Immigration, Diversity, and Education

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3 Disentangling Nativity Status, Race/Ethnicity, and Country of Origin in Predicting the School Readiness of Young Immigrant Children

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The extent to which children have a basic foundation of skills needed to begin and be successful in kindergarten has become a burgeoning topic in the fields of education, developmental psychology, and child policy. This is due in large part to a body of research showing that children who begin kindergarten already behind their peers in a range of developmental competencies have a hard time “catching up” later in schooling (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2005) and are at risk for low academic achievement, grade retention, special education placement, and high school dropout (Ramey & Ramey, 1998). As has been discussed by Hernández, Lenten, and Macartney (this volume), immigrant children are quite diverse and although many live in optimal circumstances, many more live in poverty (Brandon, 2004) and face various social and institutional barriers that can present challenges to their long-term educational attainment, health, and psychological well-being (Puligni, 1997; Leventhal, Xue, & Brooks-Gunn, 2006; Perreira, Chapman, & Stein, 2008). Fortunately, early education provides a promising solution: a quality preschool experience can help prepare children for kindergarten and have positive effects that last through adulthood (Campbell, Ramey, Pungello, Sparling, & Miller-Johnson, 2002; Schweinhart et al., 2005; Winsler et al., 2008). Early education can be a key factor in buffering immigrant children from adversities by affording them the opportunity to learn skills that can ease their transition to formal schooling.

Though growing attention to the educational attainment of immigrant youth has encouraged numerous studies on school-aged and adolescent populations, few studies exist to date on the state of immigrant children’s development in early childhood, prior to entering formal schooling. The social sciences have only recently been able to access large early-childhood datasets with the necessary information about child and parent nativity and national origins to ask how well-prepared immigrant children are for kindergarten. Taking into account the “newness” of this area of study, the central goals of this chapter are to find and both relate to our own ongoing study on the school readiness of diverse, low-income, immigrant and non-immigrant children receiving subsidies to attend childcare in Miami, Florida (Winsler et al., 2008). The first goal of the chapter is to summarize the recently available literature on school readiness for immigrant children in the US, which finds that many immigrant children begin kindergarten somewhat behind their native-born peers, especially in areas like math (Crosnoe, 2007; Magnuson, LaRue, & Waldfogel, 2006).

Second, we introduce the reader to some of the valuable research on older youth that highlights the sheer diversity of the immigrant child population (in terms of family background, generation, ethnicity, and national origins) and how this diversity is related to differences in educational outcomes. In our own study, discussed at the end of this chapter, we ask if the same heterogeneity of educational outcomes can be seen at an earlier age, and have found that indeed, children’s backgrounds a nativity histories do matter for early developmental competencies and school readiness. There is really no single, one-dimensional story to tell about the state of immigrant children’s educational progress, including their school readiness. Further, we find that even very young immigrant children bring with them important strengths, and task as researchers, educators, and policy makers is to discern how best to leverage those strengths to promote their long-term academic success.

The School Readiness of Immigrant Children in the US

It is a little-known piece of history that kindergarten and preschool were originally implemented into US society in an attempt to minimize inequality in educational attainment based on factors like race and income (Meisels & Shonkoff, 2000). In its early years, kindergartens were seen as a means to integrate the multitudes of impoverished immigrant children into American society and provide supports for their long-term attainment (Bronz & Edwards, 1972). Over 100 years later, as the US sociopolitical and typical immigrant profile have changed dramatically, we are still invested in and standing the unique needs of children in immigrant families. This vision is not surprising, as it emerges from long-held American values of diversity and equal opportunity. Studies that have investigated the early development and school readiness of children in immigrant families have shed new light on their overall level of preparateness for schooling, their progress in specific domains (e.g., cognitive and socioemotional development), and the effectiveness of the early-education programs they participate in. In one such study, using data from the nationally representative sample provided by the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS-K), Magnuson et al. (2006) found that preschool had a larger positive effect (22% increase) on the English-language proficiency of children of immigrant mothers than it did for other children. Although there were no differences in the reading scores of English-proficient children in immigrant families and those in non-immigrant families, children in immigrant families did slightly behind children in non-immigrant families in math. Further, preschool attendance was associated with higher math and reading scores for both groups, even controlling for family background. Therefore, the study found that preschool was, as beneficial for children in immigrant families as it was for children in native families, and it was most beneficial (in terms of English-language acquisition) for children whose mothers spoke a language other than English in the home.

