PISA’S POTENTIAL FOR ANALYSES OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS’ EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS

The German Case

INTRODUCTION

Migration is a universal reality. The United Nations estimated that, in 2010, approximately every tenth person living in the more developed regions of the world was born in another country (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UN DESA], 2009). Accordingly, the integration of immigrants and their descendants is of considerable concern worldwide. School systems play a central role in the integration process. They are in charge of developing knowledge and skills relevant for participation in the receiving countries’ economic and socio-political systems, they grant school leaving certificates channelling career options, and they help to transmit norms and values relevant for social cohesion.

Immigrant students lag behind their peers from native families in terms of achievement and school success in many countries. In Germany, for instance, students from immigrant families are much more likely to quit school without a school leaving certificate and much less likely to reach the general qualification for university admission (“Abitur”) than students from native families (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2010). For a long time, the conditions of these disparities were poorly understood. Large-scale assessment studies on student achievement, such as PISA, have advanced our understanding of immigrant students’ educational disadvantage considerably. The present article illustrates this for the German case. We start by describing what was known about the situation of immigrant students in the German school system before PISA. Subsequently, we discuss how the study improved our understanding of this situation. The final section of the article addresses the types of questions PISA cannot answer. As a monitoring device, studies like PISA are powerful tools for identifying strengths and weaknesses of school systems and possible target points for interventions. However, it is impossible to infer what measures should be taken to remedy the problems identified by the data.

THE STATE OF KNOWLEDGE BEFORE PISA

Before PISA and other international large-scale assessment studies such as TIMMS (Third International Mathematics and Science Study) or PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) were carried out, little was known about the outcomes of the German school system in general, and about the situation of
immigrant students in particular. Prior to these studies, analyses exploring the situation of immigrant students had to rely on data bases with limited potential in this regard. Until 2005, the official statistics (Microcensus) only recorded respondents’ nationality, so that it was impossible to identify naturalized immigrants (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2006). Similarly, the German Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP), which was introduced in 1984, failed to collect comprehensive information on the migration background of its participants for a long time. Before 2001, immigrants born in Germany and possessing German citizenship could not be identified reliably in the data set (Lohmann, Spieß, Groh-Samberg & Schupp, 2008). Moreover, although the SOEP oversampled immigrants from five countries from its start in 1984 and, in 1994, added a sample of immigrants who had migrated to Germany after 1984, immigrants from other countries as well as recent migrants are not sufficiently represented in the data set. In addition, the SOEP focuses on households as sampling units and the sample sizes of children and adolescents living in these households within each cohort are too small for in-depth analyses.

Even more importantly, none of the data sets available in Germany before large-scale assessment studies were carried out contained information on students’ levels of achievement. In order to explore determinants of disparities in educational success between immigrant students and students without an immigrant background, however, such information is essential. Moreover, international comparisons of disparities in school success need to be based on achievement data. As school leaving certificates vary across countries, it is difficult to compare them internationally.

PISA provides representative data on students’ achievement levels in reading, mathematics, and science for a large number of countries. The study also collects background information related to migration, such as students’ age at the time they moved to the receiving country, the first language they learned as a child, and the languages they speak at home. In addition, the assessments include measures of students’ school-related motivation, attitudes, and aspirations. The assessment design makes it possible to compare the magnitude of disparities between immigrant students and students from native families internationally and to explore the relative role of potential determinants of immigrant students’ achievement within and – to a more limited extent – between countries.

In the following section we first describe what Germany has learned from PISA about the size and composition of immigrant student groups in secondary schools. After a short summary of the knowledge we have gained about the determinants of these students’ disadvantages in terms of track attendance, the section presents findings on potential causes of achievement differences between students from immigrant families and students from native families at different levels of analysis.

**PISA’S POTENTIAL: WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED FROM PISA ABOUT IMMIGRANT STUDENTS’ EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGES**

*Immigrant students in Germany*

At present, approximately one fifth of the population in Germany has an immigration background (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2010). Germany’s immigrant