Ethnic convergence or perseverance?: The early school performance of children in immigrant families in the United States

Jennifer E. Glick, Arizona State University

This paper addresses the divergent educational trajectories of children in immigrant families in the United States. Specifically, the research examines the effects of familial and school contexts on academic performance and asks whether the differences across the country-of-origin backgrounds of children in immigrant families that are evident in first grade persist by third grade. Children of immigrants today are inserted into the racial/ethnic hierarchy of the United States and it seems unlikely they are not influenced by this identification. While studies of early education point to the importance of stratification for shaping even the very initial academic trajectories of children in the United States (Entwisle and Alexander, 1993; Lee and Burkam, 2002), we have less of an understanding of when in the schooling process the children of immigrants are most likely to be impacted by this disparity in the US educational system.

The data for the paper come from The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS-K). The ECLS-K is an ongoing data collection effort by the U.S. Department of Education, National Center of Education Statistics (NCES). The survey began with a cohort of 22,000 children in kindergarten and has followed the children through their elementary schooling. The data have the advantage of recording not only the birthplace of the child and parents but also allow for a very detailed analysis of racial and ethnic variation in school outcomes by containing a large over-sample of ethnic minorities. The parents and teachers of each focal child are interviewed in the Fall and Spring of the child's Kindergarten year (2000). Two follow-ups are available for the following Fall and Spring (First grade for most of the cohort). An additional wave of data is just now available for third grade (2003) allowing for a more comprehensive analysis of the children's progress through formal schooling.

The story of immigrant adaptation in the United States was historically predicated on the assumption that, with time and across generations, immigrants and their children saw increasing integration and human capital attainment. However, much of the recent research on children in immigrant families has pointed to the fact that recent immigration to the United States and other Western countries is more global than was previously the case. Migration from Latin America and Asia predominates current migration flows. The great cultural and racial diversity that has emerged from the "new" immigration has led some scholars to argue that a monolithic model of adaptation so relied upon to explain the trajectories of immigrants and their children in the mid-twentieth century will not work today. This is particularly likely in societies like the United States where disparities in health, wealth and well-being are so evident by race.

Thus some scholars have argued that adaptation in the United States really takes on a "segmented" feature whereby children of immigrants of some racial/panethnic identities outperform their third and higher generation peers while others lag behind. The children of immigrants from those groups that have been historically disadvantaged in the United States may face different opportunities or barriers than other children from immigrant

families (Zhou, 1997). This would result in a net disadvantage for some immigrants and a net advantage for others that is not accounted for by compositional characteristics such as socioeconomic status (Kao, Tienda and Schneider, 1996).

If insertion into a racial/ethnic hierarchy is a primary influence then variation in academic performance should be greater by race/ethnicity than by generation status or country-of-origin. However, those studies that do compare children across national origins suggest the "segmented" feature of adaptation may not take place across entire panethnic groups but is rather evidenced among particular national origin groups. Again, findings are mixed but for some first and particularly second-generation youth, performance is lower than those in the third or higher order generation even in the presence of controls for differences in the stock of human capital (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001). Mexican, Nicaraguan, Haitian and Cambodian youth have all been found to exhibit lower academic performance than their US born peers while Vietnamese and Chinese origin youth have been cited as surpassing their third or higher generation peers (see Kim, 2002; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001; Suarez-Orzoco and Suarez-Orzoco, 2001). In this case, a complete picture of variation in academic achievement will only emerge once country-of-origin is taken into account.

One explanation given from divergent educational outcomes is that some families provide an environment more supportive of formal schooling than others. Indeed, studies that have examined the educational orientation of immigrant youth find that recent immigrant parents provide support to their children that may even counter structural obstacles found in neighborhoods or schools (Goyette and Xie, 1999; Kao and Tienda, 1995; Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Glick and White, 2004). Analyses with the early waves of the ECLS data reveal that immigrant parents hold higher educational expectations for their children in first grade than parents of third and higher generation youth regardless of country-of-origin (Glick, 2004a).

However, when analyses investigate the reading and math test scores of these young children it is clear that considerable variation in academic performance exists across country-of-origin backgrounds. To a certain extent these differences fall along "pan-ethnic" lines so that children whose parents may be considered "Hispanic" immigrants tend to perform similarly to their third and higher generation peers who are also "Hispanic" or "Black". The panethnic line is not so clear for children of "Asian" immigrants such that Chinese origin children far outperform their "Anglo" or "Asian" third and higher generation peers but those of Laotian or Cambodian origins lag behind (Glick, 2004b).

This paper will expand the previous analyses by utilizing the newly released third-grade panel of the longitudinal data to determine whether there is convergence to a "panethnic" group mean over time. "Panethnic" groups are defined as those that hold meaning in the context of racial hierarchy in the United States but may not reflect the individual ethnic origins of each group. These panethnic groups are: "Anglo" or non-Hispanic Whites, "Black" or non-Hispanic Black, "Hispanic" (of any race), "Asian" and "Pacific

Islanders". The hypotheses are based on the sometimes contradictory predictions of the classic assimilation model and the segmented assimilation model. Specifically, I ask if children in immigrant families see their academic performance converge towards their third and higher generation counterparts in the same panethnic group or whether children from some specific country of origin groups still stand apart from their peers even in their third year of formal schooling? If country of origin differences persist, what are the familial and school contextual factors that seem to influence these differences? With the longitudinal data, it is possible to test whether high parental expectations, home language environment and other parenting practices in immigrant homes or school type, school SES and school size, influence the academic trajectories of these children.

NOTE: This research is supported by a grant from NICHD (RO3 HD44006).

References:

Entwisle, Doris and Karl L. Alexander 1993. "Entry into School: The beginning school transition and educational stratification in the United States." Annual Review of Sociology, 19: 401-423.

Glick, Jennifer E. 2004a. "Educational Expectations and Academic Performance of Young Children in Immigrant Families: The importance of Country-of-origin and Race/ethnicity" manuscript under review.

Glick, Jennifer E. 2004b. "Country of Origin and ethnicity as predictors of educational outcomes for children in immigrant families". Paper presented at the 2004 Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, San Francisco, Ca.

Glick, Jennifer E. and Michael J. White. 2004. "Parental Aspirations and Post-Secondary School Participation among Immigrant and native Youth in the United States." *Social Science Research*, 33: 272-299.

Goyette, Kimberly and Yu Xie. 1999. "Educational Expectations of Asian American Youths: Determinants and Ethnic Differences." *Sociology of Education*, 72: 22-36.

Kao, Grace and Marta Tienda. 1995. "Optimism and Achievement: The Educational Performance of Immigrant Youth." Social Science Quarterly, 76(1): 1-19.

Kao, Grace; Marta Tienda and Barbara Schneider. 1996. "Racial and Ethnic Variation in Academic Performance." Research in Sociology of Education and Socialization, 11: 263-297.

Kim, RY. 2002. "Ethnic Differences in Academic Achievement Between Vietnamese and Cambodian Children: Cultural and Structural Explanations." *The Sociological Quarterly*, 43(2): 213-235

Lee, Valerie E. and David T. Burkam. 2002. Inequality at the Starting Gate: Social background differences in achievement as children begin school. Economic Policy Institute

Portes, A. and R.G. Rumbaut. 2001. Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Suarez-Orozco, Carola and Marcelo M. Suarez-Orozco. 2001. Children of Immigration. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Zhou, Min. 1997. "Segmented Assimilation: Issues, Controversies and Recent Research on the New Second Generation". International Migration Review, 31(4): 975-1008.