EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENTS AND STUDY PATTERNS OF IMMIGRANTS FROM THE FORMER SOVIET UNION IN ISRAELI SECONDARY SCHOOLS*

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ABSTRACT

In the 1990s, nearly one million immigrants from the former Soviet Union immigrated to Israel, increasing Israel's population by about 10%. These immigrants were generally well educated, but lacked economic means. The purpose of the current study is to expand on the field of immigrant integration in the host society by examining the educational outcomes among the recently-arrived immigrant students from the FSU in comparison with native Israeli students. The sample consisted of 35,794 students, who were Israeli-born or who had immigrated from the FSU since 1990 and who were enrolled in tenth grade during any of the years 1992-94. Two main findings arose from the study. *Firstly,* immigrants' *educational achievement* tended to be polarized. Recently-arrived immigrant students proved more likely than native Israelis to drop out of school, but were also more likely to be eligible for an advanced matriculation certificate. *Secondly*, their *study patterns* were characterized by high levels of educational segregation by fields of study: they were more inclined to attend vocational tracks and to study science and technology than Israeli-born students. It can be supposed that immigrants, who were economically disadvantaged, tended to prefer educational tracks which they expected would provide their offspring with an immediate economic safety net.

INTRODUCTION

For several decades now, economically advanced societies have been receiving large immigration waves from Eastern European countries. In the decades following the disintegration of the USSR, some eight or nine million immigrants left the Former Soviet Union (FSU) and have settled in Israel, North America and Western Europe (Fialkova and Yelenevskaya 2007). Although most of them arrived with slight economic means, their educational attainments were quite high. About 40% held post-secondary degrees and were employed as professionals prior to emigrating, while less than six percent were unskilled workers. This immigration wave resembles other immigrant groups who were poor on arrival but were well educated, such as Sikhs and several East Asian groups (Basran and Bolarla 2003; Portes and Rumbaut 2001).

The purpose of the current study is to expand on the field of immigrant integration in the host society by examining the educational outcomes among the recently-arrived immigrant youth from the FSU. According to the literature, among the main influencing factors on the educational outcomes are parental education and economic background (Chang 2005; Gang and Zimmermann 2003). The segmented assimilation theory predicts that adaptation, including adaptation at school, is contingent on the socioeconomic background of the family of origin and place of birth (Portes and Zhou 1993). While the local students and veteran immigrants are characterised by a high correlation between the parental education and the economical background, immigrant students, especially during the first period of adaptation, may suffer from the higher proportion of mismatching between the parental education and the family economic background.

The case of immigration from the FSU provides researchers with an unusual opportunity to examine the influence of an educated but poor immigration wave on the educational outcomes of their offspring. It can be supposed that FSU immigrants have moved primarily to improve their economic level. Therefore they

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will presumably tend to choose for their offspring educational tracks or majors that have a potential to afford them an economic safety net. These immigrants will also tend to choose majors that do not require a high level of fluency in the language of the place.

In this study I ask the following two questions:

- Whether the educational achievements and the patterns of study are impacted by the FSU immigrants' unique characteristics?
- In case of the positive response to the question above: Does this process create migration segregation by fields of study, namely the tendency of immigrants and non-immigrants to study in different fields?

Examining immigrants' educational achievements as well as their patterns of study during the first period of absorption will promote planning of appropriate educational policies concerning the newly arrived immigrant students. Thus this research has significant political and economic implications as it has a potential to alleviate ethnic and social inequality not only in education, but also in other areas of life such as the labour market.

RECENT IMMIGRATION FROM THE FORMER SOVIET UNION TO ISRAEL

The recent mass immigration to Israel from the FSU began in September 1989. By the late 1990s, approximately 830,000 people had immigrated, increasing Israel's population by about 10%. About 20% of the immigrants were children and adolescents aged 18 years or younger, and by the mid-1990s, about 10% of all Israeli school students were immigrants. In addition to its impressive scope, immigration from the FSU had two additional important characteristics: very few of these immigrants came with significant economic means; and a very high percentage of adult immigrants held academic degrees (Sicron 1998). In the early 1990s, the proportion of FSU immigrant families in Israel below the poverty threshold (before transfer payments) was about 40%, more than double the figure in the Israeli-born population (Leshem and Sicron 1998; Sicron 1998), whereas about 50% of FSU immigrants held post-secondary degrees compared with 20% of Israeli-born people (Sicron 1998).

