Marcelo + Carola Suarez-Orozco, Children of Immigration

# 5 THE CHILDREN OF IMMIGRATION IN SCHOOL

Doing well in school is more important today than ever before. In this era of global economic restructuring, well-paid jobs that allow for advancement require education well beyond high school.[1] In particular, there is a widening gap between those working in the knowledge-intensive sectors of the economy and those working in the service sectors. In previous eras, well-paid manufacturing jobs allowed blue-collar workers, including immigrants, to achieve secure middle-class lifestyles without much formal education.[2] Those days are gone.

Completing and indeed going beyond a high school education is critical today and will be even more vital in the decades to come. The U.S. economy generates almost no meaningful jobs for high school dropouts; during the 1980s, the average real wage of high school dropouts fell by nearly 20 percent. Those with master's degrees or more, however, were able to keep up with inflation and achieve real gains in their wages. Formal schooling has become a high-stakes goal for the children of immigrants. For many of them, schooling is nearly the *only* ticket for a better tomorrow.

What are the attitudes about schooling and education of the children of immigrants upon arrival? How do these attitudes change over time? How do their prior experiences with schools in their country of origin influence their subsequent functioning in U.S. schools? And what role do immigrant parents play in the successful schooling of their children? Are schools preparing the children

to face the challenges of an increasingly competitive global economy?

## Love Is Not Enough

Immigrant parents and their children are very aware of the importance of education to their future success. We asked immigrant parents: "How do you get ahead in the United States?" and a reference to education was by far the most frequent response. A Dominican parent noted that the way to get ahead was by "studying, learning English, going to college, and becoming a professional." A Chinese parent eloquently told us: "The only way to do it is to do well in school . . . Knowledge is the most lasting thing. If you have an education you can have a more fulfilling life and nothing can defeat you. Material things are short-lived no matter how much you own. Only knowledge can last forever."

The parents' attitudes toward education are passed down to their children. The children of immigrants arrive in our schools with very positive attitudes toward teachers and other school authorities. In a study of adolescents of various backgrounds (Mexican immigrants, second-generation Mexican Americans, and a control group of non-immigrant, non-Latino whites), we asked our informants to respond "yes" or "no" to the statement: "In life, school is the most important thing." While only 40 percent of the non-Latino white students responded yes, 84 percent of the Mexican immigrant students did so.[3] Likewise, we asked all the children in our Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation (LISA) study to respond "yes" or "no" to the statement "School is important to get ahead." Fully 98 percent of the children responded affirmatively. To the open-ended question "What do you like most about living here [in the United States]?" 44 percent of the children referred to their new school. Every child was asked to complete the sentence "School is ———." Of the children in our study, 72 percent completed the sentence with a positive association such as "my life," "my second family," "the pathway to success."

In addition to revealing positive attitudes in broad terms, immi-

*Table 5.1* Responses to the sentence completion task "School is ———"

| Ethnic group | Negative | Neutral | Positive |
|---|---|---|---|
| Chinese | 2% | 64% | 34% |
| Dominican | 0% | 10% | 90% |
| Central American | 3% | 19% | 78% |
| Haitian | 2% | 23% | 75% |
| Mexican | 4% | 14% | 82% |

*Source:* Harvard Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation study.

grant children respect and appreciate their teachers and principals. Data collected in an earlier study suggest a similar picture.[4] We asked Mexican immigrant, second-generation Mexican-American, and non-immigrant white students attending the same school to complete the sentence: "My principal is ———." The immigrant adolescents had far more positive associations than did the other groups: 60 percent gave responses such as: "a good, capable person," "very friendly," "an exciting person." The two groups of U.S.-born children revealed more negative attitudes about the same principal. Only 28 percent of the white children had positive responses, while 40 percent revealed negative attitudes such as "a jerk," "an idiot," "a pain." The rest were neutral in their responses. The second-generation Mexican Americans fell between the two groups, with 32 percent having positive associations and another 32 percent having negative associations.

Are there group differences in incoming attitudes toward school and teachers? LISA data reveal an interesting pattern. Of the children in this study, 73 percent completed the sentence "Teachers are ———" with glowing attributes such as "a model to learn from," "good people," or "just like parents to us." But of all the groups, the Chinese children were the most likely to complete the sentence "School is ———" or "Teachers are ———." in a neutral way. They were more likely to give descriptive, neutral responses such as that school is "a place to learn" or "educational" and that teachers "are people who teach us" (Tables 5.1 and 5.2).

Many teachers who work closely with immigrant students delight in these positive attitudes. They go on at length about how their

*Table 5.2* Responses to the sentence completion task "Teachers are ———"

| Ethnic group | Negative | Neutral | Positive | Mixed |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Chinese | 4% | 50% | 42% | 4% |
| Dominican | 0% | 7% | 84% | 9% |
| Central American | 1% | 10% | 82% | 7% |
| Haitian | 0% | 28% | 69% | 3% |
| Mexican | 4% | 7% | 87% | 2% |

*Source:* Harvard Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation study.

newly arrived students are better disciplined, more eager to learn, and more appreciative of their efforts than nonimmigrant students. One teacher comments, "These kids are bright. They learn better than American kids, they pay more attention, they care about learning." Another teacher told us, "Having those immigrant kids come here was the best thing that happened to this school." She went on to recount how racial tension had predominated in her school when the students were largely black or white. She added that once immigrant students arrived, "race ceased to be a big issue as the school became multiethnic instead of biracial."

