PISA

IN FOCUS 33

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What do immigrant students tell us about the quality of education systems?

- Immigrant students who share a common country of origin, and therefore many cultural similarities, perform very differently across school systems.
- The difference in performance between immigrant students and non-immigrant students of similar socio-economic status is smaller in school systems with large immigrant populations and where immigrant students are as diverse in socio-economic status as other students.

Immigration has occurred ever since people have been driven to seek a better life in a different place – in other words, since the beginning of human history. While inflows of immigrants are usually the result of – and sensitive to – economic or political circumstances, constant throughout these movements is the desire – the need – for immigrants to integrate well into their new countries, at least temporarily. Education systems play a critical role in the process of integration, providing opportunities to immigrants and their children to acquire the skills needed for them to join the labour market.

With increasing inflows of immigrants…

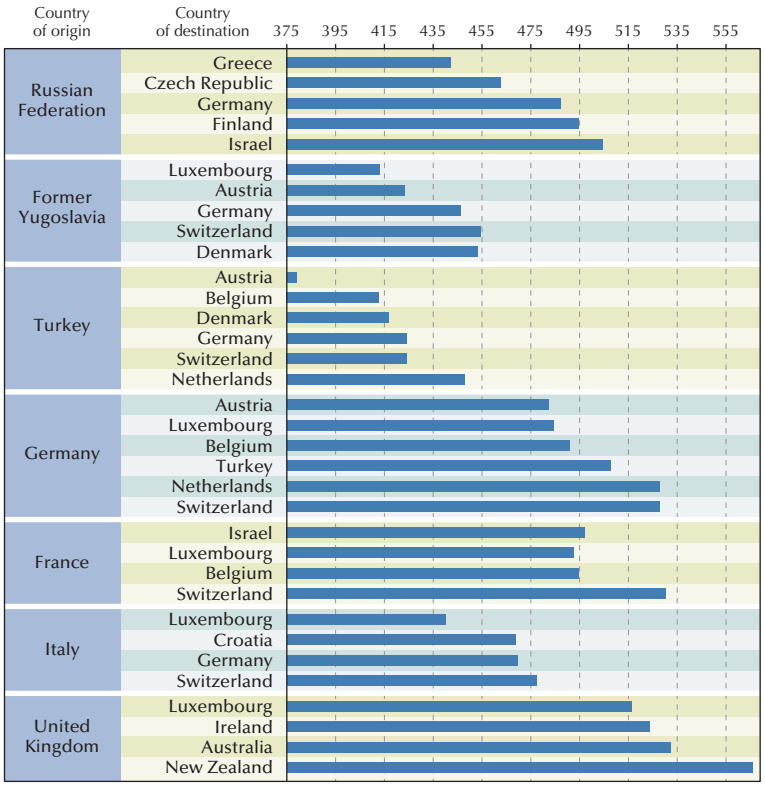
PISA 2009 sought to determine the extent to which school systems succeed in addressing the needs of diverse student populations. Between 2000 and 2009, across OECD countries the proportion of 15-year-olds with an immigrant background increased from 8% to 10%. In 13 countries, the proportion of students with an immigrant background increased by more than 2 percentage points, so that these students now constitute more than 5% of the student population. In Ireland, Liechtenstein, New Zealand, the Russian Federation, Spain and the United States, the proportion of immigrant students increased by five percentage points or more, and these students now represent from 8% to 30% of these countries' student population. In Canada, Greece and Italy, the proportion of immigrant students increased by three to five percentage points during the period.

…comes greater diversity in backgrounds – and in education outcomes.

Information about immigrant students' country of birth and that of their parents, collected by some PISA-participating countries, allows for deeper insights into these students' performance and the extent to which host countries are meeting their particular needs. Results from these countries show that immigrant students of similar socio-economic status who come from the same country perform very differently across school systems. For example, immigrant students from the Russian Federation living in Finland, Germany and Israel perform around the OECD average in reading while those in the Czech Republic score about 30 points below the OECD average – the equivalent of a full year of school – and those in Greece score more than 50 points below average. Similarly, immigrant students from the Former Yugoslavia living in Denmark score about 40 points below the OECD average while those in Luxembourg score more than 80 points below average. Immigrant students from Turkey living in the Netherlands score 45 points below the OECD average, those in Belgium, Denmark, Germany and Switzerland score between 70 and 80 points below average, and Turkish students in Austria score 115 points below the OECD average.

Different destinations, different outcomes

Mean PISA reading score, by country of origin



Note: The average performance by immigrant group adjusts for differences in socio-economic status. It corresponds to the predicted reading performance of students from the same country of origin but who migrated to different destination countries if they all had shared the same socio-economic status of the average student who migrated from that country of origin.