In the 1990s, Israel's immigration policy adopted a "cultural pluralism" model, which recognizes and encourages the preservation of cultural differences between immigrant groups (Horowitz 1998). According to this policy, immigrants were dispatched with a modest amount of money to fend for themselves in the various markets (real estate market, labour market, and the social services) where they could implement their integration into Israeli society according to their individual or group preferences and priorities (Lissitsa 2006). In Israel, as elsewhere, housing is more expensive in the large urban centers, so many immigrants sought affordable housing in either peripheral communities or in the poorer neighbourhoods surrounding the urban centers (Horowitz 1998). This geographic distribution also affected the distribution of immigrant students among schools in the country: a significant number of immigrant students ended up in some peripheral communities where the educational level was much lower than in the centre of the country.

In addition, although the state of Israel had anticipated a massive wave of migration from the FSU, the Ministry of Education had not devised any specific absorption policy (Sever 2002). On the top level, the Ministry delegated the task of immigrant absorption to a fairly marginal unit, which was entirely unprepared to tackle the great immigration of the 1990s (Sever 2002).

ISRAELI SECONDARY SCHOOLS

In most Israeli communities schooling begins with pre-school (compulsory education from age five), followed by six years of primary education, three years of middle school and three years of high school, concluding at age eighteen. Compulsory education extends to age 16 (tenth grade for most on-track students) but over 90% of the Israeli-born students continue to twelfth grade.

High school consists of two academic tracks as well as a vocational track. In the former, students are prepared for the national matriculation exams; these are administered nationally and graded anonymously. Passing these exams is a prerequisite for admission to universities and most colleges, so the matriculation certificate is an important stage in the educational and occupational selection process. It largely determines whether a student will be able to pursue higher education and become a professional or a manager, or will join the working class.

The vocational track trains most students in a profession and prepares them for the work which does not require further academic study. These students usually have lower scholastic achievements and are mostly from the lower social strata.

The academic and vocational tracks differ in the variety of subjects offered. In addition to the compulsory subjects in all tracks (English, math, Bible, history, literature, and Hebrew or Arabic), students must study several elective subjects. In the academic track they may choose among courses in social sciences, humanities, and natural sciences. In the vocational track, elective studies are available primarily in technological fields such as electronics and technology, and in office-related fields such as bookkeeping. Most courses may be taken at low (1–2 units), intermediate (3 units), or high level (4+ units).

Universities require applicants to have taken English at an advanced level; the university admission system gives preference to the students who have taken several advanced-level courses. Some departments may also require their applicants to have completed advanced science courses.

DATA AND VARIABLES

DATA

I employed a data set which merged students' secondary school records from the Ministry of Education with their household records in the population census, held in 1995[1]. I analyzed the data for 35,794 students who were Israeli-born or who had immigrated from the FSU since 1990 and who were enrolled in tenth grade during any of the years 1992-94. More than 80% of these immigrant students arrived during the 1990-91 years. Therefore on average, immigrant students have been in Israel for two-three years by the time they studied at the tenth grade (see Table 1).

VARIABLES

The first dependent variable is study patterns among students. This variable relates to both educational tracks and to chosen subjects and their difficulty level as measured by the number of units taken by the student.

The second dependent variable of the study is educational achievement in the high school. It is operationalized as a four-category classification of students' mode of high school completion. The categories are (1) an advanced matriculation certificate. This category contains students who met all the requirements of a matriculation certificate, and who passed both Mathematics and English at advanced levels. This category represents high achievement at high school; (2) a standard matriculation certificate, which does not include both Mathematics and English at advanced levels (but may include one of them at an advanced level); (3) high school graduation (completion of 12 years of study) without a matriculation certificate; (4) dropping out before completing 12 years of study.

