

**Educational attainment of children of immigrants: a transatlantic  
comparison of family resources and school context**

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## **Educational attainment of children of immigrants: a transatlantic comparison of family resources and school context**

### *Abstract*

In this paper I focus on the importance of family resources and school context for the educational attainment of children of immigrants in two different institutional settings. I use data on 3,200 young adults aged between 18 and 32 years of age in an urban area in the Netherlands and the United States. In total seven ethnic groups are included. First, a comparison of the educational attainment of children of immigrants and natives in Amsterdam/Rotterdam and New York City is made. Second, I question how and to what extent the educational attainment of immigrant and native youth is shaped by family resources and school context in these different urban settings. My findings show that socio-economic and demographic family characteristics are of main importance for all groups and in both urban settings. In addition, I find that characteristics of the schooling career are of similar importance in both urban contexts.

*Key words:* children of immigrants, schooling, international comparison, educational attainment, family

Education provides one of the main opportunities for integrating children of immigrants into society. Children of immigrants in both the US and the Netherlands are found to reach on average lower levels of education (Crul, 2007; Tolsma, Coenders & Lubbers, 2007). This is in particular reported for Moroccans in the Netherlands and Dominicans in the US (De Valk & Crul, 2007; Kasinitz et al., 2008). While educational attainment of children of immigrants has been studied in the literature, the relative importance of family and schooling resources in different institutional contexts has rarely been studied. Educational attainment is studied as one of the core aspects in sociological research on social mobility. A broad range of studies has covered the educational levels students attain (Crul & Vermeulen, 2006), their test scores (Levels & Dronkers, 2007), and the importance of background characteristics of parents (Bauer & Riphahn, 2007; Dustmann, 2004; Stocke, 2007). These issues have been studied for individual countries, but more and more also at a cross-national level (Entorf & Minoiu, 2005; OECD, 2006). Research, in particular in North-America, increasingly includes immigrants and their offspring. Nevertheless, still less is known on how children of immigrants fare in schools and the factors that affect their school outcomes. It is on the one hand often suggested that immigrant parents may have more limited influence on their children's outcomes because of their arrival in a new society. At the other hand many do migrate in order to provide their children better educational opportunities, suggesting that immigrant parents would have a significant role in their children's education. This also raises the question how important parent's role is compared to general school effects. Different studies show the importance of school and neighborhood characteristics in the educational outcome of children (Entorf & Lauk, 2008; Fekjaer & Birkelund, 2006; Felouzis, 2003; Hanushek & Woessmann, 2006; Szulkin & Jonsson, 2006). Though this may apply to all children, it can affect children of immigrants in particular as they more often live in disadvantaged neighborhoods and attend public rather than private schooling. In this paper I question how the effects of school context relate to the importance of parents for the educational attainment of children of immigrant and native origin. I do so by focusing on two large immigrant receiving cities in the US and the Netherlands: New York City and Amsterdam. By comparing these two different cities I am able to compare the effects of parents and schools in different settings and disentangle its importance in the different school systems as well. I focus my study on Dominican

young adults in NYC and Moroccan young adults in Amsterdam but also include five other ethnic groups for comparison.

The aim of the paper is thus threefold: I want to provide insight in the educational attainment of children of immigrants and compare them to those of their native born compatriots. Second, I question what the role of parents and school characteristics are for educational attainment among children with different origins. And third I ascertain whether effects of parental background and school are the same in both cities and for all groups.

### *Data and methods*

Two survey datasets are used in the current study. We include information from the *Second Generation in Metropolitan New York* study (ISGMNY) and the Dutch sample of the survey *Towards Integration of the European Second generation* (TIES). The ISMNY survey was carried out in 1998-1999 and includes 3,415 respondents living in the larger New York City area. Second generation young adults from five different immigrant groups were included in the survey. I focus my analyses on the Dominicans in the sample and include native Whites, native Blacks and Puerto Ricans for reasons of comparison. The TIES study sampled second generation Moroccans, Turks and native Dutch in the Dutch cities of Rotterdam and Amsterdam. In total 1,500 young adults are interviewed in TIES.

Respondents in both surveys were young adults and I confine my analyses to those between the ages of 18 and 32 years old. Both surveys covered a wide range of domains of young adults' lives like their family background, educational background, work experience, partner relations, and experienced discrimination. Despite the overall similarities in the questionnaire used in both surveys, not all information is gathered at both sides nor is all information easily comparable due to the specific situations in the two urban areas at both sides of the Atlantic. In order to be able to draw as much complete comparisons as possible data from The ISGMNY and TIES data were pooled for analyses in order to allow for a direct testing of the importance of family and individual schooling resources for children of immigrants in both urban settings.

The main interest of my study is the educational attainment of children of immigrants in different settings. Given the differences in the educational systems of NYC and the Netherlands it is hard to directly compare the educational outcomes based on the

highest level of schooling attained. Therefore, based on the educational outcomes the percentile scores are determined for each of the groups. I distinguish between low (lowest 25 per cent), middle (between 25 and 75 per cent) and high (above 75 per cent) achievers in both settings. Based on the individual school performance each individual is assigned to one of these three groups which is taken as the dependent variable in the multivariate analyses. Ordinal logistic regression is applied to study the effects of family resources and school context.

### *Preliminary findings*

My findings show that socio economic and demographic family characteristics are of main importance for all groups and in both urban settings. Furthermore, differences between the ethnic origin groups are explained by family composition effects implying that not including family characteristics results in an overestimation of the importance of immigrant origin. In addition, I find that characteristics of the schooling career are of similar importance in urban settings in both the US and the Netherlands. The analyses also point to a methodological issue. It is rather complex to compare educational outcomes of children of immigrants in different contexts. Measuring educational attainment as well as the meaning this has in the specific context is not straightforward. It is thus of main importance to further develop concepts that are useful in different settings.

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