Other teachers, however, are frustrated and reveal quite negative attitudes toward their newly arrived charges. These teachers seem to be responding to immigrants with the deep ambivalence found in the society at large. Some teachers view immigrant students as less intelligent, lazy, and more prone to get into trouble, and thus unlikely to assimilate into the mainstream. Some teachers made no attempt to censor such beliefs. One teacher said about her classroom of fifth-graders: "They give me kids with IQ's of 60 or 70 and they expect me to help them raise their grades. What am I, a miracle worker?" Another, talking about her class of middle-school immigrant students, predicted that one of her thirteen-year-old boys was going to "end up in jail" and that none "of my girls will go to college. They just don't have the IQ's." A superintendent of one of the largest school districts in the country said that his biggest concern was convincing his teachers and principals that immigrant and racial minority children were "teachable." His second biggest challenge was the budget.[5]

Teacher and student attitudes are only part of the larger story. The kind of love and reverence of school that immigrant children demonstrate may not always be enough to outweigh the multiple challenges and obstacles they typically encounter. What are these challenges?

## Origins

Immigrant children arrive at American schools today from very different backgrounds that defy easy generalizations. On one end of the spectrum, we find children from middle-class urban backgrounds who have been preparing in their countries since early childhood for high-stakes, competitive exams. These children are typically highly literate and have well-developed study skills; their parents have taught them well what it takes to succeed in school. In sharp contrast are those children arriving from strife-ridden countries with little or no schooling. These children have missed critical years of classroom experience and often cannot read or write in their own language. They have not mastered the basics of either rote learning or the use of higher-level cognitive strategies. Classrooms suited for children their age may not meet their learning needs. Clearly, a child's educational experiences before coming to the United States will have a profound influence on his or her transition to American schools.

The varied socioeconomic and educational backgrounds of immigrant families will affect the child's opportunities and experiences in different ways. Parents with more resources can settle in more affluent and integrated neighborhoods that typically offer better schools for their children. Conversely, parents of more limited means will tend to gravitate to poorer neighborhoods where they are likely to find inferior schools. Highly educated parents are also better equipped to guide their children in how to study, structure an essay, and access information for school projects; they may also provide resources such as additional books, a home computer, and even tutors. More educated parents typically are in a better position to navigate the intricacies of the new school system. These parents are

more likely to know the right questions to ask and will insist that their children be placed in educational programs that will ensure viable options in the future. They will know that not all courses are the same and indeed that not all schools produce the same outcomes.

The family's life before entering the United States also has an effect on school performance. Children fleeing strife and trauma come burdened with special needs. Many will need counseling for their psychological wounds before they can be ready to fully concentrate on their schoolwork.

Having the correct legal documents is also important for easing the transition to the American classroom. We have already noted that documented status can influence trust in school authorities, as well as access to the postsecondary educational system. Fear is a common theme in the schooling experiences of undocumented students. A high school student from Mexico tells of an incident soon after arrival: "At school the first week I was stopped in the hall and asked to see my green slip. I thought he meant my green card (immigration papers) and my heart raced. I was so scared I couldn't answer and was sent to the principal's office. It turned out he meant a slip from the teacher saying I had permission to be in the hall. I was afraid to tell the principal why I hadn't answered, so I lied."[6] Another high school student from Mexico shares the anxieties of many: "I don't have immigration papers . . . [T]he main thing is being afraid. All I want is my family to stay together and not have problems with the Migra [INS] . . . My teacher asks for my mother to sign a paper, but I am afraid to have her name in the school file. I am afraid they will deport her."[7]

In addition, not having the right schooling and vaccination records on hand affects the child's ability to enter the school system. In the course of our research, we encountered a number of cases where children were kept out of school months at a time because they lacked the papers from their country of origin needed to enroll. Even after the children enter the U.S. school system, keeping school records current and complete is often a continuing problem. As im-

migrant families move from one district to another in search of appropriate housing and better jobs, school records are often lost, misplaced, or not forwarded properly.

## The New Neighborhoods

Contrary to widespread belief, immigrants today are overwhelmingly an urban population. Indeed, most immigrants tend to settle in our largest urban centers such as New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Miami, and Houston. Some immigrants, however, are bypassing these large urban centers and settling in more racially integrated suburban neighborhoods. Newly arrived Latino and Caribbean immigrants follow a somewhat different path in settling than newly arrived Asian immigrants. Latino-origin neighborhoods have become increasingly more segregated in recent years, and new Latino immigrants tend to move to these neighborhoods. On the other hand, Asian immigrants often settle in more integrated neighborhoods and tend to enroll their children in schools that are predominantly white.[8]

Immigrants' choice of neighborhood in the United States will have important consequences for their interpersonal lives, experiences, and opportunities. In general, relationships play a decisive role in where immigrants settle. Florence, one of our informants, moved into a predominantly Haitian neighborhood, part of a larger African American neighborhood in the Mattapan district of Boston, because her aunt and uncle (who had migrated there earlier) found housing for her family nearby. The availability of affordable housing often determines where immigrants will settle.[9] For poor immigrants, "affordable" housing is often located in highly segregated neighborhoods where poverty prevails.

The neighborhood shapes the lives of immigrant children in many ways. The degree of racial segregation will have a series of important consequences. New arrivals of color who settle in predominantly minority neighborhoods will have virtually no direct contact with middle-class white Americans. This in turn will affect the kinds of English that the children will be exposed to, the networks

that are available to access desirable jobs, and the quality of schools they attend.[10]

Concentrated poverty is associated with the "disappearance of meaningful work opportunities."[11] Adolescents in such neighborhoods are chronically underemployed or unemployed and must search for work elsewhere. In such neighborhoods with few opportunities in the formal economy, underground or informal activities tend to flourish. These kinds of economies often involve the trade of illegal substances and are associated with gangs and neighborhood violence.

