

Schools' resources important for helping children of immigrant families succeed in the classroom

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Children of immigrants who enter school with low math and reading skills have a better chance of catching up with their peers if they attend a school with high-performing students, well-supported teachers and services to families of English as a second language (ESL) children, according to a new study.

Previous studies show the importance of family resources in children's academic performance, said researcher Wen-Jui Han, PhD, of Columbia University. Now, this study, appearing in the November issue of *Developmental Psychology* published by the American Psychological Association, shows that aspects of the school environment are just as important for immigrant children, especially those children lacking resources at home.

Many children from immigrant families attend public schools with a generally low-performing student body, inadequate teaching materials and crowded classrooms, said Han. "The majority of these students come into school with reading, writing and math disadvantages. Schools with lower concentrations of minority students, better-performing students school-wide and ESL programs for both students and their parents offer a chance for these children to close the gap in reading and math achievement scores among their peers."

Han examined 14,000 children from the Early Childhood Longitudinal

Survey-Kindergarten Cohort to determine school's role in shaping the academic performance of children of immigrants compared with native-born non-Hispanic white children. The children were tracked from kindergarten through third grade.

The immigrant students and families studied were from Latin American countries, Spanish-speaking Caribbean countries and Asian countries and represented about 12 percent of all the children and families in the study. Of this group, 66 percent were from Latin American countries with half coming from Mexico. The native-born non-Hispanic white children made up more than half of the total sample. Immigrant status was assigned if the child or at least one of the parents was born outside the United States and native status was assigned if both the child and parents were born in the United States.

Factors examined to determine their influence on academic performance included school resources (types of schools, percentage of poor or minority students, availability of English-as-a-second-language programs and services to students and parents), average student academic performance, and support provided to teachers and school safety.

Parents' education expectations, participation in school events and home learning activities were also examined.

Children's reading and math achievement were assessed in the fall and spring of kindergarten, the spring of first grade and the spring of third grade

According to the study, children of immigrants who attended schools with good resources improved their reading and math scores faster than their non-Hispanic white peers, narrowing their initial score gap and sometimes surpassing them by third grade. This was especially true for children from Mexican and Cuban families. Children from Central

American families improved their math scores while children of immigrants from Asian countries (except Vietnam/Thailand/Cambodia/Laos) showed declining growth in reading scores during this time period. This slower learning pace by children from East Asian and Indian families narrowed the reading gap slightly with their native-born white peers, although children from most Asian regions had higher reading and math scores from kindergarten to third grade.

Children of Asian immigrants usually have stronger family influences that help them in school, explained Han. "They aren't as affected by the school factors as the other immigrant children from Latin American and Southeast Asia countries," he said. "Furthermore, those children from Thailand, Cambodia or Laos are from families with high poverty rates, which set them apart from other children of immigrants from Asia and show why, in part, children of Vietnam/Thailand/Cambodia/Laos responded more to school environments."

These results show the importance of school resources for students' academic progress, said Han, especially services and programs for ESL families. These services include having translators available for parent-teacher conferences, providing translations of written communications, using outreach workers to help families to enroll children, and making home visits. Children's academic performance is likely to be stable after the third grade, said Han, and "success in the third grade is a good indicator of future school success so this is a crucial time period to make changes and offer resources."

Source: American Psychological Association

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