UNDERSTANDING DIVERSE IMMIGRANT STUDENTS' TRAJECTORIES IN AMERICAN SCHOOLS[1]

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ABSTRACT

Using a five-year longitudinal, mixed-methods approach, varying academic trajectories of newcomer immigrant students from diverse settings were identified. While some newcomer students performed at high or improving levels over time, others showed diminishing performance. Significant group differences in academic trajectories emerged, particularly between the high achieving youth and the other groups. Consistent with ecological-developmental theory, *School Characteristics* (a-school segregation rate, b-school poverty rate, and c-student perceptions of school violence), *Family Characteristics* (a-maternal education, b-parental employment, and c-household structure), and *Individual Characteristics* (a-academic English proficiency, b-academic engagement, c-psychological symptoms, d-gender, and e-psychological symptoms) were associated with different trajectories of academic performance. Analyses of 75 case studies triangulated many of the quantitative findings and illuminated patterns not detected in the quantitative data. The study shed light on the cumulative developmental challenges immigrant students face as they adjust to their new educational setting.

While some immigrant youth are remarkably successful, all too many struggle to succeed in the educational system, performing poorly on such academic indicators as grades, achievement tests, dropout rates, and college attendance (Gándara & Contreras, 2008). In particular, newcomer students who arrive sometime during their secondary education must surmount the formidable barriers of adjusting to their new land (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008), while concurrently developing their academic new-language skills (Carhill, Suárez-Orozco, & Páez, 2008) and accruing graduation requirements (Ruíz-de-Velasco, Fix, & Clewell, 2001) in a high-stakes testing environment oblivious to the needs of second language learners (Hood, 2003; Menken, 2008). Moreover, their parents are often ill-equipped to help them navigate a complex, foreign, and sometimes hostile educational system (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008). Consequently, for many immigrants, length of residence in the United States is associated with declining academic aspirations (Hernández & Charney, 1998; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001.) Such academic declines are particularly troubling when we consider the rapidly growing proportion of immigrant-origin youth in the North American educational system.

Approximately half of these newcomer students arrive sometime during their secondary education (Ruíz-de-Velasco, et al., 2001) – a time identified as being one of heightened developmental vulnerability (Eccles & Roeser 2003). The middle and high schools they encounter are often ill-equipped to address the needs of these early adolescent newcomers, leaving them "overlooked and under-served" (Ruíz-de-Velasco, et al., 2001, p 1). In a knowledge-intensive economy in which the stakes of school failure are greater than ever before (Bloom, 2004), deepening our understanding of the processes that contribute to trajectories of academic success and failure has clear social implications.

STUDY OVERVIEW

An ecological (Brofenbrenner & Morris, 1998) perspective – arguing that human behavioral development is shaped by family and school environment – informed the conceptual framing of this study. Quantitative methodological strategies were used to describe trajectories of performance over time and to delineate associations between indicators of family capital, school characteristics, and individual characteristics to academic trajectories. We deepened our under-

standing of academic trajectories of performance by using a complementary qualitative methodological strategy (Hammersley, 1992) that made use of interviews, ethnographic observations, school records, and multiple case studies. Mixing methods allowed us to determine trends and uncover unanticipated causal links, which quantitative data do not reveal, shedding light on the developmental and interactional processes at play (Yin, 2003). This mixed-methods approach allowed us to rely on several points of view – students, their parents, and school data – and deepened our understanding of the ecological challenges newcomer adolescent youth encounter as they enter American schools *(see Suárez-Orozco, Gaytán, Bang, Pakes, & Rhodes, 2010 for more detail about the methodological approach).*

The data reported here were derived from the Longitudinal Immigration Student Adaptation (LISA) study (Suárez-Orozco, et al., 2008), a five-year longitudinal study that used interdisciplinary and comparative approaches in order to document patterns of adaptation among 407[2] recently-arrived immigrant youth from Central America, China, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Mexico. Students were recruited from seven school districts in regions of Boston and San Francisco areas with high densities of newcomer immigrant students.[3] Students were interviewed annually and parents were interviewed at the beginning and then again five years later at the end of the study. In the third year of the study we selected 75 students evenly distributed by country of origin (15 participants in each) who represented a range of academic engagement profiles for case study research. These students were selected based upon an examination of school records and ethnographic observations by the research assistants, with an eye to capturing a range of patterns of school engagement and performance across country-of-origin groups analyses of the case studies. Representative cases will be presented in this text to illustrate the findings *(for more details on the specific case studies presented here as well as several other case studies for each trajectory of performance, see Suárez-Orozco* et al.*, 2008).*

