Gauging impact of immigrant students

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Singapore has experienced rapid immigration growth over the last decade. Consequently, the composition of Singapore schools has also changed dramatically.

One question of interest to education stakeholders is whether this increased enrolment of first-generation immigrant children in schools will have an effect on the academic performance of native children. Native parents are naturally interested because they are concerned as to how well their children perform in school.

The question is of interest to policymakers, principals and teachers because the answers will provide crucial insights on how best to allocate immigrant students across schools and classes.

Many people may be inclined to believe that existing in an environment with many immigrant students will hurt one's academic performance. This is understandable. After all, immigrant students often possess a weaker command of the language of instruction and teachers may allow the pace of instruction to accommodate them. Teachers may also alter their pedagogical methods, using less language-intensive methods to deliver their lessons. These may work to the detriment of students sharing the classes.

In fact, the majority of studies in the literature—most of which are country-specific—have found immigrant students to have a negligible influence on the achievements of peers. Comparing students of the same gender, race, socioeconomic background and prior academic achievement, these studies specifically find that students do not show any standardized achievement trends when placed in a learning environment with more immigrant students.

What is often overlooked, however, are the gains which might be reaped from having immigrant classmates.

For starters, students learning with immigrant classmates might be able to benefit from exposure to more diverse perspectives since immigrants potentially bring different views to classroom discussions. Furthermore, if immigrant children are better academically or if they possess more positive attributes towards education, then socialisation might result in native children acquiring such positive qualities.

Indeed, a number of studies which seek to compare the performance of immigrant and native students have found that immigrant students in high-skilled migration countries, such as Australia, sometimes outperform native students.

Findings from a recent study I did suggest that greater exposure to immigrant students actually has a positive impact on the academic achievements of native students in Australia. Specifically, I found that within a school, students in grade levels with a larger share of immigrants tend to do better academically, even after controlling for a host of factors influencing student achievement.

The question of how immigrant students affect their peers, therefore, depends on the two opposing effects. The negative effects of exposure outweigh the positive effects, thus the resultant effect of having immigrant classmates would be negative.

However, if the converse is true, then immigrant students might actually add the achievements of their peers. An increase in the share of immigrant peers would affect these relative benefits costs and, therefore, the way that native students perform. Ultimately, how an increase in the share of immigrant classmates affects the academic achievement of native students in Singapore cannot be deterred by economic theory (unfortunately), but one thing is certain—that effect need not be adverse. Hence, the question becomes an empirical one, which requires data analysis.

One potentially reliable way to empirically evaluate the effect of exposure to immigrant peers is to conduct an experiment. A simple recipe is as follows:

- Obtain a random sample of schools in Singapore.
- Within each school, randomly assign students both native and foreign— to different classes.
- Allow students to interact and learn in their assigned classes for a period of time.
- At the end of the period, administer a standardised achievement test to students.

If, within a school, native students in classes with a larger share of immigrant students perform significantly better statistically, then this would be indicative of greater exposure to immigrants having a negative impact. The converse is true as well. Of course, such experiments are easier said than done.

In practice, researchers need to ensure that students remain in their assigned classes throughout the course of the experiment. Otherwise, student movements, whether across classes or schools, could potentially give rise to misleading results.

Has such an experiment ever been done in Singapore? Unfortunately no (the cost of running one is high). In fact, I am unaware of any local-based studies purporting to investigate the effects of having immigrant peers.

However, research in this area may be timely now, given the large and increasing presence of immigrant children in Singapore schools. The government’s drive to attract more intelligent workers from abroad is making Singapore a more diverse country. It is only a matter of time before these trends result in more and more immigrants in our schools.

As such, we need to study the effects of such a trend to see how we can best help native students and how we can best help the immigrant students themselves.

Children learning with immigrant classmates might be able to benefit from exposure to more diverse perspectives since immigrants potentially bring different views to classroom discussions. Furthermore, if immigrants possess more positive attitudes towards education, then socialisation might result in native children also acquiring them.

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