The study's four independent variables are *Student's origin* (Israeli-born students and students who immigrated from the FSU after 1990 [all other immigrants are excluded from the analysis]); *Gender* (girls and boys); *Parental education:* parental education refers to the distinction of whether at least one parent has an academic degree or not; *Living standard:* this variable counts the number of durable goods owned by the student's family at the time of the census. The census questionnaire elicited information on the possession of several household durable goods, such as a VCR, a washing machine and a dryer, as well as the number of cars at the family's disposal. The values of this variable range from 0 to 14 items. If the data about any item is missing, the average standard of living of the group to which the student belongs (immigrant or Israeli- born) is used.

METHODS

To answer the two central questions of the current study, (1) whether the educational achievements and the patterns of study are impacted by the immigrants' unique characteristics; (2) and if they are, does this process affect the tendency of FSU immigrants and Israeli-born students to study in different fields. Here, a descriptive analysis of the educational achievements and the patterns of study among these two groups was used[2].

FINDINGS

SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

TABLE 1: SES characteristics of FSU immigrant and Israeli-born students

	ISRAELI-BORN	FSU IMMIGRANTS
N	33,370	2,424
%	93.2	6.8
% of an academic degree among parents	22.5	60.1
Mean living standard	5.5	3.5
% living on periphery	35.0	46.2
% immigrants who arrived by 1991 (inclusive)	–	82.2

As shown in Table 1, the ratio of FSU immigrants among tenth graders in 1992-94 was about 6.8%, of whom 85% had immigrated before 1992. FSU immigrant and Israeli-born students differed significantly in socio-demographics. Among the parents of immigrant students about 61% had an academic degree, as opposed to 22% for parents of Israeli-born students. But FSU immigrants' living standard was lower than that of their Israeli-born peers: 3.5 versus 5.5 items. More than 46.2% of FSU immigrant students lived in peripheral areas, whereas less than 35.0% Israeli-born students did. These data are consistent with the research literature (Leshem and Sicron 1998).

STUDY PATTERNS

As shown in Table 2, a higher proportion of FSU immigrants attended vocational tracks (50.4%) than did their Israeli-born peers (42.4%). Among girls, however, the gap was smaller than among boys: 5.2% versus 10.2%. The

TABLE 2: Study patterns of FSU immigrant and Israeli-born students

	ISRAELI-BORN			FSU IMMIGRANTS		
	TOTAL	GIRLS	BOYS	TOTAL	GIRLS	BOYS
% on vocational track	42.4	39.1	45.9	50.4	44.3	56.8
Average number of science units in matriculation	3.5	3.3	3.8	4.1	4.0	4.2
Average number of technological units in matriculation	5.6	5.0	6.3	6.9	6.0	7.9
Average number of humanities units in matriculation	11.8	13.0	10.5	10.3	11.8	8.7
% dropouts	6.5	3.9	9.2	15.9	11.2	20.1
% owning matriculation certificate	48.2	52.7	43.6	52.2	54.7	49.6
% twelfth-grade students owning matriculation certificate	51.6	54.8	47.9	61.9	62.0	61.7

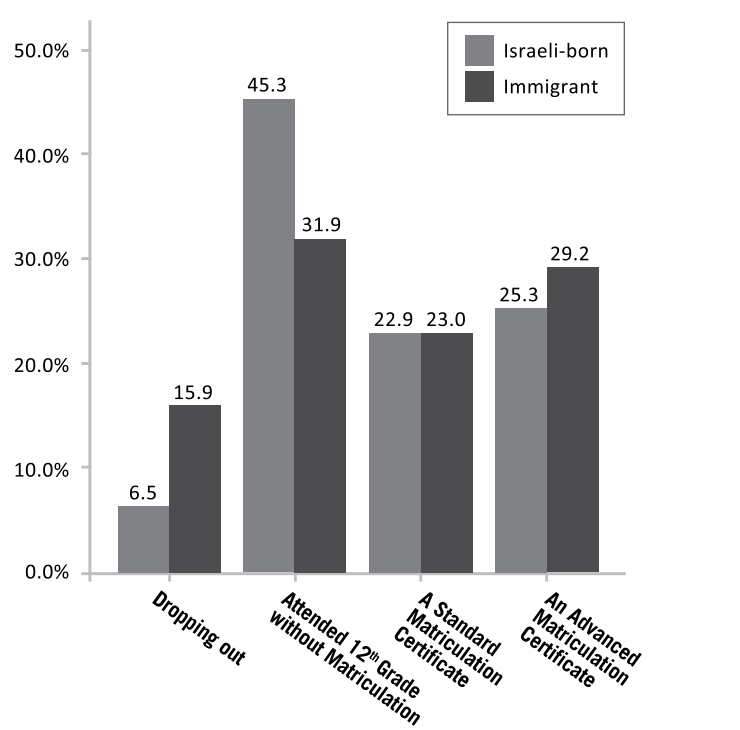
differences between FSU immigrant and Israeli-born students in study patterns were manifest also in the school subjects they chose. FSU immigrants tended to focus on technological and scientific subjects and not on humanities. For example, FSU immigrant students took on average 4.1 units of science subjects and 6.9 units of technological subjects, compared with 3.5 and 5.6 units respectively taken by native Israeli students. By contrast, FSU immigrant students took on average 10.3 units of humanities, as opposed to 11.8 units taken by Israeli-born students.

EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENTS

The percentage of FSU immigrants out of all high school students was estimated at 6.8% (see Table 1). However, among twelfth graders, this percentage dropped to 6.1% , owing to a higher dropout rate among the FSU immigrants compared with their Israeli peers: 15.9% as against 6.5% (see Table 2). Despite this high dropout rate, the percentage of FSU immigrant students eligible for a matriculation certificate out of all high school students (including dropouts) was higher than that of Israeli-born students: 52.2% as against 48.2%. The differences between Israeli-born students and FSU immigrant students were even more prominent in the rates of eligibility for matriculation certificate if we consider twelfth graders only: 61.9% as against 51.6% (see Table 2).

As seen in Figure 1, educational achievements of immigrant students were polarized. That is, FSU immigrant high school students tended to drop out (15.9% versus 6.5%) more than native Israeli students, but

FIGURE 1: Educational achievements of FSU immigrant and Israeli-born Students



more of the former owned an advanced matriculation certificate (29.2% versus 25.2%) that included study units in English and in Mathematics at the advanced placement level. In contrast, the Israeli-born students were concentrated in the center of the educational distribution, in

TABLE 3: Proportion of an Academic Degree among Parents and the Average Living Standard by Educational Achievements

EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENTS	AVERAGE LIVING STANDARD		% OF AN ACADEMIC DEGREE AMONG PARENTS	
	ISRAELI-BORN	FSU IMMIGRANTS	ISRAELI-BORN	FSU IMMIGRANTS
Dropping out	4.3	3.1	9.5	35.3
Attended twelfth grade without matriculation certificate	4.9	3.2	12.2	50.0
A standard matriculation certificate	5.7	3.4	22.1	63.6
An advanced matriculation certificate	6.4	4.1	43.3	83.0

the second and third categories (attending twelfth grade without having matriculation certificate or having a "standard" matriculation certificate only).

Table 3 presents the proportion of students who have at least one parent who held an academic degree as well as the mean living standard by educational achievements both among FSU immigrant and Israeli-born students. One can see the same trend among the two groups (FSU immigrant and Israeli-born students): parental and living standard level correlated positively with an educational attainment of the students; the higher the parental education is and the higher the living standard are, the more likely it is that a student will have an advanced matriculation certificate and the less likely he or she will be to drop out of high school. Moreover, among the Israeli-born high school dropouts, the ratio of parents who held at least one academic degree was less than 10%, whereas the FSU immigrant students' parents, it was more than 35%. In contrast, an average living standard among the Israeli-born high school dropouts was 4.3, whereas among the same group for the FSU immigrant students it was 3.4.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

TWO MAIN FINDINGS ARISE FROM THE STUDY

First, the FSU immigrant students during the first year of absorption proved more likely than the Israeli-born students to drop out of school, but also more likely to possess a better matriculation certificate. One explanation for this appears to be the dual situation in which immigrant students found themselves: as immigrants they had to cope with adaptation problems, involving all kinds of social ills; here, the lack of educational policy probably made the situation worse. Yet many immigrant students had educated parents, and were themselves motivated and able to do well at school. These two conflicting factors tended to polarize the community of young immigrants: some dropped out early while others excelled at school.