When looking only at children in Mexican immigrant families, however, Claus (2007) discovered that attending preschool did not seem to be as beneficial for the children as it was for children in native-born families. Like Magnuson and colleagues, and again using data from the ECLS-K, Crosnoe found that upon entering kindergarten, children in Mexican immigrant families lagged behind their native peers.
that defines a particular cultural group (Pereira et al, 2006). These researchers stress that educational practitioners need to move away from the conventional notion that equates each racial group with one culture and one ethnic identity and highlight the danger in assuming that, for instance, the racial identities of all Black youth are the same, regardless of community, country of origin, and social-cultural factors (Fuligoi, 1997; Rong & Brown, 2011).

Some researchers have speculated that differences in outcomes for immigrant and native-born Black children and families may partly involve differences in their interpretations of how favorable conditions are for them in the host society (Portes, 1999). They highlight the importance of considering that involuntary minority groups like Native Americans, Mexican Americans, and African Americans have a history of oppression related to colonization and, in turn, have experienced widespread discrimination that has been institutionalized (Ogba & Simmons, 1998). This outlook on their place within society can lead to feelings of marginalization that affect academic attitudes, motivation, and academic success. Conversely, the optimistic outlook and strong desire for upward mobility characteristic of many recent immigrants may contribute to higher self-regard, values, and motives when compared to same-race peers whose families have lived here for generations (Portes, 1999).

As with older immigrants, the few studies that exist on the competencies of very young immigrant children suggest segmented outcomes are evident even at a young age. Glick and Hohenmann-Marriott (2002), for instance, found that after controlling for family structure and background, first-generation immigrant children who migrated to the United States during childhood scored just as high as non-immigrant children on a math test in third grade. However, second-generation immigrant children scored significantly lower than both other groups. They also found interactions between generation and race/ethnicity for immigrant children, highlighting that both must be taken into consideration when predicting outcomes. The question is whether these racial, ethnic, and national boundaries, as well as their intersection with nativity history, matter for children's development prior to entering formal schooling in kindergarten. This question was an interest of ours and a major aim of our own study.

Generation and Its Implications for Child Outcomes

Though there would appear to be a clear distinction between immigrants (those who are foreign-born) and non-immigrants (those who are native-born), the broad conceptualizations are generally insufficient to answer questions relating to the achievement and success of immigrant children. Lest in these definitions are simplifications and processes captured by details of children's migration histories. These include factors such as generation (whether it is the child or the parent) and the parent's age at the time of migration, parents' ages at their time of migration, years spent in the US, and whether the child lives in a single status (both parents are immigrants) or mixed-status (only one parent is foreign-born) household (Oropesa & Landale, 1997; Rumbaut, 2004). Thus, generational differences in children's early developmental competencies and school readiness were also a central question of our study.

Research has consistently shown that children's outcomes differ according to their
age and level of schooling at the time of migration (Cortes, 2006; Kao & Tienda, 1995; Dropia & Landale, 1997). In a comprehensive analysis of the unique characteristics of different generational groups, Rumbaut (2004) provides a typology that takes these nativity influences into account. He uses what he refers to as “decidural” generations to further divide the first- and second-generation into more meaningful groups. According to Rumbaut, research on immigrant children should take into account whether a child migrated during early childhood (ages 0–5), middle childhood (6–12), or adolescence (in their teens). Each of these age groups is faced with different developmental tasks and contexts of socialization, and therefore, the processes of migration and subsequent acculturation change will likely be experienced differentially by each age group. Children who arrive before the age of 5, for instance, (the 1.75 generation) will have almost no recollection of experiences in their home country and experience the bulk of their language development and socialization in the US. The first-generation immigrant children in our own sample are part of this 1.75 generation.

When the focus is on very young immigrant children, what may be more important for their outcomes is the nativity status and age at arrival of their parents rather than the timing of their own arrival (Glick & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007). This is because immigrant parents who themselves arrived at a young age may be more acculturated, speak more English, and use child-rearing practices that more closely resemble those of a native-born parent, while a more recent immigrant parent may be less acculturated, speak less English, and exhibit child-rearing and parenting that is more consistent with cultural norms in the home country. Often markers like ethnicity, country of origin, and generation are simply proxies for cultural, historical, or socioeconomic differences in the family that more directly influence children's outcomes. This next section will discuss the family background/home environment and child-rearing and how they can influence outcomes for young immigrant children.

