



Educational Aspirations and Realities for the Children of Immigrants in France and the United States

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The integration of immigrant groups is an important issue in both the United States and Europe. Educational results for the children of immigrants – the group scholars call the “second generation” – are important indicators of whether immigrants can become fully part of their new home societies. Consequently, it is important for scholars to understand the aspirations and achievements of immigrant children who attend school in their parents’ new homelands.

In the United States and France, two countries that have received many immigrants, we studied educational outcomes among children of immigrants compared to children of natives. Although most research on ethnic inequalities in education among children of immigrants has focused on the United States, large-scale immigration to Europe has made this an important topic in France too. Using data from the National Educational Panel Survey of the French Ministry of Education (1995-2005) and the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (1994-2002), we focus on two second-generation groups: North Africans in France and Mexicans in the United States. These are the largest groups of new arrivals in each country and include many immigrant parents who themselves have limited educational achievement and relatively low socio-economic standing.

Educational Backgrounds of Immigrant Parents

Immigrant parents in the United States and France have lower educational levels than native majority parents.

- In France, 44% of North African mothers have no formal schooling, 50% have only achieved some primary or secondary level of schooling, and just 7% have earned a secondary school diploma. North African fathers are more likely to have graduated from high school – about twice as likely, usually with a vocational secondary degree – but also have relatively low levels of education. Most North African immigrants (about 88%) are working class, including both skilled and unskilled workers. Unemployment is a serious issue facing North Africans in France. About 19% of North African immigrant fathers are unemployed compared to about 3% of native French fathers.
- In the United States we also see gaps between the educational attainments of Mexican immigrant parents and native majority group members. Among Mexican immigrant parents, 71% have no high school diploma, compared to 11% among native Non-Hispanic white parents. Only three percent of Mexican immigrant parents have a college degree, compared to 34% of native Non-Hispanic white parents.

Educational Aspirations for Immigrant Children

In both the United States and France, children of immigrants have high educational aspirations. Second-generation North Africans express higher aspirations than the children of native French people of the same social-class background.

In the United States, second-generation Mexicans have educational aspirations similar to those of the native-white majority group. When asked about educational expectations rather than aspirations – that is, what people expect will happen no matter what they hope might happen – second-generation Mexicans express lower expectations than natives. This may be because higher education is so expensive in the United States.

Educational Attainment and Grade Retention for the Second Generation

The second-generation groups we have studied turn out to be disadvantaged educationally in both the United States and France. In both countries, they are about twice as likely to drop out of school compared to children of the native majority population. They are also less likely to earn secondary education credentials. Parental socioeconomic backgrounds explain most of these gaps.

Grade retention – when a student is held back to repeat a grade – operates differently in the two countries. In the United States, grade retention is less common than in France and it is associated with lower aspirations and greater likelihood of children dropping out of school. These general patterns hold among children of Mexican immigrants, where youngsters who have repeated a year have lower educational aspirations and expectations and tend to drop out more frequently than those who have not been held back. Indeed, grade retention has a stronger negative impact on educational outcomes in the United States than in France. The United States uses a comprehensive system in which students of all abilities are taught in the same class for most subjects. In contrast, because France uses a tracking system where students are separated by their academic ability for all classes, grade retention sometimes allows students to be rerouted to their preferred track in upper secondary schools (comparable to high schools in America).

Second-Generation Hopes and Disadvantages Challenge Both Countries

Despite institutional differences between the United States and France, the two groups of immigrant children we have studied tend to experience similar disadvantages at school. Second-generation Mexicans and North Africans are more likely to drop out of school than their peers who are children of the native majorities in the United States and France. In both countries, educational outcomes for second-generation children are associated with their parents' socioeconomic background and educational achievements.

Even so, in both the United States and France, the children of immigrants have rising educational aspirations. They face obstacles due to their parents' social class background, but they arguably aim higher than either their parents or young people in their home countries. The challenge for U.S. and French educational authorities is to help these second-generation young people actually achieve their aspirations at school – and beyond. Read more in Yaël Brinbaum and Amy Lutz. "[Examining Educational Inequalities in Two National Systems: A Comparison of the North African Second Generation in France and the Mexican Second Generation in the United States.](#)" *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* (2017): 1-25.

Read more in Yaël Brinbaum and Amy Lutz. "[Examining Educational Inequalities in Two National Systems: A Comparison of the North African Second Generation in France and the Mexican Second Generation in the United States.](#)" *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* (2017): 1-25.