Language, Acculturation, and Academic Performance among Children of Immigrant Families: A Review of the Literature

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Abstract

This review will discuss the extant literature on acculturation, language use and proficiency as it pertains to the academic performance of children of immigrant families in the United States. In particular, it will explore the different associations found between bilingualism and academic performance, compared to English dominance/monolingualism and academic achievement. Key findings from the research on bilingual education will be discussed as well. A summary of the limitations of the existing research will be presented. This review will conclude with a discussion of the “immigrant paradox” and recommendations for future research.
Language, Acculturation, and Academic Performance among Children of Immigrant Families: A Review of the Literature

High rates of immigration and the parallel growth of the Latino demographic are having a dramatic effect on the United States population. Because of these current trends, children of immigrant families have become the fastest growing segment of the US child population. Consequently, the number of Latino and Spanish speaking language minority children in US schools has increased dramatically and continues to rise.

The integration of immigrants is critical for the entire nation, and thus dependent upon the academic success of their children. It has been well documented that education is strongly positively correlated with a variety of socioeconomic, health and behavioral outcomes. The academic success of children of immigrants is a key policy issue, as how they perform in school is arguably a determinant of how this demographic will fare in our society. Therefore, it is necessary to know how children of immigrant families are performing academically. Furthermore, current research suggests a link between academic outcomes and acculturation. Thus, it is important to understand what effects, if any, adjusting to life in the US has on academic performance for children of immigrant families, and what factors impact educational achievement.

The Life Circumstances of Children of Immigrant Families

Children of immigrant families contend with a variety of challenges that may hinder their ability to do well in school (Kao, 1999). Specifically, they face certain problems that native-born children do not, such as learning a language-English-that their parents likely do not speak at home. Many also have parents who are undocumented which may subject them to certain hardships (Capps, et al., 2005). In addition, children of immigrant families are more likely to be poor: in 2003, 54 percent of children of immigrants lived in families with incomes below 200 percent of poverty, compared to 36 percent of children of non-immigrant families (Capps, et al., 2005). They are more than two times as likely to lack health insurance (Capps, et al., 2005, Shields, & Behrman, 2004), not to visit a health care provider on a regular basis (Brown et. al, 1999), and four times as likely to live in crowded housing (Shields, & Behrman, 2004). They are also less likely to be in center-based child care, which may limit their preparedness for formal schooling (Capps, et al., 2005).

In addition, children of immigrants tend to come from large families and have many siblings. Their parents generally have a low level of education and little knowledge of English, tend to be low-skilled and work in low-wage jobs, and have little understanding of and familiarity with this country’s most basic institutions, such as schools (Hernandez and Darke, 1999). Although most immigrant parents place tremendous value on education and have high hopes and expectations for their children, immigrant parents often are not very involved in their children’s education. Because of their lack of familiarity with the school system, immigrant parents frequently do not know what they can do to foster their children’s success in school (García Coll, et al., 2002). In addition, many do not believe that parents should be involved in education the way it is typically defined in the US, and thus do not participate in the standard parent involvement activities of white middle class families (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Okagaki, 2001; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Valdés, 1996). The challenges children of immigrant families face are exacerbated by the fact that they often lack adequate English language skills themselves and, because they tend to live in poor urban neighborhoods, attend large, segregated, inner-city schools with few well qualified and certified teachers, overcrowded classrooms, dilapidated facilities, and outdated curricula, where parent involvement is not just not encouraged but often explicitly discouraged (Nord & Griffin, 1999, Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix 2000). Furthermore, Limited English Proficient (LEP) children (primarily immigrants themselves or born in the US to immigrant parents) are a largely
segregated subpopulation—almost 70 percent of LEP students are enrolled in only 10 percent of US schools (Cosentino de Cohen, Deterding, & Clewell, 2005).

These realities pose certain liabilities for children and their development. Specifically, low levels of academic achievement are associated with many of the challenges children of immigrants face: poverty, low socioeconomic status, low levels of maternal education, and minority status (Alexander, Entwisle & Kabbani, 2001; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Gringlas & Weinraub, 1995; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; McLoyd, 1998). Although some research has found that not all children with such risk factors perform poorly in school (Finn & Rock, 1997), children of immigrants face obstacles to educational success.