When poverty is combined with racial segregation, the outcomes can be devastating. A large-scale sociological study concluded, "No matter what their personal traits or characteristics, people who grow up and live in environments of concentrated poverty and racial isolation are more likely to become teenage mothers, drop out of school, achieve only low levels of education, and earn lower adult incomes."[12]

Although deep neighborhood poverty and intense racial segregation are critical predictors of future outcomes, other factors play a role. George De Vos has argued that culturally constituted patterns of community cohesion and supervision can "immunize" immigrant youth from the more toxic elements in their new settings.[13] Likewise, Harvard Medical School psychiatrist Felton Earls and his colleagues have studied patterns of social cohesion in poor and segregated neighborhoods in Chicago. This research suggests that when communities are cohesive and when adults within the community can monitor youngsters' activities, the children tend to do better. Children that live in such communities are less likely to be involved with gangs and delinquency and are more focused on their academic pursuits.[14] Min Zhou has examined how community-based organizations geared to youth can make a tremendous difference in the life chances and opportunities of immigrant children.[15]

The immigrants' point of entry will shape their perceptions and opportunities in the new land. Middle-class immigrants who are able to join more integrated and more affluent communities will

come to experience a very different America than those who settle among other immigrants or among native-born racial and ethnic minorities. They will be better able to maximize the opportunities that led them to migrate in the first place.

## School Factors

Many neighborhood characteristics are reflected in the schools. How do these factors play out in schools? What are these schools like?

When an ethnographer enters a school, the thing that impresses her most, beyond its physical appearance and neighborhood context, is its social climate or ethos. This quality is often difficult to measure, but it is an essential factor in the everyday experience of schooling. The gifted ethnographer will pay attention to the following issues: Is there a charismatic leader at the helm? Does she project an aura of authority, and does she broadcast the expectation that all children, including immigrant children and other children of color, can learn and excel? Is morale among teachers and staff high or is the atmosphere one of suspicion, conflict, and tension? What is the nature of the relationship between teachers and students? Is it one of appreciation and mutual trust, or do teachers feel burdened and resentful of their new students? Does the school district provide teachers with adequate curriculum and training, as well as books and other supplies? What is the relationship between students of various backgrounds?

Research has demonstrated that effective schools have a number of common characteristics. These include: positive leadership and high staff morale; high academic expectations for all students regardless of background; a high value placed on the students' cultures and languages; and a safe and orderly school environment. Schools participating in the LISA project, which exemplify schools that immigrant children typically encounter, range from high-functioning schools with a strong culture of high expectations and a focus on achievement to catastrophic institutions characterized by ever-present fear of violence, distrust, low expectation, and institutional anomie.[16]

On the healthy end of the spectrum, we have identified schools that create "fields of opportunity" for immigrant students. In one such school located in a lower-middle-class integrated neighborhood in the outskirts of Boston, the campus, while not opulent, is well-kept and welcoming. Signs in multiple languages greet visitors, and student art and special projects decorate the walls. The computer lab is equipped with fairly up-to-date computers and software that the children frequently use. In this school, the principal's voice is strong, caring, and warm. A charismatic school counselor who is herself a Chinese immigrant knows in intimate detail the circumstances of each of her wards. Most teachers have advanced degrees in the subjects they are teaching. When we made a presentation about immigration, the room was crowded with interested and engaged teachers eager to learn more about the topic to better serve their immigrant students. We had planned a one-hour presentation, but the teachers kept us an additional hour with questions and comments.

Unfortunately, many other schools in our project (which represent the kinds of schools that many immigrant students attend) fall at the opposite end of the spectrum. Such schools are "fields of endangerment" where concerns with survival, not learning, prevail. Many such schools are located in neighborhoods troubled by drugs, prostitution, and gangs. At one school, one of our research assistants found that boys sneak out at noon to watch pornographic films at a convenience store nearby. Many of these schools are dilapidated and unkempt. In one, we were stunned to be met by a principal—obviously drunk at ten in the morning—who proudly proclaimed that five of her teachers had just requested a transfer. In some schools, violence is pervasive. In an elementary school participating in our study, a young girl was found raped and murdered on school premises. In a participating district, an irate parent stabbed a teacher in front of her students. In another school, just days after the Columbine incident, a cherry bomb was set off as one of our research assistants was conducting an interview. In many schools there is tremendous ethnic tension. At one of our sites, students regularly play a game called "Rice and Beans" (Asian students versus Latino students) that frequently deteriorates into physical violence. In many

sites students report living in constant fear; they dread lunch and class changes because the hallways are places of confrontation and intimidation, including sexual violence. All too many schools have such "cultures of violence."[17]

These schools affect the opportunities and experiences of their many immigrant students in several immediate ways. They tend to have limited resources. School buildings are often poorly maintained and run down, and classrooms are typically overcrowded. Textbooks and curriculum are outdated; computers are few and obsolete. Many of the teachers may not have credentials in the subjects they teach. Clearly defined tracks sentence students to non-college destinations. Because they lack strong English skills, immigrant students are often enrolled in the least demanding and least competitive classes, a path that eventually excludes them from courses needed for college. These schools generally offer few (if any) Advanced Placement courses, which are critical for entry in many of the more competitive colleges. The ratio of guidance counselors to students is impossibly low. Because the settings are so undesirable, teachers and principals routinely transfer out in search of better assignments elsewhere. As a result, in many such schools there is little continuity or sense of community. In these schools children and teachers are often preoccupied with ever-present violence and morale is often very low.

### SEGREGATION IN SCHOOLS

Poverty and segregation are all too often highly correlated. A large-scale study by Harvard University scholars Gary Orfield and John Yun has found that among Latino immigrants, segregation has increased rapidly over the last two decades. This explains in large part why "Latino students have by far the highest drop-out rates of any major group in American schools and are experiencing declining access to college."[18] Asian students are generally more likely to enroll in integrated and relatively more affluent schools, which produce better results for their students.

