An empirical examination of data has found that immigrant students in Singapore fare better than native students. In a way, this is reassuring because it suggests that immigrants do not dilute the quality of the peer group which native children are exposed to. Consequently, exposure to immigrant peers is unlikely to hurt native children.

Ask: NUS

Immigrants outdo native students in studies

Kelvin Seah
Kah Cheng
For The Straits Times

0.31 and 0.40 is huge. A difference in test scores of between 0.30 and 0.40 standardised point is comparable to a person having approximately one additional year of schooling.

I next investigate whether immigrants would have performed even better relative to natives had they possessed the same home language. Accounting for differences in home-language, the achievement gap between immigrants and natives increase to 0.43, 0.41 and 0.35 standardised point respectively for maths, science and reading, affirming the idea that immigrant students would have performed even better if not for their English-language deficiencies.

What could explain the superior performance of immigrant students? To investigate this, I control for differences in students’ socio-economic characteristics, as measured by parents’ education levels, employment status and material possessions as well as students’ age, gender and family structure. Find that the achievement gap between immigrants and natives shrink dramatically, by more than half. Specifically, after adjusting for differences in these characteristics, immigrant students now outperform native students by 0.17 and 0.12 standardised point in maths and science; in fact, when it comes to reading, there is no longer evidence that immigrants and natives perform any differently. This confirms that a major reason for the superior performance of immigrant students is their better socio-economic backgrounds. It is unclear what accounts for the remaining immigrant-native differential in maths and science, although possible reasons include the better learning attitudes of immigrant students, their more effective learning methods, or other differences in socio-economic characteristics between immigrant and native students which the data does not capture.

The fact that the achievement gaps between students in Singapore fare better than native students is, in some sense, reassuring because it suggests that immigrants do not dilute the quality of the peer group which native children are exposed to. Consequently, exposure of immigrant students is unlikely to hurt native children. If anything, it might actually enhance their achievement. More importantly, the results indicate that immigrant children in Singapore are doing well academically. Consequently, there seems to be little urgency, at least for now, to have some form of equalisation programme to further support the academic performance of immigrant students.

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The writer is a lecturer in the Department of Economics, National University of Singapore. This is a monthly series by the NUS Department of Economics. Each month, a panel will address a topical issue. If you have a burning question on socioeconomics, please email stopinion@spoh.com.sg with 'AskNUS' in the subject field.