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The aims of this study were to identify the varying academic trajectories of recently arrived immigrant students and then describe family, school, and individual contextual factors associated with membership to the different trajectories. We found five distinct trajectories of performance for the newcomer students *(see Suárez-Orozco,* et al.*, 2008 for details).*

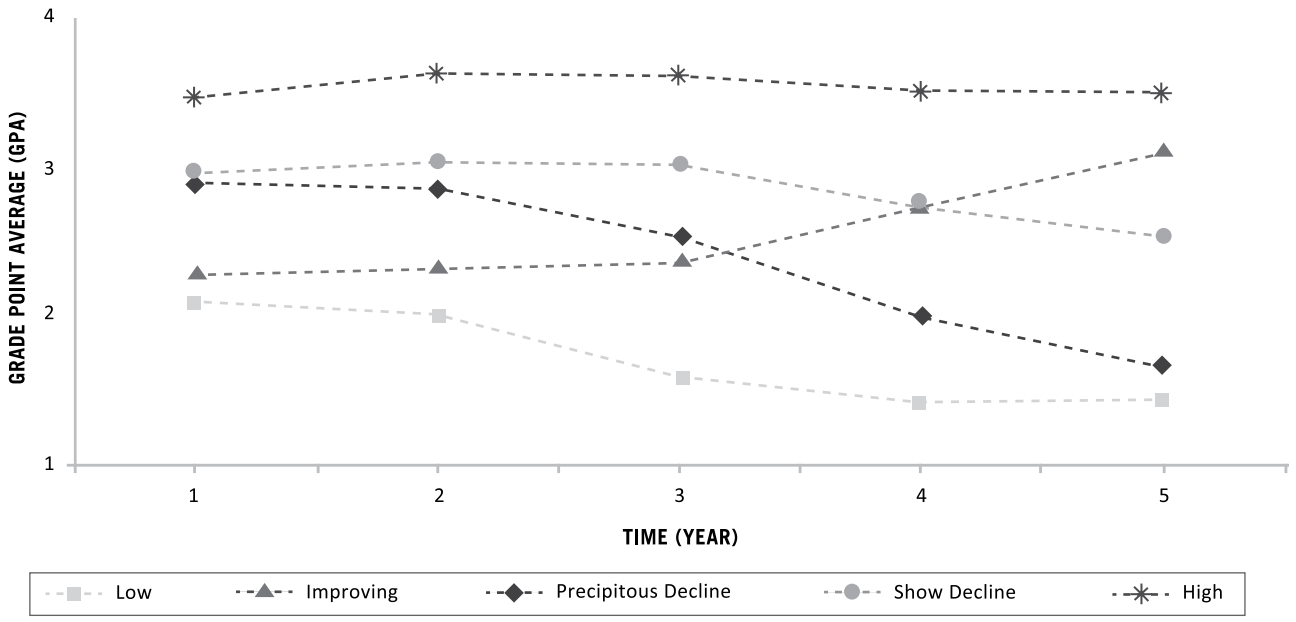
We examined the contributing role of several family capital factors, school characteristics, and individual characteristics using multinomial logistic regressions and multiple case study approaches *(see Suárez-Orozco,* et al.*, 2010 for details).* These analyses established factors distinguishing trajectories including: having two adults in the household, school segregation and school poverty, student's perceptions of school violence, academic English proficiency, reported psychological symptoms, gender, and being over-aged for grade. The multiple case study approach (Yin, 2003) triangulated and validated many of these quantitative findings. The multiple case study approach "capture[d] the complexity of the experiences" (Foster & Kalil, 2007, p. 831) across school and home contexts, allowing us to make cross-case conclusions, and revealed patterns that did not emerge simply from the descriptive data nor from the multinomial regressions.

Approximately a quarter of the participants did remarkably well academically. These *High Achievers* started out as high performers and maintained high achievement through the course of the 5 years of the study. High Achievers demonstrated predictable advantages in family capital and family structure associated with academic achievement (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Madaus & Clarke, 1998). Relative to the other groups, High Achievers attended schools that were the least segregated and had the fewest students qualifying for free lunch. They had the strongest English language skills and were the most engaged in their studies.