**Acculturation**

In spite of the many risks they face, studies have found that children of immigrants are doing fairly well in school. Interestingly, the research has found a negative association between acculturation and academic performance, as well as other health and behavioral outcomes. According to Berry (Berry, et al., 1992), acculturation is a process that unfolds from contact between groups, and characterizes how a person responds to and orients him or herself to a changing cultural context. Acculturation is a process that results in certain socio-cultural adaptations, or the long term ways in which a person rearranges her/his life, and how well s/he can settle-down and manage day to day life in their new cultural context (Berry, et al., 1992, p.369-370). There are different acculturation types, for example, a person can assimilate, relinquish or not acquire the cultural practices, language, and behaviors of their country/family, or they can become bicultural, maintaining the language and culture of their family/country while learning the culture and language of the culture they are becoming part of. Sometimes, if acculturation is thought of as a linear process, “degree” of acculturation (i.e., “greater” or “more” acculturation”) is used to denote acculturation type, as an indicator of how “American” a person is, defined as how far removed they are from the culture of their country of origin. It is through the process of acculturation that immigrants adapt to life in a new country that is culturally dissimilar from where they or their families came.

Contrary to prevailing ideas of immigrant incorporation and traditional theories of assimilation, the studies reviewed in the following pages have found that, for some immigrant populations, those who are less acculturated often have more favorable educational outcomes than those who are more acculturated, and compared to native-born individuals of the same ethnic or national group as well as the white majority population. The research has also found a positive association between bilingualism and more positive academic, health and behavioral outcomes, indicating that bilingual/bicultural children are healthier, do better in school, and engage in fewer risky behaviors. This suggests that bilingualism/biculturalism functions as a protective factor that can offset some of the vulnerabilities immigrant children face, mitigate their negative effects, and shelter children against academic failure, such as doing poorly or dropping out of school, by providing them with tools that help them do better academically. However, there are differences among and within groups, and the processes/mechanisms through which these things unfold are not well understood.

**Language, Acculturation, and Academic Performance**

There is relatively little research on how immigrant children fare in school, particularly the second generation. In an early study, Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (1995) examined school attitudes among a diverse sample of Mexican origin adolescents (first generation Mexican immigrant, second generation Mexican-American¹) and white students. The study found some early indications that acculturation was associated with attitudes towards school, specifically that less acculturation is associated with more positive attitudes, which the research suggests are the foundation of future academic performance. They found that white students knew they had to
do well in school in order to have a fulfilling and stable future. However, compared to Mexican-origin students, they were more likely to be angry and frustrated about school, and displayed a high degree of ambivalence towards school and especially school authority figures. Mexican immigrant students had comparatively more positive attitudes towards school and school authorities than white students. They were also more appreciative of their opportunity for an education, believed school authority figures were fair and had respect for them, and expressed feelings of sadness and shame when they were disciplined because they felt they were letting their teachers down. Among first generation Mexican students, they found that students who were less acculturated—those who maintained more of the home culture and language—had a more positive attitude toward school and had higher educational expectations than their Mexican peers of the same generation who were more acculturated. As a group, some second generation Mexican-American students had the same attitudes as first generation Mexican immigrant students, whereas some had attitudes towards school like those of white students. The researchers suggested that this indicates a blend of attitudes reflective of their higher level of acculturation compared to the less acculturated first generation students, but that they are also not as acculturated as the white students.

In their longitudinal study of high school students, Kao & Tienda (1995) studied the relationship between generational status and academic performance among immigrant students. Using a nationally representative sample of 24,599 students in 1,052 randomly selected schools, they followed students from the eighth through twelfth grade to understand educational achievement (grades, test scores, college aspirations) and assess if it was associated with generational status and length of residency, which are proxies for acculturation. Their research found that students’ generational status had important consequences for academic performance. They also found that racial/ethnic differences in academic performance were relatively absent among the first generation, but became more important as length of residency increased with subsequent generations. Interestingly, they found that parents’ immigrant status had more of an influence on academic performance than the generational status of the child, although generational status could explain more of the variation in educational outcomes among Asian students than among white students or students of other minority groups. Although they found little difference in academic performance between first and second generation immigrant students, first and second generation students outperformed students of the third or higher generation. In other words, students who themselves or their families had been in the U.S. for shorter periods of time did better in school than those who had been here longer.