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that all Asian students are thriving in well-functioning integrated schools. The re-

cent Asian immigrant student experience suggests two distinct pathways.[19] As more Asian immigrants find themselves in poor and segregated schools, they face the same limited opportunities of other immigrants of color. As a result, for these students academic achievement and the pursuit of the American dream is more elusive. Orfield and his associates have found a dramatic range in academic performance among Chinese-origin immigrant students in San Francisco. While some are following the expectations attached to the "model minority" stereotype, others are struggling with schoolwork and are performing at the same level as other ethnic and racial minority students.[20]

## BILINGUAL EDUCATION

A discussion of the experiences of immigrant children would not be complete without reference to the ever-controversial subject of bilingualism and bilingual education. Indeed, no topic related to immigration is as emotional and subject to political passion and manipulation than this issue. Why is this so? What are the realities of bilingual education? Are immigrant children learning English? Are they isolated in "linguistic ghettos" that doom them to second-rate citizenship?

That language should be the topic of emotional and politicized debate should not surprise anyone. While on the surface language is about communication, it is also a marker of identity and an instrument of power. The United States is not alone in experiencing tensions regarding bilingualism and second-language policy. While some countries such as Switzerland have worked out successful multilingual arrangements, other countries continue to struggle with this issue.

As a rule, where there are language-marked social inequities, the groups involved will resist (both consciously and unconsciously) mastering and using the other's language. Some proud Flemish speakers in Brussels simply refuse to speak in French (the once dominant language) in many social situations. Where one language is clearly a higher-status language, native speakers of the lower-status language often have trouble mastering and will indeed resist using

the higher-status language. And native speakers of the high-status language seldom bother to use the second language.

In the United States, the controversies surrounding the teaching of a second language in schools suggest a number of paradoxes. While many view the mastery of a second or third language to be a clear advantage in this era of global capitalism and transnationalism, the public has deep reservations about teaching immigrant children in their native languages. Rather than being viewed as a potential asset to be cultivated, the linguistic skills brought by newly arrived immigrants are seen by many as a threat to the integrity of the English language and as a symbolic refusal to accommodate to American culture.

The debate over bilingualism in the United States is as old as the history of immigration itself. For example, in an earlier era of immigration, there were deep anxieties about the supposed threat that German-speaking immigrants posed to the English language. Even earlier, Benjamin Franklin vocally opposed teaching German on U.S. soil, fearing that Germans would never learn English and would thus fail to become loyal Americans.

German speakers were not alone. Many major immigrant groups to the United States—including Eastern Europeans, Chinese, and Japanese—eventually organized their own after-school language programs. These programs were developed to teach the children of immigrants in their own languages about their cultures and national origins. While the parents may have been eager to maintain the home language, surely in part to be able to maintain discipline and the flow of communication within the home, their children had another agenda. Among the children of immigrants, English emerged as an unequivocal winner in the struggle for their linguistic souls. As we noted in Chapter 2, this is also true among today's immigrant youth. In the facetious words of Harvard sociologist Stanley Lieberson and his colleagues, the United States is "a cemetery" for languages.[21]

Third- and fourth-generation descendants of earlier waves of European immigrants have made an effort in recent years to regain lost linguistic traditions. In Massachusetts, fourth-generation monolin-

gual English-speaking parents are sending their youngsters to special after-school classes and tutors to learn such languages as Yiddish and Lithuanian. These attempts at resuscitation reveal the powerful emotional appeal of language as a symbol of identity.

What should we know about bilingualism in children to generate rational and coherent policy? In reality, very few people can be considered "balanced" bilinguals. Most bilingual speakers are in fact dominant in one language. For other bilinguals, language use is divided according to specific domains: family and emotional matters may be most comfortably expressed in one language, while conversations about work may be most fluently discussed in another. Still other bilinguals engage in a linguistic flow characterized by strategically switching between the two languages depending upon the context and need.[22]

Bilingual skills fall along a continuum; most so-called bilinguals might be more properly called emerging bilinguals. In reality, balanced bilingualism is quite an achievement.[23] It requires a lot of effort to learn a second language well. Once mastery is achieved, regular use is necessary to maintain it. At the same time, much effort is required to keep up the original language through frequent use. Language skills atrophy quickly if not exercised on a regular basis. A real danger to cognitive development occurs when children rapidly lose their first language without receiving adequate training and practice in the new language.

How do immigrant students acquire a second language? Research in second-language acquisition suggests that the best predictor of success is the skill amassed in the child's first language. It seems that cognitive skills developed in the first language can greatly assist in the learning of the second. Hence, a Spanish-speaking child who has a good mastery of the vocabulary and metalinguistic aspects of her first language will find her transition into English much easier than someone with underdeveloped linguistic skills in her first language.[24]

A common myth is that young children learn a second language effortlessly and better than older speakers. This is simply not true. In fact, all things being equal, an older speaker will tend to learn a sec-

ond language faster than a younger speaker does.[25] Young children will, however, do better than older learners in speaking the new language without an easily detectable foreign accent.

While there are individual differences among school-age children, full academic mastery of a second language usually takes between six and seven years of study and exposure.[26] Linguistically gifted children who are systematically exposed to good language models may achieve mastery in two to three years. It is important to note the profound difference between having a superficial conversational ability in a language and having the deeper level of competence required to understand difficult new subjects, to express subtleties of meaning, and to write a well-argued and well-phrased term paper.

