

Educating an Underclass

Review of *Learning a New Land: Immigrant Students in American Society*, by Carola Suarez-Orozco, Marcelo M. Suarez-Orozco, and Irina Todorova, Harvard University Press, September 2010

By John Wahala

Our federal immigration program accounts for nearly all of the increase in public school enrollment over the last two decades.¹ It is estimated that 20 percent of all children in the United States have foreign-born parents and by 2040 one in three will be raised in an immigrant household.² This is a social transformation with no historical precedent. Yet there is little discussion of this aspect of immigration. Researchers typically focus on the fiscal and economic impacts of adult newcomers, a critical component but only the beginning of the story. The children of these workers, given their number, will define what type of nation the United States will be in the coming generations.

One reason for the lack of analysis on immigrant and second-generation students is that most statistics are collected separately by each school district and are not readily available. As a consequence, much of what is known comes from qualitative research that is limited in scope. When evaluating these studies, it is important to be careful in drawing conclusions about the entire immigrant student population based on the experiences of a small sample. However, legitimate assumptions can be drawn from quality research.

In their book *Learning a New Land: Immigrant Students in American Society*, Professors Carola Suarez-Orozco, Marcelo M. Suarez-Orozco, and Irina Todorova provide such quality research. Their five-year study chronicles the experiences of approximately 300 students enrolled in more than 100 school districts in and around Boston and San Francisco. The students were born in Central America, China, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Mexico. These regions account for nearly 80 percent of all immigration to the United States. In other words, the participants have backgrounds that are comparable to most immigrant students. While their experiences are unique to their specific situations, together they may be representative of most newcomers.

The authors identify common problems among the participants:

- Attendance in segregated schools defined by violence, poverty, and low expectations
- Pervasive family instability resulting in less guidance and discipline and fewer resources
- Declining academic performance the longer they attend American schools
- Difficulty learning English that persists for many years, even under optimal conditions
- Significant disparity in achievement between girls and boys

Fear and Isolation

Observers focus on the benefits of immigrating to the United States. The promise of a better life is what drives immigrants to come and most workers are able to obtain a higher material standard of living here than they had back home. But this comes with a cost. As the authors note, uprooting oneself “is not just a financial decision” but “a

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profoundly social undertaking.” Leaving the familiarity of one’s homeland to establish a life in modern America is a long and arduous transition.

The adjustment is probably hardest for adolescents, who are forced to make the awkward transition to adulthood separated from friends and in unfamiliar surroundings.

This would be a challenge in the most accommodating environments, but immigrant students end up in schools

described as “fields of endangerment,” where the challenge of integrating is secondary to avoiding physical harm.

As hyperbolic as this seems, it is repeatedly supported by the authors’ observations: “Most disturbing of all were the general violence and culture of fear that pervaded many of the schools in our study.” In interviews conducted with the participants, “an alarming number of them spoke of crime, violence, feeling unsafe, gang activity, weapons, drug dealing, and racial conflicts.”

After spending significant time at a school in one of Boston’s most historic neighborhoods, they note, “Daily, we hear taunting and racial epithets and see pushing and bullying. Fighting and threats of violence are ever-present Personal safety is a theme of conversations with students and staff alike. All define their school experience around the fear of violence.”

Some of the personal accounts are so shocking they do not seem credible. “The mother of Rolando, a 15-year-old Central American boy, remarked: ‘The role of the school is to educate the students the best that they can so that they can have a better future. But unfortunately, there are many terrible things going on in schools, many delinquent students killing others Jean from Haiti likewise said: ‘I don’t like it when kids are bad at school — like to the teachers, when kids don’t listen and try to beat up the teachers.’”

There was this admission from a young man born in Macau, “When you walk down the corridor, you never know whether some one will stab you with a knife in the back . . . people bring knives, baseball bats, glass bottles. Home is the safest place.” When asked who fights with whom he explained, “Usually it is the Vietnamese vs. the Latino, or the Chinese vs. the Latino. But never Chinese vs. Chinese.”

Apprehension toward outsiders is part of human nature, but this tendency is exacerbated for immigrant students because of their isolation. Lacking fluency in English, they attend impoverished schools with little resources where pupils are divided by race or ethnicity. The authors refer to this as “triple segregation” and note that since legislative efforts to integrate in the 1960s, public schools have become increasingly re-segregated. They note that, “the separation and segregation between the immigrant English-language learners and their native-born peers was total.”

In their study, “86 percent [of the participants] attended schools in which more than half of students were of color, and 54.2 percent attended schools where more than 90 percent of students were minority students Remarkably, only 4 percent of all informants reported having close friendships with white American peers, after an average of six years in the United States.” In one school, the authors note that “the segregation here is absolute: Asians sit with Asians, blacks with blacks, Latinos with Latinos, whites with whites.” The few relationships immigrant students had with their American peers “are ambivalent at best and hostile at worst.”

