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IMMIGRANT YOUTH IN PORTUGAL: INSIGHTS FROM PISA 2022

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Among PISA-participating OECD countries, Portugal experienced the largest increase in the share of students with an immigrant background between the 2018 and 2022 PISA assessments, rising from 7% to 11% (OECD, 2023). Using the 2022 PISA data, this policy paper examines immigrant-native gaps in Portugal across three key domains: (i) academic achievement (mathematics, science, reading); (ii) life satisfaction, and (iii) exposure to bullying.

The 2022 PISA data for Portugal indicates that first-generation immigrants (i.e., students born outside Portugal with two foreign-born parents) constitute 7% of the student sample, while second-generation immigrants (i.e., students born in Portugal with two foreign-born parents) account for an additional 4%. Approximately 73% of immigrant students report speaking Portuguese at home most of the time, reflecting the distribution of their countries of origin. Among first-generation immigrants, around 75% were born in Brazil or Portuguese-speaking African countries, while approximately 61% of second-generation immigrants have at least one parent born in these countries. A comparison of immigrant and native students' background characteristics shows that, on average, immigrant students come from larger families and have lower socioeconomic status. Moreover, immigrant students are unevenly distributed across regions, with roughly 50% concentrated in the Lisbon metropolitan area.

Academic Performance: Bridging the Immigrant-Native Gap

The results reveal that the raw mean test score gaps in mathematics, science, and reading are 32, 23, and 22 points, respectively, in favor of native students. Notably, these gaps are more pronounced for first-generation immigrants compared to second-generation immigrants. This initial disparity raises concerns about the integration and academic opportunities available to immigrant students. However, after controlling for student characteristics (i.e., gender, number of siblings, language spoken at home, and the economic, social, and cultural status (ESCS) index) as well as school fixed effects, the test score gaps narrow significantly. Specifically, the gap in mathematics decreases to 7 points, while the gaps in science and reading become statistically insignificant.

These findings have significant policy implications:

- I. Addressing Socioeconomic Disadvantage:** The strong and positive association between the ESCS index and test scores highlights the critical role of socioeconomic background in educational outcomes. Policies that address socioeconomic disparities among all students, including immigrants, are essential. Financial assistance and the provision of educational resources for disadvantaged families can promote more equitable educational opportunities for both immigrant and native students, thereby helping to narrow the achievement gap.
- II. Prioritizing Language Support:** The positive influence of speaking Portuguese at home on test scores across all subjects underscores the importance of comprehensive and effective language support programs for immigrant students, particularly first-generation immigrants from non-Portuguese-speaking countries, who are more likely to speak a different language at home.
- III. Ensuring Equitable School Resources and Quality:** The significance of school fixed effects in explaining test scores suggests that disparities in school resources and the overall learning environment may contribute to raw achievement gaps. To address these disparities, policies should focus on ensuring the equitable distribution of resources, strengthening teacher professional development in diverse classrooms, and promoting inclusive pedagogical practices across all schools.

Subjective Well-being and Exposure to Bullying: Fostering Inclusive School Environments

In the 2022 PISA background questionnaire, students rated their life satisfaction on a scale from 0 (not at all satisfied) to 10 (completely satisfied) in response to the question:

“Overall, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?”

Our empirical findings show that the raw immigrant-native gap in life satisfaction is statistically significant and in favor of native students. When we control for gender, language spoken at home, average of PISA math, science and reading test scores, the ESCS index, and school fixed effects, the gap narrows but remains statistically significant. This result suggests that immigrant students may face challenges such as integration difficulties and cultural maladjustment, which can affect their feelings of social belonging.

Bullying victimization in adolescence can lead to long-term adverse mental health outcomes. In the PISA dataset, the student-level bullying index is created to measure the prevalence and frequency of bullying among students (OECD, 2024). Our findings indicate no statistically significant difference in exposure to bullying between second-generation immigrant and native students. However, first-generation immigrant students, on

average, report higher exposure to bullying than native students, even after controlling for gender, language spoken at home, average of PISA math, science and reading test scores, and the ESCS index and school fixed effects.

These findings call for policy interventions focused on creating more supportive and inclusive school environments:

- I. Investing in Mental Health and Well-being:** Recognizing the lower levels of life satisfaction among immigrant students, schools should invest in mental health services and programs that promote students' overall well-being. Key initiatives may involve providing access to school counselors and promoting a sense of belonging and cultural understanding within the school community.
- II. Strengthening Anti-Bullying Initiatives:** The higher rates of bullying experienced by first-generation immigrants call for targeted anti-bullying strategies that specifically address the vulnerabilities of immigrant students. These initiatives should focus on raising awareness about different types of bullying including relational and verbal bullying and promoting empathy and respect for diversity.

According to the 2022 PISA data for Portugal, significant disparities exist between immigrant and native students in academic achievement, subjective well-being, and exposure to bullying. First-generation immigrants face particularly pronounced challenges. While much of the academic gap can be attributed to socioeconomic factors and school environments, disparities in life satisfaction and bullying persist even after controlling for those factors. Our findings underscore the need for comprehensive, targeted policy interventions, including measures to address socioeconomic disadvantage, prioritize language support, ensure equitable school resources, invest in mental health initiatives, and strengthen anti-bullying programs.

References

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