The academic performance of nearly two-thirds of the sample declined over the course of the study. Approximately a quarter of the participants were *Slow Decliners,* demonstrating a waning in performance of approximately a half of a grade over 5 years. The analyses of our multiple-case studies data set allowed us to code for unanticipated patterns, which revealed that in many cases, a premature transition into a demanding academic setting led to a downward trend in grades. Often we would see a newcomer student put in a Herculean effort in a fairly sheltered setting, one that was not particularly demanding academically, and achieve high grades in that setting. After two or three years students would then be transferred into a more demanding academic setting. However, they did not necessarily have the requisite academic English skills in place and received little in the way of social or academic supports while making that transition. This academic context would lead to a drop in grades as well as a highly stressful academic voyage. Some young people swam against these strong currents, eventually getting to the other side, but others had trouble sustaining the energies it took to do so (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008).

More alarming was the grade and a half drop that *Precipitous Decliners* (who comprised 27.8 percent of the sample) experienced. The multinomial logistic regressions indicate that these students struggled with multiple school and background impediments. They attended low

FIGURE 1: GPA performance trajectories



quality schools and had poor English language proficiency. In addition, Precipitous Decliners were the most likely of all the groups to report psychological symptoms both at the beginning and end of the study – clearly, these issues took their toll. The case studies revealed that many of these students had difficult pre-migratory histories (hardship abroad and long separations from parents) and arrived to complicated circumstances (difficult reunifications, less than optimal neighborhoods and schools) once they arrived to their new land. Students who were initially engaged in their school work had difficulty maintaining this engagement for long in far from optimal and often hostile school environments (Suárez-Orozco, et al., 2008). Few had adult supports or academic models, though they sometimes had active social lives with peers. Although the majority of Precipitous Decliners arrived with great hopes and dreams, they could not sustain them in the face of cumulative adversity.

Another 14.4 percent of our participants – the *Low Performers* started out with low performance and declined further over time. Low achieving students tended to arrive to their new land with a series of significant challenges. The quantitative data showed that these students had families with the least resources. Their English skills were weak, and they admitted to the least academic engagement, which distinguished them from all of the other trajectories. Their low engagement was not surprising given that school segregation and poverty, indicators of poor quality schools, also separated them from all of the other performance trajectories. The multiple case study analyses added further insights into the role of interrupted schooling, lengthy family separations, undocumented status, and barren social worlds in the poor academic performance of these youth. The Low Achievers simply never found their academic bearings and found the lure of work both economically more viable and a salve to their egos. In the illustrative case study of León, we see how a multitude of negative circumstances leads to compromised academic opportunities.

The remaining 11 percent of the students – the *Improvers* – started out quite low but over the course of time, overcame their initial acculturation stress and reached nearly the same levels of achievement as the *High Achievers.* With these participants, the quantitative data revealed that they tended to be more engaged and attend less problematic schools than their counterparts who precipitously declined or who achieved poorly. The multiple case studies, however, provided evidence that there were other distinguishing patterns among these newcomers. Many had sustained some sort of pre-migratory trauma. They had undergone long family separations and problematic initial family reunifications. To their advantage, they tended to settle into schools that provided them a healthy fit with their developmental needs (Eccles & Roeser 1993). Over time, many found mentors and

community supports that guided them in their journeys in their new land, and who arguably contributed to their academic engagement (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008).

Overall, students with the most school, familial, and individual resources tended to perform better academically over time. The *High Achievers* often demonstrated a constellation of advantages: they started out as high performers and maintained high achievement throughout the five-years of the study. On the other hand, the *Low Performers* started out with low performance and declined further over time, unable to engage in school given the myriad of risk factors. The *Precipitous Decliners* started out doing better in school than their *Low Achieving* peers but after struggling with multiple school and background impediments, appeared unable to sustain the effort over the course of time. *Improvers,* on the other hand, faced initial challenges but had enough environmental supports that, over the course of time, allowed them to overcome their initial "transplant shock."

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In some ways these patterns of findings are consistent with findings among non-immigrant students.

