

Immigrant Kids May Need Some Help To Do Their Best At School

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One of Canada's great strengths in our globally competitive world is an educated population. Canada scores well in international student assessments of literary, numeracy and science, specifically on tests administered by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. The effectiveness of our education system has a direct impact on our economic performance. Research suggests a one-percent increase in the literacy rate yields a 1.5-per-cent increase in gross domestic product, which in Canada's case translates into more than \$20 billion of GDP growth.

Education is about more than money, of course, but its contribution to national economic well-being is hard to overstate. We need all students to realize their academic potential in order to ensure prosperity — theirs and ours.

However, a new paper by Shaljan Areepattamannil, a PhD candidate at Queen's University, raises some troubling questions that put the success of our schools, particularly when it comes to first-generation immigrant children, in doubt.

In his study, Areepattamannil found first-generation immigrant students performed below average on the 2007 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study and he sought to relate this result to the student's attitudes to math and science. While earlier research had confirmed that positive attitudes and higher levels of confidence were good predictors of academic achievement, Areepattamannil uncovered anomalies among the 2,636 students from British Columbia, Ontario and Quebec indicating that many were struggling despite these self-beliefs. In other words, there are other factors at play in their academic performance that need to be explored.

That immigrant students are struggling in our educational system may come as a surprise. Statistical evidence over the years has shown immigrants have more years of schooling than native-born Canadians, and they earn proportionally more university degrees. In fact, a study last year found that 88.3 per cent of young Chinese immigrants to Canada go to university, more than double the rate of Canadians as a whole.

Other studies have found that first and second-generation scores on OECD assessments are equal to the scores of the mainstream population (in Canada, second-generation scores are higher than those of the general population). Based on figures from the 2001 census, Statistics Canada reported that 4.3 per cent of boys who immigrated to Canada at age 11 or younger went on to receive postgraduate degrees, compared with 2.9 per cent of Canadian-born men.

If this new research has correctly identified a problem of first-generation immigrants failing to perform as well as they could, it should be addressed quickly.

As Areepattamannil points out, immigrant children are the fastestgrowing sector of Canada's children population, accounting for one in five schoolchildren. He argues that many of the parents of first-generation students come from countries where the educational systems emphasize rote memorization, which may explain to some degree their children's apparent disengagement from Canadian schools.

For the immigrant child (first or second generation), says a 2007 study by Lee Gunderson, professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia, being accepted socially at school is essential to academic adjustment. Perhaps, then, integration is at the root of the problem.

While researchers continue to look for answers, our schools must do whatever they can to help immigrant children achieve academic success.