The findings of Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (1995) were supported by Rumbaut’s (1995) comparative study of students in the San Diego, California schools, which also found evidence of a negative association between greater acculturation (as measured by language) and academic performance. The study compared the academic performance of students of various national immigrant groups and white students and specifically examined the impact of language, namely English language proficiency, on academic outcomes. The study collected data on almost 80,000 high school students in their sophomore, junior and senior year in two cohorts during the 1986-1987 and 1989-1990 school years. More than a third of the sample was Latino, primarily of Mexican-origin (20%), and approximately 17 percent were Asian. Among Latino and Asian students 75 percent spoke a language other than English at home. The San Diego school district used an English language proficiency assessment tool to classify students as Limited English Proficient (LEP) or Fluent English Proficient (FEP). Rumbaut (1995) treated these classifications like the measures of bilingualism proposed by Peal and Lambert (1962), where FEP was equated with being a “balanced bilingual”, defined as someone who can effectively and competently communicate in two languages, and LEP was equated with being a “semi-bilingual,” defined as someone who knows one language much
better than the other and who does not communicate in the second language (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). These classifications were used to test for correlations between English language proficiency and various measures of academic performance (grade point average, standardized test scores and drop-out rates).

During the years of the study, the average cumulative grade point average (GPA) excluding physical education for all students was 2.11 out of 4, and for white students it was 2.24. However, both averages were surpassed by the GPAs of all Asian national groups in the study (Chinese students surpassed the average GPA by one full point). Importantly, they found that FEP students (also defined as fluent bilinguals in this study) did better than LEP and English monolingual students of the same ethnic group, as well as better than white majority students.

On tests of reading comprehension, English monolinguals tended to have the highest test scores, with white majority students performing the best. As Portes and Rumbaut (2006) state, “this result essentially confirms the validity of the linguistic classification of students by saying that those who are supposed to know English best actually do” (p.215). However, on standardized math tests FEP or fluent bilingual students had significantly higher scores than white majority, English monolingual, and lower performing bilingual students, for every national group in the study.

This study did not have a selection bias favoring students who remained in school (non- drop-outs), rather it included students who either dropped-out or left the district. Analyses of drop out rates in the San Diego school district for the 1989-1990 cohort found that Chinese language minority students had the lowest drop out rate. Furthermore, LEP students in every immigrant national group had a significantly higher drop-out risk than FEP students. Among Asian students, FEP students had significantly lower drop out rates than English monolinguals.

Although there were important differences among groups in Rumbaut’s (1995) work, being bilingual emerged as a protective factor. The study’s findings about language and academic performance support the idea that greater bilingualism (as opposed to limited bilingualism or English monolingualism) is an asset that can function as a protective factor for children of immigrant families and that more acculturation (loss of the home culture and language) can be a liability for immigrant children. As Rumbaut points out, this result provides support for the concept of “additive” rather than “subtractive” acculturation (p. 52), denoting when a cultural/linguistic resource is either maintained or lost, respectively, through the process of acculturation. The findings from Rumbaut also support the findings by Peal and Lambert (1992) in their study of French monolingual and English-French bilingual children in Montreal. In their influential and carefully controlled study of French monolinguals and balanced French-English bilingual ten-year-olds, they found that, when controlling for demographic factors and socioeconomic status, bilingual students performed significantly better than monolingual children on a battery of both verbal and non-verbal IQ tests. This little known research contradicted decades of heavily biased and methodologically unsound research on bilingualism (Peréa & García Coll, 2008; Portes & Rumbaut, 2006; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001).

Fuligni (1997) studied 1,100 sixth, eighth, and tenth graders of Latino, East Asian, Filipino, and European descent, focusing on the impact of family background, parent attitudes towards schooling, peer support, and adolescents’ attitudes and behaviors towards school and academic performance. The study found that first and second generation immigrant students out performed third generation immigrant students in math and English. These successes were achieved even though they were more likely to come from families where English was not the primary language. Although socioeconomic status was associated with performance in English and math, only a small portion of academic success was attributable to socioeconomic status. A more significant correlate was a strong emphasis on education that was shared.
by students, parents, and peers, although parent education and occupation accounted for only a small portion of children’s academic success. Ethnic background was also associated with academic performance: East Asian students had the highest grades and Latino students had the lowest. However, when controlling for ethnicity, foreign-born students performed significantly better than their third generation peers in both math and English. In addition, when controlling for ethnic background, he found that compared to their third generation peers, first generation children placed a higher value on their education, had higher educational aspirations and expectations, and reported feeling higher expectations and aspirations from their parents.

