

THE EFFECT OF BACKGROUND ON STUDENT PERFORMANCE

Whereas in the 1960s higher education was a privilege, today the vast majority of individuals in developed countries complete secondary education and a third hold a degree in tertiary education (OECD 2011). In line with growing evidence that education is crucial for economic and social development, countries improved their educational systems. One important goal of educational systems today is to provide all students with equal learning opportunities. The impact of a student's socio-economic, and particularly migration, background on his or her performance should be reduced to a minimum in order to maximize the human capital of a country, and thereby its growth potential.

Figure 1 and 2 focus on the relationship between student performance and immigration status. They show that a migration background can often explain performance differences, but the size of its impact varies strongly across countries.

Figure 1 shows the average difference in reading performance of students with and without an immigrant background. The OECD (2011) defines students with an immigrant background as students who are foreign-born and whose parents are also foreign-born ("first-generation immigrants"); or those who were born in the country of assessment, but have foreign-born parents ("second-generation immigrants"). The average reading performance is measured by the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) survey of the OECD, which tests young people's skills in all OECD countries every three years.

According to Figure 1, in most countries students with no immigrant background tend to outperform students with an immigrant background. The exceptions are Hungary and Australia, where average reading performance is slightly higher for students with an immigrant background.

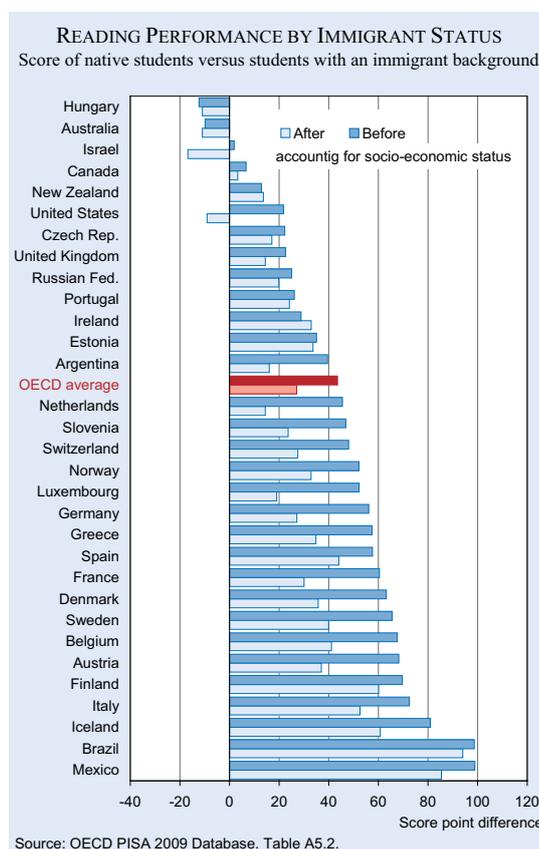
Moreover, the performance gap varies greatly between countries. On OECD average, students with an immigrant background achieve a score that is 44 points lower than that of non-immigrant students across OECD countries. With the average progress of one school year equaling 39 points on the PISA

reading scale, this means that immigrant students lag more than one school year behind their non-immigrant peers in terms of reading skills (OECD 2011). The greatest performance gaps between non-immigrant students and their immigrant peers are evident in Mexico and Brazil.

Part of the performance gap between students with and without an immigrant background, can be explained by other socio-economic factors. Figure 2 shows the score point difference of students with and without an immigrant background before and after taking socio-economic background into account. The measure of socio-economic background is the "PISA index of social, cultural and economic status", which considers the parents' education and occupation and the students' home possessions (OECD 2011).

Accounting for socio-economic background reduces the performance gap of students with immigrant background in comparison to their non-immigrant peers from 44 to 27 score points on OECD average. In the majority of countries students without an immigrant background still achieve better reading test scores than their immigrant peers, even after taking socio-economic background into account.

Figure 1



The persistence of the performance gap after accounting for the socio-economic back-ground of students indicates that lower achievements in school by students with migration background can be directly attributed to their immigrant status (OECD 2011).

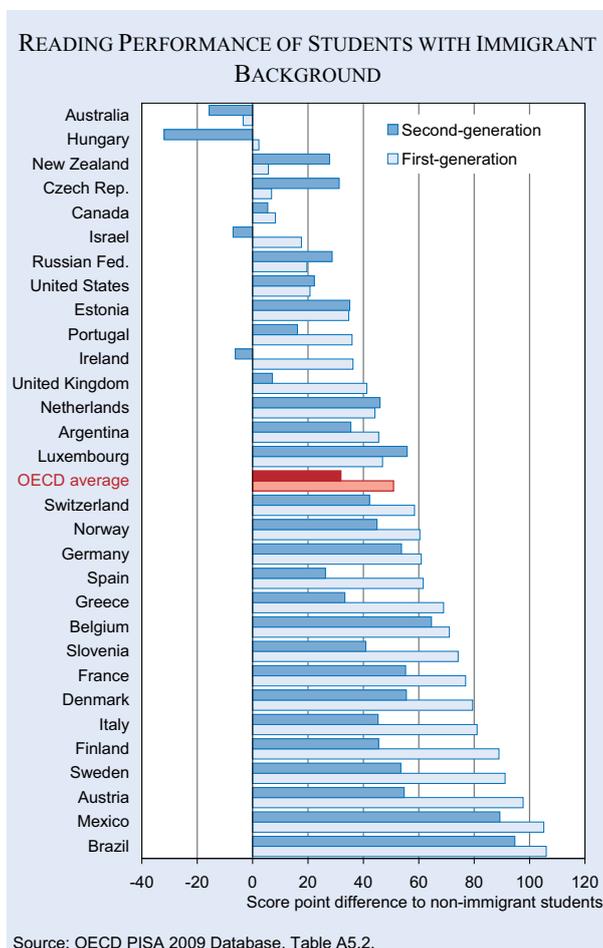
Figure 2 shows that, on the whole, second-generation immigrants tend to have a lower reading performance gap to non-immigrant students than first-generation immigrants. In Australia, Hungary, Israel and Ireland second-generation students even outperform their non-immigrant peers. In seven countries, however, second-generation immigrants achieve lower test scores than first-generation immigrants. This gap is particularly large in New Zealand and the Czech Republic. On OECD average the test scores of first-generation students is 51 points below those of students without immigrant back-ground. For second-generation students the average gap is only 33 score points

While the educational experience of first-generation immigrants abroad may explain part of their performance lag of almost one and a half school years, second-generation immigrants seem to have benefited from the educational system of their host country (OECD 2011). Therefore, the OECD concludes that differences between first and second generation immigrants might reflect the success of integration policies and signal social mobility, but could also be due to the varying characteristics of families participating in different immigration waves.

The results of these figures show that countries still need to improve both their education and their integration policies. Even after controlling for socio-economic back-ground, the performance gap between immigrant and non-immigrant students is very large in most countries. With the exception of a few countries, this performance gap still persists among second-generation immigrants.

K.D.

Figure 2



Reference

OECD (2011), Education at a Glance 2011: OECD Indicators, OECD Publishing, http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/education-at-a-glance_19991487.