Secondly, the FSU immigrant and the Israeli-born students differed in their study patterns. The former inclined more to vocational tracks than did the latter. The FSU immigrant students also tended to study more science and technology subjects and fewer humanities. This finding is consistent with my theoretical considerations that immigrants, who were economically disadvantaged, tended to choose educational tracks that they expected would furnish them with an economic safety net. These tracks furthermore did not require a high level of fluency in Hebrew, which most immigrants lacked.

In sum, these results bore out Portes and Zhou's (1993) segmented assimilation theory, which implied diversity of educational achievement by immigrant students as a body, and also segregation between them and native students in fields of study. Moreover, the study findings emphasized that the FSU immigrant students whose parents had higher levels of education, but lacked economic resources tended to be found in higher rates among high school dropouts. Even the immigrant students with higher educational background, but with fewer economic resources, may belong to a vulnerable educational group. In other words, high educational background is a necessary but not sufficient condition for students' success. Thus, the educational policy that supports and enhances educational learning with regard to the recent immigrant students is of paramount importance for the successful educational absorption.

LES RÉSULTATS ET LE CHEMINEMENT SCOLAIRES DES IMMIGRANTS DE L'EX-UNION SOVIÉTIQUE DANS LES ÉCOLES SECONDAIRES D'ISRAËL[1]

Depuis plusieurs décennies, les sociétés avancées économiquement accueillent d'importantes vagues d'immigration en provenance d'Europe de l'Est. Au cours des décennies suivant la dissolution de l'URSS, de huit à neuf millions d'immigrants ont quitté l'ex-URSS pour s'établir en Israël, en Amérique du Nord et en Europe de l'Ouest (Fialkova et Yelenevskaya 2007). Dans les années 1990, près d'un million d'habitants de l'ex-URSS ont immigré en Israël, augmentant la population du pays d'environ 10%. Généralement, ces immigrants étaient éduqués, mais disposaient de peu de moyens financiers. Ils se sont donc installés dans des habitations de piètre qualité, en périphérie. Bien que l'État d'Israël avait prévu l'arrivée massive d'immigrants en provenance de l'ex-URSS, le ministère de l'Éducation n'avait pas mis au point de politique particulière d'intégration (Sever 2002). Au niveau supérieur, le Ministère a délégué la tâche de l'intégration des immigrants à un service plutôt marginal qui n'était absolument pas prêt à gérer l'immense flot d'immigrants des années 1990 (Sever 2002).

Dans la présente étude, notre objectif est d'approfondir notre connaissance de l'intégration des immigrants dans la société hôte en étudiant les résultats scolaires des jeunes immigrants récemment arrivés de l'ex-URSS.

D'après la littérature, la scolarité des parents et le statut socioéconomique (SES) sont parmi les principaux facteurs influençant les résultats scolaires (Chang 2005; Gang et Zimmermann 2003). Selon la théorie de l'assimilation segmentée, l'adaptation, y compris l'adaptation scolaire, dépend du SES de la famille d'origine et du lieu de naissance (Portes et Zhou 1993). Alors que les élèves originaires du pays et les immigrants de longue date présentent une corrélation élevée entre l'éducation des parents et le SES, les jeunes d'immigration récente, particulièrement au cours des premières années d'adaptation, peuvent être désavantagés en raison du pourcentage élevé de mauvais assortiments entre l'éducation des parents et le SES de la famille.

Le cas des immigrants de l'ex-URSS offre une occasion exceptionnelle aux chercheurs d'étudier l'influence qu'ont eue des parents d'une vague d'immigration pauvre mais éduquée sur les résultats scolaires de leurs enfants. On peut supposer que les immigrants de l'ex-URSS ont quitté leur pays principalement pour améliorer leur statut économique. Ils auront donc tendance à choisir pour leurs enfants des parcours scolaires qui auront le potentiel de leur procurer un filet de sécurité économique. Ces immigrants auront également tendance à choisir des domaines d'études qui n'exigent pas un niveau élevé de compétence dans la langue du pays.