The friendships that the participants typically formed were with peers from the same country of origin. This helped them retain a connection to the only life they knew. With no feasible alternative, these bonds persisted. In the fifth and final year of the study, “nearly 59 percent of all students maintained a sense of identity completely linked to their country of origin.” The authors found that those who did form relationships with other students tended to do so in “pan-ethnic” groups, comprised of peers with similar linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

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Latin America accounts for 58 percent of all immigration to the United States, and Mexico alone sends 29 percent of all newcomers.³ Given these numbers, it is not surprising that the dominant pan-ethnic group in many of these schools is Spanish-speaking and heavily influenced by Mexican culture.

While visiting a school in northern California, the authors found that “The large concentration of Mexican-origin students created a special dynamic, and Mexican culture dominated the ethos of the school. ESL teachers consistently drew from Mexican culture and not from the cultural backgrounds of students of other nationalities, including Salvadoran, Guatemalan, Peruvian, and Vietnamese ... there is a lot of pressure to be ‘Mexican’ in this school ... Mexican Spanish was the most common language spoken. Students’ clothing, binders, and book covers sported Mexican soccer-team colors or Mexican flags.”

This is the inevitable result of large-scale Mexican immigration coupled with high levels of segregation. Once viewed as places that fostered assimilation into a locally distinct but coherent American culture, many public schools today provide immigrants with little exposure to the values and norms that shaped the country. They are not known by most of their peers and they have been deemphasized by curriculums beholden to fashionable multiculturalism, which rejects the very notion of cultural cohesion. Understandably, Mexican students have filled this vacuum, bringing their preferences with them.

But it is a mistake to assume that these American schools are becoming exactly like their Mexican counterparts. Mexican students bring their preferences to a diverse setting comprised of children who have also been uprooted from their respective backgrounds. It is an artificial environment of competing norms that provides far less support than the organic settings back home. The resulting competition among groups creates vulnerability and hostility and a general feeling of chaos.

In one school, where the authors claim that “fear, anomie, separation, and disengagement were rampant,” a female student explains, “My mom told me that when I finish this grade, she is going to send me to Mexico. She does not want me to go to the high school here because in the high school all children became bad. The girls get pregnant.”

For many immigrant parents, hope for a better life becomes disillusionment over the untenable condition of the schools. It is not known how many parents actually send their children back home, but a few do. The vast majority, however, remain in their new environments. And most of these children must try to cope with their problems without adequate support at home.

Family Instability

While the nuclear family has become less common and the stigma of illegitimacy has waned, one thing remains certain: Traditional families provide the greatest advantage for children. Empirical research is so decisive on this that academics from different disciplines and perspectives find complete agreement.

Using Census Bureau data, researcher Robert Rector explains that marriage drops the probability of child poverty by 82 percent. Since the mid-1960s, the percentage of children born out of wedlock has increased from 6 to 41 percent and with this exponential increase in illegitimacy a “two-caste society” has emerged. “In the high-income third of the population, children are raised by married parents with a college education; in the bottom-income third, children are raised by single parents with a high school degree or less.” Of all families who are living in poverty, 71 percent are headed by single parents. Marriage dramatically reduces the poverty rate when controlling for educational attainment and race or ethnicity.⁴

And Rector finds that the advantage of marriage goes far beyond material wellbeing. Comparing families of the same race and parental education, children from single-parent homes are twice as likely to be arrested for crime, treated for emotional and behavioral problems, and suspended or expelled from school. They are a third more likely to drop out before graduating from high school.

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Suarez-Orozco *et al.* cite sociological research that corroborates Rector's data. "It is well established that children who grow up in two-parent families tend to be at an advantage academically. Two or more adult figures in the home are better able to provide financial resources, supervision, guidance, and discipline. They are also more likely to have the time and energy to be involved in their children's education."

Single parenthood is devastating to native-born children, but at least they do not have to make the transition to life in the United States. For immigrant children, broken families often define that transition. Many lose contact with a parent as a result of the immigration process and, as is the case in most broken homes, it is typically the father who departs. Leaving may occur with the intention

of securing work and future stability for the family, but the duration of the separation is usually longer than expected and is often permanent. This leaves the mother as the main caregiver and provider. Many of the mothers interviewed in the study reported they had not worked in their homelands. But in every immigrant group in the study, mothers were more likely to be working outside of the home after coming to the United States.

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The authors explain, "Immigrant youth often do not live in traditional family constellations composed of two married parents and children — rather they live in extended family systems composed of, say, an uncle and mother or a father and stepmother." These constellations may not even include a parent. Nearly half of the students in their study were separated from both their mothers and fathers for a significant period of time.