Family Characteristics and Parenting

Though the particular influence of the home environment may differ with the age and developmental stage of the child, background characteristics of the family and strategies parents use are undoubtedly important for immigrant children during the time of transition. Indicators of human capital, such as family socioeconomic status and parental education, consistently predict outcomes for all children (Gershoff, Aber, & Farrow, 2005; McLoed, 1998), including those in immigrant families (Crosnoe, 2007; Magnuson et al., 2005), with higher income and parental education related to more favorable educational outcomes. As discussed by Hernandez et al. (this volume), there is more diversity in parental education among immigrant groups than any other demographic indicator, and similar diversity is found with regard to income. Other research has demonstrated the shifting influence that socioeconomic stratification and segregation based on race, ethnicity, or nativity can exert on children's success (Garcia Coll et al., 1996), making the expansion of programs and policies that aim to reduce this disparity paramount to the discussion of the well-being of immigrant children.

Researchers have also gone beyond indicators of human capital and examined aspects of social capital to explain influential family processes in immigrant families. Social capital is generally defined as “a unique resource generated from social relation-
School Readiness for Diverse Immigrant Children in Poverty in Miami

Study Description and Methods

The Miami School Readiness Project (Winsler et al., 2008), a large-scale, 5-year, university-community collaborative project that involved evaluation of a variety of different early-childhood programs and services, offers an excellent opportunity to examine multiple domains of school readiness for immigrant children. Essentially the entire (consenting) population of the county’s ethically and linguistically diverse preschool children receiving subsidies to attend a variety of non-Head Start early-childhood programs were assessed on a wide variety of school-readiness domains and are currently being followed as they progress through the early elementary school years. The location of the study was quite ideal because Miami has long been known as a “melting pot” with a large, diverse immigrant population. In fact, in 2004, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) ranked Miami as the city with the highest foreign-born population in the world at 59% (UNDP Human Development Report, 2004).

Consequently, the Miami preschool sample offers a unique opportunity to study and compare large samples of subgroups of young immigrant children.

Because the literature on adolescent immigrant children consistently finds that some groups of immigrant youth tend to thrive while others struggle, we found it important to examine whether these same patterns of disparity would be found in young children, prior to starting formal schooling. If there proved to be substantial nativity group differences already in the skills considered important for kindergarten, the situation may call for early intervention and preschool curricula that are more targeted to unique issues faced by various groups of immigrant and non-immigrant preschoolers. If, however, these diverse groups are virtually indistinguishable at this young age in terms of pre-academic and socioemotional skills, and disparate patterns of achievement appear only later in development, there would be implications for focusing on the early grade school years for offsetting the sources of disparity among children with different nativity histories.

Child participants for the current study consisted of 2,194 4-year-old preschoolers attending some kind of child care (center-based childcare, family daycare, or informal care) in the Miami community via childcare subsidies during the 2003–2004 academic year. The subsample discussed in this chapter consists only of those children who a) had sufficient data on child country of origin and parent country of origin to determine generational status of the child, and b) had at least some repeated measures (pre and post) child-assessment data during their 4-year-old preschool year.

Children were assessed for cognitive and language development with the Learning Accomplishment Profile–Diagnostic (LAP-D; Nehring, Nehring, Bruni, & Randolph, 1992) which was administered individually to children in a separate room of the child’s school, both around the beginning and end of the academic year. The assessor chose the language to use for assessment (English or Spanish) after asking the teacher to report the child’s strongest language and/or establishing which language was more comfortable for the child during brief initial interactions. For more methodological details about the instruments used and procedures, see Winsler et al. (2008).

Children’s social-emotional strengths and behavior problems were measured with teacher-report using the Devereux Early Childhood Assessment (DECA; LeBuffe & Naglieri, 1999) at the beginning and end of the school year. The DECA was designed to create a profile of children’s social-emotional strengths or “protective factors” within a resilience framework. Teachers reported on the frequency of children’s behavior by rating them on items comprising four subscales: initiative, self-control, attachment/closeness with adults, and behavioral concerns. The first three subscales are combined to create an overall socioemotional total protective factors score (bigger numbers indicating greater strengths) and the behavior-concerns scale is scored such that larger numbers indicate greater concerns with behavior. Total protective factors and behavior concerns are the scales used here in the analyses in the form of standardized national percentiles. Teachers had the choice of completing the form in English or Spanish.

