

Demographic Insights



IMMIGRANTS & EDUCATION

Europe's youth is becoming increasingly diverse. On average 10% of all fifteen-year-olds are so-called second-generation migrants – at least one of their parents was born in another country. In younger generations, the share of children with a migrant background will be even higher, and without them our societies would be ageing much faster. Yet, for these young Europeans it is especially difficult to succeed in the education system. Recent research takes a closer look at immigrant children's education and how our school systems could work better for everyone.

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Avoiding segregation is crucial

5 Questions for Demographer Amparo González-Ferrer

WHAT ARE THE SPECIFIC DIFFICULTIES THAT PUPILS OF IMMIGRANT BACKGROUND FACE IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEMS?

Language barriers and lack of a proper understanding of the functioning of the education system in countries of destination are the two main difficulties that affect pupils who were born abroad. For pupils who were born in the country of residence, the second generation, these two factors are relatively less important. But both groups are frequently in disadvantaged socio-economic positions and this is the variable that remains most important for all children of immigrant background.

What will be the consequences of this underachievement for European societies in the future?

If the underachievement remains, it is obvious European societies are not only at risk of wasting a huge potential of human capital, which will damage economic development and global competitiveness in the long term, but social cohesion is also very likely to be put at risk.

How could the education system be improved to better meet the needs of the new Europeans?

It is crucial to avoid segregation, not only for mainly racial or ethnic segregation, but socio-economic segregation. In a recent analysis of PISA 2009, the reading performance of immigrant-origin pupils was found to be more strongly dependent on the concentration of socio-economic disadvantage in schools, like a high proportion of mothers with low educational level, than on the concentration of immigrant students per se.

What can schools do practically to minimise these differences?

It is important to avoid school practices that deepen pre-existent socio-economic disadvantages. For example, we learned from a recent school

survey in the city of Madrid that adolescents of immigrant and non-immigrant origin make quite similar use of their non-school time during weekdays. It is during the weekends when activities like reading or doing homework are mostly compromised for adolescents of immigrant background. Even though the described differences are strongly related to parental socio-economic background, it seems quicker and easier to change a school schedule than to improve the parental job situation. Such small changes may have crucial impact in minimizing the differences between children with more and less resources within the same school.

Many parents are worried about sending their children to schools with many immigrant children. Can you reassure them?

It is not immigrant origin but socio-economic background that makes the difference. There are highly diverse schools that clearly outperform more homogenous ones, there is a lot of variation across countries for schools with the same proportion of immigrant background students, which clearly indicates the percentage of immigrants is not the only and best shortcut to proxy school quality. Moreover, some countries like Germany, Belgium and Switzerland have substantially reduced and, in some cases, even eliminated, the immigrant-native gap in school performance. Asking for better schools instead of more homogeneous schools will assure a better future not only for our children, but for our societies as whole.



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The Impact of Education Systems

Across Europe, statistics show that children from migrant families are less successful in school than other pupils. In a recent article Camilla Borgna and Dalit Contini examine the impact of education systems and provide explanations beyond language skills and socio-economic background. Using data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey, the authors compare results for 17 countries. They focus on second-generation immigrants and their achievements at the end of compulsory schooling, about age 15.

Unlike previous studies, Borgna and Contini do not measure the average achievement gap between immigrant and native pupils, but the relative position of immigrant students compared to their native peers with the same socio-economic background (see Figure 1).

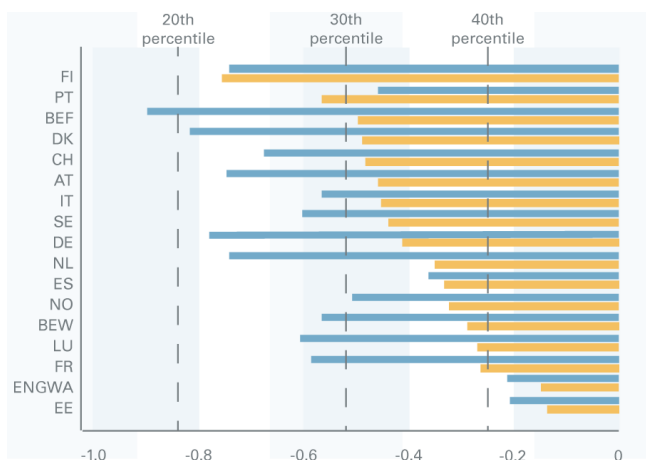


Figure 1. Underachievement of second-generation immigrants in relation to native pupils (blue bars) and in relation to native pupils with the same socio-economic background (yellow bars).
Source: Borgna and Contini (2014) based on PISA 2006-2009 mathematical literacy data

One of the most striking results from this study shows the existence of educational penalties that do not operate along the lines of socio-economic background, but specifically affect migrants. According to the authors, “in ten countries, the average second-generation immigrant lies below the 35th percentile of the mathematics achievement distribution of natives with the same socio-economic background.” Similar results were found for reading and science. Borgna and Contini explain that the degree of marginalization that second-generation immigrants face is an important factor for this: The more likely it is that immigrant children end up in “bad schools”, the more likely they will have lower educational achievements. Contrary to conventional wisdom, such marginalization can not only be produced by a highly stratified school system, as it exists in the German-speaking countries, but also by spatial segregation, or the lack of a national standardization of the education system.



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51% of second-generation Turkish children with a low socio-economic background are in tertiary education in France, whilst in Germany the figure is only 12%, says a study by Maurice Crul (Free University of Amsterdam / Erasmus University, Rotterdam). He found that “the most favourable context for the Turkish second generation is one where children start early in pre-school, selection only takes place at age 15 and tracking does not block their chances to move into higher education.” The benefit of such education systems, as to be found in France and Sweden, is that they don’t require a lot of parental support, like help with homework. Such parental resources are crucial in a system like in Germany, where the author found that children “often did not go to pre-school, had a limited number of contact hours in primary school and were selected early into tracks that left almost no room for up-streaming”.

In his study Crul compared access to higher education in six European countries: Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, France, Germany and Sweden. Using data from the TIES study he focuses on the school trajectories of youth born in Europe whose parents were born in Turkey and have only modest educational credentials.



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What Parents Pass On

The level of a migrant’s education in their country of origin has a significant impact on their children’s educational achievements in the country of residence. Whilst this might not sound surprising, so far there has been a lack of empirical evidence. In a new study with a sample of 8,040 immigrants in France, Mathieu Ichou (Oxford University) created a unique individual measure for the relative level of educational attainment before migration. Linking this information to the educational achievements of their children, Ichou found a robust positive correlation – even when the families lived in difficult socio-economic circumstances in France.

Examining data from 1950 to 2010 the study also shows the diversity of educational profiles, both between and within countries of origin. Thus suggesting that a better understanding of who immigrants were in their former homeland is essential to assess their children’s achievements.



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Publications

The book “Unequal Attainments – Ethnic educational inequalities in ten Western countries”, edited by Anthony Heath and Yaël Brinbaum, investigates the educational careers of second-generation immigrant groups in Belgium, Britain, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland and the US. Using large-scale national datasets and harmonised analyses of outcomes, it identifies patterns of success and failure and the mechanisms underlying such inequalities.



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