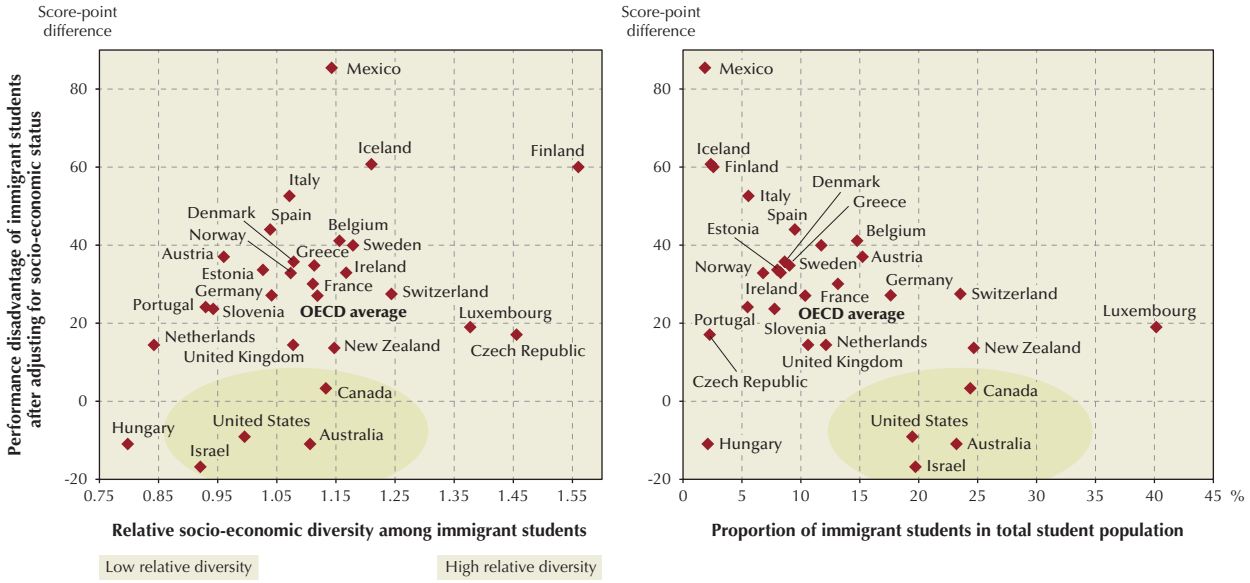
Source: OECD 2009 PISA Dataset, *PISA 2009 Results: Overcoming Social Background: Equity in Learning Opportunities and Outcomes*, Volume II, OECD Publishing, Table II.4.5.

StatLink http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932343285

The same pattern is observed among students from OECD countries who have immigrated to other countries. For example, on average, German students in Austria and Luxembourg perform at least 10 score points below the OECD average, while those in the Netherlands and Switzerland score more than 30 points above average. On average, French students going to school in Belgium, Israel and Luxembourg perform around the OECD average, while those in Switzerland score 35 points above average. Italian students in Croatia, Germany and Switzerland perform between 20 and 26 score points below the OECD average, while those in Luxembourg score nearly 55 points below average. Students from the United Kingdom in New Zealand score 64 points above the OECD average while those in Australia score 31 points above average. They perform closer to the OECD average in Ireland (24 score points) and Luxembourg (17 score points).

The wide performance differences between students with similar socio-economic status and a common origin suggest that schools and education policy in the host countries influence these students' performance. While immigration policies, similarities between the immigrants' and the host culture, and other social policies also explain some of these differences in performance, some education systems appear to be able to facilitate the integration of immigrant students better than others.

Where diversity does not mean disadvantage



Note: The "relative socio-economic diversity" indicator was calculated as the ratio of the standard deviation of the *PISA index of economic, social and cultural status* among immigrant students to the standard deviation of the *PISA index of economic, social and cultural status* among students without an immigrant background.

Source: OECD (2012), *Untapped Skills: Realising the Potential of Immigrant Students*, OECD Publishing, Tables 1.3 and 2.1a.

School policies can minimise performance differences between immigrant and non-immigrant students.

While it is important to consider immigrants' country of origin when designing policies to help these students integrate into the school system, it is probably not the most important factor that can affect integration. Socio-economic status too varies widely within the immigrant population. In general, some school systems manage socio-economic diversity more successfully than others. Immigrant students tend to perform better in school systems that have relatively large populations of immigrant students and where immigrant students are as diverse in their socio-economic status as other students. For example, between one in four and one in five students in Australia, Canada, Israel and the United States have an immigrant background. In these four countries, all students with similar socio-economic status perform equally well, regardless of whether or not they are immigrants. By contrast, in countries where immigrant students represent only a small proportion of the overall student population, and this group is more socio-economically diverse than the overall student population, performance differences between immigrant and non-immigrant students are relatively large, even after taking socio-economic status into account.

Immigrant students tend to do better in countries and economies that rise to the challenge of diversity and whose school system is flexible enough to adapt to students with different strengths and needs. Countries that are just beginning to receive increasing numbers of immigrant students from diverse backgrounds can learn from the experience of those systems that have been confronted with this challenge for longer and have succeeded in integrating these students into their school systems.

The bottom line: The fact that immigrant students from the same country of origin, cultural backgrounds and socio-economic status perform so differently across host countries indicates that education and social policy can have an impact not only on these students' performance in reading but also on how prepared they are to make the most of available opportunities in their host countries.

For more information

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See OECD (2010), *PISA 2009 Results: Overcoming Social Background: Equity in Learning Opportunities and Outcomes*, Volume II, OECD Publishing;
OECD (2012), *Untapped Skills: Realising the Potential of Immigrant Students*, OECD Publishing.

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