For the purposes of this study, and as is common in other research on immigrants, generational status of the child was determined by a combination of the country of origin of the child and the country of origin of the reporting parent. These groups were created, namely, first-generation immigrant children, second-generation immigrant children, and third or later generation (hereafter referred to as non-immigrant) children. A first-generation immigrant child was defined as being born in a country other than the US. Using Rumbaut’s (2004) delineation of the immigrant first generation, this group, given they are only 4 years old, would technically be considered a part of the 1.75 generation. A second-generation immigrant child was defined as having a US country of birth with the reporting parent having a country of birth other than the US. A non-immigrant child was defined as having a US country of origin with the reporting parent also having a US country of origin. While it is the case that we only received country-of-origin information for one (reporting) parent, a full 92% of children in this high-risk sample were living in single-parent households, and therefore we can be reasonably confident that the nativity status of the reporting parent is of greatest proximity and importance to the development of the child.

Regions were created geographically and were based on the most common geographical regions of immigrant parents in the sample, namely, South America, Central America, Cuba, and (non-Cuban) Caribbean Islands. Because Cubans represent such a large and influential group in Miami, and are therefore strongly represented in the preschool population, we decided to analyze their data in two ways—as a separate “region” as well as include them when analyzing by country. Given the unique historical circumstances of the relationship between Cuba and the US, and the status of most Cubans as political refugees, it seemed appropriate to analyze outcomes for Cuban children separately.

The countries that constituted each region of origin are as follows, in descending order by largest number of families to smallest. Countries of origin in the South American region included Colombia, Venezuela, Peru, Chile, Brazil, Argentina, and Bolivia. Countries in the Central American region included Nicaragua, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, and Costa Rica. Countries in the non-Cuban Caribbean region included Haiti, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, Bahamas, Virgin Islands, and Other West Indies. It should also be noted that because the sample is composed only of children receiving subsidies to attend childcare, these countries of origin are not likely representative of the entire population of Miami preschoolers nor Miami immigrants. The
preschoolers in this sample are those whose families are in need of, and receive, financial assistance in order to provide their children with some type of childcare. There are surely countries not represented in our sample that are more represented in the higher-income demographic in Miami, and are therefore able to pay for childcare out of pocket. Also, there are likely other low-income immigrant families in the area with preschoolers who do not receive childcare subsidies who are systematically not in our sample.

Results

Child and Family Background Characteristics

There were several differences across the nativity groups with regard to child and family characteristics. Though the entire sample was very low income and therefore at elevated risk for educational difficulties, it appeared first- and second-generation immigrant children had slight advantages in terms of family background and resources while non-immigrant children with native-born parents had slight disadvantages. On average, non-immigrant children were living in larger families and their parents were the youngest and least likely of the three groups to be married. The majority of non-immigrant children were Black/African American (57%), and although they were most likely to be English-proficient, almost 26% of non-immigrant children were still stronger in Spanish than English, and these children tended not to do as well in language skills overall, as will be discussed in more detail below.

First-generation immigrant children were highly likely to be Latino (89%) and highly unlikely to be English-proficient. Two distinct advantages first-generation immigrant children had over the other groups is that their parents were more likely to be married and hold a high school diploma or GED, which could translate into more social capital and resources available to their children. Second-generation immigrant children were also likely to be Latino (78%) and only 39% were English-proficient. Immigrant parents of second-generation immigrant children had slightly higher incomes ($10,000) compared to the other groups but the lowest levels of education. Further, only 10% of these parents were married. This snapshot of the family lives, on average, of the different nativity groups helps to provide some context when interpreting their relative competencies in skills considered important for school readiness.

As is demonstrated by the above data on child and family background characteristics for the sample, it should be noted that the entire sample of children is low income and at higher than average risk for academic difficulties. As such, when we describe any one group’s competence as “high” or “low,” it is in relative terms within a sample of children who are all scoring generally low on these assessments. Results are reported here using national percentile scores where appropriate so the reader can more easily gauge the skill levels of the children relative to national norms. It should also be noted that controlling for the above demographic and family background factors did not change the outcomes of the analyses presented below, potentially because the sample is based on an already quite restricted range of family income.

During our study, we were interested in taking what we had learned from the literature on the diversity of educational outcomes for adolescent youth according to nativity, generation, ethnicity, and country of origin, and examining how it applies to preschool children, an understudied population in these areas. For each school-readiness domain (cognitive, language, socioemotional, protective factors, and behavior concerns), we start with broad conceptualizations of the term “immigrant” and reach higher levels of specificity with each analysis. We first ask if children show similar levels of competence in these domains according to whether they are first-generation immigrants with foreign-born parents, second-generation immigrants with foreign-born parents, or non-immigrants with native-born parents. We then ask what importance race/ethnicity has for the school readiness of children with and without immigrant parents and examine whether the overall generational patterns persist within each race/ethnic group. Next we look deeper into the specific national origins of the first- and second-generation immigrant children, and ask whether diversity of school-readiness outcomes exists according to region or country of origin.