The study findings are contrary to theories that low socioeconomic status places students at greater risk for doing poorly in school. Portes and MacLeod (1999), expanded on existing research by looking closely at how parents’ socioeconomic status, human capital factors and modes of immigrant incorporation influence academic achievement among second generation immigrant students. They found that, after controlling for parental education, language, skills (human capital), and family structure (social networks), differences in academic achievement across students of different national groups disappeared. However, after controlling for group differences in the context of reception and immigration history, differences in academic performance among children of different national groups were evident. Results indicated that socioeconomic status could only partially predict academic performance, in which case children of immigrants are no different from peers with US-born parents.

The Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS) is the largest study of immigrant children to date, specifically second generation immigrant youth. The CILS sampled over 5,000 children and their families, and was based primarily on a series of surveys with children and their parents between 1992 and 1996. The CILS looked at diverse national groups, and focused on second generation children of immigrants from Cuba, Nicaragua, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Trinidad, Mexico, Vietnam, the Philippines, Cambodia, and Laos. This is different from many earlier studies which had looked at only a handful of pan-ethnic groups, such as “Latino” and “Asian,” as opposed to distinct national groups. The study is the most comprehensive study of the immigrant second generation to date, and attempted to cover numerous intertwined issues. Portes and Rumbaut (2001) used the CILS for a longitudinal study of second generation immigrant teens in the Miami and San Diego metro areas. They sought to understand the collective influence of immigrant incorporation, immigrant status, parent education, socioeconomic status, and of multiple contexts (the home/family, school, community) on development, specifically academic outcomes.

One of the many strengths of this research is that it was designed to look at different national groups comparatively, for example, how Vietnamese and Cuban students fair in Miami compared to each other, as well as individually in order to understand the observed academic outcomes relative to the particular realities and unique characteristics of each group. Their study’s underlying theory is one of segmented assimilation and acculturation, a theory that proposes that there is not one, but various immigrant experiences and outcomes that depend on where immigrants come from and how they are received in this country (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001, Portes and Zhou, 1993). Segmented assimilation and acculturation is based on the understanding that acculturation is not a uniform or linear process, and that immigrants and their children adjust to life in the US using different strategies and following different paths. As Portes & Rumbaut (2001) state, “the process [of acculturation] is subject to too many contingencies and affected by too many variables to render the image of a relatively uniform and straightforward path credible. Instead, the present second generation is better defined as undergoing a process of segmented assimilation where outcomes vary across immigrant minorities and where rapid integration and acceptance into the American mainstream represent just one possible solution” (p.45).
Many interesting findings emerged from the CILS, one being that children who had been in this country for a longer period of time were less motivated toward school. With regard to language, they found substantial evidence that greater acculturation is associated with poorer academic outcomes, specifically that bilingualism functioned as a protective factor for children from immigrant families. The research found that loss of the home/family language was strongly associated with cultural dissonance, namely increased parent-child conflict, which was found to have a consistently strong, negative effect on academic achievement. The data also showed that although children of immigrant families were doing fairly well in school and that greater acculturation led to greater English language proficiency- usually an unquestioned good thing- it also led to less effort in school and lower grades. The authors propose that as second generation children increasingly acculturate to U.S. culture, losing the home/family language and culture, they gradually lose their drive to achieve in school, resulting in lower grades.

Portes and Rumbaut (2001) found that increased length of residency and acculturation type (assimilated/English only; bilingual/bicultural) profoundly influence children’s academic performance. In contrast to prevailing strategies of forced assimilation, such as English immersion programs in schools, they offer “selective acculturation” as an alternative. Forced assimilation “forces” children to acquire a new language, namely English, by prohibiting them from using their first language in the classroom and by placing them in classrooms where the teacher only teaches in English. In many so-called English immersion programs, teachers may not use the native language at even a bare minimum to support children in their learning and as they transition to schooling in a language that they do not know. Thus, in immersion programs children are “immersed” in English and forced to assimilate by (1) acquiring English and (2) being prevented from maintaining the home language. Selective acculturation entails the exact opposite of assimilation as an acculturation strategy, namely maintenance of the home culture and language, while learning English and the dominant American culture. In essence, Portes and Rumbaut suggest that biculturalism/bilingualism as an appropriate acculturation strategy for second generation children of immigrant families. They make this recommendation based on the many benefits of preservation of the home/family language and culture they found in their research, and the liabilities associated with assimilation to the US and loss of the home/family language and culture. Specifically, they found that selective acculturation, which is intertwined with fluent bilingualism, is associated with higher academic and occupational aspirations and expectations, better academic outcomes, greater self-esteem, and less parent-child conflict.