This leaves immigrant children with little stability at home to counter the fear and isolation they face at school. Not surprisingly, those who came to the United States with their families intact had fewer depressive symptoms than those living in other types of family arrangements. But most did not have this advantage. When the participants were asked to identify the most important people in their lives, 15 percent named loved ones back home, even after living in the United States for a number of years. This percentage was 34 percent for Dominican children.

Instability at home did not go unnoticed by teachers in the study. One explained, "Part of our problem is that parents don't support their children We have open houses for report cards. We have 1,200 students, and if we have 100 parents, we think it is a good year. So that's what I mean, there isn't that interest there." Other comments made by the teachers were not as diplomatic, but reflected the lack of support most immigrant children are getting at home. This disturbing trend is not relegated to the immigrant community and has become nearly universal. But given the other vulnerabilities they face, immigrant children may be the least equipped to overcome broken homes.

A Downward Trajectory

Considering these obstacles, poor academic performance by immigrant children seems almost inevitable. And this is what the authors find, "On aggregate, the longer the newcomer immigrant students were in school, the worse they did academically as measured by grade-point averages By the fourth year, however, almost all of the students began a significant downward trajectory that continued into the fifth year Disconcertingly, two-thirds of all

participants in this study demonstrated a decline in their academic performance over five years.”

They compare their findings to other research, noting that “cross-sectional data comparing first-, second-, and third-generation students show a paradoxical pattern with second- and third-generation students doing less well on a variety of educational indicators. Indeed a large-scale national study of high school achievement found that while immigrants on the whole demonstrated greater engagement in school, the longer they attended American schools the worse they did academically.”

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These poor results are not necessarily due to a lack of enthusiasm. The authors cite studies that find immigrant students generally have a more positive attitude toward school than their native-born peers. But they bluntly add, “The school environment has a tremendous influence on the engagement and performance of students. It is hard to be open and eager to learn if you have to be constantly on guard against being attacked.”

But even immigrants who find themselves in safe learning environments must master English if they wish to succeed, and this takes time. One study claims it takes the average person five to seven years to achieve fluency.⁵ Another concludes that the average English learner in California has less than a 40 percent chance to be proficient after 10 years of schooling in the United States.⁶ This suggests that many will reach graduation age lacking the ability to effectively read and write in English, much less understand abstract texts.

Suarez-Orozco *et al.* separated their participants into groups based on their academic performance over the course of their study. The students who performed the best were designated as high achievers. Of all the girls, 27 percent made this designation, whereas 16 percent of the boys did. The group contained 47 percent of all of the Chinese students in the study, 17 percent of Mexicans, 13 percent of Dominicans, and 11 percent of Haitian students.

The significant gender gap that was seen among the high achievers was also seen among the poorest performers. Boys were twice as likely to be “precipitous decliners” and “low achievers” and girls “exhibited higher grades and substantially outperformed boys in every immigrant-origin group for the duration of the study.” The disparity in performance between girls and boys is a trend that has developed throughout academia, among practically every group, and at every level both nationally and internationally. There are many theories as to why this has occurred. Some contend that the current educational system has adapted to a post-industrial economy and therefore rewards traits traditionally seen as more feminine, such as small-group coordination and a willingness to deliberate.

For their part, the authors acknowledge that, “girls are more likely than boys to comply with the often tedious behaviors that are expected in classroom settings while boys are more likely to engage in disruptive behaviors.” They claim the gender gap is even more pronounced in minority populations due to the stigmatization and lower expectations faced by boys of color. In addition, immigrant boys are more likely to be recruited into their new environments, which are often defined by violence and disengagement.

The achievement disparity between immigrant groups can be explained, at least partially, by circumstances. Those who did not perform well tended to face more obstacles. For example, almost half of the Chinese participants were classified as high achievers. Not coincidentally, Chinese immigrants were the most likely to immigrate as a family. Conversely, both Haitians and Central Americans were the least likely to immigrate as a family. An astounding 96 percent of the families in these two groups experienced multiple separations throughout the course of the study and Haitian and Dominican students had the lowest percentage of high achievers.

Similarly, it was noted that, “Chinese participants were less likely to report family conflict than the other groups, whereas Haitian students reported the most family tensions.” In the absence of an intact family situation, role models can serve as positive influences for immigrant students. In fact, the authors assert that, “Behind nearly every

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successful immigrant youth journey we found a mentor — from church, the athletic team, or from the local community center.” Unfortunately, the students who needed these types of relationships the most were the least likely to have access to them or to actively seek them.

There are other factors as well. It is well established that the educational attainment of a student’s parents is linked to his or her academic achievement. Those who did the poorest in the study typically had the least-educated parents. Also, those who received more exposure to English performed better. The authors note that “Spanish media is a booming industry in many parts of the country. As a result, we found that many of our Spanish-speaking participants spent more than half of their radio-listening or television-watching time tuned into Spanish media.”

