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Immigration: Youth Adapt to Change

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I. Introduction

In the first decade of the new millennium a new cycle of public concern about the benefits and harms of immigration has erupted. In mid-2006, exactly twenty years after the last major U.S. immigration overhaul (the United States Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986¹), the quiescent public discourse regarding immigration began rumbling and eventually erupted into a full-throated national debate. Suddenly, immigration talk saturated the airwaves: popular television and radio commentators hyperventilated about broken borders and the illegal-alien invasion. At about the same time, by the end of May 2006, millions of people--especially undocumented immigrants and significant numbers of children of immigrants--had taken to the streets of major American cities, clamoring for the right to stay in the United States.

The harsh spotlight on border controls has blinded us to the broader picture, however. To a large extent, we have failed to consider how immigration is transforming our society: immigrant-origin children are the largest growing segment of the U.S. child population, now constituting twenty percent of our nation's children and projected by year 2040 to make up a third of our children.² Nevertheless, the United States has virtually no policy at all to smooth the transition of immigrant families to their new society. We need to develop an ambitious, workable, and humane approach to immigration that considers the integration of youth and that addresses the realities of the twenty-first century.

Young immigrants today are extraordinarily diverse and their experiences defy facile generalizations.³ They arrive from multiple points of origin and add new threads of cultural, linguistic, religious, and racial difference to the American tapestry. Some are the children of educated professional parents while others have parents who are illiterate. Some have received excellent schooling while others arrive from educational systems that are in shambles. Some are escaping political, religious, or ethnic persecution; others are motivated by the promise of better jobs and the hope for better educational opportunities. Some are documented migrants while others, estimated at 1.8 million, are unauthorized young migrants.⁴ Some settle in well-established communities with dense social supports that ease the transition of youth into the new educational system. Others move from one migrant setting to another, forcing students to change schools frequently. The social and educational outcomes of immigrant youth will thus vary substantially depending upon their settlement context and the specific constellation of resources available to them.⁵

Immigrant youth's level of academic success dramatically affects their future wellbeing. The global economy is largely unforgiving to those who do not achieve post-secondary education and beyond; as a result, schooling processes and outcomes shape socio-economic mobility. The average annual earnings of those without a high school diploma are only \$19,169. The average college graduate earns \$51,554 with a bachelor's degree, and \$78,093 with an advanced degree.⁶

Immigrants defy easy educational generalizations. Recent studies suggest that, while some immigrant youth are successfully navigating the American educational system, large numbers struggle academically. Those who struggle then often leave schools without acquiring the tools that will enable them to function in the highly competitive labor market and ever more

complex society.⁷

The Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation (LISA) study we co-directed at Harvard (1997-2003) assessed over time the academic performance and engagement of recently arrived immigrant youth from Asia (born in China), the Caribbean (born in the Dominican Republic and in Haiti) and Latin America (born in Mexico and in various Central American countries).⁸ Strikingly, over time the achievement (including grade point average (GPA)) of students coming from Mexico, Central America, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic all declined in a statistically significant manner. A similar trend emerged for the Chinese-origin students, although the decline did not reach statistical significance. Specifically, immigrant girls consistently have statistically significant higher GPAs than boys throughout the five-year period, and the GPAs of immigrant boys declined significantly more than that of girls for all groups. For both girls and boys, their grades in the first two years are considerably higher than their grades in the last three years, peaking in the second year and declining steadily from the third year on.⁹

II. Critical Factors

Based on existing social science research, the ten factors outlined below have the strongest implications for the trends in schooling performance and social adaptation of immigrant children identified in by LISA and other studies.

1. Educational background

Immigrant youth arrive in American neighborhoods and schools with varied educational skills. On one end of the spectrum, we find youth from upper-status urban backgrounds. They are typically highly literate and have well-developed study skills. Their more educated parents are well equipped to both provide resources including additional books, a home computer, Internet access, and tutors. They can guide their children in how to study, access, and make meaning of data and information. In sharp contrast are those youth whose parents have little or no formal educational experience. Equally disadvantaged are the children who arrive from countries with compromised educational infrastructures having missed critical years of classroom experience and often unable to read and write in their native language. Such varied experiences and backgrounds have profound implications for immigrant children's transition to the U.S. setting. Unsurprisingly, those arriving with lower levels of education tend to decline academically more markedly once they settle in the United States.¹⁰

2. Poverty

Although some immigrant youth come from privileged backgrounds, large numbers of them must face the challenges associated with poverty. Immigrant children are more than four times as likely as native-born children to live in crowded housing conditions and three times as likely to be uninsured.¹¹ Poverty frequently coexists with other factors that augment risks such as single-parenthood, residence in suboptimal neighborhoods, as well as schools that are segregated, overcrowded, and understaffed. Children raised in circumstances of poverty are more vulnerable to an array of psychological distresses including difficulties concentrating and sleeping, anxiety, and depression as well as a heightened propensity for delinquency and violence--all of which have implications for educational outcomes.

