

Does Acculturation Lower Educational Achievement for Children of Immigrants?

Emily Greenman

The educational success of children in immigrant families is paramount to the national interest. One-fifth of U.S. schoolchildren now come from immigrant families, and this number is projected to grow. Whether these children succeed in school will be critical to their ability to become effective workers, parents, and community members. Among the many challenges involved in educating the children of immigrants, one particular concern has emerged in the literature in sociology and education: the effect of acculturation on educational outcomes. As I discuss below, current theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence suggest that acculturation – the process of increasing cultural similarity between immigrants and natives – may be associated with worsening educational outcomes for children of immigrants. By providing a deeper understanding of the relationship between acculturation and educational outcomes, this project will help educators design more effective interventions to help children of immigrants succeed in school.

Goals

This project will clarify the relationship between acculturation and educational outcomes by examining a crucial intermediary factor linking the two: attitudes and behaviors toward education. The sociological literature has often attributed declines in children's educational outcomes across immigrant generations to the negative effects of acculturation on children's educational attitudes and behaviors, such as the effort they expend on schoolwork. However, there have been few empirical studies directly examining patterns of generational change in such attitudes and behaviors. Nor has there been a large-scale study based on national data that explicitly links such generational change to either acculturation or educational outcomes. In

absence of any such studies demonstrating a mechanism through which acculturation could affect educational outcomes, the connection between the two cannot be firmly established.

This project will further elucidate the relationship between acculturation and the educational outcomes of children of immigrants by a) assessing whether there is a pattern of generational change in educational attitudes and behaviors; b) assessing to what extent generational differences in educational outcomes, such as grades and high school graduation, are attributable to generational differences in attitudes and behaviors; and c) exploring whether acculturation is truly the process leading to generational change in attitudes and behaviors. Clarifying the reasons for such changes will allow educators and policymakers to better identify how to help children of immigrants maintain their initial positive attitudes and behaviors.

Background and Significance

After taking into account differences between immigrant and native children in English fluency, family poverty, and parental education, there is considerable evidence that first-generation immigrant children (foreign-born children of foreign-born parents) do better in school than second-generation children (U.S.-born children of foreign-born parents) and/or third- or higher-generation children (U.S.-born children of U.S.-born parents). For example, Perreira, Harris, and Lee (2006) find that, all else equal, first-generation Hispanic and Asian children have lower odds of dropping out of high school than third-plus generation peers of any race. Other studies have also found that first- or second-generation children outperform their third-plus generation peers in educational outcomes such as high school graduation and academic achievement (Driscoll 1999; Rumbaut 1997).

Most theoretical explanations for this generational decline focus on acculturation. Acculturation is typically thought of as a process by which immigrants, through exposure to and

interaction with natives, adopt the cultural attributes of the host society. Current theoretical perspectives on acculturation, such as segmented assimilation theory (Portes and Zhou 1993), recognize that there are multiple distinct subcultures that immigrants may acculturate to. Some immigration scholars have been concerned that some children of immigrants may acculturate into “oppositional cultures” supposedly found among American youth, particularly minority youth (Zhou 1997; Portes and Rumbaut 2001). According to Ogbu and Fordham (1986), oppositional cultures that denigrate academic achievement have developed in minority communities in response to experiences of discrimination and blocked opportunities. If immigrant children adopt these cultural models, it follows that their schooling may suffer (Portes and Zhou 1993).

Generational declines in educational outcomes have been taken for evidence of this kind of negative acculturation. I argue that more direct evidence is necessary in order to attribute generational changes to acculturation rather than some other factor. For instance, children’s direct experiences in school, rather than acculturation, could be the primary factor driving attitudinal change (see Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 1995). This project will provide a more direct test of the acculturation hypothesis by examining the social context in which children acculturate. If the process driving generational change in immigrant children’s attitudes is acculturation, then such change should be connected to children’s exposure to particular cultural models regarding education. Thus, greater deterioration in attitudes should occur in schools with more negative peer cultures. This project will provide the first analysis of the relationship between peer culture and immigrant children’s patterns of attitudinal change.

