#2019-048

Confronting the challenge of immigrant and refugee student underachievement: Policies and practices from Canada, New Zealand and the European Union

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Abstract:
Immigrant and refugee students consistently demonstrate a performance disadvantage when one considers their achievement against non-immigrant students. This paper examines the double- and triple-disadvantages that characterise immigrant and refugee student groups. To highlight the different levels of adversity they face, not only to socioeconomic background characteristics but also migration trajectory related factors are mentioned. Next, the paper synthesises trends from policies and practices associated with more favourable student outcomes. Concrete examples are discussed from the cases of Canada, New Zealand and the European Union. Finally, implications for policymakers, educational leaders, and schools are discussed. The paper concludes with a critical view on simply policy borrowing and calls for contextually and culturally responsive adaptation of promising policies and the implementation of new policies that effectively engage communities and enhance the skills of educators.

Introduction

The education of immigrant and refugee students has become a prominent concern with the increased mobility of these populations to popular Western destination countries such as the United States, Germany, United Kingdom, Canada, France, Australia, Spain, and Italy (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2015). Governments, particularly those within industrialised nations, are often faced with the unenviable task of developing policies and extending specific supports to immigrant students against the backdrop of fiscal restraints. In an increasing number of contexts, these policies and supports may also be situated within geopolitical environments that possess a growing anti-immigrant sentiment (Marsh, 2015). Yet, the international research suggests that the prospects for immigrants and refugees is particularly bleak if they are not able to thrive in their respective host school system – with deleterious effects for the economic and social well-being of individuals and nation states (Volante, Klinger, Siegel, & Bilgili, 2017).

The international community is able to draw upon pockets of success within and across various countries to isolate policies and practices that have been more (or less) successful in ameliorating the performance disadvantage associated with immigrant student groups. Indeed, there are even select jurisdictions around the world where immigrant students may outperform their non-immigrant peers (see Volante, Klinger, Bilgili, & Siegel, 2017). This paper synthesises trends from empirically validated education policies and practices associated with more favourable educational outcomes. Implications of our analyses for policymakers, educational leaders, and schools are also discussed.

Immigrant student achievement results are situated within nation states that possess distinct political, economic, cultural, and social characteristics. Nevertheless, researchers have been able to identify a cadre of broad cross-cultural contextual features that appear to ease the transition of immigrants and by extension their children (Migrant Integration Policy Index, 2015). Policymakers around the world must find ways to understand why immigrant students who share a common country of origin, and therefore many cultural similarities, underperform in particular national contexts (OECD, 2013; 2015a; 2015b). For example, how does one account for the fact that Turkish-born students in Germany perform almost two years lower than similar students in the Netherlands, even after adjusting for different economic backgrounds (The Economist, 2016). Similarly, why do immigrant students with the same cultural background and background characteristics tend to fare better in Canada versus the United States (Cardoza, 2018). These types of relationships are fairly abundant and underscore the important role that policies, practices, and national context can play in the life chances of immigrant student populations around the world. Ultimately, the extensive literature underscores the important role that characteristics within and across nations play in influencing the achievement levels of immigrant student groups (see Bilgili, Huddleston, & Joki, 2015; Brunello & Rocco, 2013; Dronkers & de Heus, 2013; Levels, Dronkers, & Kraaykamp, 2008; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2015c; Schlicht-Schmalzle, & Moller, 2012; Volante, Klinger, & Bilgili, 2018).

Adversity among Immigrant and Refugee Students:
Double and Triple Disadvantages

Before moving on to policy discussions it is important to acknowledge that all immigrant and refugee students have at least one thing in common: they all face adversity as a function of their migrant status. The level and depth of adversity experienced vary by their socioeconomic

background as well as the characteristics of their migration trajectory and the subsequent experiences (Bilgili, 2017). A great deal of variability exists within immigrant students, which is significantly influenced by the SES of individual families. That is, immigrant students from low SES groups tend to underperform relative to immigrants from higher SES groups, both within and across countries (Alba, Sloan, & Sperling, 2011; OECD, 2011, 2012). This "double disadvantage" is perhaps the most prominent challenge for policymakers, namely to improve the outcomes of an immigrant student population that may be struggling to integrate into a new school system.

