

Academic Achievement among Québec Secondary School Students of Immigrant Origin in the English School Sector

Key words

Academic achievement • Young Quebecers • Immigration • Secondary education • Analysis of cohorts

Summary

This research study was primarily intended to document the progress, participation and academic performance of Québec students of immigrant origin (the entire population of first- and second-generation immigrant students) who began their secondary studies in 1998 and 1999. The second objective of the study was to obtain a better understanding of the factors that influenced these phenomena, using information in ministerial databases on these students and the schools they attended.

Although their characteristics at the outset were less advantageous than those of students whose families have been in Canada for at least three generations (both parents born in Canada), the study shows that students of immigrant origin did not, as a whole, constitute a population at a high risk of failure in the Québec school system with regard to their academic progress and performance. Their resilience came through particularly well in the higher graduation rates they attained when given two additional years. This positive observation, valid for both the French and English sectors, nonetheless does not take into consideration variations based on sector, region of origin, generational status and language used at home.

This summary presents the study's findings regarding students who attended the English sector.

Context

In Québec, academic achievement has become a central concern due to poor academic results, which is a widespread problem in our schools. This concern pertains as well to students of immigrant origin because they make up an increasingly large proportion of our school population. In their case, however, a second issue comes to the fore, namely, their integration into Québec society as actors in its future development.

In 1998, the ministère de l'Éducation stressed the importance of equal opportunity as a corollary to fairness and non-discrimination and as a prime principle of action when it published the *Policy Statement on Educational Integration and Intercultural Education* (MEQ, 1998). The Ministère also pointed out that this concept was not limited to accessibility to educational services but also involved compensatory measures for all students who needed them. However, since it did not provide an overall framework for analyzing these students' success or the factors that influenced them, the task of

identifying precise incentives was hampered. This brief document presents the findings of a research study that makes it possible to overcome this drawback.

Methodology

The study involved a systematic follow-up of Québec immigrant students who began secondary school in 1998-1999 and 1999-2000, and examined contrasting findings on the respective situations of these students in the French and English sectors throughout secondary school. Taking both sectors together, the target group - students born outside Canada or having at least one parent who was born outside the country - accounted for 31,119 students. Of these, 77.4% attended schools in the French sector, while 22.6% went to English sector schools.

The final report distinguished these students according to seven major areas of origin, linguistic characteristics and generational status.

Comprehensive analyses of the seven regions of origin of immigrant French sector students showed that the groups from the Caribbean and Sub-Saharan Africa, on the one hand, and from North Africa and the Middle East, on the other, were the most numerous. They represented, respectively, 20.1% and 15.4% of the student population. But a vast majority of all groups attended school in the French sector. The analysis of the English sector also looked at the seven regions of origin but the resulting descriptive tables were confined to three sub-groups selected on the basis of their relative weight in this sector and their distribution between the French and English sectors. These groups consisted of students from the Caribbean and Sub-Saharan Africa (9.9%), South Asia (8.2%) and East Asia (5.5%).

With respect to linguistic characteristics, the students were divided into three groups: those whose mother tongue was also their language of instruction; those whose mother tongue was a different language but who nonetheless used their language of instruction at home; and, finally, those for whom their mother tongue and

the language used most commonly at home were different from their language of instruction.

Finally, a number of analyses also divided the students in the target group into first-generation students (those born outside Canada) and second-generation students (those who had at least one parent born outside the country).

The report also covered a variety of student characteristics. These ranged from socio-demographic factors (age, sex, the family's socioeconomic status) and factors related to the schooling process (late start in secondary school, switching of schools, level at which students entered the system) to the nature of the institutions attended (ethnic concentration, degree of deprivation, education system). The indicators, for their part, pointed to students' progress and results (graduation and dropout rates, choice of electives, results in various subjects and the amount of academic delay accumulated by the time students reached Secondary III). The findings that resulted from multiple regression analyses make it possible to identify the factors that influence the academic success of these students.

Keep in mind that the results presented in this summary pertain to the English school sector.

Highlights

This study enables the English sector to make observations relating to various characteristics of immigrant students and their academic progress and performance, to identify the factors that influence them and, finally, to bring into view certain implications for policies and programs.