Cognitive Development

We first considered how each of the three nativity groups of first-generation immigrant, second-generation immigrant, and non-immigrant children performed in terms of cognitive skills. The first noteworthy pattern we observed was that all three nativity groups were making important and similar gains from the beginning to the end of the pre-kindergarten year in terms of cognitive skills. These gains are in terms of national percentiles, so it is not just maturation we are observing here. On average, children in the sample were improving their relative standing compared to national norms by about 5-6 percentile points across the year. Though the three groups were making similar gains, they differed in their overall level of cognitive competence at both time points. Specifically, non-immigrant children displayed stronger cognitive skills than both first- and second-generation immigrant children, who were not significantly different from each other. These differences were not accounted for by differences in parental income, education, family size, or marital status between the groups. Non-immigrant children reached the national average of the 50th percentile by the end of the year on average whereas the immigrant children started (39th-41st percentile) and ended the year (44th-45th percentile) at greater cognitive risk below national averages.

Because the ethnic composition of the nativity groups differed substantially, we investigated whether the nativity group differences discussed above held within each ethnic/racial group. Interestingly, while the same pattern showing non-immigrant advantage for cognitive skills was true for Black children, a different pattern emerged for Latino children. For Latino children, non-immigrant and first-generation immigrant children were indistinguishable in terms of cognitive skills, with only second-generation immigrant children lagging behind.

There were also geographic region and country-of-origin effects on immigrant children’s cognitive functioning. Immigrant children from South America tended to demonstrate higher cognitive skills (49th percentile at post) than immigrants from other regions (40th-47th percentile at post), and Central American immigrant children appeared to be struggling the most (40th percentile at post). In terms of country of origin, there were both main effects for country but also significant country-by-time interactions. Children with family origins in Puerto Rico started the year showing the
most cognitive competence (49th percentile), and thus did not show much improvement over the year. Comparatively, immigrant children from Honduras and the Dominican Republic appeared to be struggling the most with regard to cognitive skills at the beginning of the year (28th and 29th percentiles, respectively), but Dominican-origin children made excellent gains across the year, and by Spring, showed similar levels of cognitive skills as the other six groups. Children from Haiti began the year in the middle of the pack with regard to cognitive skills, but made great gains across the year and by Spring showed the highest levels of cognitive skills of any immigrant group (49th percentile). Though we predicted Cuban children may have an advantage in some domains due to their group's elevated social standing within the Miami community, we found they demonstrated average cognitive skills among this group of low-income, first- and second-generation immigrant children. Overall, these results reveal that there is already substantial heterogeneity in cognitive outcomes and trajectories in preschool for immigrant children according to nativity status, ethnicity, region of origin, and country of origin.

Language Development

The LARP language measure was administered in what appeared to be the child's strongest language, and thus was intended to measure general linguistic competence. As was seen earlier for cognitive skills, all three groups of children were at considerable risk but made excellent and similar gains (i.e., 10 national percentile points) in language skills across the preschool year. Again, however, they differed in overall competence at any time point. Non-immigrant children (about 82% of them assessed in English) demonstrated the strongest language skills (46th percentile at post). First-generation immigrant children (78% of them assessed in Spanish) showed intermediate levels of language facility (49th percentile at post), whereas second-generation immigrant children (65%) of them assessed in Spanish scored the lowest (35th percentile at post) in language skills. As was done with cognitive skills, we asked whether the overall nativity group differences held within each ethnic group (still overall, ignoring language of assessment). Within Latino children, it was second-generation immigrant children who lagged behind the other two groups in language and for Black children, non-immigrants scored significantly higher than the two immigrant groups.

A more interesting picture emerged when we analyzed just Latino children's language outcomes by nativity group separately for those assessed in English and Spanish. English-dominant/assessed Latino children followed the overall pattern that non-immigrant children were more linguistically advanced (in English) than first-generation immigrant children who, in turn, were more advanced than second-generation immigrant children. However, for Spanish-dominant/assessed Latino children, first-generation immigrant children were more linguistically advanced (in Spanish) than both second-generation and non-immigrant children.

So it appears first-generation children, if they are strong in their native language and are assessed in their native language, do quite well among the other groups in language skills considered important for kindergarten. On the other hand, second-generation and non-immigrant children tend to do better if they take their assessments in English. The finding that second-generation immigrant children tend to demonstrate the least competence of the three groups in language skills, regardless of whether they were assessed in English or Spanish, is quite important and suggests that the quality of language input in the home in both English and Spanish may be limited for second-generation immigrant children in poverty.