A number of other characteristics related to the migration trajectory also influence the severity of adversity. These include (cultural) distance, time and immigrant-generation, migration motivation and intensity of the migration journey (e.g. level of preparedness) (Bilgili, 2017). For example, refugee students face additional challenges because of gaps in their education due to missed school and/or trauma resulting from exposure to war. In many ways, refugee students are at a triple disadvantage in that they are routinely in a precarious economic situation and may be grappling with lingering psychosocial effects associated with past conflict (Volante, Klinger, Siegel, & Yahia, 2019). Regrettably, cross-national data and research also suggests that immigrant students are more susceptible to bullying and school safety issues in their host society (Garver & Noguera, 2015; Hong, Merrin, Crosby, Jozefowicz, Lee, & Allen-Meares, 2016; Katschnig & Hastedt, 2017; OECD, 2017).

Collectively, these double and triple disadvantages are formidable challenges for policymakers. Fortunately, the existing literature suggests that these immigrant and refugee student groups can rise above these challenges if provided with targeted supports and evidenced-based policies. These academically resilient pockets of student success offer the broader community an important reference point when contemplating large-scale educational reforms. The next section examines the emerging research literature on academic resiliency and its concomitant implications (see Agasisti & Longobardi, 2017; Bilgili, 2017).

Refugee Integration Policies – Pockets of Success

The patterns of immigration have changed, resulting in an increased diversity of cultures migrating, albeit largely to Western nations. These immigrants also vary in terms of their backgrounds as many nations, for example Canada, New Zealand, and Australia have specific procedures to attract immigrants based on needed skills or financial investment, while also accepting refugees from various countries. Given the diversity of migrants, both in terms of cultural and financial backgrounds, it is not surprising that more bespoke practices and policies are being implemented to support immigrant groups based on their recent backgrounds. In this section, we discuss "pockets of success" looking at the cases of Canada, New Zealand and the European Union.

Canada has long been a source of high levels of immigration, and it is one of the jurisdictions in which the immigrant disadvantage is less pronounced or not found. Educational policies throughout the country have a long history of providing publicly funded English and French Language Learners (ELL/FLL) support for both first, second, and where required, subsequent generations of immigrant students (and adults) for whom English or French is not their first language (e.g., Alberta Education, 2017; British Columbia Government, 2013; Ontario Education, 2007). Teacher training and funding are provided to ensure high quality language learning opportunities and successful integration.

Canada serves as one of the destination countries for refugees, with the majority of current refugees coming from Syria (Statista, 2018). Refugees comprise just over 10% of the total number of immigrants to Canada (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2014). This has led to a recognition of the need for more focused policies and supports for such immigrants, that not only support language development, but also integration, reunification, and protection (Braun, 2016, Cheng & Yan, 2018). Private refugee sponsorship, often through churches or community groups, and government sponsored programmes provide the foundation for supporting refugee families as they endeavour to settle across the country. At the same time, provincial Ministries of Education have also developed policies to support refugee students. The federal Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) also supported a scoping review to identify challenges that schools would need to address in order to support refugee students including increased focus on cross-cultural competence and social justice (Ratković, Kovačević, Brewer, Ellis, Ahmed, & Baptiste-Brady, 2017). As one example, Manitoba published a series of refugee stories in order to help teachers understand the circumstances and experiences of the refugee students coming into their classrooms.

Also in the case of Ontario, schools are considered as a social community hub for enhancing interactions and collaborative actions between community members (see Bilgili, 2017). The goal of enhancing communication through school activities aims to support sociocultural acculturation of both immigrant and refugee students. By incorporating both before and after school activities, schools seek to reach out to students as well as their families. Key to the emerging success within these Canadian contexts has been the multiple efforts across sectors and community stakeholders to understand the needs of refugee families and children, obtain public or private resources, and the development of relevant skills to support refugee families and children.

New Zealand provides another salient example of a country with relatively high levels of successful immigration. Given its relatively small population size (approximately 4.8 million people), the extent of New Zealand's immigration is best viewed in terms of proportions rather than raw numbers. According to the 2013 census, 25% of the people living in New Zealand were born outside of New Zealand (Statistics New Zealand, 2017). The vast majority of immigrants to New Zealand come from Asia and the United Kingdom; however, the diversity of countries of origin has increased over the recent years (Law, Genc, & Bryant, 2013; Poskitt, 2018). Along with economic immigration, New Zealand also accepts approximately 1,000 refugees each year as part of its responsibility through the United Nations quota programme. Refugees can also enter New Zealand through family reunification and through request for asylum. Supports for refugees include a 6 week stay at a resettlement centre, medical and needs assessment, and enhanced educational supports.

