

Moving On: The Transition Out of High School for Children of Immigrants and Immigrant Children

Higher levels of educational attainment are becoming increasingly important for long term occupational success. As industry continues to shift from a manufacturing base to a service sector economy, jobs become unavailable to workers without high school degrees (Landale, Oropesa and Llanes 1998, Perlmann and Waldinger 1997, Perriera, Harris and Lee 2006). Having a job, any job, is a primary means to obtaining economic security as well as emotional well-being. There is a vast difference, however, between having a job that provides an hourly or minimum wage, and having a job that provides opportunities for monetary and professional advancement. Unstable jobs without benefits or security disadvantage the people who perform these jobs (Kalleberg, Reskin, and Hudson 2000). If immigrants and their children hope to achieve socioeconomic improvement over time, it is increasingly important that they are able to access not only high school education, but also higher education.

While many studies of immigrant and second and third generation youth examine high school drop out rates (Driscoll 1999, Fry 2007, Hirschman 2001, Landale, Oropesa, and Llanes 1998, Perreira, Harris and Lee 2006) and others examine achievement and performance while in high school (Kao and Tienda 1995, Pong and Hao 2007), far fewer studies examine the processes through which students transitioning out of high school chose to pursue higher education, labor market opportunities, or both (one notable exception is Fry and Lowell 2002). As success and real socioeconomic advancement in the present day labor market depend not only on high school graduation but also on pursuits of higher education or training, it is imperative that we gain a better understanding of the factors that influence the transition out of high school for adolescent

immigrants and children of immigrants. By examining the familial, community, and school contexts for first, second and, third + generation immigrant youth, I will be able to examine various factors influencing post-secondary school achievement.

According to the traditional assimilation model (Gordon 1964), more time in the host society would predict easier entrance into its institutions, such as institutions of higher learning. Although Portes and Rumbaut (2001) and Portes and Zhou (1993) make a compelling case for segmented assimilation that positions many 2nd and 3rd generations to downwardly assimilate due inner-city geographic location, and poor schooling and limited economic opportunities within their communities, first generation children of immigrants who lack legal documentation face additional barriers that their citizen peers do not confront. Portes and colleagues stress poor schooling or disinterest in school as main factor contributing to downward assimilation (Portes and Rumbaut 2001, Portes and Zhou 1993). Even if we accept Alba and Nee's (2003) model of new assimilation which allows for distinct avenues of assimilation into various sectors of a diverse society, access to education would certainly help all groups assimilate in an upwardly mobile direction.

Undocumented youth, particularly those who arrived in the U.S. as young children, are often similar to their 2nd generation peers in terms of language ability and socioeconomic status. Many undocumented youth in the 1.5 or 1.75 generations thereby have similar, or only slightly lower, educational outcomes as their 2nd generation peers in similar contexts (Fry and Lowell 2002, Abrego 2006). In fact, many do not have to confront the fact that they are undocumented until they are faced with the severe limits that they face in terms of accessing higher education or advancing within the job market (Suárez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 2001). It is estimated that 65,000 undocumented

immigrants graduate from high school every year (Passel 2003). While it is difficult to obtain data of documentation status in longitudinal surveys, we can at least obtain valuable information about how citizenship status impacts achievement beyond high school.

Both citizen and non-citizen children of immigrants draw on various types of capital and social networks to improve their well being. Although previous studies have identified the importance of familial, school, and community contexts, some do a far better job of operationalizing these concepts than others. Pong and Hao's analysis of family context, for example, over simplifies parental involvement and monitoring to a single versus married parent dichotomy. While Perriera, Harris and Lee (2006) more thoroughly test various kinds of capital, their analysis does not extend beyond high school. Furthermore, they do not, presumably due to data constraints, differentiate between citizen and non-citizen youth nor do they carefully examine distinctions within the first generation. Although they distinguish between immigrant youth who arrived before and after age six, other studies have shown major distinctions within the first generation to exist for immigrants who arrived before age 13 (Fry and Lowell 2007). One study went even further and differentiated among the 1.75 (arrival before age 6), 1.5 (arrival before age 13), and 1.25 (arrival between age 13 and 17) immigrant generations (Landale, Oropesa, and Llanes 1998). Age at arrival is an important predictor of successful incorporation and achievement, and should be examined in full detail.

Although previous studies have carefully examined generational status, most do not look at citizenship status. While citizenship status is not a proxy for documentation status, citizens are generally more acculturated and afforded easier access to resources

than non-citizens. If first generation non-citizen youth live in economically isolated areas with few job opportunities, they are doubly disadvantaged in terms of attempting to advance educationally or occupationally. If they live in suburban or rural areas, they may not be able to benefit as much as their citizen peers from community, school, or familial capital. It is worthwhile, therefore, to consider both citizenship and generation status in analyzing competing educational and labor market outcomes as children of immigrants and immigrant teens and young adults transition out of high school.

The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY 97) data affords a unique opportunity to analyze transitions out of high school for children of immigrants and immigrant adolescents. Using multinomial logistic regression, I intend to analyze the impacts of family, school, and community context, as well as generation and citizenship status to determine the likelihood of pursuing a job, higher education, or both. In addition to the examining the likelihood of entering higher education versus the labor market, the data will allow me to test if the students are transitioning onto 2 yr or 4 yr institutions, and in what types of employment they work. The data are rich in the areas of familial characteristics including parent/child relationships and interactions, employment and income history, high school and community characteristics, and geographic information.

In the year 2000, 6% of the school aged population in the U.S. was foreign born while 14% had at least one foreign born parent (Fry 2007). As these percentages continue to grow, it will become increasingly important to identify the factors contributing to success for children of immigrants not only within high school, but also beyond high school as these children become adult members of U.S. society. The results

of this study will greatly contribute to the understanding of the school-to-work transition for 1st, 2nd and 3rd generation immigrant youth, as well as to the various factors impeding or facilitating the advancement of immigrant youth as they transition out of high school.

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