In terms of country and region of origin, the story is similar for language skills as it was for cognitive skills—immigrant children with origins in South America, Cuba, and the Caribbean islands all showed similar levels of language skills (50th-40th percentile at post), but children from Central America tended to be struggling by comparison (30th percentile at post). Puerto Rican and Cuban children started the year more advanced in language skills (50th and 29th percentiles, respectively) than children from other countries, and both groups made modest gains across the year. Children from Colombia and Haiti, on the other hand, began the year in the middle of the groups in terms of language competence, but made larger gains across the year so that by Spring, they were scoring higher than all other groups (42nd and 35th percentiles, respectively). Immigrant children from Honduras (50th percentile at post) and the Dominican Republic (32nd percentile at post) appeared to be struggling the most with language, but Dominican-origin children made good gains and by the end of the year were more similar to other groups in language skills, while Honduran children still lagged behind. Again, we see that heterogeneity by country of origin, ethnicity, and language background is the key to understanding immigrant children's school readiness and that simple comparisons of nativity groups averaging across these factors are limited.

Socioemotional Development

In the area of socioemotional protective factors, which includes initiative, attachment/desire, and self-control, children in all groups started the year at lower risk than they did in the cognitive/language area (around the national average for 4-year-olds) and made good and similar gains in social skills across the year. Most importantly, however, first-generation immigrant children showed considerable strength in this area and were rated as higher on socioemotional protective factors by their preschool teachers (59th to 60th percentile) than second-generation immigrants (52nd to 59th percentile), who in turn were rated higher than non-immigrant children (50th to 56th percentile) at both time points. When examined separately within each ethnic group, the same pattern of first-generation immigrant advantage in social skills was seen within each ethnic group at both time points.

Unlike what we saw in the cognitive and language domains, there were no differences in overall levels or gains in socioemotional protective factors among children with immigrant parents according to either region or country of origin. Rather, children with immigrant parents from all regions and countries showed similarly high socioemotional skills when compared to children with native-born parents.

Behavior Concerns

Overall, children in all groups either remained stable or improved their behavior slightly over the course of the school year according to teachers. However, as was seen with protective factors, the groups differed with respect to the mean levels of behavior.
problems displayed, with first-generation immigrant children displaying the fewest behavior concerns (46th percentile—just below national averages at post for problem behavior for 4-year-olds), followed by second-generation immigrant children (52nd percentile at post), and then non-immigrant children (57th percentile at post), who posed the greatest behavior problems for preschool teachers.

When immigrant groups were compared separately within Black and Latino children, we found that Black children followed the overall pattern, however, within just Latino children, non-immigrants were still the group with the most behavior concerns (57th percentile at post), but first- and second-generation immigrant children did not differ significantly from one another (47th and 52nd percentiles, respectively). There were few differences in children's behavior concerns according to region or country of origin. However, there was one exception worth pointing out—immigrant children with Haitian origins in Miami showed impressive reductions in behavior problems across the 4-year-old preschool year while the behavior concerns of children from all other countries remained relatively stable.

Conclusions

As is discussed throughout this book, immigrant children are extremely diverse in terms of language, skin color, religion, culture, and national origins, and this diversity has been shown to translate into disparities in educational outcomes for different groups (Crossno, 2007; García Coll et al., 1996; Magnusson et al., 2006). The first step in solving this puzzle is to close the achievement gap between children of varying national and ethnic backgrounds, to start early, and focus on how these children are doing before entering formal schooling. Once we have a good understanding of overall school-readiness patterns, we can begin to identify any familial, cultural, or sociohistorical processes involved in these educational disparities, and be more prepared to develop and implement relevant and informed educational policies and practices.

A major goal of our study was to investigate whether the same heterogeneity of educational outcomes found among older immigrant youth according to factors like generation, ethnicity, and country of origin would be found in the school-readiness outcomes of a sample of ethnically diverse, low-income preschool children. Our results revealed that even at the preschool age, children differed in a number of important ways according to family immigration history, ethnicity, and national origins. Though the entire sample was low income and all the families likely faced a number of challenges, non-immigrant children tended to be slightly more disadvantaged in terms of family socioeconomic factors than either first- or second-generation immigrant children.