In a supplement to CILS study findings in 2001, Portes and Hao (2004) analyzed the school contextual effects of the CILS data. Using a hierarchical model of contextual and individual level effects on academic achievement and school attrition, they studied 5,266 second generation children who were originally interviewed during the 1992–1993 school year when they were in the 8th and 9th grades. Consistent with earlier studies of the CILS and other research, the study found that longer periods of US residency had a negative effect on academic performance regardless of school context. Although this research did not examine language specifically, the findings are consistent with previous studies of the effects of greater acculturation. As the researchers posit, “this result points to the influence of acculturation in bringing down the initial achievement drive among immigrant youths to the level predominant among native-parentage students” (p.11926).

Using 1990 Census data, Feliciano (2001) examined language use, the language spoken in the home, the presence of immigrants in the household, and school drop-out rates among Vietnamese, Korean, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Chinese, Filipino, and Japanese youths age 18-21 to determine if maintenance of the parents’ immigrant culture was beneficial or detrimental to academic attainment (a white comparison group was included as well). The study’s
The key finding was that bilingualism/biculturalism as well as exposure to the parents’ immigrant culture did not increase the probability that youth in any of the immigrant groups would drop out of school. The study found that the effect of language and the proportion of foreign born persons in the home were all significant predictors of academic attainment when controlling for sex, age, and socioeconomic status. Overall, youths living in homes where everyone was an immigrant were about half as likely to drop out as those in households where everyone was born in the US. Most importantly, youth who spoke English only were 43 percent more likely to drop out than bilinguals, and those in homes where everyone was bilingual were half as likely to drop out of school compared to youth living in homes with no bilingual persons. Similar to previous studies, the results indicate that youth who have acculturated while maintaining ties to the home language and culture, those who speak English very well but live in bilingual immigrant households, are the least likely to drop out of school. These findings suggest that those youth who can have tap into both the mainstream and home culture are the most successful academically.

The negative effect of increased length of residency on academic performance is also evident in a recent study that found differences among children with foreign born and US-born parents. Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Pong and Hao (2007) examined neighborhood and school level effects on achievement among adolescent youth from immigrant families of different ethnicities and nativities. In a study of 17,262 youth in 127 schools in grades 7 and 8, of whom 4,271 were children of immigrants, researchers studied 1600 Latino and 792 Asian youth of diverse ethnic groups (Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Chinese and Filipino), in the first, second, and pre-school generations (the preschool generation was defined as those who immigrated to the US before the age of six), in addition to non-Hispanic whites and blacks. Using hierarchical models, results indicated that the overall socioeconomic status of the neighborhood had a positive effect on GPA, however further analysis revealed that the association existed among immigrants’ children, but not among the children of US born parents. Family socioeconomic status was found to be highly predictive of GPA among the children of US born parents, as well as among immigrants’ children, although to a lesser degree. Overall, the first and preschool generations were found to have a higher GPA than second generation children. Differences in family background, as well as neighborhood and school conditions did not explain the advantage of foreign birth. Second generation Latinos were found to have far lower GPAs than non-Hispanic whites, whereas second generation Chinese were found to have higher grades than non-Hispanic whites. Furthermore, second generation children who did not speak English or Spanish at home, so those who spoke native Chinese and Filipino languages had superior performance compared to their English speaking peers. However, speaking Spanish was related to lower GPA in children of immigrants but not among children of natives.

The Pong and Hao (2007) study show that there are generational differences among and within diverse pan-ethnic groups in this country, which are associated with academic performance. Furthermore, the results indicate that the effects of Spanish language usage on academic performance differ depending on generational status among Latino adolescents. The study raises important questions, and points to the importance of examining contexts beyond the family in order to understand key outcomes such as academic performance. Importantly, the study demonstrates the need for within group studies of children of different generations to better understand how these dynamics might unfold over time as children grow up and with greater length of residency in this country.