While most of the high achievers in the study benefitted from certain advantages, even they struggled. The authors conclude, “The vast majority of the immigrant students in our study, who had all been in the United States for more than five years, were testing well behind their native born peers in academic English. Even high-performing, highly motivated students like Lotus and Henry found themselves floundering once they began taking courses with native-born students in more competitive mainstream programs.”

Endorsing the Status Quo

Suarez-Orozco *et al.* provide a devastating look into how immigrant students are faring in American schools. Unlike many in the debate, they do not share the assessment that everything will work out for these children just like it did for the immigrants of yesteryear. Their research will not allow them to embrace such a naïve position. They describe the schools as “toxic sinkholes” and “dysfunctional warehouses” and predict they “will likely continue to feed our voracious penal system, the repository of growing numbers of disenfranchised boys and young men.”

With remarkable candor, they acknowledge that “there is nothing preordained about integration” and fret that the United States may encounter the violent upheaval that has occurred in recent years in parts of Europe:

“Failure to change could bring us closer to the scenario now unfolding in Western Europe. There is little doubt that five decades of neglect and ambivalence regarding its immigration policies have led to Europe’s greatest postwar failure: its inability to incorporate a large number of immigrants who are increasingly segregated, disenfranchised, and disadvantaged in the new labor market. Most ominously, throughout Western Europe, the marginalized children of immigrants seem to be turning into a permanent underclass, one that is strikingly over-represented in the penal system. In recent years Western Europe has also proven to be a fertile breeding ground for fundamentalist terrorism. The children of immigrants, almost by definition, have much greater expectations than their immigrant parents. Frustrated in their ambitions, without a place in the cultural narrative of the nation, locked out of adequate education and the most desirable jobs, too many of Western Europe’s second-generation immigrants are nursing their wounds with the false balm of long-distance nationalism and militant nihilism. Except for the elements of militant religious fundamentalism, what is happening in Europe today echoes the emergence of marginalized gangs that nearly always accompanied failed immigration policies in the United States.”

After making these observations, however, the authors fail to acknowledge how the United States solved the serious problems associated with previous waves of immigration. Namely, there was a lengthy immigration slowdown brought on by legislation in the 1920s, the Great Depression, and two World Wars. This period of low immigration gave immigrants the chance to assimilate into the American mainstream. They moved out of enclaves, learned English, established civic and cultural ties, and became upwardly mobile as a result of less job competition from fewer immigrants. The decline of immigration for most of the Twentieth Century is, in many ways, the story of American immigration.

This is the conclusion the authors should draw from their own research. For immigrant students to overcome the odds they must somehow escape from the alienation and violence that defines their educational experience. There will always be those determined few who will succeed. But too many are failing. And they will continue to fail if these highly segregated schools continue to absorb record numbers of newly arrived students. Instead of questioning the current policy of mass immigration, the authors insist that the United States “[C]ultivate our immigrant youth — however and from wherever they arrive, and whatever their numbers — to grow up to be engaged and productive citizens.” This statement shows they have no regard for national sovereignty or for the capacity of our institutions and communities to absorb an unlimited number of foreign students.

They make vague calls for “incorporation” while rejecting the very notion of integration into a common culture. Instead they embrace the development of dual cultural loyalties and claim that:

“Because of global migration, children and youth growing up today are likely to work and network, love and live with people from different national, linguistic, religious, and racial backgrounds. And to the extent that immigrants succeed in accommodating and contributing to these multiple cultures, they have much to teach their native-born peers.”

One of the problems with this analysis is that it contradicts their own research. Immigrant students, brought here by their parents who sought to take advantage of the opportunities afforded by American society, are not accommodating and contributing to multiple cultures. They are forming an underclass that is far removed from the American mainstream and even from their previous ways of life. Unlimited future immigration will grow this underclass and, as a consequence, should be seen as anti-immigrant.

End Notes

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³ Steven A. Camarota, “A Record-Setting Decade of Immigration: 2000-2010”, Center for Immigration Studies, October 2011, <http://cis.org/2000-2010-record-setting-decade-of-immigration>.

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⁵ Wayne P. Thomas and Virginia P. Collier, “A National Study of School Effectiveness for Language Minority Students’ Long-Term Academic Achievement”, Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence, <http://www.usc.edu/dept/education/CMMR/CollierThomasExReport.pdf>.

⁶ “Effects of the Implementation of Proposition 227 on the Education of English Learners, K-12: Findings from a Five-Year Evaluation”, submitted to the California Department of Education by the American Institutes for Research and WestEd, January 2006, <http://www.air.org/files/227Report.pdf>.