Another common myth concerning bilingualism is that native language use at home interferes with the acquisition of a second language at school. In a state-of-the-art review of bilingualism and second-language learning sponsored by the National Research Council, language scholars Diane August and Kenji Hakuta conclude: "The use of the child's native language does not impede the acquisition of English."[27]

In fact, children who speak two languages may have special advantages. Some scholars emphasize the obvious job-market advantage of speaking more than one language.[28] Others see bilingual speakers as having an edge in the cognitive and interpersonal realms. Bilinguals may develop greater skill and empathy in dealing with people from a variety of backgrounds. Some have argued that by shifting from one code to another, bilinguals may also develop cognitive flexibilities that allow them to approach other new language tasks more creatively.[29] Still other scholars point to the aesthetic value of being able to easily navigate linguistic boundaries.[30] In general, research suggests that bilinguals may have special advantages in "their overall linguistic, cognitive, or social development" over monolinguals of the same socioeconomic background.[31]

Bilingual education has been controversial ever since it was created. In 1968 President Lyndon Johnson signed the Bilingual Education Act to provide educational support to poor children who were

"educationally disadvantaged because of their inability to speak English."[32] It did not mandate first-language instruction and allowed for a wide range of interpretations and implementations. A few years later, the historic Supreme Court ruling on *Lau v. Nichols* mandated special school assistance to San Francisco's largest immigrant groups—Chinese, Filipinos, and Latinos—without spelling out how the assistance was to be implemented. The debate over whether the goal of bilingual education is to provide transitional support or to produce individuals who are bilingual and biliterate is far from settled.

Under the rubric of bilingual education, we find a wide variety of programs and practices.[33] In some school settings, "bilingual education" is nothing more than teaching children in English and minimally modifying the curriculum by simplifying vocabulary so that they can understand the lesson. Such programs are sometimes termed "structured immersion." Other schools offer "sheltered English" programs, where "every lesson in every school subject becomes, in part, a language lesson."[34] With "sheltered English," a science lesson is also an English lesson. English as a Second Language programs typically consist of a daily pull-out period where the child is taught the basics of English; the rest of her day may be spent in an immersion setting.[35]

In other schools, we find so-called transitional bilingual education programs. In these settings the child is provided with structured English-language instruction. At the same time, the child is taught a variety of subjects in her native language until she achieves competence in English. At that time she will be moved to an English-only classroom. The idea behind this model is to keep the child from falling behind in other subjects while she is mastering English.[36] Yet other programs come under the rubric of "two-way bilingual education."[37] In such programs, children are taught in their native language alongside English monolingual students who are motivated to learn a foreign language. In theory, all students receive the same amount of instruction in both languages in a variety of subject matters.

Scholars of second-language acquisition argue that two-way bi-

lingual programs tend to be effective for a variety of reasons. In such settings, language-minority children are in intimate, systematic, and reciprocal contact with speakers of the dominant language who provide good language models—a critical ingredient for effective second-language acquisition.[38] Furthermore, being surrounded by native-born dominant-language speakers who value learning a second language can act as a partial antidote to negative social mirroring.

Bilingual education has had strong critics since its initial legislation. While some object to the costs involved in such programs, others are philosophically opposed to the idea of teaching language-minority children in American schools using a language other than English. These critics fear that teaching children in a language other than English will undermine the American culture and doom students to academic failure, eventually handicapping them in the job market.

But does bilingual education really threaten American mainstream culture? We have already reviewed the research that shows how most immigrant children shift quickly into using English and lose their first language. Furthermore, the idea that immigrant languages pose a threat to English, and hence to the unity of the country, ignores the fact that English is a pervasive and highly influential language both at home and on the world stage. Never before has a language reached the dominance that English has achieved in the realms of business and commerce, science and technology, and media and popular culture.[39]

The issue of whether or not children in bilingual programs are handicapped in their academic progress is more complex. Research considering the efficacy of bilingual programs reveals contradictory results. This should not be surprising given that there are nearly as many models of bilingual and language assistance programs as there are districts in the country. It is therefore natural to find that while some programs produce excellent results, others are plagued with problems.[40]

The research suggests that while some bilingual programs are successful, others are characterized by poor administrative support, inadequate resources, and uncertified personnel. Under the best of

circumstances it is a challenge to educate large numbers of immigrant students. Indeed many of the problems found in bilingual programs tend to mask other issues. Many of the children in such programs come from poor backgrounds, have had little or interrupted schooling in their country of origin, move often from district to district, and are dealing with the trauma or losses involved in the immigrant journey. These children would face academic difficulties whether or not they were enrolled in a bilingual program. Blaming their slow progress on the bilingual program they attend ignores the many other difficulties that these children face. The paradox of bilingual education is that it is asked to do more with less. Bilingual programs must educate children, many of whom have a variety of special needs. It is an investment in the future—one that is in most cases supported half-heartedly—for which there is little immediate apparent payback.

Many bilingual programs have real problems in their implementation. Perhaps the most common problem in the day-to-day running of bilingual programs is the dearth of fully certified bilingual teachers who are trained in second-language acquisition and who can serve as proper language models to their students. It is a challenge to find qualified teachers even for such popular languages as Mandarin, Cantonese, and Spanish. In California, emergency credentialing is routine. Some districts in desperate need of qualified teachers have recruited in Spain and South America. While these teachers speak Spanish, in some cases their English skills (grammar, vocabulary, and accent) are inadequate. Furthermore, most of these teachers are neither familiar with teaching in an American setting nor aware of the cultural and historical backgrounds of the immigrant students. In districts where children arrive speaking a hundred different languages, it is virtually impossible to find qualified bilingual teachers.

In the course of our research, we have found that children whose native language is Fujianese must first master Cantonese on their way to learning English because their bilingual classrooms are taught in a Cantonese and English. In other classrooms, we saw how immigrant youngsters who had been here a bit longer come to

function as de facto teacher's aides. While this has clear advantages for the teacher and may help such children develop confidence, there are costs. It has been reported that in some bilingual programs, children have been kept from advancing into mainstream classes because teachers need them to help newly arrived immigrant students.[41] Furthermore, because the somewhat more advanced students typically have limited English skills themselves, newly arrived students are not receiving ideal language modeling.

There is a danger in segregating large numbers of immigrant students into bilingual programs.[42] First, in most such programs, children have almost no meaningful contact with English-speaking peers; without such contact, an important source of linguistic modeling is wasted. Moreover, because many bilingual programs are ambivalently supported throughout the nation, they simply do not offer the breadth and depth of courses that immigrant students need to prepare for college. Bilingual high school science courses with very basic content and limited lab access, for example, may not provide the necessary foundations to succeed once the student has acquired sufficient English to enroll in a more advanced class. Hence, there is an ever-present danger that once a student enters the "ESL" or "bilingual" track, she will have difficulty switching to the college-bound track.