Although most studies to date have found a positive association between bilingualism/biculturalism and academic performance, and a negative association between greater acculturation (assimilation)/speaking English only and performance in school, some studies have had mixed results. In their study of sixty ninth grade Mexican origin students in the three high schools in a southwestern US school...
district, Lopez et al. (2002) examined the impact of acculturation and social support on academic achievement, as measured by grade point average (GPA). Only students who identified as Mexican origin were included in the study. Although the study found that the degree of acculturation was not associated with academic performance, the results indicated that the type of acculturation (e.g., bicultural, assimilated) was significantly related to achievement. The researchers hypothesized that this mixed finding might have resulted from the use of poor measures, specifically that the measures used were not fine enough to capture the variability within degree of acculturation, and that a more comprehensive and inclusive measure of acculturation that accounted for variations in cultural norms and values might be needed. In sum, the results indicated that bicultural students tended to have higher levels of academic achievement. This is consistent with previous studies as the results indicate that youth who perform better in school are those who adopt the behaviors and values of the dominant culture needed in school while maintaining the home/family culture and language. Girls were found to have higher GPAs and, perhaps most interestingly, the boys overall were slightly more acculturated. Thus, these results suggest a gender-by-acculturation interaction for grades.

**Bilingual Education**

There is growing evidence that maintenance of the home/family language may be an asset to children of immigrant families and may lead to higher levels of academic performance, findings that are supported by research in bilingual education. Research on bilingual education is conducted primarily to determine whether or not instruction in the native language facilitates English language learning and long-term academic achievement. One of the major problems with bilingual education research, however, is the number of diverse programs and practices which fall under the rubric of bilingual education. There are about as many successful programs as there are those that are riddled with various problems (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 1997). Although the evidence provides more support for bilingual education than it does against it, the research has not proved conclusively the superiority of bilingual education over monolingual English education for all children in all contexts (Crawford, 2000, p.84). Although research has not identified a single effective bilingual education program for English Language Learner (ELL) students, studies suggest there are perhaps various different methods and types of programs that are and would be successful in educating ELL students so that they learn English and succeed academically.

What is clear, however, is that one-year of English instruction is generally insufficient to adequately prepare ELL students to succeed in English-only classrooms (Ma, 2002; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). No study has found that English immersion is necessarily better, but various studies indicate that well-designed and implemented bilingual programs result in higher levels of academic achievement for ELL students, and that ELL students in these types of programs have test scores equal to or above those of their native English speaking peers (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 1997; Green, 1997; Ma, 2002; Thomas & Collier, 1997 and 2001; Willig 1985). Although Baker & de Kanter (1983) and Rossell & Baker (1996) sought to study transitional bilingual education (TBE) programs, or compare TBE and English only or English immersion programs, these poorly designed studies were widely critiqued for having numerous flaws, primarily the inconsistent criteria used to select studies and its poor labeling of programs (Cummins, 1992; Stritikus, 2002; Stritikus & Manyak, 2000).

The research on second language acquisition suggests that the best predictor of English language achievement is skill in the first language, in that skills developed in the first language facilitate development of the second language (Thomas & Collier, 1997, 2001; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). In addition, use of a language other than English, either at home or at school, does not inhibit the development of English language skills. As August & Hakuta conclude in their review of bilingualism and second language learning
sponsored by the National Research Council: “the use of a child’s native language does not impede the acquisition of English,” and effective schools for ELL students include “some use of the native language and culture in the instruction of language-minority students” (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 1997). In their review, they found that bilingual education programs produce better results than English immersion programs on key outcome variables. There is no significant evidence showing that bilingual programs impede the academic achievement of ELL students (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 1997; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Furthermore, research indicates that it takes between two and eight years for ELL students to attain English fluency (Ma, 2002), and five years for ELLs to attain English language skills and academic achievement levels equal to their native English speaking peers (Thomas and Collier, 1997).

The findings from bilingual education support research on immigrant children and academic outcomes. Research in both areas has found evidence that maintenance of the home/family language is associated with higher levels of academic achievement. Research from bilingual education offers some evidence that the longer the native language is maintained as ELL students learn English, the better they will do in school.

**Limitations of Existing Research**

The research on immigrants and acculturation to date has been primarily conducted with adolescents and adults, and studies of academic performance among immigrant children have focused exclusively on adolescents. Middle childhood is a historically understudied developmental period, and with one exception, there exists no other research on pre-adolescent immigrant children. The one exception is the study Children of Immigrants: Development in Context (CIDC) (García Coll, et al., 2002; García Coll, Szalacha, & Palacios, 2005; García Coll and Marks, forthcoming), the first study of its kind to study immigrant children during middle childhood and in particular explore questions about acculturation, language, culture, and their impact on academic outcomes.