Overall, non-immigrant children showed stronger cognitive and language skills than first- or second-generation immigrant children. However, in the areas of social emotional protective factors and behavior concerns, there was a clear immigrant advantage. First-generation immigrant children showed more socioemotional strengths than second-generation immigrant children, who in turn showed greater socioemotional strengths than non-immigrant children. Further, both first- and second-generation immigrant children displayed fewer behavior concerns than non-immigrant children. Unlike with cognitive and language skills, national origins did not seem to matter as much for socioemotional skills and behavior. First- and second-generation immigrant children displayed stronger socioemotional skills and fewer behavior concerns than non-immigrant children regardless of their family’s national origins.

Perhaps there is something more universal about the immigration experience that helps young immigrant children attain stronger socioemotional skills in preschool. It could be the selection factor that parents who choose to migrate raise more socioemotionally competent children than parents who stay in the home country. Perhaps a more likely explanation is that parents from these non-US countries simply emphasize traits like initiative, self-control, and closeness with adults in children this age to a greater extent than do mainstream American parents, who often emphasize more academically focused socialization goals. Increased emphasis on social and behavioral competence by immigrant parents has been documented in other literature (Hsu & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998; Ogaski & Sternberg, 1993; Perreira et al., 2006; Yearwood, 2011) and may be an area that educators can leverage in concert with immigrant parents to promote the academic achievement of immigrant children.

For most of the school-readiness domains, the effects of generational status depended somewhat on children’s ethnicity. For Black children, non-immigrants demonstrated more language and cognitive competence than either of the immigrant groups. However, the pattern was different for Latino children, for whom first-generation immigrant children performed just as well as non-immigrant children. We also saw differences in cognitive and language skills according to national origins, whereby South American immigrant children showed the strongest skills and Central American immigrant children tended to be struggling, especially those from Honduras. We do know that many of the migrant farmworkers in South Florida originate from Central America, and that children in these families face additional risks such as increased mobility, crowded housing, and exposure to pesticides (McHale et al., 2000). It is possible that these increased risks are being reflected in lower average cognitive and language skills for low-income Central American immigrant children as a whole.

Another interesting finding was that first-generation immigrant children, if they were strong in their native language and assessed in their native language, did quite well compared to the other groups in language skills considered important for kindergarten. On the other hand, second-generation and non-immigrant children tended to do better if they took their assessments in English. The low language performance in general (regardless of language of assessment) for second-generation immigrants is of some concern and suggests that interventions focusing on rich language input in home and in school for second-generation immigrant children may be needed. Clearly, further research on the how the home language and literacy environments differ between first- and second-generation immigrant children is needed and may shed more light on language patterns such as those found here.

In interpreting the overall results of our study, it is also important to consider the unique local context of Miami with regard to its history, demographics, and present policies toward immigration. First, Florida, and Miami-Dade County in particular, is unique with regard to the sheer number and concentration of recent immigrants. In the period between 2000 and 2005, the US-born population in Florida grew by 8.7%, while the state’s immigrant population grew by 20.8% (totaling 3.2 million in 2005). Miami-Dade has the highest percentage of immigrants state-wide, with 51% of
residents born in another country (Eisenhauer, Zhang, Hernandez, & Angee, 2007). This makes immigrants in Miami a majority, rather than a minority as in many other locales across the country. This concentration alone, and its implications for Miami as a receiving community with a firsthand understanding of the challenges of migration, could contribute to our finding that first-generation immigrant children have some developmental advantages. These advantages could act through better second-language accommodations in the community, enhanced resources available and accessible for recent immigrants, and an increased social capital and support during the transition.

Further, we found that being a recent immigrant appeared to provide a larger advantage for Latino as compared to Black children. Here, it may be important to consider the local context and political climate in Miami. First, not only is the Latino population larger in number, but there exists a controversial US policy toward the differential treatment and repatriation of Cuban (the largest Latino immigrant group) versus Haitian immigrants (the largest Black immigrant group) seeking refuge on the Miami shores. Since the beginning of the Cold War, the US has taken in Cubans who make the 90-mile ocean voyage to US soil, defining them as political refugees seeking asylum from a Communist regime. Haitians, on the other hand, make a similar voyage to escape economic, and in some cases political, oppression, but have historically been sent back to Haiti (Dawkins, 2000). Further, in December 2001, there was a change in Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS; now US Citizenship and Immigration Services— USCIS) policy that resulted in the indefinite detention of Haitian refugees and asylum seekers in INS facilities and detention centers, rather than immediate release and repatriation. Because this policy applied specifically to Haitians, it attracted the attention of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the Florida Immigrant Advocacy Center (FIAC) and was described by the organizations as “discriminatory” and “anti-Haitian” (US Commission on Civil Rights, 2002). It is quite possible that such policies could contribute to racial tensions in the community as well as feelings of marginalization for Black immigrant parents, somewhat neutralizing the immigrant optimism and advantage that has been described in other studies (Ogul & Simmons, 1998; Portes, 1999).