The irrefutable reality is that large-scale immigration generates special needs that cannot be addressed with easy shortcuts. Immigrant children require special help with English.[43] Learning a second language takes time and effort. Yet while children are mastering English, they must keep up with the content of their classes so that by the time they can function in English they are not hopelessly behind in their other subjects. Bilingual education at its best can assure that children prosper academically and develop and maintain competencies in two linguistic realms.

### SCHOOL REFORM

In 1997 California voters, dissatisfied with bilingual education, passed Proposition 227—thereby dismantling overnight bilingual

programs in the state with the largest enrollment of immigrant students in the nation. The discontent with bilingual education is part of a broader, more general concern about the quality of our schools and their ability to prepare our children for the global economy.[44]

These concerns have led to a variety of efforts that have come to be known generally as "school reform." They include such varied policy initiatives as increased graduation requirements, systematic assessments through "objective tests," "school choice," and "inclusion." Some researchers have pointed out that such efforts, while often undertaken to improve the quality of education for all children, may ultimately benefit middle-class students but do little, and may even harm, the academic progress of children who come from poorer homes, whose parents have little education, and who are English-language learners.[45]

The rush to do away with bilingual education in California exemplifies the serious problems, as well as the negative possible consequences, of these new policy initiatives. Under Proposition 227 teachers were mandated to "immerse" second-language learners in an "English only" environment. The idea is that an intense one-year immersion program is enough to bring second-language learners to the point where they can fully function academically in English. But as we already noted, the scientific literature on second-language acquisition clearly shows that this takes more than a year to achieve. To make matters worse, teachers in California received very limited preparation, training, or appropriate materials (including textbooks) to teach their non-English-speaking students. In essence the old programs, both good and bad, were eradicated without first providing an appropriate replacement.

Likewise, what is perhaps the centerpiece in the new wave of educational reform—increasing high school graduation requirements and introducing high-stakes testing as a graduation requirement—will have a far-reaching effect on large numbers of immigrant students. A number of studies suggest that immigrant high school students who do not have adequate English to enroll in mainstream classes end up in classes that neither count toward the new gradua-

tion requirements nor prepare them for the tests needed to graduate. Under such circumstances, many immigrant high school students will drop out.[46]

High-stakes testing is another popular wave in the current school reform movement. The frequent use of standardized tests generates special problems for immigrant students. Yet performance on these tests will significantly influence the student's future. Some states are requiring that all students pass an examination before being allowed to graduate from high school. In addition, in what has become a dreaded yearly ritual, school districts compare the performance of their students to that of students in other districts based solely on the use of standardized tests. In many districts pressure to do well on these assessments is reshaping teaching practice and curriculum, with valuable class time devoted to "teach to the test."

Such testing has come under heavy criticism—a complex issue that is beyond the scope of this book. It is relevant here, however, to point out the problems that these assessment tools pose for immigrant students. These measures are typically developed and normed on "mainstream" students. Many of these tests are not only *not* "culture free" but are indeed "culture bound." Tests pose questions that are often framed around issues and content not as familiar to immigrant children as to children brought up in the dominant culture. Language difficulties compound the problem of a timed test for some immigrant students because such children simply take longer to read materials intended for English monolinguals.[47]

Two other school reform initiatives bear mention. "School choice" is designed to allow parents to enroll their children in schools of their choice. To date there is no evidence to suggest that large numbers of the very best schools would be eager to develop curriculum to serve significant numbers of poor immigrant students. Furthermore, recently arrived immigrant parents are often not knowledgeable about placing their children in these "choice" schools, nor do they have the resources to do so. While well-networked middle-class parents are poised to take advantage of these choices, many poor immigrant parents are left with no choice at all.[48]

"Inclusion" is used to describe incorporating children with special needs in regular classrooms. Children with physical disabilities (such as those who are visually impaired or confined to wheelchairs) or with learning disorders (such as children diagnosed with dyslexia or Asperger's Syndrome) fall into this category. Little data exist on how "inclusion" works for language minority students with physical or learning disabilities. Certainly, inclusion requires ongoing efforts to integrate and support these students as they strive to become a dynamic part of the class. Teachers working with such students often need specialized training and support to provide adequate service to their students. The progress of the students must be regularly assessed to determine that they are indeed receiving the support they need.[49]

We need to be cautious when carrying out school reform efforts. From our perspective, a basic weakness in all of these efforts is that they do not fully recognize the experiences and needs of *immigrant* children. The models for these school reform efforts have as a common denominator the experiences of middle-class mainstream children. This is not an insignificant oversight given that immigrant youth are the fastest growing sector of our student population.

These policies have the potential to shape academic opportunities for immigrant students. Yet through ethnography we have learned that abstract educational policies are often not implemented in classrooms in ways that help immigrant students. And what takes place in the classroom has an immediate effect on the child's experiences, behaviors, and developing attitudes.

## Classroom Engagement

When an immigrant child finally sits at her desk in her new classroom, a world of possibilities can open. In some classrooms, immigrant children will flourish. During the course of our fieldwork, we have observed classrooms where teachers constructively engage their students' energies, optimism, and willingness to work hard. Children in these classrooms are surrounded by peers who recognize and support the crucial role of school in their future well-being. They are exposed to a curriculum that presents meaningful ideas in

creative ways, and they have access to instructional technologies and other up-to-date classroom materials.