Research Methods and Data Analysis

This project will analyze data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add

Health). Add Health is a nationally representative school-based survey of adolescents in grades 7-12 in 1994-1995. All students in sampled schools were asked to complete the school-based portion of the survey. A subset of students also completed a longer in-home interview. This subset has been re-interviewed twice, most recently at ages 18-25. Add Health provides adequate sample sizes to examine change across three generations for Mexican (N=1132) youth. Sample sizes are inadequate to make three-generation comparisons for other specific ethnicities, but I will examine pooled Asian (N=1110) and Hispanic (N=2502) groups. There is also sufficient sample size to compare the second and third generations among Puerto Ricans (N=523). All of these groups will also be compared to third-plus generation natives.

Part 1 of the analysis will provide the literature's first thorough investigation of the role of educational behaviors and attitudes as intermediary factors between acculturation and educational outcomes. It will answer two key questions: Is there evidence of a generational pattern of change in educational behaviors and attitudes consistent with known patterns of change in educational outcomes? If so, to what extent does this change in attitudes/behaviors explain these generational changes in educational outcomes?

My first statistical models will address the first of these questions: the effects of generation on educational attitudes and behaviors. Add Health contains several questions measuring students' educational attitudes/behaviors. Behavioral measures include students' reports of how often they skip school and how frequently they have trouble paying attention, getting along with teachers, and getting their homework done. Attitudinal measures include students' self-ratings of their effort to do well in school and their desire to go to college. I will experiment with creating a single scale combining information from all the measures, in which case I would model the attitude/behavior scale as a function of generation using OLS regression.

I will also try creating a dichotomized version of each measure (e.g., “frequent” school skippers are coded as 1, all others as 0) and individually modeling each using logit models. In these and all subsequent models, I will include covariates to control for differences by immigrant generation in potential confounders such as income, parental education, English fluency, etc.

To answer my second question, I will run two sets of models to assess the effects of generation on three educational outcomes: high school graduation, college enrollment, and grades. For grades, I will examine both concurrent grades and change in grades during the high school years. The first set of models will include only immigrant generation and the control variables as predictors. The second set will also include attitudinal/behavioral measures. Using these results, I can then assess how much of the effect of generation is due to changes in attitudes and behaviors by comparing the size of the generation effect across the two sets of models.

Part 2 of the analysis will examine the role of school peer context in creating generational change in immigrant children’s educational attitudes and behaviors. In so doing, it will also provide a test of acculturation’s potential as an explanation for generational change in educational attitudes and behaviors. If acculturation into oppositional cultures is occurring, immigrant-origin youth in schools with many peers who have negative education-related attitudes/behaviors should experience greater deterioration in their own attitudes/behaviors than youth in schools with more positively-oriented peers. Add Health is ideal for studying peer effects because rather than relying on respondents for information about their peers, it measures each peer’s behavior directly via the in-school questionnaire. All of the behavioral/attitudinal measures except skipping school are available for every student in the sampled schools. I will use school average responses in order to measure school peer culture regarding education.

My statistical analysis will model attitudes and behaviors as a function of generation and

school peer context. I will include interaction terms between generation and school peer culture in each model to test whether the effect of generation on attitudes/behaviors varies across school peer contexts. Using the longitudinal component of Add Health, I will also model change over time in attitudes/behaviors as a function of school peer context. If these models show that there is a stronger (negative) effect of generation and/or greater attitudinal deterioration over time in schools with more negative peer cultures, this would support the acculturation explanation of attitudinal change.

Interpretation

My analysis provides two critical tests of the causal relationship between acculturation and worsening educational outcomes among children of immigrants. First, acculturation theoretically can only affect outcomes such as grades and high school graduation through changing immigrant children's attitudes and behaviors. If generational differences in attitudes and behaviors do not explain any of the relationship between generation and educational outcomes, it is less likely that acculturation is the factor driving generational change in educational outcomes. Second, if acculturation is responsible for generational change in attitudes, then the particular subculture that children of immigrants acculturate *to* should matter: if there is no relationship between the cultures children are exposed to and attitudinal change, this makes it less likely that acculturation is the primary factor behind generational declines in educational attitudes and behaviors.

Ultimately, if the acculturation-education link cannot pass these tests, we need to consider the possibility that observed generational changes are caused by factors other than acculturation, such as exposure to discrimination by peers or low expectations from teachers. Results from this project will therefore help educators identify the most effective points of intervention to help children of immigrants succeed in school.

References

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