Dans cette étude, nous posons les questions suivantes :

1. Le cheminement et les résultats scolaires sont-ils influencés par les caractéristiques particulières des immigrants de l'ex-URSS?
2. Si la réponse à la question 1) est « oui », ce processus crée-t-il une ségrégation migratoire par champs d'études, autrement dit, les immigrants et les non-immigrants ont-ils tendance à étudier dans des domaines différents?

Nous avons utilisé des données fusionnant les dossiers des élèves du secondaire du ministère de l'Éducation et les dossiers du recensement de 1995[2] portant sur leur foyer. Nous avons analysé les données de 35 794 élèves nés en Israël ou qui avaient immigré de l'ex-URSS depuis 1990 et qui étaient inscrits en 10e année au cours des années 1992 à 1994. Plus de 80 % de ces élèves immigrants sont arrivés en 1990-1991. Donc, en moyenne, les élèves immigrants étaient en Israël depuis deux ou trois ans au moment où ils ont fait leur 10e année.

DEUX CONSTATS RESSORTENT DE L'ÉTUDE

D'abord, au cours de la première année d'intégration, les élèves immigrants de l'ex-URSS risquent davantage que leurs camarades nés en Israël de décrocher de l'école, mais ils ont également plus de chances d'avoir un meilleur certificat d'immatriculation. On peut expliquer ceci par la situation double dans laquelle se trouvent les élèves immigrants : en tant qu'immigrants ils ont à surmonter des problèmes d'adaptation impliquant toutes sortes de difficultés sociales; ici, l'absence de politiques en matière d'éducation a probablement empiré la situation. Toutefois, plusieurs élèves immigrants ont des parents éduqués et sont eux-mêmes motivés et aptes à bien réussir en classe. Ces deux facteurs opposés tendent à polariser la population des jeunes immigrants : certains décrochent rapidement alors que d'autres ont d'excellents résultats.

Deuxièmement, les immigrants de l'ex-URSS et les élèves nés en Israël ont des cheminements scolaires différents. Les premiers choisissent davantage les secteurs professionnels que les deuxièmes. Les élèves immigrants de l'ex-URSS ont également davantage tendance à choisir des matières scientifiques ou technologiques au détriment des sciences humaines. Ce constat confirme nos considérations théoriques voulant que les immigrants, désavantagés du point de vue économique, aient tendance à choisir des domaines d'étude qui, espèrent-ils, leur fourniront un filet de sécurité. Par ailleurs, comme nous l'avons supposé, ces domaines n'exigent pas une connaissance approfondie de l'hébreu, que la plupart des immigrants ne maîtrisent pas.

En résumé, ces résultats confirment la théorie de l'assimilation segmentée de Portes et Zhou (1993) suggérant que les élèves immigrants en tant que groupe auront un ensemble varié de résultats scolaires et qu'il existe une ségrégation entre eux et les élèves natifs du pays selon les domaines d'étude. En outre, les résultats de l'étude montrent que les élèves immigrants de l'ex-URSS dont les parents avaient un niveau d'éducation élevé, mais qui n'avaient pas les ressources financières nécessaires, se trouvaient en fortes proportions parmi les décrocheurs de l'école secondaire. Même les élèves immigrants dont les parents sont très éduqués, mais qui ont peu de ressources financières, peuvent appartenir à un groupe d'élèves vulnérables. Autrement dit, il est nécessaire d'avoir un niveau de scolarité élevé, mais ce n'est pas une condition suffisante pour assurer la réussite des élèves. Il est donc crucial de mettre sur pied une politique éducative qui appuiera et permettra d'améliorer l'apprentissage des élèves d'immigration récente pour assurer leur intégration dans le système scolaire.

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NOTES

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[2] En 2009, le nouveau recensement de la population a été effectué par CBS, mais les données n'étaient pas encore diffusées au grand public. Par conséquent, l'étude n'a pas pu examiner les changements dans les résultats scolaires des élèves immigrants survenus dans le temps.

FOOTNOTES

[1] In 2009 the new population census was conducted by CBS, however the data was not available for public release. Consequently this study was not able to examine the change in the educational achievements occurred among the immigrant students over time.

[2] I also run the multivariate analysis. The findings from this analysis repeated the descriptive results.