- Families with limited resources often enter our poorest school systems, which have the very least to offer the students most in need of support. Thus, the poor performance of Low Performers and Precipitous Decliners can in part be attributed to the particularly poor quality of the schools they attended, which did little to foster engagement in their students and possibly motivated transfers to other schools, augmenting their academic risk (Eccles et al., 1993; Orfield & Lee, 2006).
- The pattern of *Slow Decliners* is typical of this age group as they make transitions through middle and high schools; the academic demands of high school are greater than those middle school, the distractions of puberty increase, and the social supports from adults tend to lessen (Alspaugh, 1998). Our findings also show how premature transitions into new academic settings without sufficient supports place newcomers at risk of declining performance despite great efforts on their part.
- Consistent with previous findings in other populations, girls demonstrated better educational outcomes than boys both initially and over time (Conchas & Noguera, 2004; Suárez-Orozco & Qin-Hilliard, 2004). Girls were more likely to report interpersonal relationships in school that bolstered their engagement and persistence in the face of academic frustration (López, 2003; Suárez-Orozco & Qin-Hilliard, 2004).
- School engagement was related to higher academic performance (Fredricks et al., 2004; Greenwood et al., 2002), as has been found in other school populations. The effort required to do well in school – regular attendance, completing homework assignments, being able to express and understand the language – were related to high academic performance over time.
- As with other populations, students who reported greater psychological distress were at greater risk for academic decline (Blechman et al., 1986; Ripple & Luthar, 2000). Addressing the psychological needs of students would help them to better attend to their studies.

OTHER RISK FACTORS WERE MORE UNIQUE TO THE IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE

Family Separations. The issue of parental separations as a result of migration is an issue very specific to the immigrant youth experience (Suárez-Orozco, Todorova, & Louie, 2002). For a variety of reasons – the high cost of migration, the difficulty establishing stable work and living conditions in the new land, and inefficient (at best) or draconian (at worst) immigration policies – a majority of immigrant children experienced separations from their parents of a prolonged nature lasting anywhere from 6 months to nearly their entire childhood as part of the migratory process. Our analysis of parental separations revealed complicated relationships between various dimensions of the separation experience and resulting academic trajectories. The presence of a maternal separation in the child's immigration history is negatively associated with academic trajectory: students who have experienced separation from their mothers were more likely to be Precipitous Decliners or Slow Decliners than Higher Performers. This was also the case for separations from the father. Furthermore, the longer the separation from the father the greater the negative effect on academic trajectories. Our national policies should work to minimize protracted family separations, which currently too often extend across half a childhood. Once reunifications occur, family community and counseling supports should be provided to ease the transition.

School Changes. In addition to their immigrant transition, we found that early adolescent newcomers must cope with what has been established to be extremely disruptive to academic performance: school changes. Participants changed schools two or three times in the course of the five years; thus, multiple school transitions proved to be a norm and placed them at risk for academic decline (Mehana, & Reynolds, 2004). Families should be counseled about the implications of school transitions, as parents may not be aware of its effects on their children's academic performance. A system of national school records should be developed to allow records to follow students in a streamlined manner across school and district sites. Assessment for appropriate placement and transitional tutoring would also serve to minimize the transitional academic wear and tear on students.

Second Language Acquisition. It has been well established that 4 to 7 years of *optimal academic instruction* are generally required for students to develop academic second language skills comparative to native English speakers (Cummins, 1991; Hakuta, Butler, & Witt 2000). Unfortunately, instead many newcomers enter highly segregated, high poverty, linguistically isolated schools (Orfield and Lee 2006) that provide far from optimal conditions. Thus, struggles in language are well presented in LISA data: only 7 percent of the sample had developed academic English skills comparable to those of their native-born English-speaking peers after an average of 7 years in the U.S (Carhill, Suárez-Orozco, & Páez, 2008; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008). The case studies revealed that in many cases, newcomer immigrant children have almost no meaningful contact with English-speaking peers. Indeed, more than a third of the immigrant students in the LISA study reported that they had little opportunity to interact with peers who were not from their country of origin, which no doubt contributed to their linguistically isolated state (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008). When English learners are not able to participate and compete in mainstream classrooms, they often read more slowly than native speakers, do not understand double entendres, and simply are not exposed to the same words and cultural information of native-born middle-class peers. Their academic language skills may also prevent them from being easily engaged in academic contexts, and to perform well on "objective" assessments that are designed for native English speakers. It is not surprising that children with limited English proficiency were likely to evidence lower trajectories of performance. Thus, students should be provided the second language learning supports they need for sufficient time to allow them to catch up with their native speaking monolingual peers. They should not be assessed on high stakes tests designed for monolingual peers until they have had adequate time to develop their academic new-language skills. They should be assessed on content rather than new language knowledge in academic courses. While they are acquiring their new language skills, they should be provided with academically engaging and rigorous course materials so that they will not fall behind their native-speaking peers but be provided tutoring and support as they attain their new language skills.