Some 7,020 immigrant students in the cohorts studied attended secondary school in the English sector - this number represents 35.5% of the entire student population in the sector. These students presented a profile very similar to that of their peers whose families have been in Canada for at least three generations (both parents born in Canada). Most of them were born in Canada (73.0%), a fact explained by the

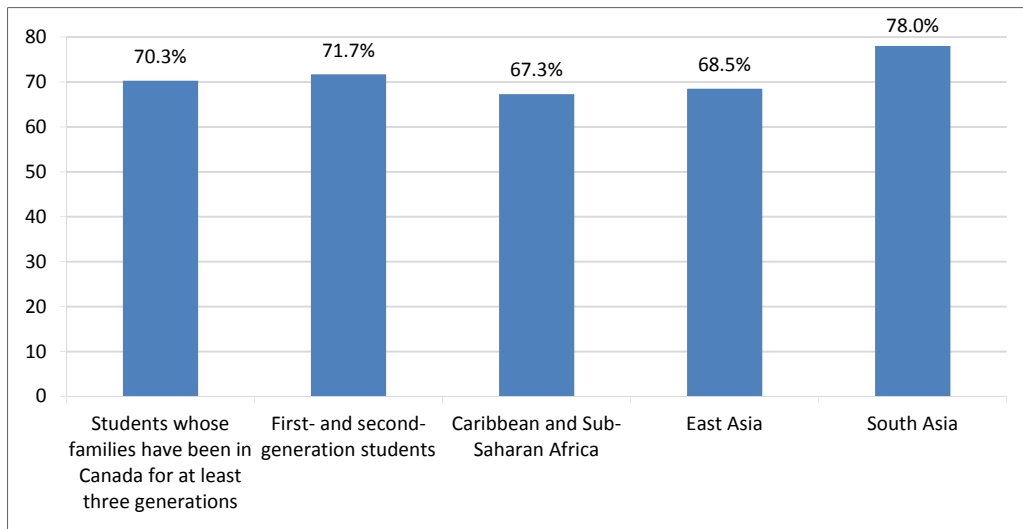
provisions of the *Charter of the French language*. Again, most of them (81.5%) entered the school system at the elementary level. Their rate of academic delay by the time they entered secondary school was similar (17.6%). English was the mother tongue or the language most commonly used at home by almost three quarters (72.6%) of these students. Boys and girls were equally represented in the group. Their socioeconomic profile was more or less equivalent to that of their peers whose families have been in Canada for at least three generations (both parents born in Canada), with a slight overrepresentation among affluent families. They attended private school more frequently than students whose families have been in Canada for at least three generations (both parents born in Canada), but attended in similar proportions public schools located in somewhat or disadvantaged areas. Note, however, that they were more concentrated on the Island of Montréal (71.6%) than the student population of the English sector taken as a whole, which is spread throughout Québec.

Whether one looks at generational status, linguistic characteristics or regions of origin, it is difficult to establish cohesive risk profiles for every indicator according to subgroup. Generally speaking, therefore, one cannot say that first-generation students or students who do not have English as their mother tongue or as the language most commonly used at home systematically have a less positive profile than second-generation students or English speakers. The same holds for regions of origin: according to various indicators, students from South Asia, East Asia, the Caribbean and Sub-Saharan Africa have characteristics that are more or less positive when compared against each other or the target group (see the brief profiles of the respective communities for more details). This trend probably results from the fact that immigrant students who attend the English language sector form a subgroup that can have specific characteristics.

These positive characteristics of immigrant students in the English sector are reflected in their academic progress and paths. In fact, five years and seven years after entering secondary school they present a graduation rate slightly higher than that of their peers whose families have been in Canada for at least three generations (both parents born in Canada). Their “net dropout rate”, which takes into account departures from Québec and resilience beyond the seven-year mark, is much more positive (a difference of six percentage points). The strong motivation shown by immigrant students and their parents also comes through in the fact that these students are more likely than their peers whose families have been in Canada for at least three generations (both parents born in Canada), to take the most selective mathematics course. And this holds particularly for first-generation students and for groups from South and East Asia. This illustrates the predominantly positive view of education and higher studies held by these communities.

However, apart from this generally positive observation, the situation calls for a more nuanced description as soon as one takes into consideration students’ membership in a variety of subgroups. Students of South Asian origin graduate at significantly higher rates than the immigrant student population as a whole, particularly when they are compared with students whose families have been in Canada for at least three generations (both parents born in Canada). Students of East Asian origin exhibit a less positive profile, but one not quite as negative as that of their peers from the Caribbean and Sub-Saharan Africa. Note, however, that there are no differences in these groups’ net dropout rates, which, among the students of the three communities, are lower than those of students whose families have been in Canada for at least three generations (both parents born in Canada).

