

The Educational Fortunes of Children of Immigrants in France

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Translated from the French by Oliver Waine

How can the attainment gap between children of immigrants and children of native-born parents be explained? While some underline the role of an implausible “culture of origin”, Mathieu Ichou shows that differences in academic achievement are linked above all to social origin, and in particular to the social positions occupied by immigrant parents both in their host country and in their country of origin.

Despite many nuanced contributions from sociologists, the theme of academic failure among children of immigrants remains a familiar refrain in political and media discourse, often associated with the denunciation of the presumed shortcomings of immigrant families and their lack of “willingness to integrate”.¹ In France, for example, it is difficult to forget the words of a recent interior minister, who, using fabricated statistics, explained in May 2011 that “two thirds of cases of educational failure concern children of immigrants”.² This association between immigration and academic failure is just one of the many facets of the dominant vision of immigration as a social problem. However, viewing immigration as a phenomenon that “seems only to exist in terms of the problems that it creates for society” (Sayad 1991, p. 14), and, more particularly, reducing the educational trajectories of children of immigrants to their supposed academic failure is at best a partial view and at worst fallacious.

Looking beyond the “problem” of underachievement among children of immigrants: taking account of the diversity of their trajectories

It is true that, *on average*, the children of immigrants do less well at school than the children of native-born parents.³ These lower levels of achievement can be observed both in terms of educational attainment at primary and middle school and in the way students are guided when they make the move to high school:⁴ they are more often directed towards the least prestigious streams of the *baccalauréat* (high-school diploma), or indeed towards other kinds of qualifications. However,

¹ This text presents certain arguments developed in other publications (in particular Ichou 2013, 2014a).

² Original quotation in French: “Les deux tiers des échecs scolaires, c’est l’échec d’enfants d’immigrés.” See also, for example, the article by Philippe Jacqué in the 27 June 2011 edition of *Le Monde* (“L’Insee corrige Claude Guéant à propos de l’échec scolaire des enfants d’immigrés”)

³ For a review of the literature on this question, see Ichou and van Zanten 2014.

⁴ Translator’s note: in France, children attend *école maternelle* (nursery school/kindergarten) from ages 3–6 and *école élémentaire* (elementary school) from ages 6–11 (grades 1–5); collectively, this phase is known as *école primaire* (primary school). From ages 11–15 (grades 6–9), students attend *collège* (middle school), and from ages 15–18 (grades 10–12) typically continue their education in a *lycée* (high school), which may be general (catering to the majority of students), technical, or vocational. Each type of *lycée* offers several types of *baccalauréat* (France’s national high-school diploma, generally obtained at age 18), as well as other qualifications, notably in the case of vocational *lycées*. The *baccalauréat* is required to pursue university studies.

what particularly characterizes the educational trajectories of children of immigrants, more than academic failure, is diversity: significant differences in attainment exist between groups of different geographical origin. For example, children of Turkish immigrants tend to do noticeably less well at school than others; conversely, children of South-East Asian immigrants often achieve the best results. And for children whose parents were born in Portugal or the Maghreb region of North Africa, levels of attainment tend, on average, to be somewhere in the middle of the spectrum.⁵ But in addition to these differences *between* groups, the widest variations are actually observed *within* each of these groups. This marked educational heterogeneity among the “second generation” demonstrates the irrelevance and inadequacy of a homogenizing vision that indifferently tars all children of immigrants with the brush of educational failure.

Having established that this educational diversity exists, we must now ask what significance should be attached to it.

“Social origin” or “culture of origin”?

