



## Policy options for addressing immigrant student achievement gaps\*

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### Introduction

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) has quickly become the most prominent achievement measure used by policymakers around the world to judge the quality and equity of their education system. In terms of equity, PISA triennial survey results consistently show a pronounced achievement gap between first- and second-generation immigrants and their non-immigrant counterparts in the areas of reading, mathematics and science literacy. In some cases, immigrant students are more than two grade levels behind their non-immigrant peers – a result that impedes their ability to pursue higher education and ultimately their prospects for economic advancement. However, it is important to note that these performance disadvantages vary significantly across international jurisdictions, underscoring the importance of cultural context, education policies and support and the nature of school systems.

### The importance of the cultural context

One of the most notable international trends on this topic is that traditional countries of immigration – such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States of America, where first- and second-generation students make up approximately 25 per cent of the overall student population – tend to possess favourable immigrant student outcomes.<sup>2</sup> In Western Europe, where the relative share of immigrant students is also significant, immigrant students also tend to perform better when compared to their Eastern European

counterparts.<sup>3</sup> Overall, immigrant students seem to have enhanced performance in national contexts that possess a heterogenous student population – a result that also aligns with broader studies of migrant integration. For example, results from the Migrant Integration Policy Index (2015) illustrate that immigrants usually benefit from more equal rights and opportunities in wealthier, older and larger countries of immigration, for example in Western Europe and popular countries of immigration previously noted (namely Canada and the United States).<sup>4</sup> Collectively, the broader literature suggests that critical features of host societies, such as income inequality, inclusion in social welfare provisions, settlement policies, as well as immigration and multicultural policies, all positively influence immigrant student outcomes.

Given these previous results, what options do educational policymakers have at their disposal to enhance immigrant student outcomes? Certainly, the previous features reside outside of their direct control and require policy coordination across multiple sectors, such as finance, health, social protection and immigration, to name only a few. Yet, there are case examples that educational policymakers can draw from to inform the nature and scope of their policies, as well as the provision of supports they offer to students and teachers within compulsory education settings. Indeed, by connecting these cases with the extensive empirical literature in the field, there are some important lessons to be shared.

### Education policies and support

One of the most notable findings in the international literature underscores the deleterious effects of stratification and tracking (such as academic versus vocational and university versus college versus apprenticeship programmes). In general, education systems that track students into different schools and/or programmes tend to increase inequities in student outcomes, particularly when this occurs at

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<sup>2</sup> Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 2016.

<sup>3</sup> European Commission, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Migrant Integration Policy Index, 2015.

a younger age.<sup>5</sup> Not surprisingly, it is students from immigrant backgrounds who are often placed into these vocational schools and/or lower academic tracks around the world. Thus, policymakers need to (re)consider the rationale undergirding stratification and tracking structures in their school system.

Policymakers also need to consider the distribution of resources within their school systems if they intend to ameliorate the performance disadvantage. For example, immigrants tend to be particularly at risk within schools with a concentration of low socioeconomic status (SES) students. In fact, the OECD, which is responsible for the administration of PISA, argues “it is not the concentration of immigrant students in a school but, rather, the concentration of socioeconomic disadvantage in a school that hinders student achievement”.<sup>6</sup> This double disadvantage, namely being an immigrant who is in a low SES environment, suggests additional support is required for schools serving this type of student population. Unfortunately, the research also suggests these types of schools are often characterized by lower teacher expectations, inadequate understanding of immigrant groups and inaccurate teacher evaluations, which negatively impact immigrant student achievement and self-concept.<sup>7</sup>

Given that two thirds of students born outside their host country use another language at home, it is understandable that the provision of language support is very important for immigrant students.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, language instruction and associated policies are the most frequently cited issues associated with immigrant student outcomes in the international literature.<sup>9</sup> Immigrant students who arrive at the age of 12 or older and have spent less than four years in their new country are farther behind students in the same grade than their immigrant counterparts who arrived at a younger age.<sup>10</sup> This “late arrival” penalty underscores the necessity of providing more intensive language support to older students, particularly since late arriving immigrants may not be able to catch up to their non-immigrant peers before they apply to higher education settings.

Thus far, the relative importance of tracking/segregation, socioeconomic inequality and language support as critical elements impacting immigrant student outcomes have been emphasized. There are many other characteristics that also impact immigrant student achievement that have not been highlighted, for example, community networks or adult education programmes, to name only a few. It is important to remember that no individual feature, taken in isolation, is likely to positively impact immigrant student outcomes. Education policymakers that delay tracking for an additional year or two or allocate additional resources for late arrivals or low SES schools cannot automatically assume that significant changes in immigrant student outcomes will naturally follow. Rather, it is a constellation of policies that find their expression in a “multicultural friendly” context that is likely to meet with the greatest success. The Canadian context is particularly illustrative of this, in that immigrant students in particular provinces actually possess a significant performance advantage. That is, first- and second-generation immigrant students outperform their non-immigrant peers, who themselves consistently achieve high standards.