In terms of education, the immigrant and refugee educational policies and practices seem to have a positive impact. New Zealand is third in terms of educational support for immigrants according to the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) (Huddleston, 2015). As one example of such support, immigrants from non-English speaking countries receive English for speakers of other languages funding. As noted by New Zealand education "refugees receive more intensive funding support for the first 2 years at school here, followed by 3 years of standard funding" (New Zealand Education, 2018). The Ministry of Education also provides regional advisors for immigrants and refugees. In recognition of the educational challenges that many refugee students may have faced prior to coming to New Zealand, schools have access to further funding support (Refugee Flexible Funding Pool). More recently, the Ministry of Education revised its 2003

educator handbook, *English for speakers of other languages: Refugee handbook for schools.* The handbook provides an extensive overview of refugee policies, backgrounds and guidelines for educators and school administrators in order to best support incoming refugee students (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2003, 2016). As Poskitt (2018) noted in her analysis of targeted policy initiatives in New Zealand: "These glimmers of hope suggest that targeting resources to students who most need it is a strategy that may actually address performance differences and equity challenges associated with immigrants and students from less advantaged backgrounds" p. 191.

The European Union is at the centre of the industrialised world in terms of issues related to refugees and asylum seekers. Member countries of the European Union (EU) have been witness to a series of waves of refugees, with each wave being from predominantly different regions of the world. As a result, nations in the EU have become host to those fleeing from Eastern Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. These numbers peaked in 2015, creating what has been called either the "immigrant crisis" or the "refugee crisis" (e.g., European commission, n.d.; Harju-Luukkainen & McElvany, 2018). The impacts of this most recent wave of refugees and asylum seekers cannot be underestimated across the EU. It has become a focal point for elections, national policies, and increased anti-immigrant sentiment across the continent.

Countries such as Sweden, which accepted the largest proportion of refugees based on its population, and Germany, the European country host to the largest number of refugees, highlight both the challenges and opportunities to support the education of refugee students (e.g., Lundahl, & Lindblad, 2018). Certainly, the large numbers of refugee children arriving over a short period of time has been challenging. This challenge has been exacerbated by the geographic location of the EU which has resulted in a large influx of unaccompanied children entering as refugees. Sweden accepted the largest number of such refugee children (Çelikaksoy & Wadensjö, 2016) and Germany has specifically referred to these children as "*Unbegleitete minderjährige Flüchtlinge*" (which roughly translates to unaccompanied refugees who are minors in German) (Teltemann & Rauch, 2018). As an example, Teltemann and Rauch noted that 58,000 of these non-accompanied children arrived in Germany between 2015 and 2017.

Perhaps the response of countries within the EU provide "pockets of success" that are best considered in terms of growing recognition that current educational structures and systems are insufficient to meet the needs of both immigrant and refugee students. In Sweden, this can be observed in the realisation that current educational policies that promote school choice negatively impact refugee children and hinder their access to quality educational supports (Lundahl, & Lindblad, 2018). While not specifically targeted towards refugee children, recent recommendations have been made to lower the age for mandatory school entry and to provide more targeted supports to schools in underprivileged areas. Similarly, the German tradition of focused educational interventions towards language acquisition are increasingly understood as insufficient. As Teltemann and Rauch (2018) acknowledge, "little is known about the educational background of these [refugee] children, and the German educational system's ability to deal with the sudden intake of refugees is still under question" (p. 38). Government policies are shifting to better target support, and teachers' organisations in Germany are taking the lead in the call for more intensive and wider support (Vogel, & Stock, 2017). Vogel and Stock (2017) concluded that government, schools, and teacher unions would all need to work to not only enhance teacher education in relation to understanding the unique social and learning needs of refugee children, but also implement broader initiatives to promote human rights, social justice and anti-discrimination policies.