Since the 1960s, researchers have been accumulating empirical evidence of the influence of students’ social origin on their educational trajectories (Clerc 1964; Vallet and Caille 1996). Parents’ social position and the levels of economic and educational capital associated with this position are the primary source of attainment gaps between children of native-born parents and children of immigrants. To put it another way, “if foreign children are failing in our education system, it is not due to their condition as *foreigners* but above all to their condition as *labourers’ sons [sic]*” (Boulot and Boyzon-Fradet 1984, p. 1911). Indeed, children of immigrants are much more likely to have parents with low levels of economic and social capital than children of non-migrants, and it is for this reason that they fail more often at school. In a study now considered a classic, Vallet and Caille (1996) used multivariate statistical analyses to demonstrate that, “all other things being equal”, children of immigrants generally do not, in fact, do less well than children of native-born parents.

Nevertheless, the disparities in educational attainment between different groups do not completely disappear when we compare students from similar social backgrounds in France. For a given social milieu, children of Turkish immigrants still do less well than children of native-born parents, while children of South-East Asian immigrants do better (Ichou 2013, 2015; Brinbaum, Mogue rou and Primon 2015). The explanation for these attainment gaps cannot, therefore, lie solely in the social characteristics of families in France. The root cause is, in fact, to be found elsewhere, and more specifically in the society from which parents emigrated.⁶ Here, there are two possible interpretations: the first – the more simplistic of the two – consists in ascribing responsibility for the under- or overachievement of children of immigrants to their parents’ “culture of origin”; the Confucian values of South-East Asian immigrants, on the one hand, and the traditionalism and supposedly heightened religiosity of Turkish immigrants, on the other, offer ready-made explanations for the educational success or failure of children in these groups.

These apparently obvious culturalist explanations nevertheless have three fundamental flaws. First, they tend to dehistoricize the phenomena observed. The culturalist narratives surrounding the academic success of Asian Americans is a good example of the inability of these explanations to take account of these historic variations: the idea that “Confucian culture” is in some way superior

⁵ For example, according to the results of the *TeO (Trajectoires et Origines* – “Trajectories and Origins”) survey, among 18- to 35-year-olds, less than a third of children of Turkish immigrants had obtained the *baccalaur at*, compared with around half of children of Maghrebi or Portuguese immigrants and two thirds of children of South-East Asian immigrants (Brinbaum, Mogue rou and Primon 2015, p. 192).

⁶ Of course, in addition to the society of origin, other explanations for residual attainment gaps are also possible and deserve to be explored. In particular, we might consider explanations related partially or entirely to the way the education system itself operates, such as the effects of socioethnic segregation between schools and between classes, or the consequences of potential ethnoracial discrimination at school.

to other cultures struggles to explain why the educational and professional success of Asians in the United States is only a quite recent phenomenon in these groups' long history of migration to, and settlement in, the US (see, for example, Weinberg 1997, chap. 2; Louie 2001, p. 441). Second, approaches based on "cultures of origin" severely underestimate the importance of intergenerational changes. As Denys Cuhe – who has conducted a synthetic analysis of a large number of studies – points out, "if the notion of culture of origin, when scrutinized, is already on shaky ground, and ultimately not particularly useful, when it comes to considering the case of migrants *per se*, it should come as no surprise that using this same notion to explain situations relating to the children of these migrants, who were born in the host country, is completely inappropriate" (Cuhe 2010, p. 135). The third limitation of using "culture of origin" to explain differences in academic achievement is that such explanations produce a homogeneous representation of quite different groups (Appadurai 2005, pp. 43–45). Even if we set aside the fact that this homogenizing representation is applied primarily to minority groups, thus contributing to their stigmatization (Rea and Tripier 2003, p. 80), it still fails to take account of internal variations and hierarchies within each group that supposedly shares a given culture (Lamont and Small 2008, p. 79).

Broadening the definition of social origin: the importance of pre-migratory social characteristics

While explanations based on the notion of "culture of origin" have irredeemable flaws, this does not mean that there is no merit at all in examining the society that migrants leave behind. Abdelmalek Sayad demonstrated this clearly: "any study of migratory phenomena that neglects the conditions of origin of migrants is condemned to give only a *partial* and *ethnocentric* view of the migratory phenomenon" (1977, p. 59). One useful approach – based on the second of the two interpretations mentioned above – is to focus on the educational consequences of the social position and social resources of emigrants/immigrants and their families in the society of origin.

