

Does PISA Generate Better Policies for Better *Immigrant Lives*?

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One of the most prominent messages on the OECD's education [platform](#)¹ is the tagline “better policies for better lives”. This message is clearly visible below the OECD emblem and is featured on every page of their website. One might naturally wonder if and how PISA results have indeed been used to improve the lives of immigrant students around the world.

Along with my colleagues Don Klinger and Özge Bilgili, we examined this immigrant issue in a recent [Springer \(2018\)](#)² book. This volume featured leading academics from England, Germany, Italy, Sweden, Finland, Netherlands, Ireland, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Each national profile provided an overview of the student population; explained the trajectory of achievement results – primarily in relation to PISA; and discussed the effectiveness of policy responses that have been adopted to close achievement gaps between non-immigrant and immigrant students.

Why is migration and student achievement an important topic?

The future of nations and their ability to become inclusive and reflective societies is ultimately determined by their youth. And children with a migration background compose an increasingly important part of our societies. According to [United Na-](#)

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¹ <http://www.oecd.org/education>

² <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-319-74063-8>

tions Department of Economic and Social Affairs³ (UN DESA) data, the estimated number of international child immigrants (aged 19 years and under) rose from 28.7 million in 1990 to 36 million in 2017. In 2017, child immigrants accounted for 13.9% of the total immigrant population. Collectively, the present global context underscores the diverse challenges, particularly those related to lower educational outcomes in immigrant children, facing popular migrant destination countries in Europe, North America, and Australasia.

Is PISA a defensible measure to study this issue?

While many have criticized PISA as a measure of student achievement, this assessment does provide a fairly robust measure of comparative student performance across international jurisdictions. Moreover, the design of PISA enables further inter- and intra-national comparisons of sub-groups of students. PISA has allowed countries to examine achievement gaps for their immigrant children in relation to the international community and take active steps to address these performance disadvantages.

Are countries successfully closing migrant achievement gaps?

Our analyses suggest the profiled countries are having varying degrees of success in closing achievement gaps. Even in a nation such as Canada, which is one of the few jurisdictions to boast a performance advantage (meaning immigrant students outperform non-immigrant peers), significant differences were observed across its ten provincial education systems. Regional differences also figured prominently in the Italian context.

Overall, our work suggests that simple classifications of immigrant students (i.e., first- versus second-generation status) are insufficient in understanding this complex issue, and the PISA data provided the evidence for this conclusion. For example, performance differences in New Zealand appear to be more attributable to ethnic grouping than immigrant status, while in Australia immigrant children from East and Southeast Asia consistently had some of the highest levels of achievement. Our cross-cultural analyses using the PISA data indicate the increasing diversity of nations will require more diverse policy approaches that target specific sub-groups of students.

³ <https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/estimates17.asp>

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