

The Education of the Second Generation in Canada and Britain: What about Primary and Secondary Effects?

Extended Abstract

There appears to be a constant quest for the most applicable explanation of immigrant adaptation via the examination of the outcomes of the children of immigrants, the second generation, especially with regard to one particular aspect: education. The position of the second generation within the educational system, or the end product of spending time in the educational system (qualifications) can give an indication of the second generation's future 'life chances', especially in 'meritocratic' societies, where, technically, qualifications are important in determining one's socio-economic outcomes. Qualifications are not the only important educational factor in assessing immigrant adaptation. Performance during schooling influences, amongst other factors, overall qualifications, all of which are important for the second generation and for the broader issue of immigrant adaptation.

Few studies have looked at immigrant adaptation as being inclusive of both performance and qualifications, especially with regard to ethnic minority second generation individuals. Even fewer explanations have been put forward as to explain the link between performance and qualifications. The goal of this paper will thus be to assess a recent attempt to link school performance and the qualifications of the second generation, the primary and secondary effects explanation (PSE), as advanced by Heath and Brinbaum (2007) by assessing the education of the second generation at two different points in the schooling career in Canada and Britain and examining whether the explanation holds in light of the state of ethnic educational inequalities in the two countries.

The primary and secondary effects argument was brought forward by Heath and Brinbaum (2007) to study ethnic educational inequalities. According to the authors, and based on Boudon's work (1974), differentiating between primary (via test scores during compulsory schooling) and secondary (via the continuation rates after compulsory education) in analysing ethnic educational inequalities amongst the second generation is important, as there might be quite different processes at play. For example, 'cultural dissonance',¹ a term that resembles dissonant acculturation² to explain second generation (dis)advantage, might have a more important (negative) impact on school performance (given parental lack of cultural capital or language fluency) but can also affect continuation rates. Positive selection of migrants, which is linked to higher aspirations, as well as fear of discrimination on the labour market, on the other hand, might lead the children of immigrants to

¹ Cultural dissonance includes elements such as the lack of parental cultural and linguistic capital that can have an impact on the school performance of children (Heath and Brinbaum, 2007: 297).

² When the learning and adoption of the host country's language and lifestyle is faster amongst the children than the parents (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001: 53).

have greater continuation rates past compulsory schooling or even have higher performance, for some (Heath and Brinbaum, 2007: 297–298). Resembling the way in which human capital theory explains the education of the second generation (Chiswick and DebBurman, 2003; Haveman and Wolfe, 1995) and influenced by the ‘immigrant optimism’ argument (Kao and Tienda, 1995) as well as Boudon’s framework, the PSE argument is one of the most recent approaches focusing on linking school performance and qualifications, that might help shed light on the education outcomes of the second generation in various countries. The goal of this paper is to assess this in Canada and Britain, two countries that are bound by a colonial-historical past and whose treatment of ethnic minorities and immigrants are close to one another.

The paper will be divided as follows. The first section will briefly review the PSE argument and then offer a literature review of the current state of research on the education of the second generation in Canada and Britain in the second section. The third section will discuss the data and methods used to verify the applicability of the PSE explanation to second generation outcomes in the two countries. The fourth and fifth sections will, respectively, present the analysis results and discuss those in light of the PSE argument.

The results show that it would be a bit premature to talk about a success story when looking at the gaps between performance and attainment, where attainment is greater than performance in both Britain and Canada, but these elements do point towards the fact that it does seem as if educational resilience is a common theme within the second generation. This does especially make sense in light of the high level of parental aspirations found in analyses of school performance, which most likely have an important impact on overall educational attainment. Hence, looking at the ‘bigger picture’, the results tie into the PSE argument. The application of primary and secondary effects to second generation outcomes in Canada and Britain does appear to be supported by the results outlined above, even if continuation rates were not measured as defined by Heath and Brinbaum. Moreover, the idea that ‘cultural dissonance’ and perceived future discrimination might play a role in the school performance of the second generation does appear to be sensible, given the pairing between performance and attainment. The fact that most ‘culturally dissonant’ groups (with regard to the average individual in the comparison group) appear to bridge the negative performance gap is an indication that, in terms of attempting to explain ethnic educational inequalities, the PSE argument is not far off the mark.

References

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