In other cases, we have found classrooms where teachers are resentful and feel burdened by their new charges, convey pessimism about the immigrant students' abilities to learn, and fail to engage them. In such classrooms, immigrant children come in contact with many peers who have given up on school and are regularly disruptive. "Classroom management techniques"—a euphemism for discipline—consume teachers' energies. Textbooks are either out-of-date or way above students' reading skills, and much of the class time is spent filling out dull and meaningless worksheets. In these classrooms students often are not engaged with their teachers or with the materials they are supposed to master. Over time, the outcomes are predictable. In the poignant words of Stanford researcher Guadalupe Valdéz, "During the course of the year, the eagerness of the newly arrived youngsters gave way to vacant expressions. The students who had looked forward eagerly to school in the United States were disappointed. Even *they* knew that they were not making much progress."[50]

Perhaps the most important challenge that takes place within the classroom is facilitating the child's ability to build on the cognitive skills that she brings with her to the new setting. Because most immigrant children arrive at the classroom with very limited English skills, cognitive competencies may be masked. While the student may be able to work at fairly advanced levels in her native language, her inability to speak English will make it difficult for her to cover the same materials in the new language. Many immigrant children in our study report feeling frustrated that they are now going over materials they had mastered in their native language long ago. A Central American high school student noted that while he was learning English, his teachers always asked "the same question—things you already know. So you don't learn new stuff." A middle-school Mexican boy expressed his frustration: "I am learning again what I already knew in Mexico and I get bored in class."

Some parents also express concerns that their children have not

been challenged in their new schools. A Chinese mother complained that her son was not being encouraged to learn new material, despite moving to one of the highest-ranked schools in the Boston area. "School is mainly a place for kids to interact with other kids. [My son] does not really learn much from his teachers." A Dominican father noted, "I think classes should be more challenging. Homework should be expected *and* corrected. Teachers should pay more attention to student's achievements. I would think that there are greater expectations for white American [students]."

As immigrant children progress in their acquisition of English skills, learning can accelerate. Over time, much will depend on whether the teacher can engage children who are often linguistically as well as culturally different from herself. A number of studies suggest that teachers who are able to teach in culturally relevant ways are better equipped to engage immigrant children and produce better results in learning, student morale, and classroom dynamics.[51]

In exploring the issue of culture in the classroom, three significant matters should be kept in mind. First is the issue of culturally and linguistically meaningful materials. If a child cannot understand, she will not be able to identify with and emotionally invest in a given topic; in such circumstances, meaningful learning cannot occur. Efforts to make curricular materials relevant to the social and cultural experiences of children engage interest and generate enthusiasm.

In a Boston area school, an extraordinarily gifted teacher introduced his newly arrived immigrant students to statistical concepts by developing a special project about immigration. They drew on their own immigrant experiences, which were then used to examine broad patterns in the history of immigration to the United States. Soon, young students were charting the mean number of immigrants arriving in the United States every year, the top countries of origin, and the main cities where immigrants tend to settle. Teachers who introduce cultural materials that provide a familiar mirror to their students will be rewarded by their enthusiasm and joy in learning.

A related theme is the issue of the discontinuities that immigrant children experience as they move from classrooms in their countries of origin to American classrooms. Beyond the obvious linguistic and curricular differences, children must learn to navigate in classrooms that are dominated by different cultural styles. Many immigrant children are used to classrooms that are highly structured and require cognitive and interpersonal practices that are quite different from what is expected in the typical American classroom. When visiting classrooms in countries where our informants come from, we witnessed children seated in symmetrically arranged rows facing the teacher, who stood at the front of the classroom, chalk in hand, making the children repeat in unison memorized materials. In such classrooms the authority of the teacher is unchallenged; in some cases corporal punishment is an ever-present threat.

When we asked children what they found different about American schools, many were quick to comment on the distinct classroom practices. A fifteen-year-old Chinese girl noted: "Here [in the United States] I am more open. I have the courage to raise my hand if I know something. If something funny happens I will laugh. I will talk in class. I did not dare do these things when I was in Canton." A nine-year-old Dominican boy told us: "There everybody was afraid of the teachers, but here we are not." A twelve-year-old Haitian boy wryly advised us: "In Haiti, they beat the kids in school . . . [Here] it is the teachers who get beat up, not the kids."

Classrooms in the United States are dominated, however superficially, by an ethos of egalitarianism and democracy. The immigrant child may initially come to experience the new social pace and structure as disorienting. In some classrooms, students are expected to address their teachers by their first names, a practice that many immigrant children and parents find incomprehensible. Cultural miscommunication easily ensues. Guadalupe Valdéz, in a study of immigrant children in a California school, found that immigrant children "who were used to teachers who are strict and who demand both silence and respect, had trouble reading the signals of those teachers who seem nice, who wanted to be liked, and who wanted to make learning fun."[52]

## School and Parent Relations

Just as the potential for miscommunication is ever present between teachers and students in the classroom, the relationships among teachers, staff, and parents are likewise quite complex and often reveal tensions and misunderstandings. While in general newly arrived immigrant parents tend to be positive about the schooling opportunities afforded to their children, there is one area where they hold deep reservations about the American system. Many, if not most, come to abhor the lack of discipline and respect they see in their children's new schools. American children are viewed as disrespectful of elders, and authority figures and teachers are considered weak and ineffectual in maintaining discipline and order.

There are other areas of conflict and misunderstanding based on differences in cultural expectations. In many cultural settings, there is a somewhat rigid social boundary separating the realm of school from the realm of home. In the United States, there is more fluidity and parents are expected to be active partners in their children's schooling. Teachers and administrators expect parents to participate in a host of social activities such as in Parent Teacher Associations, as volunteers in classrooms, and as fund-raisers. Parents are expected to be involved in school projects and homework assignments and to advocate for their children. When asked what she saw as her biggest challenge in dealing with immigrant parents, a charismatic principal replied, "They need to become *advocates* in their children's schooling."

