues to have relevance and importance to our subsequent efforts. Evidence of his relevance is illustrated in the example of New Zealand (Poskitt, 2018). The Māori population in New Zealand is a significant proportion of the country’s population. Yet, as Poskitt discusses, the educational attainment of Māori children lags behind many of the immigrant groups. While not a focus of this book, similar experiences are found with respect to Aboriginal learners in both Australia and Canada. Admittedly, Ogbu has been criticized with respect to key aspects of his theories regarding voluntary and involuntary immigrants (e.g., Foley, 2004). Nevertheless, the efforts described in this book clearly resonate with Ogbu’s cultural-ecological theory (e.g., Ogbu, 1981; Ogbu & Simons, 1998). His argument regarding the importance of societal and school factors is clearly evident in some of the policy initiatives highlighted in this book. Further, the economic and social barriers associated with the educational disadvantage experienced by sub-groups of immigrants parallel Ogbu’s conceptions of instrumental, relational, and symbolic discrimination (Foley, 2004). Lastly, many of the policies described in this book are clearly intended to address these explicit and implicit forms of discrimination. We cannot help but acknowledge the impact that Ogbu has had on these current efforts. Our future success with respect to



eliminating the immigrant student disadvantage will likely owe its foundation to creating the types of socio-cultural communities Ogbu envisioned.

## A Final Word

Admittedly, the ability to show the impact of educational policies directed to support immigrant children's education is difficult to demonstrate. Large-scale effects take time to demonstrate their influence, and measures such as PISA and TIMSS are notoriously insensitive to change. Nevertheless, the findings presented here provide evidence not only of focused efforts to address the immigrant disadvantage, but also the emerging positive impacts of these initiatives. More importantly, the collective efforts highlighted here suggest the most promising directions for policy and resources need to differentially target sub-populations of immigrants and non-immigrants. To repeat the conclusions of Poskitt (2018) in her analysis of targeted policy initiatives in New Zealand: "These glimmers of hope suggest that targeting resources to students who most need it is a strategy that may actually address performance differences and equity challenges associated with immigrants and students from less advantaged backgrounds."

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