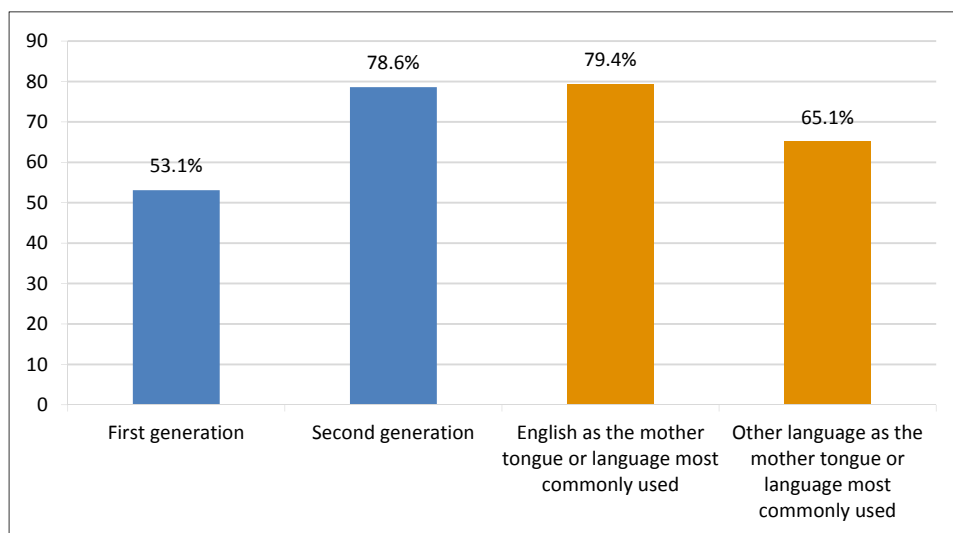
Graduation rates seven years after starting of secondary school, by ethnocultural characteristics



Results vary just as sharply between generations and linguistic characteristics. As might be expected, students born in Canada graduate at clearly higher rates than their foreign-born peers. However, there are few differences with regard to net dropout rates - which implies that this difference may result primarily from the higher rates at which first-generation students leave the province. Moreover, there are great

differences in graduation rates associated with the status of English, or some other language, as the mother tongue or the language most commonly used at home, but it is students who have other language as a mother tongue and English most commonly used who benefit, contrary to students who have English as their mother tongue.

Graduation rates seven years after starting secondary school, by generation and mother tongue or language most commonly used at home



With the exception of differences related to ethnocultural origin - outlined by region within the framework of this research - most of these differences lose their meaningfulness when, using a multivariate regression analysis of graduation rates, one takes into account certain student characteristics with which these differences are linked. With regard to the target group, these analyses in the English sector essentially confirm the descriptive data, which is explained by the fact that the students in the target group had characteristics very similar to those of their peers whose families have been in Canada for at least three generations (both parents born in Canada). The odds ratio for the entire immigrant student population continues to be largely favourable (1.28), once one adjusts for the students' characteristics at the outset. However, compared with the descriptive data, it falls slightly for the latter as well as for the second-generation students.

The importance of area of origin is qualified. In fact, the least favourable graduation profile (that of students from the Caribbean and Sub-Saharan Africa) improved significantly, while little change was observed among the other two subgroups (students of South Asian and East Asian origin). Note, however, that students from the Caribbean and Sub-Saharan Africa have continued to present low graduation rates, a fact that does not fit well with their initial characteristics, which were more or less equivalent to those of the other groups.

There were substantial variances between schools that could not be explained by the characteristics of their students, and there were also significant differences between the school boards. This requires us to better identify what characterizes those communities that "make a difference".

The analyses also revealed that various factors largely shared with the entire school population represent additional obstacles to the success of first- and second-generation students. These factors include being a boy, beginning secondary school with an academic delay and adding to it, and having switched schools.

Although other variables did play a role, their impact was less pronounced among the target group than it was among the control group. This was a matter of, among other things, the families' more or less disadvantaged socioeconomic status and of public school attendance, especially in disadvantaged areas.

The results of analyses focused on private schools show that they are a positive tool for academic success for immigrant students, but in a clearly less pronounced manner than in the control group.

Contribution to policies and programs

Overall, immigrant students who attend English sector schools are not particularly at risk in terms of academic progress and performance. This observation can be explained by the specific characteristics of this subgroup within the entire population of immigrant students, but also by policies and programs that have been established to support these students in this sector. However, given that certain intergroup differences have proved resistant to statistical analysis, it is essential to develop measures targeting students from certain communities whose progress and performance indicators are less positive than might be expected on the basis of their initial profiles.

In this regard, we need to better understand the degree to which the unexplained elements are related to factors attributable to families or the community - or, on the other hand, to systemic factors. Ethnographic studies or research initiatives focusing on families' educational practices and values, as well as on the prevailing dynamics within educational institutions and the measures they have instituted, should help us better understand these issues.

The more generic approaches implemented in Québec to support students from disadvantaged areas and, to a lesser degree, male students, are also likely to have a positive impact on immigrant students' success insofar as their specific characteristics are recognized within such programs.

Finally, better indicators of the students' socio-economic profiles are necessary in order to take immigrant families' characteristics into account. Such indicators could include, among other things, individualized data on families' socioeconomic status and information on the occupational status or level of education of immigrant parents in their countries of origin.

Project

La réussite scolaire des jeunes Québécois issus de l'immigration au secondaire

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