

Academic performance of youths of immigrant background in Canada: a study from Quebec

Jake Murdoch, Université de Montréal
Jacques Ledent, Institut national de la recherche scientifique

Introduction

In a context where equal opportunity has emerged as a fundamental normative benchmark, schools in modern democratic societies are expected to foster the academic success of a very diversified student population, both with regard to abilities and interests, and to social, linguistic and cultural characteristics (Mc Ewen, 1995; Crahay, 2000). This is a particularly big challenge in Canada. Indeed, on the one hand, our various provincial school systems tend to stream students on different educational pathways, rather late in the overall schooling process, at least when compared with other countries (Council of Ministers of Education Canada, 2003). On the other hand, Canada pursues an active immigration policy, which has many consequences for education.

The number of immigrants entering the country every year, 236 578 in 2007, has significantly increased over the past 15 years (CIC, 2008). These immigrants are coming from more diversified countries, and also from countries that do not have French or English as their official language. The selective nature of the Canadian immigration policy also results in a relative class balanced composition of the immigrant flux, which stands in contrast with other societies where immigration is less planned (Mc Andrew, 2004).

Discrepancies between expected and achieved educational attainments and/or pathways among immigrant youth, particularly where differences exist between youth from different backgrounds must be scrutinized. Indeed, for immigrant parents, successful integration into their new country is often assessed, not so much by their current situation, but according to the quality of relationships that their children are able to establish with the school system, and most of all, the return they get from it in the longer run.

In this regard, much qualitative research, based on the observation of classrooms and schools or on surveys with teachers, students or parents, points to the fact, in Canada, that the academic integration of the youths who are immigrant themselves (1st generation) and even of those who are children of immigrants (2nd generation) is not without flaws. This is the case particularly for new arrivals who do not have French or English as their mother tongue, and students who are visible minorities (Mc Andrew & Cicéri, 1997; Beiser *et al.*, 1998; Anisef & Kilbride, 2001). However, there is a paucity of quantitative studies which assess the current state of academic performance and educational pathways of immigrant students in the Canadian context (Anisef *et al.*, 2004).

Scope, methodology and research questions

In Canada, education is a provincial rather than a federal prerogative and consequently there is no single database enabling one to analyse the academic performance of youth of immigrant background. Thus, the present paper carries out such an analysis for just one province, French-speaking Quebec.

Using an administrative database from the Quebec ministry of education, the paper aims at answering the following questions:

- 1) After accounting for differences in characteristics (socio-demographic and schooling-related), do the youth of immigrant background and those of selected sub-groups among them succeed better, equally or worse than the native Quebecers?
- 2) What are the factors that significantly influence academic performance among immigrant youths and selected sub-groups?
- 3) Do these factors affect native Quebecers in the same manner?

Academic performance is measured as the cumulative graduation rate two years after the normal year of graduation. We use a logistic regression model to estimate the probability of graduating. Since we have also both students and school level information, the statistical analysis employs a multi-level approach where individuals (level 1) are nested within school (level 2).

Results

Our results show that before control variables are introduced into the models, the youths from immigrant background graduate less than the native Quebecer youths. However, once the control variables are introduced, the immigrant group clearly succeeds better. However, this globally favourable result actually masks major differences between sub-groups. Some sub-groups clearly outperform the native Quebecer youths (e.g. youths from East Asian backgrounds), while others are at the bottom of the scale (e.g. youths from Latin American backgrounds) even when their characteristics are taken into account. These differences can be interpreted from many theoretical perspectives, as confirming either the impact of different family and community values and strategies, a positive/negative relationship with the host society or systemic factors such as the teacher's attitude or valorization of specific languages and cultures.

Amongst the youths of immigrant background, various factors influence their graduation. The advantage of female students and students who attend private schools is not surprising, both based on national and international literature and on public perception. Other schooling process variables behave as would be expected by decision-makers, parents, the community, and academics, e.g. all things being equal, a student who arrives late in the school system or repeats years, who often changes school is less likely to graduate. An interesting result however is that youths whose mother tongue is not French and/or do not speak French at home are more likely to graduate, once other characteristics have been taken into account.

How do these results for the youths of immigrant background compare to that of native Quebecers? A few differences are worth mentioning, as they may have some policy implications. The first one is the overall higher impact of factors linked to socio-economic status. This shows that socio-economic background plays a greater role in the school success of native Quebecers. Schooling process variables also have a greater impact. In some instance, some of the variables considered acquire a significance that they did not have in the immigrant group. This can be explained by the fact that a negative schooling profile (such as delayed entry into secondary schooling or numerous school changes) is more likely to be associated with social or learning problems for the native Quebecer group. In the case of the immigrant group, such a profile can be explained in part by pre-migratory factors or by the time needed to adjust to the new society.

References

- Anisef, P. & Kilbride, K.M. (2001). *To Build on Hope: Overcoming the Challenges Facing Newcomer Youth at Risk in Ontario*. Toronto: CERIS.
- Anisef, P., Mc Andrew, M., Blais, J.G., Ungerleider, C. & Sweet, R (2004). *Academic Performance and Educational Mobility of Youth of Immigrant Origin in Canada: What Can We Learn from Provincial Data Banks?* Research Report. Immigration and Metropolis/CIC.
- Beiser, M., Hou, F., Hyman, I. & Tousignant, M. (1998). *Growing up Canadian – A study of new immigrant children (W-98-24E)*. Hull: Human resources and development Canada.
- Citizenship and Immigration Canada (2008). *Facts and figures 2007 – Immigration overview: Permanent and temporary residents*
- Council of Ministers of Education Canada (CMEC). (2003). *Education Indicators in Canada: Report of the Pan-Canadian Education Indicators Program*. Catalogue n° 81-582-XIE. Canadian Education Statistics Council: Ottawa, Toronto.
- Crahay, M. (2000). Les défis de l'école démocratique. In M. Crahay (dir.), *L'école peut-elle être juste et efficace ? De l'égalité des chances à l'égalité des acquis* (p. 48-82). Paris: De Boeck Université, coll. Pédagogies en développement.
- Mc Andrew, M. (2004). Immigration, pluralism and education. In A. Gagnon (ed.), *Québec: State and Society*. 3rd edition (p. 307-328). Peterborough: Broadview Press.
- Mc Andrew, M. & Cicéri, C. (coll. P. Lamarre & A. Varma) (1997). *The Role of the Education in the Integration of Immigrants: Current Research and Future Perspectives*. Proceedings of the Seminar in Education, Metropolis Project. St.John, Newfoundland, June 13, 1997, Montréal: Immigration et métropoles.
- Mc Ewen, N. (ed.) (1995). Accountability in education in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Education* 20(1), special issue.