

Across and Beyond Borders: A study of transnational families in Miami

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Resumen/ Abstract

Population growth in the United States is currently fueled by immigrants and the children of immigrants (Olmedo, 2004). This is especially true of the metropolitan area of Miami-Dade which holds one of the largest populations of foreign-born residents at 1.2 million (U.S. Census, 2003) in the United States. The ability of the school systems and social service agencies to absorb and serve these new arrivals is important for the future economic and social health of this region. In this paper we analyze the school readiness results of a cohort of immigrant children living in Miami and receiving childcare subsidies. The school readiness measures used, the DECA, a measure of social and emotional development, and the LAP-D, a comprehensive developmental battery, demonstrated that these children of immigrants, as a whole, are not significantly behind in school readiness compared to their non-immigrant peers attending the same preschools.

This suggests that poverty, not immigration status, is what puts children at risk. Being an immigrant may even afford some advantages, especially in predicting healthy social and emotional development. These results can help change the perception of the larger community on how the immigrant experience shapes the young learner.

Palabras clave / Keywords: immigration, Early Childhood, United States

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The Central Problem

Population growth in the United States is currently fueled by immigrants and the children of immigrants (Olmedo, 2004). This is especially true of the metropolitan area of Miami where 52 percent of the population is made up of immigrants and their children (U.S. Census, 2005). The ability of the school systems and social service agencies to absorb and serve these new arrivals is important for the future economic and social health of this region. In this paper we present the results of a one year study of immigrant children receiving childcare subsidies.

Previous Key Findings in the Literature

The education of new immigrants has become a topic of national concern, much as it did over 100 years ago when waves of Southern and Eastern Europeans crowded the schools of New York and Boston (Olmedo, 2004, Louie, 2006, LaFromboise, 1993). The story of those immigrants is largely the story of the great ascendancy of the United States in the twentieth century. The story that will be told one hundred years from now will be shaped by the decisions of this next generation of educators and policy makers.

These new groups of immigrants are largely from Latin America. They are connected to their families and countries in ways that other groups before them could not have even imagined. The ease of communication with the home country, whether through telephones, internet, or even cheap air travel makes it possible to live a dual identity. What researchers are calling the transnational experience (Pickett, 2006, Hondagneu-Sotelo 1997), living two national identities, makes these new arrivals distinct. Miami is a city in which this natural experiment is being played out at arguably a greater rate than in any other large city in the United States. This new wave of immigrants portends a larger trend of global migration that is occurring to a lesser extent all over the United States (Friedman, *The World is Flat*).

The children of immigrants increasingly filling our schools can be a source of new creative and intellectual energy fueling a robust cultural and economic renaissance, or they can become part of a permanent, disaffected underclass working always outside the gates of opportunity. "Marginal People" was the title given by Park (1928) and Stonequist (1935) to those individuals who live within two cultures and claim to belong to both. According to Fromboise et al, "...little empirical research exists in this area and what there is is spread throughout the social sciences. [They] found that some aspects of the psychological impact of being bicultural have received a great deal of well-designed and controlled study, whereas others have been addressed only along theoretical lines" (396).

Empirical research in early childhood education and children's transition to and progress within elementary school is currently very strong. The interest in implementing and evaluating the effectiveness of early childhood education programs is fueled by the understanding that (a) children's child care and preschool experiences during the preschool years are crucial for the development of important school readiness skills



(Bowman et al., 2000; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2002), (b) a successful transition to school buffers children's future academic and behavioral development for years to come (Huffman et al., 2004; Rimm-Kaufman, 2004), (c) early childhood intervention programs are successful in improving the developmental outcomes of children in poverty (Currie & Thomas, 1995; Campbell et al., 2002), and (d) accountability is important in ensuring program effectiveness (Florida Partnership for School Readiness, 2003). Much of the recent interest in early childhood policy and practice is motivated by a desire to help improve the school readiness and academic trajectories of children in poverty, who are at risk for early academic retention and school drop out, poor academic performance and behavior problems in the early years of school, and lower levels of literacy attainment (August & Hakuta, 1997; Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997).

Research Questions

The main questions that this research seeks to answer are (1) Do children of immigrant families make the same gains in school readiness as their non-immigrant peers?, and (2) Do they make effective transitions to public schools and continue to make gains compared to non-immigrant children? The answers to these two primary questions will prompt other questions such as (a) What factors determine a positive or negative transition? (b) Does country of origin make a difference? (c) Is preschool language of instruction important?, and (d) What factors predict success or failure in the first years of elementary school for immigrant children (e.g., parent's education, income, family size)? Our hypothesis is that being a child of a low-income immigrant does not in itself put a child at risk. What does portend school failure is a more complex combination of factors having to do with family structure, community support, and opportunities for high quality early childhood education.

Methodology

We analyzed, using quantitative, multivariate techniques, the developmental scores (LAP-D, DECA) of approximately 2,500 four-year-old children of immigrant parents and a matched comparison group of equal size attending preschools in high poverty neighborhoods in Miami-Dade County. A brief survey of the parents at intake provided demographic variables for the quantitative analysis.

Findings

The sample (n=5489) represents all four-year-old children receiving state childcare subsidies during the 2003-4school year in Miami-Dade County. What we found is that approximately half of the population were either first or second generation immigrants (2,318 out of 5,489). Of these immigrant families and their children approximately 80% were Hispanic/Latino. The next largest group (18%) was of African decent, with 2% being made up from immigrants from Europe and Asia. Of the



Hispanic group, two-thirds were from Cuba. Large numbers also came from the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Honduras, Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela and Peru. Overall 76 distinct countries were represented in our sample.

This population breakdown is representative of immigrant groups in Miami. These groups are clustered in distinct neighborhoods throughout the Miami-Dade metropolitan area. The other half of our population was from non-immigrant families (defined as those whose parents were born in the United States).

While the immigrant children were behind their non-immigrant counterparts on cognitive and language measures, they were rated higher on social and emotional measures by their teachers and parents. This could be attributed to more family cohesion, stricter parenting styles, greater expectation for appropriate behavior, and the sense of purpose and mission so often associated with immigrant families.

The profile that emerges from our analysis is that immigrant children taken as a whole do show greater risk for delay in the important cognitive and language areas of development, but seem to have strength in the areas of social and emotional development. Certain groups show greater strengths than others. The profiles of Hispanics and non-Hispanics are also different and there are within country differences between the two ethnic categories.

What we have learned from this analysis is that there is no one prototypical immigrant. In Miami the largest and the most successful immigrant group is from Cuba. Given their privileged political and legal status they make easier transitions. The other major immigrant groups have a more difficult road and this road is rockier depending upon the poverty and political strife in their home country. Immigrants from poorer countries tend to bring fewer resources and formal education than wealthier ones. There are success stories, though, throughout most of the distinctive groups. The relative high functioning of a large majority of the children in our sample suggests that the immigrant experiment in the US is still alive and well.

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