Certain researchers have shown, for instance, that the children of immigrants who do best at school generally have parents – and even grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins – who were better educated, lived in more urbanized areas, and had more economic resources than the majority of inhabitants of their country or region of birth (Zeroulou 1988; Santelli 2001; Laacher 2005; Ichou 2014a). In my own research (Ichou 2014b), I have shown that the provenance of immigrants' educational aptitudes and of those of their children are to be found essentially in, and in reference to, the society of origin. By comparing the relative social position of immigrant parents *in their country of origin* with the educational attainment of their children in France,⁷ it becomes clear that the "overachievement" of children of immigrants from South-East Asia and China in France is in large part linked to the fact that these migrants were more likely to have belonged to the most highly educated groups in their society of origin. Similarly, the relatively low level of education of Turkish immigrants with regard to their society of origin is directly associated with their children's low levels of educational attainment in the French education system.

The social position of immigrants in the society of origin influences the educational trajectories of their children in the host country via a number of processes. The educational success of parents themselves and, more generally, the family's educational history in the country of origin contribute to the intergenerational transmission of a specific approach to knowledge and to school that can be beneficial or detrimental to their children's education to varying degrees. Furthermore, a privileged pre-migratory social position is often at the root of specific educational and professional expectations that parents pass on to their children.

⁷ In addition to conducting a survey based on qualitative interviews, I was able to quantitatively identify certain pre-migratory characteristics of immigrants using data from the *TeO* survey (Ichou 2013). I was also able to reconstruct the relative educational positions of immigrant parents compared with the educational levels of the population in their country of origin using the Barro–Lee dataset (Ichou 2014a, 2015).

Educational inequalities and migration: “culture of origin” and class culture

In order to describe and explain the diversity of educational trajectories of children of immigrants, it is therefore necessary to break with two commonly held views: reducing their educational trajectories to academic failure, and explaining their trajectories in terms of their “culture of origin”. Studies of differences in educational trajectories according to students’ migratory origins must therefore under no circumstances be considered a substitute for analyses of educational inequalities as a function of social origin. Empirical studies show, on the contrary, the extent to which the educational aptitudes and trajectories of children of immigrants are linked to the social position and the resources of their parents, both in the country of origin and in the host country.

These observations do not mean it is necessary to proscribe the use of “culture” in explanations of educational trajectories. But, just as cultural capital designates cultural resources that are unevenly distributed among social groups (Bourdieu 1979), it is essential to situate the cultural practices and representations of immigrants within the wider social structure. Rather than being linked to some homogeneous and fixed culture of origin, it appears that the cultural practices of immigrants in France depend above all on their social group within their society of origin. From this perspective, we wholeheartedly recommend the recent work of two American sociologists (Lee et Zhou 2015), who show how the overachievement of children of Asian origin in the United States is the product of a *class culture* (specifically, that of the middle and upper classes in the society of origin from which many of those who migrate to the US have come), rather than a *culture of origin* uniformly shared by the whole population in the country of origin.

Aside from its inability to take account of the logics that produce disparities in educational success, explanations based on “culture of origin” share, along with “common-sense” discourse, the essentializing and stigmatizing effects of ascribing a presumed culture – sometimes considered superior but often described as deficient and backward – to immigrants and their descendants. This obviously does not mean that all reference to countries of origin should be avoided or ignored in discourse on migration and immigrants. However, it is only relevant to take account of such factors in contexts where migrants are situated – just as any sociologist would do for native-born individuals – within the social stratification of their societies of birth.

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To cite this article:

Mathieu Ichou, translated by Oliver Waine, "The Educational Fortunes of Children of Immigrants in France", *Metropolitiques*, 6 July 2018. URL: <https://www.metropolitiques.eu/The-Educational-Fortunes-of-Children-of-Immigrants-in-France.html>.