Considerations for Policy Reform

The previous literature and the "pockets of success" described above highlight not only the challenges faced by immigrant and refugee students but also the potential policies and practices that may help to ameliorate the current levels of underachievement found for these student groups. Along with the challenges related to second language development and lower socio-economic status commonly experienced by immigrants, refugee students often face significant gaps in their learning coupled with related trauma (e.g., Crosnoe, 2005; OECD, 2012; Patel, et al., 2017; Pottie, et al., 2015; Volante, Klinger, Siegel, & Yahia, under review). Recognising the different levels of adversity students face, we have called this a triple disadvantage, which we understand may still be underestimating the range of experiences and challenges faced by immigrant families and their children. And it is within this realm that educational researchers, policy makers, and practitioners are now focusing their attention.

The examples above highlight explicit efforts to better prepare educators to understand the challenges being faced by refugee children and to provide increased resources to support both teachers and students. These are critical initial steps but are likely not sufficient in themselves. When discussing education policies for immigrant and refugee children with considerations of promoting resilience, Bilgili (2017) calls for a wider focus on the social environment that shapes the experiences of children. By identifying the risk and protective roles associated by student's social environment, more targeted and effective interventions and measures can be developed. In the case of immigrant students, research indicates that their academic outcomes are shaped not only by the resources and circumstances of their families and the communities they come from, but also the social and education policies of destination countries, and the attitudes towards immigrants that residents in their new communities express (Berry, Phinney, Sam & Vedder, 2006; Levels et al., 2008; Pieloch, McCullough & Marks, 2016). Therefore, particular attention needs to be paid to schools and school systems and how they can foster immigrant and refugee student's resilience. By paying equal attention to family, community, school, and country characteristics, policymakers can identify other contextual and structural factors that explain student adjustment processes (Ungar, 2011). Moreover, policies risk to fail unless they are integrated with multi-level reform efforts to also support parents, communities, and other relevant professionals which support immigrant and refugee families.

The challenges are increasing as evidenced by the increased influx of refugees which has been increasingly referred to as a "refugee crisis." This crisis includes a social milieu in which refugees are now entering countries in which the social and political climate may not be fully welcoming. Private sponsorship and family reunification models help to create a more welcoming environment, providing community commitment and support, while also providing a level of social protection. Similar levels of commitment and support are required at the school level, and this is in addition to the support provided by teachers in the classroom. As one example, the additional resources being provided to schools in New Zealand to support refugee students increase access to language training and counselling support. The ability to best direct these resources requires more specific training for school administrators and teachers beyond the resources being developed and circulated.

Our work here illustrates a range of salient policy directions for policymakers to consider as they grapple with the challenges of immigrant and refugee integration and educational underachievement. The latter is conceptually distinct from policy borrowing efforts that have tended to follow the results of international achievement surveys such as PISA, which seem to "borrow" in a rather simplistic, and some would argue, dangerous manner (see Grek, 2009;

Meyer & Zahedi, 2014; Volante, 2018). Such approaches seem always bound to fail and risk diverting a great deal of resources and attention from more viable approaches that are responsive to regional and national contexts. As such, policy direction efforts are likely to be the most successful when they carefully attend to their educational, political, cultural, and economic contexts to guide efforts to adapt particular policies and practices shown to have positive impacts in other international jurisdictions. These policy directions build on the available empirical evidence and best-practices in the field, while emphasising the constellation of characteristics and issues that impact immigrant and refugee underachievement within a given context.

It is also worth noting that while the available and emerging literature is quite broad, it is also constrained by the available student achievement data and corresponding surveys that are administered by international organisations such as the OECD and IEA. At present, these international achievement surveys have not accounted for circular migration patterns, which represent the norm for many first-generation immigrants around the world (Skeldon, 2013). As such, this limits the ability of researchers and policymakers to fully understand the impact of migration on social integration and educational outcomes for different subsets of the population. The inclusion of disaggregated achievement results such as the latter may underscore the importance of particular policies for immigrant children that have undergone multiple entry and re-entry processes within countries and their corresponding education systems.

Collectively, our efforts to not only understand the challenges of immigrant and refugee students but also to find ways to ameliorate these challenges are still in their infancy. The contextually and culturally responsive adaptation of promising policies and the implementation of new policies that effectively engage communities and enhance the skills of educators provide direction for our subsequent efforts. Of importance, such continued efforts will lead to a broader understanding and build a stronger foundation to support this critical population of children around the world.

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