
Social Inequality and Diversity. Education and training are analyzed at the WZB from the perspective of social inequality and life chances. Key themes of the research unit Skill Formation and Labor Markets include the cumulative processes of educational and social stratification over the life course and the resulting inequalities in employment opportunities. How societies cope with other aspects of inequality, diversity, and integration is explored mainly in the Research Area on Migration and Diversity. The objects of study include the integration of immigrants along its various dimensions, the reactions of native populations to immigration, as well as the impacts of immigration and diversity on social trust, cooperation and solidarity in society at large.

Migration, Education, and Inequality

Which European Educational Systems Provide Fair Opportunities to Learn?

Camilla Borgna

Europe has long cherished the illusion of immigration as a transient phenomenon. In this vision, common especially – but not only – in continental Europe, immigrants were Gastarbeiter (guest workers), individuals who came to work for a limited period of time and would eventually make their way back to their families and homelands. However, reality turned out to be rather different: immigrants settled down, tried to reunite with their families, and claimed their social and political rights. In short, as pointed out by Max Frisch, “We called for workers, but people came.” Only when this fact became evident did European societies begin to adjust their institutional settings to the new reality, a process that is still ongoing.

The lack of integration of children of immigrants became a hot topic in public debates and many expectations started to be directed toward the educational system. Education is generally seen as a crucial precondition for upward social mobility and could then boost future life chances of second-generation immigrants. Moreover, investing in education could also indirectly foster the social and cultural integration of immigrant parents.

Yet, education is a double-edged sword: it also legitimizes the reproduction of social inequalities, since children with a favourable family background are more likely to gain access to high educational levels and to successfully complete them.

And this is where Europe so not succeeded: national educational systems have so far missed the chance to empower children of immigrants by ensuring equal learning opportunities. In all Western European countries, students of immigrant origin generally lag behind their native peers in terms of years of educa-

Summary: In Europe, immigrant-origin students underperform their native peers, even accounting for differences in family background. In some countries this disadvantage is severe, in others it is mild. This discrepancy leads to the question which institutions produce the most egalitarian outcomes. Empirical evidence suggests that the timing of entry in school and preschool, the existence of differentiated tracks, and the degree of residential segregation play a major role in shaping the learning opportunities of second-generation immigrants.

tion completed, kind of qualification attained, and competences acquired in the basic domains of mathematics, reading, and science. They are also more likely to drop out of school, to repeat a year, and to end up in less prestigious school tracks.

There are differences, however, which indicate that there is a partial and gradual integration process in place: children who were born in the host societies from immigrant parents (second-generation) tend to perform better than those who have personally experienced immigration (first-generation). Among first-generation immigrants, those who arrived in the host society early in their lives have better educational outcomes.

Nevertheless, the persistence of a disadvantage for second-generation immigrants – born, socialized and educated in the destination country – clashes with the image of school as an institutional setting providing equal learning chances to all.

While immigrant/native gaps exist in all Western European countries, the size of these gaps is variable: all educational systems are unequal, but some are more unequal than others. In order to understand which institutional aspects of the European educational systems are especially detrimental to the progression of students of immigrant origin, one has to retrace the sources of their initial disadvantage.

Since immigrants are overrepresented in the least privileged strata of the population, traditional mechanisms of social stratification account for much of the immigrant learning disadvantage: fewer material and educational resources at home make it more difficult for students of lower socio-economic background to attain good results in school; when parents themselves attained only low education, they may lack the skills and/or the inclination to help their children with homework; moreover, the value conferred to education varies across social classes, just like the costs associated with delaying entry into the labour market: hence, an early disengagement can emerge among pupils who know they will not stay long in school.

The disadvantage that migrants face in learning, however, is only partially explained by the lower socio-economic background of immigrant families. There is a migrant-specific disadvantage hindering the educational careers of first- and second-generation immigrants, not only compared to the typical native students, but also to those natives who have access to a limited amount of resources within their families. Assessing the size of this migrant-specific disadvantage and investigating which educational systems do a better job in keeping these disparities low was the goal of my dissertation project, which I developed between 2010 and 2014 at the State University of Milan. By using the 2006 and 2009 PISA data, I analysed the educational achievement of 15-year-old students in the key literacy domains of mathematics, reading and science, comparing second-generation immigrants to students with no migration background. Then, by comparing 17 Western European countries and using a variety of methods, I assessed the role of educational systems in producing more or less severe degrees of migrant-specific educational disadvantage.