Unauthorized Status. Because this was a longitudinal study and it was important to us not to compromise our participants' trust, we never directly asked about citizenship status as part of our data collection. Thus, this was not a variable available to us for our quantitative analyses. Over the course of the study, however, many of our participants confided to us their worries about their precarious unauthorized status. Particularly for the Low and Precipitous achievers, the case studies revealed that the students' sense of being unable to participate in this society and their hopelessness about their ability to continue on to college and work at anything but the lowest echelons of the service and underground economies contributed to their academic disengagement in palpable ways. Having students who are second-class members of society living in the shadows is a serious issue that receiving societies must squarely face. If left unaddressed, the negative implications over time for both the students and society are clear.

COMPRENDRE LES DIFFÉRENTS CHEMINEMENTS DES ÉLÈVES IMMIGRANTS DANS LES ÉCOLES AMÉRICAINES

Les élèves immigrants qui arrivent au milieu de leur cheminement scolaire doivent relever d'importants défis tout en s'adaptant à leur nouveau pays (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco et Todorova, 2008). Ils doivent se familiariser avec un nouveau système scolaire, acquérir des compétences académiques en anglais et remplir les exigences pour obtenir leur diplôme (Ruíz-de-Velasco, Fix, et Clewell, 2001). De plus, leurs parents sont souvent mal outillés pour les aider à se débrouiller dans un système scolaire étranger, complexe et parfois hostile. Ces élèves sont soumis au stress de la migration (Suárez-Orozco et Suárez-Orozco, 2001), ce qui les place en situation de risque au niveau scolaire. Près de la moitié des élèves nouveaux venus arrivent au milieu de leurs études dans des écoles secondaires souvent mal équipées pour répondre à leurs besoins. Par conséquent, plusieurs élèves sont « négligés et mal servis » (Ruiz-de-Velasco et coll., 2001:1).

Cette étude, basée sur des données longitudinales sur de jeunes immigrants, a deux objectifs : 1-comprendre les différents cheminements scolaires des nouveaux venus d'origine immigrante et 2-examiner comment les variables individuelles, familiales et scolaires contribuent aux différentes trajectoires d'adaptation.

Nous avons recruté 407 participants (dont 53 % de filles) récemment arrivés d'Amérique centrale, de Chine, de République dominicaine, d'Haïti et du Mexique, dans la région de Boston et de San Francisco. Les participants étaient âgés de 9 à 14 ans au début de l'étude (M = 11,7 ans). De façon significative, les Haïtiens étaient plus jeunes de un an que les Dominicains et les Chinois. Tous les participants n'avaient pas passé plus d'un tiers de leur vie aux États-Unis (M = 1,93 an). À l'an 5 de l'étude, il restait 309 élèves : 72 Chinois, 60 Dominicains,

57 Centre-Américains, 50 Haïtiens, 70 Mexicains) soit un taux d'attrition annuelle de 5%. L'échantillon actuel comporte 282 élèves pour lesquels nous avons les bulletins (notre variable dépendante) des cinq années.

Les élèves ont été recrutés dans une cinquantaine d'écoles de sept secteurs représentatifs des milieux d'accueil des nouveaux venus de chaque origine. Nous avons rencontré les élèves en entrevue chaque année, pendant ou après l'école. Les entrevues avec les parents se sont déroulées au domicile des participants. Des assistants de recherche bilingues ont procédé à toutes les entrevues individuelles, dans la langue préférée des participants.

