



School segregation and academic achievement among Hispanic children

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Abstract

Although prior research suggests that Latino children of immigrants are segregated in low-income, high-minority schools, no prior work has examined the effects of race and class composition on Latino student's academic achievement or the extent to which compositional effects vary by generational status. We analyze the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) data using hierarchical linear models. Academic achievement is measured by grade point average (GPA) and add health picture vocabulary test (AHPVT) score. We find that socioeconomic composition of the school but not racial composition is an important predictor of AHPVT test scores of Latino adolescents. The findings vary by generational status in the case of GPA. School SES has a positive effect and school minority composition has a negative effect on grades only in the case of foreign-born Latinos. Although GPA and AHPVT scores vary significantly by generational status and ethnicity, these achievement differences are better explained by family background than by variations in school composition. A possible reason, one which is supported by the results, is that high levels of social capital in immigrant families help buffer children from the disadvantages associated with the schools they attend.

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1. Introduction

Many immigrant groups have been extremely successful at using education as a vehicle for socioeconomic mobility (Caplan et al., 1991; Fejgin, 1995; Schneider and Lee, 1990; Hirschman, 2001). However, Hispanic children of immigrants, particularly Mexicans, stand apart in that they tend to score lower on standardized tests, are more likely than other groups, including African Americans, to drop out of high school, and less likely to attend college (Hirschman, 2001; Van Hook and Fix, 2000). Moreover, these adverse outcomes tend to be more common among those who have lived in the United States for a significant portion of their lives (Hirschman, 2001), and cannot be entirely explained by individual- or family-level factors.

The persistence of the Hispanic disadvantage has led some scholars to view diversity in social and institutional contexts of reception as a potential explanation for group-level variations in educational outcomes (Gans, 1992; Massey, 1995; Portes and Zhou, 1993; Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993; Fernandez-Kelly and Schauflyer, 1996; Fernandez-Kelly, 1995; Portes, 1998; Waters, 1999). Importantly, Hispanics stand apart among immigrant groups as experiencing some of the highest levels of school segregation. Hispanics have become increasingly likely to attend high-minority schools and now are nearly as segregated as African Americans (Logan, 2002; Orfield et al., 1997). In California, Spanish-speaking students are more concentrated in high-minority, high-poverty schools than other groups, including non-Hispanic whites, blacks, and non-English speaking Asians (Van Hook and Balistreri, 2002). On a national scale, schools that are 90–100% black and Hispanic are 14 times more likely to be majority poor than schools that are 90% or more white (Orfield et al., 1997).

In this article, we examine the effects of two dimensions of school context—race/ethnic and income composition—on academic achievement among Hispanic adolescents. We further examine how school composition effects may vary by the number of generations in the United States (e.g., first, second, third or higher generation). Although prior research has explored the effects of school race/ethnic and income composition on achievement (Alexander and Eckland, 1975; Bankston et al., 1996; Coleman et al., 1966; Cook et al., 1984; Entwisle and Alexander, 1992; Longshore and Prager, 1985; Jaynes and Williams, 1989; Rumberger and Wilms, 1992), no work has yet examined the influence of both of these dimensions of school composition on Hispanic children by generational status. This represents an important gap in the literature as Hispanics now constitute the youngest and fastest growing population among major minority groups in the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000; Therrien and Ramirez, 2001). As elaborated below, the concentration of racial and ethnic minorities and/or poverty in the schools attended by Hispanic children may negatively affect achievement by constraining the development and value of school-based social capital and limiting the instructional resources available to students. Moreover, if the effect of school composition were to increase with time and generations in the United States, a result that would be consistent with the expectations of contemporary assimilation theory which emphasizes the importance of the social and economic contexts of reception, then the problems associated with school segregation are likely to worsen over time.

In addition to its significance for educational policy, the research here enhances our understanding of the incorporation process by estimating the effects of both race/ethnic and income composition on school success. Contemporary assimilation theory stresses the importance of the context of reception and barriers to upward mobility for shaping the incorporation patterns of immigrants (Portes and Zhou, 1993; Bean and Stevens, 2003; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001; Alba and Nee, 2003). However, it remains unclear which

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