3. Segregation

Where immigrant families settle shapes the overall immigrant journey and the specific experiences and adaptations of children. Latino immigrants in particular tend to settle in segregated, deeply impoverished, urban settings. In such neighborhoods with few opportunities in the formal economy, informal and underground activities tend to flourish. Immigrants of color who settle in predominantly minority neighborhoods will have virtually no direct, systematic, and intimate contact with middle-class White Americans. This, in turn, affects a host of experiences including cultural and linguistic isolation from the mainstream. A pattern of triple segregation--by race, language, and poverty--shapes the lives of many new immigrants, especially those originating in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Segregated and poor neighborhoods are more likely to have dysfunctional schools characterized by ever-present fear of violence, distrust, low expectations, and institutional anomie. Lacking English skills, many immigrant students are often enrolled in the least demanding classes that eventually exclude them from courses needed for college preparation. Such settings undermine students' ability to sustain motivation and academic engagement. The least engaged students are most likely to decline in their academic performance over time.¹²

4. Undocumented status

Today there are approximately 1.8 million youth living in the United States without proper documentation, and an estimated

3.1 million are living in households headed by at least one undocumented immigrant.¹³ Research suggests that undocumented youth and their families resemble other immigrant families in basic ways. Many waited patiently for years for their visas to be approved so they could be reunited with family members already in the United States. Frustrated by the seemingly interminable waiting lists--over five years in many cases--many immigrant youth finally venture forth without the required papers.¹⁴ LISA data suggest that undocumented students often arrive after multiple family separations and traumatic border crossings. Once settled, they may continue to experience fear and anxiety about being apprehended, being separated again from their parents, and being deported. Such psychological and emotional duress can take its toll on the academic experiences of undocumented youth. Undocumented students with dreams of graduating from high school and going on to college will also find that their legal status stands in the way of their access to post-secondary education.¹⁵

5. English language acquisition

Most immigrant children are second language learners. English language difficulties present particular challenges for optimal performance on high-stakes tests. Performance on tests such as the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), the Regents Exams in New York, and the MCAS in Massachusetts has real implications for college access. Second language acquisition issues can serve to mask actual skills and knowledge. Even when immigrant students are able to enter colleges while they are still refining their language skills, they may miss subtleties in lectures and discussions. They may read more slowly than native speakers and may have difficulty expressing more complex thoughts on written assignments. This is likely to bring down their grades, in turn impacting access to graduate or professional schools.

In many schools, the separation and segregation between the immigrant English language learners and their native-born peers is nearly complete. The hermetic status quo results in less exposure to the linguistic modeling their U.S.-born peers could provide, and U.S. students, in need of knowledge about the world beyond our borders, also miss out. Conversely, the data show that immigrant youth who report having even one native English-speaking friend acquire English skills more quickly and proficiently.¹⁶

6. Promoting academic engagement

Healthy social support networks are linked to better adjustment. Interpersonal relationships and social companionship maintain and enhance self-esteem, acceptance, and approval. Instrumental social support provides individuals and their families with tangible aid such as language tutoring, as well as guidance and advice about good teachers and supportive counselors. Instrumental supports are particularly critical for disoriented immigrant newcomer youth. LISA data suggest that social supports also can play a role in moderating negative influences.¹⁷

7. Family

Family cohesion and the maintenance of a well-functioning system of supervision, authority, and mutuality are perhaps the most powerful factors in shaping the well-being and future outcomes of all children. Families can support children's schooling by establishing the value of education and promoting high expectations. They can also actively support children as they complete assignments. Immigrant parents who work long hours and who may have limited schooling are at a distinct disadvantage in this regard. Aside from logistical difficulties, immigrant parents are often unable to support their children in ways that are congruent with American cultural models and expectations. Many come from traditions that revere school authorities and expect parents to keep a distance from the day-to-day workings of their child's education. This stands in sharp contrast to U.S. expectations of parental involvement.

8. Peer relationships

Peers often play an important role by sustaining and supporting the development of significant social competencies in youth. Peers can specifically serve to support or detract from academic engagement. By valuing (or devaluing) certain academic outcomes and by modeling specific academic behaviors, peers can establish norms of academic engagement. Peers can tangibly support academic engagement by clarifying readings or lectures, helping one another complete homework assignments, and by exchanging information about, for example, standardized tests, helpful tutors, volunteer positions, and other college pathway knowledge. Because, however, immigrant youth often attend highly segregated poor schools, they may have limited access to knowledgeable networks of peers beyond their immigrant group.