It is likely that what happens during middle childhood can set children on certain trajectories, and some evidence suggest that academic performance in the elementary grades can predict academic performance in adolescence. Using data from the study CIDC, Peréa and colleagues (2006) found that elementary school GPA was highly predictive of academic outcomes in high school for Dominican and Cambodian adolescents, although there were differences between the two immigrant groups. In general, analyses showed that children who were doing well or excelling in elementary school were likely to be doing well in high school, and children who were underperforming or at risk for academic failure in the upper elementary grades (grades four to six) were likely to be doing poorly in high school. Research has found that infancy and early childhood are critical periods in human development and what happens during that time can have huge and to some extent irreversible consequences for development, and health and well being later in life (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2000); and it is likely that what happens during middle childhood can have an equally profound impact. As Huston and Ripke (2006) argue: “although the preschool years establish the base for future development, experiences in middle childhood can sustain, magnify, or reverse the advantages or disadvantages that children acquire in the preschool years. At the same time, middle childhood is a pathway to adolescence, setting trajectories that are not easily changed later” (p.2) Knowing and understanding what happens during middle childhood can perhaps shed light on adolescent phenomena as well as academic outcomes during youth.

**Conclusion**

The research to date presents substantial evidence of a strong association between acculturation and
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academic outcomes. Importantly, the research has found a negative effect on academic outcomes with greater levels of acculturation, or with assimilation to U.S. culture. Studies indicate that with more acculturation—greater length of residency and/or greater use of English—grades tend to decrease; or the more assimilated children are, the poorer their academic outcomes. These studies have observed more optimal outcomes in less-acculturated children than in white majority children or more acculturated children of the same immigrant, national, or pan-ethnic group. The process of acculturation, particularly assimilation—notably greater use of English coupled with loss of the home/family language—seems to lead to poorer academic outcomes among children of immigrant families. Conversely, maintenance of the home/family culture and language seems to function as a protective factor for immigrant children, which is associated with better outcomes. In short, contrary to dominant beliefs, the more Americanized children of immigrant families are, the poorer their academic outcomes. These findings are important because they are in conflict with traditional, prevailing theories of immigrant incorporation and assimilation; theories which state that immigrants who are more acculturated, those who speak English and adopt “American” cultural ways, will have better educational, health, behavioral and socioeconomic outcomes.

These highly provocative and controversial findings have been termed the “immigrant paradox.” The immigrant paradox refers to the counterintuitive finding that more recent and less acculturated immigrants have more optimal educational, health, and behavioral outcomes than more acculturated immigrants, or than would be expected given their low socioeconomic status and other risk factors present. This is difficult to understand because as people acculturate to life in the US they tend to use more English, develop social networks and acquire social capital, and earn more money, factors that are associated with higher levels of academic achievement. Thus, the immigrant paradox is the phenomenon that foreign birth and less acculturation appears to be a protective factor, and that increased length of residency/subsequent generations and greater acculturation and use of English is associated with a variety of negative educational, health, and behavioral indicators.

Overall, the evidence suggests that immigrants lose something over time in this country, and that this is associated with various measures of health and well being with greater levels of acculturation. Research is needed to understand how and why this occurs, as well as how early in the life span it can be identified. In addition, there are profound differences among and within groups—no one model can fit all immigrant, minority, linguistic, national, or racial/ethnic groups. However, most research that has studied racial/ethnic minority groups has used a comparative approach, and there is limited understanding about how the particular realities and characteristics of distinct ethnic groups shape development and academic performance. Furthermore, the studies discussed point to the complexity of acculturation as a construct, the difficulty in measuring it, and the need to develop more accurate measures that can perhaps be tailored for study with distinct groups. Thus, there is a need for studies that employ within-group designs (Phinney & Landin, 1998), which would allow for the study of individual groups on their own terms, instead of compared to their similarities and differences from other groups.
Endnotes

1. The first generation refers to foreign-born children who immigrated to the U.S. with their parents, and the second-generation refers to children born in the U.S. to immigrant parents.

2. In Transitional Bilingual Education programs English Language Learner student have some degree of instruction in the native/first language (L1) for a determined period of time. The goal is transition to English-only instruction as quickly as possible.
References