Immigrant parents arrive with very different cultural models and expectations than those found among mainstream American parents. There are important cultural differences between groups; indeed the expectations of Haitian parents are quite different from those of Chinese parents. Nevertheless, there is a common denominator in the general attitudes and expectations among a broad range of immigrant parents. First, many immigrant parents believe that it is not their business to micromanage the schooling of their children. We have found a general belief among many immigrant parents that teachers are responsible for what goes on in school. This is true

among both high-status and low-status immigrant parents. Many parents note that it would be presumptuous for them to second-guess teachers' decisions and behaviors. Second, these beliefs tend to be compounded by the fact that immigrants, as social outsiders, feel less secure about questioning the judgment of school authorities. This is especially true for parents who have themselves had little formal schooling and are thus less savvy about the culture of "going to school."

Beyond these cultural differences, immediate social factors constrain how present many immigrant parents can be in their children's schools. For parents working two or three jobs, it is simply impossible to attend school activities in the middle of the day as teachers often expect. Lack of English skills among many immigrant parents makes the expected participation in school activities quite problematic. Lower-status immigrant parents with little formal schooling may feel self-conscious and socially uncomfortable when interacting with authority figures in schools. Undocumented parents must overcome other barriers; the ever-present fear of being caught by the INS is sometimes generalized to all authorities, including school personnel.

Many teachers interpret the general "hands-off" approach to schooling among many immigrant parents as lack of interest in the child's school progress. Nothing could be further from the truth. As we have already suggested, for the vast majority of immigrant parents the opportunities afforded by schooling in the new country are a highly valued gift.

In fact, for many immigrant parents, their admiration and trust of the schools turn out to be double-edged. Some immigrant parents, especially those escaping very poor and violence-ridden countries, come to believe that their children are succeeding in school simply because they are able to attend school daily without the interruptions brought about by warfare or lack of funding. For others, the fact that school is free and children are given books and sometimes breakfast and lunch is proof positive that they live in a bountiful country where opportunities will be provided for their children.

## Parental Savvy about School Differences

While early on immigrant parents tend to become intoxicated with the prospects that schooling seems to provide their children, over time they may develop a more sober understanding. Their initial anxieties and ambivalence about discipline become more generalized. Parents who begin to focus more attentively on what is happening in schools worry that their children are going over materials they had learned years ago. Over time, as knowledge circulates through immigrant networks, parents are better able to understand the finer distinctions between types of schools as well as types of educational programs within schools and the different paths they lead to. At this point, immigrant parents who can afford to will move to better districts and will enroll their children in schools that promise them a better program of study. Others begin to worry about making sure that their children are taking the right courses that will get them into a good college.

Herein lies the critical role that parents can and indeed must learn to play in the education of their children. Many immigrant parents will discover that it is dangerous to put too much trust in an educational system that produces such uneven results. The very best and the very worst that American schooling has to offer can be found within a thirty-mile radius of most major cities. Learning this information requires an active effort for newcomers.

In order to gain access to better educational opportunities for their children, parents must learn the new rules of engagement in a very complex, high-stakes game. They need to know things that middle-class college-educated parents take for granted: the difference between college-track and non-college-track courses, preparing for the PSAT and SAT, differences in opportunities afforded by attending different colleges (junior colleges, four-year colleges, and universities), how to write a college application essay, and how to access financial aid.

In short, immigrant students and their parents must learn about the educational requirements for various careers as well as how to

access that education in the new land. Guidance counselors should play a major role in this regard, but as it stands today, they often do not. Caseloads for guidance counselors are staggeringly large, and funding is inadequate. Further, many guidance counselors are out of touch with the realities of the new economy. They frequently misinterpret linguistic difficulties as indicating a lack of intelligence or "college potential" and track immigrant students into non-college course sequences. Even high-achieving immigrant students are sometimes locked out of the better colleges either by being overlooked or through active subversion by their guidance counselors. We have been told by Ivy League affirmative action recruiters that some guidance counselors even act as gatekeepers by writing negative evaluations of even their gifted and hard-working immigrant students.

Mastering the rules of the new game is an essential ingredient of parental empowerment, but in some cases it is not enough. The structural barriers of poor, crowded, and violent schools with no meaningful curriculum or pedagogy are for many, especially low-status immigrants, simply too much to overcome. Massive investment in troubled schools is needed to update materials, properly train and supervise certified teachers, shrink classroom size, and make teachers and administrators more accountable to the students—and families—they serve. Providing culturally sensitive information to immigrant families about how they can ensure that their children will receive a solid education clearly should be a policy goal.

While many immigrant children face serious obstacles in their schooling, their optimism, positive attitudes, and willingness to work hard in many cases act as a powerful counterforce even in less than optimal schools. Immigrant families, as a rule, strongly believe in the importance of schooling. And research suggests that parents can make a tremendous difference.[53]

A charismatic mentor can also play a decisive role. We have seen how a caring baseball coach who explicitly instructs his Dominican protégés in the "rules of the game" (both in the field and in life)

made an immense difference in the careers of his immigrant students.

Finally, let us never underestimate the powerful influence a teacher can have in a child's life. Albert Camus, himself an immigrant, grew up in a poor neighborhood in Algiers, without a father and with a deaf and mute mother. He went on to write one of the most widely celebrated novels of the twentieth century. A few months after receiving the Nobel Prize for literature in 1957, he wrote to his teacher Monsieur Germain:

> I let the commotion around me these days subside a bit before speaking to you from the bottom of my heart. I have just been given far too great an honor, one I neither sought nor solicited. But when I heard the news, my first thought, after my mother, was of you. Without you, without the affectionate hand you extended to the small poor child that I was, without your teaching, and your example, none of this would have happened. I don't make too much of this sort of honor. But at least it gives me an opportunity to tell you what you have been and still are for me, and to assure you that your efforts, your work, and the generous heart you put into it still live in one of your little schoolboys who, despite the years, has never stopped being your grateful pupil. I embrace you with all my heart.[54]