

“Optimism and Achievement: The Educational Performance of Immigrant Youth”

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Abstract: The rise in the volume and diversity of immigrants to the United States since 1960 has increased concerns about whether assimilation benefits educational achievement. This issue is addressed by evaluating the relative merits of three hypotheses regarding generational status and scholastic performance: (1) straight-line assimilation; (2) accommodation without assimilation; and (3) immigrant optimism.

Methods. The National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 is used to examine the impact of generational status on three indicators of educational achievement: grades, achievement test scores, and college aspirations of eighth graders.

Results. Overall, the results are consistent with hypotheses (2) and (3) and suggest that behavioral differences between immigrant and native parents are essential ingredients in explaining the differential performance of immigrant and native youth. However, the effects of generational status on scholastic outcomes differ by race and ethnic group, such that parental nativity is most crucial for Asians and less so for Hispanics, while child's birthplace is more decisive for educational achievement among blacks.

Conclusions. Because foreign-born youth are at a slight disadvantage due to their limited English skills and because immigrant parents promote academic achievement, second generation youth (i.e., native-born children of foreign-born parents) are best positioned to achieve scholastically.