Les données obtenues des écoles comprenaient le pourcentage d'élèves non-blancs fréquentant l'école; le pourcentage d'élèves de l'école recevant un repas gratuit ou à coût réduit et les données du bulletin. *Les données obtenues des élèves* incluaient : leur perception sur la violence à l'école, leur implication scolaire; leurs compétences en anglais (BVAT), leurs résultats au WJTA-R (Woodcock- Johnson Tests of Achievement—Revised) et leurs symptômes psychologiques. *Les données obtenues des parents* incluaient la scolarité de la mère, l'emploi du père et des renseignements sur les séparations familiales.

Les données quantifiables révèlent que même si certains élèves immigrants obtiennent de bons résultats scolaires ou s'améliorent, dans le temps, d'autres ont des résultats qui faiblissent. Parmi les facteurs influençant le cheminement scolaire, on trouve : la scolarité de la mère, la présence de deux adultes à la maison, l'absence de séparation familiale, la ségrégation et la pauvreté scolaire, l'implication scolaire et les symptômes psychologiques. De nombreuses études de cas approfondies ont révélé de nouveaux renseignements pour lesquels nous n'avions pas de données exhaustives (événements traumatisants, statut de sans-papiers, émergence d'un mentor informel) ainsi que les processus développementaux et interactionnels en jeu.

Les élèves bénéficiant des meilleures ressources scolaires, familiales et individuelles obtiennent de meilleurs résultats scolaires dans le temps que les élèves moins avantagés. Les élèves forts présentent souvent un ensemble d'avantages alors que les élèves faibles qui commencent souvent par des résultats faibles qui déclinent dans le temps sont incapables de s'impliquer dans leurs études étant donné les nombreux facteurs de risque qu'ils présentent. Par contre, les élèves dont les résultats s'améliorent dans le temps font face à des défis initiaux, mais ont assez de soutien pour surmonter le choc initial de la transplantation.

D'une certaine manière, ces constatations s'appliquent également aux non-immigrants. Le déclin des résultats est typique des élèves de cet âge, à mesure qu'ils traversent les différents niveaux de l'école secondaire. L'école et les transitions développementales ainsi que le travail scolaire plus exigeant préparent souvent le terrain pour un déclin normatif dans le temps. Les élèves fréquentant des écoles faibles présentent un risque accru. Toutefois, les familles d'immigration récente dont les ressources sont limitées fréquentent souvent les écoles les plus pauvres qui ont très peu à offrir aux élèves qui ont pourtant besoin d'un grand soutien. On peut donc attribuer leurs faibles résultats à la mauvaise qualité des écoles qu'ils fréquentent.

Comme dans tous les groupes, les filles réussissent mieux que les garçons, initialement et dans le temps. Les élèves vivant une grande détresse psychologique risquent de voir leurs résultats décliner. Les jeunes qui connaissent un déclin scolaire rapide risquent de présenter plusieurs symptômes d'ordre psychologique. En outre, l'implication scolaire est généralement liée à de bons résultats scolaires. Les efforts nécessaires pour réussir—fréquenter assidûment l'école, faire ses devoirs, bien s'exprimer et comprendre la langue—sont liés à de bons résultats scolaires dans le temps.

Les nouveaux arrivants font face à deux défis particuliers : la séparation familiale et l'apprentissage de la langue. Pour plusieurs raisons—le coût élevé de la migration, la difficulté de trouver un travail stable et de s'établir dans un nouveau pays et les politiques d'immigration au mieux, inefficaces, au pire, draconiennes—la plupart des enfants immigrants sont séparés de leurs parents pendant des périodes s'échelonnant de six mois à l'enfance tout entière, pendant le processus migratoire. Pour un enfant, le fait d'avoir vécu une séparation pendant son processus migratoire est associé à un cheminement scolaire négatif. C'est également le cas des élèves ayant des difficultés en anglais, car cela les empêche de maintenir leur implication ou de bien réussir des évaluations « objectives » conçues pour des anglophones de naissance.

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FOOTNOTES

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[2] By the end of the 5 year study there were 309 participants in the study. The multinomial regressions were conducted on the 287 participants for who we had complete data.

[3] We do not claim that this sample is representative of the entire immigrant population in the United States, as it was not randomly generated all across the country. As participants were recruited from public schools, it would not be inclusive of middle and upper status families who send their children to private or parochial schools. We are confident, however, that it is representative of immigrant youth from these five sending regions attending public schools in the Boston and San Francisco areas.