

Characteristics of Schools in New Immigrant-Receiving Communities in the US

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Objectives

The goal of this study is to obtain a national-level profile of public schools in new immigrant-receiving communities in the United States. Specifically, we describe district, school, and educator characteristics in these communities. We then compare the attributes of schools in new immigrant-receiving communities to those of schools in established immigrant-receiving communities. Findings contribute to the literature regarding the socioeconomic incorporation of the children of immigrants and carry important implications for educational policy.

Background

Children of immigrants—especially those of Latin American and Asian origin—represent the fastest-growing sector of the U.S. youth population (Capps et al. 2005; Stepick and Stepick 2002). Children of immigrants currently comprise approximately 1 in 5 students in our K-12 schools (Fortuny et al. 2009) and are projected to account for nearly all of the population growth among those aged 17 and under in the U.S. through 2050 (Capps et al. 2005). Most notably, the share of children who are Latino is expected to increase from 20% in 2005 to 35% in 2050 (Passel and Cohn 2008).

In addition to the numeric increase in this population, the most recent wave of U.S. immigration brings with it a shift in geographic distribution. Long characterized by their geographic concentration, immigrants in the U.S. are now becoming increasingly dispersed. For the past several decades, immigrants have been highly concentrated in six major destination states: California, New York, Texas, Florida, Illinois, and New Jersey, respectively (Urban Institute 2002). While these states remain home to the majority of the country's foreign-born population, their overall share of immigrants has decreased since the 1990s. In contrast, the proportion of immigrants in 22 “new growth” states has increased dramatically (Urban Institute 2002). In particular, South Carolina, Arkansas, Nevada, Tennessee, and Alabama have experienced the greatest growth in their foreign-born populations (Pew Hispanic Center 2009).

The type of immigrant destinations is also changing. Recent immigration patterns point to a shift away from urban centers in traditional gateway cities and into rural, small town, and suburban areas around the country (Massey and Capoferro 2008). Although all of the major groups of immigrants appear to be experiencing geographic diversification, Latinos, and Mexicans in particular, are undergoing the greatest re-distribution (Massey and Capoferro 2008). Beginning in the 1990s, Latinos began to gravitate toward states and counties that previously had very few Latino residents (Fry 2008). In fact, Latinos now represent the fastest-growing population in rural and small-town America (Kandel and Cromartie 2004).

We situate our study within the context of the changing geographic distribution of the school-age children of immigrant population in the U.S. Though the majority of immigrant children still remain highly concentrated in the six major destination states, their presence is growing in new states (Capps et al. 2005). In particular, North Carolina, Nebraska, Arkansas, Nevada, Georgia, and Iowa have experienced the greatest increases in the young immigrant population (Fortuny et al. 2009). This movement into the Midwest and the South and into rural and suburban communities suggests that schools and educators in areas that have never had to address the unique academic, linguistic, and social needs of the children of immigrants now provide a primary source of education for these students.

Theoretical Framework

We approach this topic from the theoretical perspective that social institutions—in this case, schools—play a critical role in the immigrant incorporation process. Schools are responsible not only for educating immigrant students in the traditional academic sense, but also for equipping them with the social and linguistic skills necessary for socioeconomic incorporation into mainstream society in the receiving country. The rapid rate of growth of the children of immigrant population in the U.S. suggests that these students will eventually represent a sizeable portion of the U.S. workforce. Thus, the ability of schools to adequately prepare these students for higher education and participation in the labor market is a matter of urgent concern. In order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the educational experiences of immigrant youth, it is essential to have knowledge about the schools that serve them.

In line with this theoretical motivation, we are interested in the district, school, and teacher-level characteristics, services, and practices that carry particular import for immigrant students given their unique needs. For example, district and school-level variables such as socioeconomic status, racial and ethnic composition, and urbanicity may work in confounding ways with the services offered for immigrant students, thus potentially reinforcing patterns of segmented assimilation identified by Portes and Zhou (1993). Similarly, school and teacher-level variables, such as the availability of English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction, language assistance services for parents, and experience teaching Limited English Proficient (LEP) students, may affect the quality of education that immigrant students receive and their educational outcomes.

Furthermore, patterns of variance between attributes of schools in new and established immigrant-communities may be indicative of larger systemic responses to demographic change. For example, in established immigrant-receiving districts, services for immigrant students, such as bilingual or ESL instruction, may be concentrated at the elementary level. If these districts have well-established and effective programs in place at the elementary level, immigrant students may progress at such a rate that they no longer require these services in high school. In turn, this may result in a tapering-off of services at the high school level in these districts. In contrast, services for immigrant students in new receiving communities may be more evenly distributed across grade levels as programs in these districts may still be in developmental stages that have not yet allowed them to achieve the same level of efficacy as programs in established communities.