9. Communities and community organizations

Because no family is an island, family cohesion and functioning are enhanced when the family is part of a larger cohesive community. Culturally constituted patterns of community cohesion and supervision can support immigrant youth when they encounter the more socially toxic elements in their new settings. Youth-serving community based organizations, much like

churches and some ethnic-owned businesses and extended family networks, can enrich immigrant communities and foster healthy development among its youth through the support they provide to parents and families. Such urban sanctuaries, often affiliated with neighborhood churches, non-profit organizations, and schools provide youth out-of-school time that is not spent in isolation, unsupervised, or on the streets with one's peers. Community program staff can serve as "culture brokers" for youth, bridging the disparate norms in place in children's homes and those in place at school. Adults who work in community programs can provide tutoring, educational guidance, advice about the college application process, and job search assistance, information which is often inaccessible to immigrant youth who attend schools with few guidance counselors and whose parents have not navigated the academic system in the United States.

10. Mentoring relationships

In nearly every story of immigrant success there is a caring adult who took an interest in the child and became actively engaged in her life. Connections with non-parent adults--a community leader, teacher, member of the church, or coach--are important in the academic and social adaptation of immigrant adolescents. These children are often undergoing profound shifts in their sense of self and are struggling to negotiate changing circumstances in relationships with their parents and peers. Protective relationships with non-parent adults can provide immigrant youth with compensatory attachments, safe contexts for learning new cultural norms and practices, and information that is vital to success in school.

Additionally, mentoring relationships may have special implications for immigrant youths. During the course of migration, loved ones are often separated from one another and significant attachments are ruptured. LISA data reveal that approximately eighty percent of immigrant youth were separated from one or both parents during the migration to the United States.¹⁸ Mentoring relationships can give immigrant youth an opportunity to be involved in reparative relationships engendering new significant attachments. Since immigrant parents may be unavailable due to long work hours or emotional distress, the guidance and affection of a mentor may help to fill the void created by parental absence. The mentor can provide information about and exposure to American cultural and educational institutions and help as the adolescent negotiates developmental transitions. If the mentor is bicultural, he or she can interpret the rules of engagement of the new culture for parents and youth and hence, help to attenuate cultural rigidities. Bicultural mentors can also serve as role models in the challenging process of developing a bicultural identity, exemplifying the ways in which elements of the ethnic identity can be preserved and celebrated even as features of more mainstream American culture are incorporated into youth's lives.

Taken together, these networks of supports can make a significant difference in immigrant children's lives. They can help immigrant youth develop healthy bicultural identities, engender motivation, and provide specific information about how to navigate schooling pathways. When successful, these relationships help immigrant youth and their families overcome some of the barriers associated with poverty and discrimination that prevent full participation in the new country's economic and cultural life.

III. Policy Implications

The research on these ten factors most strongly affecting schooling performance and social adaptation of immigrant children has significant policy implications. Major reforms in the area of immigrant policy must address two critical areas: the status of undocumented immigrants, and the structure of our nation's schools. Recent policy initiatives have proven ineffectual in the short term, and thus irrelevant to the modern realities of migration in the long term. The U.S. immigration bill, approved by Congress on September 29, 2006 and subsequently signed into law by President Bush, failed to systematically address immigration reform. Nothing in the new bill addressed the fate of the undocumented immigrants already in the United States or the need for more visas and possibly a guest worker program.¹⁹ Policies in several states that push newly-arrived immigrant children into the high-stakes world of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) are similarly short-sighted about the realities of immigration for children. Nowhere in any of these policies is there any discussion of how to aid the children of immigrants in becoming integrated and well-functioning members of our society.

We must first develop a formula to regularize the status of undocumented immigrants. Without a clear policy, it will be impossible to develop any comprehensive policies to better the welfare of immigrant children. Regardless of the exact formula, the effects of regularizing status on access to opportunities for undocumented immigrant youth will be significant. Research suggests that undocumented immigrant youth as well as youth growing up in households headed by undocumented parents will most likely remain in the United States, rather than returning to their countries of origin. Without incorporating these millions of children into mainstream society, they are condemned to living in the shadows. The nation will ultimately be forced to bear the social cost of driving these youth deep into the world of illegality. Federal financial aid for higher education is not available to undocumented immigrants, creating ripple effects throughout the lives of immigrant youth. Not only are employment opportunities limited for those with only a high school diploma, some undocumented immigrant youth begin to disengage from high school, knowing there would be no realistic way for them to pursue a college education. Some of these immigrant youngsters are making a premature transition to the labor market.²⁰ Solving the problem of undocumented

immigrants is a necessary prerequisite to other viable reforms.