From a theoretical perspective, behind migrant-specific educational disadvantages we can envisage first of all a lack of language skills in the destination-country language: while mainly relevant for students who migrate at school age, this factor can also affect the performance of children of immigrants born in the country or arrived at very young age, if they had limited chances of interaction with native peers during early childhood. In effect, according to my results the late start of compulsory schooling could explain the apparent paradox of some Scandinavian countries, where the comprehensive character of primary and lower-secondary schooling is able to reduce the educational inequalities driven by social class, but not so much those driven by migratory status.

Interestingly enough, in Sweden, Denmark and Finland – where compulsory schooling starts at the age of seven – pupils of immigrant origin experience far greater learning difficulties than in Norway, where school is already compulso-



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ry at the age of six. In the early phases of learning, a short period of time can make the difference. Access to early education and care might be equally important for the cognitive development of immigrant children: in France, where attendance at preschool (3 to 5 years) is almost universal, migrant-specific educational penalties are considerably lower than in the French-speaking cantons of Switzerland, where fewer than 40 per cent of children are enrolled in preschool.

A second hindrance to the academic success of immigrant students derives from the fact that in many cases their parents have a limited knowledge of how the host-country educational system works, and more generally on what are its implicit values, cultural norms and expectations. Therefore, educational systems where choices are crucial for school progression are likely to exacerbate immigrant/native gaps. In particular, the early selection of students into rigid tracks with differentiated curricula can be detrimental, because the earlier the choice takes place, the more important the guidance role played by families in decision making. In Germany and Austria – where students choose between academically-oriented and vocationally-oriented tracks very early in life – immigrants are overwhelmingly concentrated in marginal sectors of the school system. In these marginal schools, the initial disadvantage deriving from migratory status is exacerbated by the exposure to a lower-quality learning environment, in terms of peers, teaching staff and educational resources. Not surprisingly, in Germany and Austria large differences in educational achievement also exist between students of different socio-economic backgrounds: just like children of immigrants, children coming from low-educated families are penalized by the early selectivity of these systems.

Where residential segregation is an issue, immigrant students may be marginalized into disadvantaged schools even before any kind of selection into tracks occurs. In Sweden and Denmark, for instance, during primary schooling, immigrant children are already four times more likely than natives to be enrolled in the lowest-performing schools. Despite the concerns of public opinion, many studies conducted in the US and in Europe show that schools with high proportions of immigrants are not detrimental per se to the academic performance of their students. Instead what seems to matter is the socio-economic composition of the school, as well as the human and financial resources of these “ghetto” schools. Troublesome schools tend to have less qualified teachers, as a consequence of freedom of choice and/or assignment procedures. While most parents would perceive those schools as problematic, only those with sufficient time, economic and informational resources will eventually succeed in sending their kids elsewhere, which contributes to making the disadvantaged schools even more marginal. Therefore, if immigrant families are heavily concentrated in poor neighbourhoods, their children will most likely be exposed to a low-quality learning environment.

What do we make of this evidence from a policy-making perspective? Each educational system can be seen as a complex constellation of elements, embedded in a social and historical context. The attempt to identify a one-size-fits-all recipe to grant equal learning opportunities to immigrant children is a wild goose chase. Nonetheless, three main lessons can be drawn from the empirical research on migrant learning disadvantage. First of all, in order to tackle the initial language difficulties experienced by immigrant children, educational systems should be designed in a way to include them as soon as possible and to facilitate their interactions with native peers. This can be done either by lowering the age that compulsory schooling should start, or by providing accessible and good-quality preschool facilities, thus promoting the participation of both native and immigrant children.

Second, differentiated educational systems should postpone the moment when students choose between tracks, and improve institutional counselling in order to bridge the informational gap of immigrant families. Moreover, in order to avoid the marginalization of students who have opted for vocational tracks, one should make sure that in these tracks curricula and teaching staff are of adequate quality standards.

The third and final point concerns countries where residential segregation produces a disproportionate concentration of disadvantaged students in some schools. In order to minimize the risk of a vicious circle, career incentives could be provided to the most qualified and motivated teachers to stay in these otherwise marginal schools. Also, additional resources should be made available for such schools, enabling them to offer their students remedial courses and supplementary educational materials.

As the French experience of zones d'éducation prioritaire (ZEPs) shows, when designing such compensatory measures, policy-makers should be careful not to create a stigma against targeted schools. However, in spite of the harsh critiques directed towards this model, when looking at educational gaps between students of immigrant and native origin, the ZEPs do not seem to be a complete failure. On the contrary, France is one of the few Western European countries – together with the UK and Luxembourg – where immigrant students fare nearly as well as their native peers with similar socio-economic resources. These experiences show that – although the road to a full integration of second-generation immigrants in Europe is still a long one – improving the egalitarian character of national educational systems is not a chimera.

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