The Role of Legal Immigrant Parents’ Pre- and Post-Migration Characteristics in their Children's Academic Achievement

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The goal of this research is to extend our knowledge of the academic achievement of children of immigrants by widening the lens through which their parents’ characteristics and experiences are examined. In the absence of information on immigrants' pre-migration characteristics, it is difficult—if not impossible—to understand the unique role of post-migration circumstances in the outcomes of immigrants and their children. In our featured study published in Child Development in 2012, using parent and child data from the New Immigrant Survey, we argue that families’ socioeconomic status before migrating contributes significantly to their socioeconomic status (SES) after migrating but in different ways. For example, immigrant parents’ education before migrating is significantly tied to their children’s achievement in the United States, but parents’ occupations before migration does not. Taken together, pre-migration parental attributes fully account for the test score disadvantage of Mexican-origin children of legal immigrants relative to non-Latino children of legal immigrants.

Did You Know?

- Almost one quarter (24%) of children in the United States were either born abroad or are children of immigrants.

Source: 2007 data cited in Clark, Glick, and Bures (2009).

Related Article


Immigrants arrive in the United States with different SES and language proficiency backgrounds. A challenge faced by scholars of immigration is to separate what immigrants arrive with from how they adapt and assimilate after immigration and settlement. For this study, we used parent and child data from the New Immigrant Survey, a longitudinal and nationally representative study of legal immigrants. This database contains extensive information on pre-migration characteristics. We were able to simultaneously account for parents’ attributes before and after migration in our analysis of children’s academic achievement. To measure academic achievement, we used scores from Woodcock Johnson III

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tests that were given as part of the New Immigrant Survey to more than 2,100 children ages 6 to 12 whose parents were included in the study.

Our Findings

Parents’ pre-migration SES (education, work status, and occupation) fully account for the test score disadvantage of Mexican-origin children of legal immigrants compared to non-Latino children of legal immigrants.

The level of cognitive stimulation (e.g., how often a parent reads to a child) in immigrant homes is significantly related to parents’ pre-migration and English skills over and above their post-migration socioeconomic status.

Among all parental SES attributes before and after migration, parental education before migration is most strongly associated with children’s achievement.

Immigrant parents who previously held higher-status occupations tend to find lower-status jobs after migration, whereas those who were previously unemployed are able to find jobs after migration.

Our research reveals important aspects of continuity between immigrants’ pre- and post-migration resources. Even after the transformative event of immigration, family social privilege or disadvantage often persists and is transmitted to subsequent generations. The results raise the possibility that adult literacy programs to compensate the low pre-migration education levels of some immigrant parents could have benefits in both parents’ and children’s generations. Such approaches may be particularly important to consider for immigrant families from Mexico.

Conclusion

Our study extends our knowledge of the academic achievement of children of immigrants through examining parents’ characteristics and experiences before migration. The research results highlight the continuity that prevails in human capital resources of migrants in the origin countries, and the transmission of social privileges and disadvantages to next generations after migration into the United States. For all origin groups, parental education acquired before migration is strongly related to all measures of children’s achievement, but the benefit of parental education acquired after migration shows only in language-related tests. Given the fact that low SES origin groups, particularly Mexican immigrants, tend to come with little or no education, our study proposes several policy recommendations that target all low SES children, of whom Mexican children make up the largest percentage. These policies, such as adult literacy program, after-school tutoring and school-based extracurricular activities should start as early as possible in preschool or elementary school.

References

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PRI at the Pennsylvania State University encourages, organizes, and supports innovative research and training in the population sciences. With the talents of more than 60 outstanding scholars, PRI provides a supportive and collegial environment to stimulate collaborative externally funded research. PRI is an NICHD-supported population center, grant no. 2R24HD041025.