Previous Research

Despite abundant research about the educational outcomes of immigrant youth and about the new geography of U.S. immigration, few studies have analyzed school responses to this major demographic change. Kandel and Parrado (2006) address this topic through a set of qualitative case studies regarding public school response to Latino population growth in two new immigrant-receiving communities in the South. Hamann (2003) provides a detailed ethnographic account of “The Georgia Project,” an innovative teacher exchange and training program created in response to the rapid and unprecedented growth of the school-age Latino population in Dalton, Georgia. Although their study does not focus on new immigrant-receiving school districts, Van Hook and Balistreri (2002) employ a similar theoretical perspective in their analysis of institutional changes in the California public school system as a result of demographic changes in

the immigrant student population. Most other research on the educational experiences of immigrant students in new receiving areas focuses primarily on individual-level characteristics, such as English proficiency, year of entry, parental education, and other such variables that tend to be associated with educational outcomes. Thus, while we may know who and where these new immigrant students are, we know much less about the schools that they attend.

Research Questions

Our study addresses this gap in the literature by providing an aggregate-level profile of schools in new immigrant-receiving communities. Specifically, we ask: 1) What are the characteristics of school districts, schools, and teachers in new immigrant-receiving communities? 2) How do these characteristics compare to those of districts, schools, and teachers in established immigrant-receiving communities?

Analytical Strategy

To explore our research questions, we employ the following empirical strategy. First, we use linked data from the National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data and the 1990 and 2000 U.S. Censuses to identify new and established immigrant-receiving school districts. To do this, we calculate the percent change from 1990 to 2000 in the population of children of immigrants enrolled in public school districts in the U.S. Adapting Kandel and Cromartie's (2004) definition of established and high-growth immigrant-receiving communities, we classify districts with 10% or more children of immigrants in 1990 as "established immigrant-receiving districts." Of the remaining districts, we categorize districts that have experienced a change of 150% or more in their enrollment of children of immigrants since 1990 as "new immigrant-receiving districts." We eliminate districts that do not fall into either of these categories.

Next, we undertake a comparative descriptive analysis using data from the 2007-2008 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS). With a sample of 5,250 districts, 9,800 public schools, and 47,440 public school teachers in grades 1-12, SASS is the ideal dataset for our research questions as it is the largest and most comprehensive dataset of district, school, and educator characteristics in the U.S. In addition, SASS data for public schools is representative at the state, regional, and national levels, and thus allows us to construct aggregate-level portraits of schools that serve large populations of immigrant students.

We then systematically describe district, school, and teacher-level characteristics in these two types of communities. We select variables on each level that are most relevant to our theoretical framework. On the district level, we focus on characteristics such as overall enrollment; racial and ethnic composition; socioeconomic status; teacher recruitment practices, especially in content areas with anticipated shortages; and graduation requirements. On the school level, we look at characteristics related to overall enrollment; student body composition; socioeconomic status; number of full and part-time teachers, especially ESL and bilingual teachers; number of new teacher hires; special programs offered (such as ESL, Advanced Placement courses, career and tech ed); LEP assessment practices; and services for LEP students and parents. On the teacher-level, we hone in on characteristics related to educational background; certification and specialization; participation in professional development activities; overall teaching experience; and experience teaching LEP students. We present findings on the elementary, middle, and high

school levels. In addition, we draw on geographic variables available in SASS to further analyze our results by regional context and urbanicity.

Implications

At least two important policy implications stem from this research. First, our findings will allow us to assess the extent to which schools in new immigrant communities resemble schools in established immigrant communities and will thus provide evidence of any disparities that may exist in immigrant students' access to educational resources. Identification of these disparities may indicate which educational practices, services, and programs warrant increased evaluation, development, or financial support in order to best serve the needs of this growing population. Second, these disparities may in turn point to larger patterns of institutional challenges that schools in new immigrant-receiving communities face. Identification of these challenges may offer helpful insight into the shaping of policy responses to demographic transformations.

Finally, our study contributes to the literature on the educational experiences and socioeconomic incorporation of the children of immigrants by providing a nationally representative descriptive account of district, school, and educator characteristics in new immigrant-receiving communities. While our study does not analyze the relationship between school contextual variables and educational outcomes of children of immigrants in these communities, it lays the groundwork for future studies to do so.

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