It is further possible that US government support of Cuban refugees has “spillover effects” for Latino immigrants in general, at least in terms of language accommodations and resources. Research on older youth has found that retention of ethnic identity, values, and community ties can be beneficial for the educational attainment of some immigrant youth (Rong & Brown, 2001; Rumbaut, 1997) and while the Miami context likely facilitates this process for Latino immigrants, the same may not be the case, at least not to the same extent, for Black Caribbean immigrants, and we may be seeing this reflected in lower cognitive and language skills for their children. Though these are some of the unique immigration policy issues facing the Miami community, each community across the nation is experiencing increased recent immigration in its own way, and the local policies that are enacted directly affect the opportunities and resources available to immigrant children. A better understanding of how these local policies in Miami and around the country, influence the lives of immigrant children is needed to evaluate their effects and drive policy toward more effective strategies for educating our diverse nation.

One “immigrant advantage” that persisted regardless of ethnicity or national origin was in socioemotional protective factors and behavior. Teachers consistently rated all groups of immigrant children as stronger than native-born children in these areas. These findings are similar to those by Cressace (2006, 2007) where Mexican immigrant children nationally showed fewer externalizing behavior problems and more emotional competence and maturity when compared to their non-immigrant peers. Considering that kindergarten teachers often place more importance on social skills and behavior for success in kindergarten than on academic skills (Lin et al., 2003; West et al., 1995), the strong initiative, self-control, attachment, and good behavior of immigrant children could be a valuable asset to build upon when they enter kindergarten. In fact, future longitudinal analyses with our sample will serve to answer the question of just how important immigrant children’s socioemotional skills are to their later academic success.

If kindergarten teachers are aware of and can leverage these skills in immigrant children, then it is possible that socioemotional strengths could serve as a “bootstrapping” mechanism by which immigrant children can raise their level of skills in academic domains, perhaps through enhanced teacher-child and child-child interactions in the context of learning. Our preliminary follow-up research on this sample of children suggests that by second grade, first- and second-generation immigrant children no longer lag behind non-immigrant children in academic areas (grades and standardized test scores), and perform even better on behavioral measures like attendance and tardiness (De Feyter, Hutchison, & Winsler, 2008). Future analyses will determine whether the ability of children in immigrant families to “catch up” to non-immigrant children academically during the early years of school can be attributed, at least in part, to their socioemotional and behavioral strengths. Further, more detailed knowledge of the combinations of strengths and challenges held by many immigrant children in early childhood will help teachers and parents be more prepared to implement educational practices that can build on those strengths which, in turn, will serve to foster their later contributions as members of US society.

Finally, the provision of quality early-childhood education programs is seen by many as an important policy strategy for improving the school readiness of academic trajectories of children in poverty, immigrant or not, and for reducing the achievement gap (Entwistle & Alexander, 1995; Takahashi, 2004). Results from the Miami School Readiness Project so far (Winsler et al., 2008), and those presented here, suggest that immigrant and non-immigrant children who attend even garden-variety early childcare and pre-K programs make considerable progress in multiple domains of school readiness during their 4-year-old pre-K year. The fact that there were no nativity group-by-time interactions found here suggests that such early care and education experiences likely benefit both immigrant and non-immigrant children equally.

Immigrant children in the Miami community have benefited from the recent implementation of a voluntary universal pre-k program in the state of Florida (Florida House of Representatives, 2004), and as such, Miami can serve as a model for other communities wanting to increase access to early education and care for immigrant children. As pointed out by Cressace (2007) and discussed earlier, good-quality childcare and early-education programs for young immigrant children are a worthy investment, especially if they can build on and not jeopardize the existing socioemotional and behavioral strengths of young immigrant children. Evidence from our study in Miami suggests that immigrant children’s social skills only increased over the course of the year in childcare and children’s behavior problems as reported by teachers certainly did.
not increase over time. Thus, it would appear that early-childhood programs have much potential for improving the health and welfare of a diverse of immigrant families.

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Notes

1. Though Puerto Rico is not a sovereign nation but a self-governing US territory, we found it appropriate to analyze their outcomes as a group distinct from mainland US children.

2. Throughout, we present only results that are statistically significant at least at the p < 0.05 level.

3. Unfortunately, because of the low numbers of White immigrants in Miami as compared to other groups, we were not able to investigate this point for children who were White.

References