### The Canadian approach: Accommodation versus assimilation

One of the more interesting features of Canada is that it is the first country in the world to adopt multiculturalism as an official policy and included provisions within its Charter of Rights and Freedoms that essentially protects the rights of minority groups. Not surprisingly, multicultural friendly policies have found their expression in provincial education systems that have shown a preference for culturally sensitive integration approaches to preserve the cultural identities of diverse populations. Such policies are in direct contrast to the assimilationist approach to immigration that existed in Canada before the 1960s. Overall, education policies across Canada tend to underscore a preference for fairly broad accommodations within provincial education systems, and these are further reinforced by teacher education programmes that are themselves highly selective in their admission requirements.

Canada’s largest province, Ontario, provides policy guidelines to teachers regarding “Culturally responsive pedagogy”, “Antiracism and ethnocultural equity in school boards” and “Ontario’s equity and inclusive education strategy”. British Columbia developed its

<sup>5</sup> OECD, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> OECD, 2015:8.

<sup>7</sup> Moosung, Dean and Kim, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> *The Economist*, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Potochnick and Mooney, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> OECD, 2015.

“Diversity in BC schools: A framework” to safeguard against discrimination, harassment and violence. Similarly, Alberta provides a curriculum framework that contains provisions for belonging and identity that underscore its efforts to promote diversity and inclusion in its multicultural and pluralistic society. Across the country, curricular frameworks tend to underscore the importance of pedagogy and curriculum expectations that respect ethnic and cultural diversity. Although curriculum considerations are always context specific, policymakers can and should use best practice examples to inform their own curricular reform efforts.

In addition to curriculum and pedagogy, the allocation of resources within Canada is also geared towards an accommodation approach. That is, funds are typically devoted to where they are needed most and largely reside within the direct control of provincial policymakers. Consider the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), which is Canada’s largest and most ethnically diverse school district, where more than 50 per cent of students speak a language other than English at home.<sup>11</sup> Although the province provides per pupil funding of approximately 12,000 Canadian dollars (CAD) for each Ontario student, schools also receive approximately CAD 10,000 per English learner over four years, as well as additional grants, which are particularly beneficial for districts with high percentages of English language learners.<sup>12</sup> Among its many programmes and support, TDSB created the Literacy Enrichment Achievement Program (LEAP) to help immigrants and refugees, who have missed months or years of schooling. The programme is designed to make up two years of academic progress every year so students can catch up with their English-speaking peers within three years.

Collectively, the Canadian context is characterized by funding models and special programmes that underscore a broader commitment to equitable outcomes for immigrant student groups. No doubt, policymakers in other parts of the world will find it especially challenging to secure additional funding for immigrant students given the rise in anti-immigrant sentiment, competing priorities and fiscal restraints imposed by national economic conditions. Nevertheless, immigrant student outcomes in Canada

suggest that integration policies and associated school supports represent good “value for money”. According to the OECD, Canada boasts one of the highest achievement levels in the world with fairly narrow gaps between high and low achievers, including those from lower socioeconomic and immigrant status student groups. Given the established association between student achievement and human capital, it makes sense to largely advance arguments for increased resources for immigrant students on economic versus compassionate grounds. Indeed, the authors’ previous work notes that the educational success of immigrants is inextricably intertwined with the success of nations.<sup>13</sup>

## Conclusion

Policymakers around the world are ultimately tasked with understanding why immigrant students who share a common country of origin, and therefore many cultural similarities, are underperforming in their national context. One might naturally wonder why the PISA scores of Turkish-born students in Germany are almost two years lower than those of students in the Netherlands, even after adjusting for different economic backgrounds.<sup>14</sup> Conversely, why does Finland, which has consistently been ranked one of the top achieving countries in the world, have one of the biggest performance disadvantages across the European Union?<sup>15</sup> These examples illustrate that traditional variables associated with student achievement such as parental education or SES cannot fully explain immigrant performance disadvantages, and that cultural context is an important mediator of immigrant student achievement. The authors’ cross-comparative work suggests that education policymakers have a range of options and supports, within their direct purview, to help narrow these persistent achievement gaps.<sup>16</sup> ■

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<sup>11</sup> See [www.tdsb.on.ca/High-School/Your-School-Day/Curriculum/ESL](http://www.tdsb.on.ca/High-School/Your-School-Day/Curriculum/ESL)

<sup>12</sup> Cardoza, 2018.

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<sup>13</sup> Volante, Klinger, Siegel and Bilgili, 2017.

<sup>14</sup> *The Economist*, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> European Commission, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Volante, Klinger and Bilgili, 2018.

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