Current proposals in several states requiring newly-arrived immigrant students to be subject to take high-stakes testing after just one year in the United States would have very negative results. Research suggests that the vast majority of immigrant children cannot possibly be expected to master the complex intricacies of academic English in one year of study, particularly in the highly dysfunctional schools where huge numbers of newly arrived immigrant students are concentrated. Submitting newly-arrived immigrant youth to the regular testing regimes required under NCLB would push more youth toward premature disengagement from school. Rather than requiring immediate integration into the testing regime, we need policies that ease the acquisition of English, and school cultures where immigrant and native students are well integrated and can learn from each other. This is the best way to keep children in school and support the development of English language skills. It is important to remember, however, that in our globalized economy multilingualism is an asset. Immigrant bilingualism and its accompanying linguistic diversity are cultural resources to be nourished. We should make normative multilingualism an educational objective for all youth growing up in the global era, immigrant and native alike.

IV. Conclusion

Immigrants arrive sharing an optimism and hope in the future that must be cultivated and harnessed. Almost all recognize that schooling is the key to a better tomorrow. Unfortunately, over time many immigrant youth, especially those enrolling in highly impoverished and deeply segregated schools, face negative odds and uncertain prospects. Too many leave our schools without developing and mastering the kinds of higher order skills needed in today's global economy and society. The future of our country will in no small measure be tied to the fortunes of these new young Americans. We need a major new policy agenda, backed by sound social science insights, to ease the transition of American newest and littlest arrivals to their new home.

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1 Pub. L. No. 99-603, 100 Stat. 3359 (Nov. 6, 1986).

2 See Carola & Marcelo Suárez-Orozco, *Education*, in THE NEW AMERICANS: A GUIDE TO IMMIGRATION SINCE 1965, at 243-57 (Mary C. Waters et al. eds., 2007).

3 In this article we define immigrants as the foreign born population of the United States, now estimated at approximately 36 million people. If we add the generation born in the United States to immigrant parents, there are now over 55 million people in the United States who are either immigrants, usually termed the first generation, and the offspring of immigrants, usually termed the second generation.

4 The total unauthorized immigrant origin population of the United States is estimated to be between 11 and 12 million. See Frank Bean & B. Lindsay Lowell, *Unauthorized Migration*, in THE NEW AMERICANS: A GUIDE TO IMMIGRATION SINCE 1965, at 70-82 (Mary C. Waters et al. eds., 2007).

5 See ALEJANDRO PORTES & RUBÉN RUMBAUT, LEGACIES: THE STORY OF THE IMMIGRANT SECOND GENERATION (2001).

6 See U.S. Census Bureau, Census Bureau Data Underscore Value of College Degree (2006), available at <http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/education/007660.html>

7 See CAROLA SUÁREZ-OROZCO & MARCELO SUÁREZ-OROZCO, CHILDREN OF IMMIGRATION (2002). See also PORTES & RUMBAUT, *supra* note 5.

8 The children participating in the LISA study were all immigrants, meaning that they were foreign born and had spend approximately two-thirds of their lives in the country of their birth before migrating to the United States.

9 See CAROLA SUÁREZ-OROZCO, MARCELO SUÁREZ-OROZCO, & IRINA TODOROVA, LEARNING IN A NEW LAND: IMMIGRANT STUDENTS IN AMERICAN SOCIETY (forthcoming Nov. 2007) (manuscript at Chapter 1, pp.5-8, on file with authors).

10 See *id.* (manuscript at Chapter 1, p.11, on file with authors).

11 See *id.* (manuscript at Chapter 3, p.3, on file with authors).

12 See *id.* (manuscript at Chapter 1, p.21, on file with authors).

13 See JEFFERY S. PASSELL, PEW HISPANIC CENTER, SIZE AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE UNAUTHORIZED MIGRANT POPULATION IN THE U.S. (2006), available at <http://pewhispanic.org/reports/report.php?ReportID=61>.

14 See SUÁREZ-OROZCO ET AL., *supra* note 9 (manuscript at Introduction, p.5, on file with authors).

15 See CAROLA SUÁREZ-OROZCO & MARCELO SUÁREZ-OROZCO, CHILDREN OF IMMIGRATION (2002).

16 See SUÁREZ-OROZCO ET AL., *supra* note 9 (manuscript at Chapter 4, p.15, on file with authors).

17 See *id.* (manuscript at Chapter 2, p.31, on file with authors).

18 See *id.* (manuscript at Chapter 2, p.5, on file with authors).

19 The U.S. House of Representatives' December 2005 immigration bill addressed the issue of undocumented immigrants by proposing to criminalize and deport millions of undocumented immigrants and harshly penalize anyone aiding them. The effects of this proposal - turning 11 to 12 million undocumented immigrants into felons overnight - would have been staggering. See H.R. 4437, 109th Cong. (2005).

20 See SUÁREZ-OROZCO ET AL., *supra* note 9 (manuscript at Chapter 1, p.3, on file with authors).