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Acculturation Identities in the American Public Education System: Domain-Specific 'Separation' Strategies Among High-Skill Immigrants in the United States

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Abstract. Drawing on John Berry's seminal work in acculturation theory, this study employs focus group methodology to seek deeper insight into the education-specific acculturation process of high-skill immigrant parents in the United States as they help their children navigate the American public education system for maximum academic and professional achievement. Without attempts to generalize to the culturally diverse population of high-skill immigrants in America, findings suggest that high-skill immigrant parents may favor a separation strategy in the educational domain as they skeptically evaluate the structural arrangements of the egalitarian, child-centered public education system in the United States.

Keywords: *acculturation, identities, high-skill immigrants, public education system, US*

Introduction

The rapidly changing face of immigration to Western countries have had widespread implications in the economic, political and cultural spheres of both sending and receiving societies. Developments over the past decade illustrate a fundamental change in the nature of immigration to the United States. In 2011, the percentage of immigrants with a bachelor's degree surpassed the percentage of immigrants with less than a high school education for the first time in the country's history (Camarita, 2012). Relative to the native population, new arrivals are more likely to have at least a college education compared to the native population and to possess skills suited for the information-based economy of western societies. This profile often includes college-educated individuals originating from relatively well-to-do echelons of their countries of origin and who often arrive in the United States for graduate school or high-skill employment.

High-skill immigrants have often been described as great contributors to western economies that need them to fill positions for which a sufficiently large pool of native-born candidates is not available (Kaushal, 2006) As employers struggle to

hire for certain positions, policy makers have been quick to point out that immigrants bring skill sets that are currently critical for western economies, especially in projected growth industries such as construction and health care. In the US, it has been estimated that over 230,000 science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) jobs requiring an advanced degree would be left unfilled by 2020 even if every U.S.-born STEM graduate were to finds a job in their field.

Not only are western countries in a global competition to attract and retain human capital but because populations in these countries are rapidly aging, the potential of more unfilled jobs and talent shortages is expected to impede necessary economic growth. Finally, immigrants with language skills and international linkages are believed to open new, global business and trade opportunities that are highly desirable for national economies with global ties. Immigrants are now today twice as likely to found businesses as their native-born counterparts and are responsible for more than 25% of all new business creation and related job growth (Fairlie, 2015) While some of these immigrant-led businesses are next-generation startups and small businesses, many top the charts among America's largest companies. Currently, more than 40 percent of Fortune 500 companies were founded by immigrants or the children of immigrants (Minier, 2017). Despite ample critiques of the desirability of unlimited economic growth (Bartolini, 2019; Liodakis, 2018), little attention has been paid to structural, cultural, institutional and other internal factors that may explain why contemporary western educational systems fail to socialize, educate and train their native-born populations in ways that can ensure a large enough pool of qualified candidates for the 21st century job market.

While much research has been conducted on high-skill immigrants' direct contributions to the economy in their worker roles, less attention has been paid to their indirect contributions in their parental roles as co-educators, particularly when compared to native parenting styles. Children of first generation high-skill immigrants have been repeatedly recognized for their impressive academic and professional achievements (Feliciano, 2017). They tend to outperform academically children of native-born parents from similar socio-economic backgrounds and are more likely to opt for high-demand majors such as STEM (Chachashvili-Bolotin, 2019). Explanations for these outcomes include high-skill immigrant parents' high expectations of children's academic performance and the relatively advantageous socio-economic position of the immigrant family in the country of origins (Crul,2017); however, even when controlling for socio-economic status, children of high-skill

immigrants tend to outperform American-born children as long as language-related limitations are not involved (Suárez-Orozco, 2009).

A closer examination of high skill immigrants' socio-economic status reveals that while many such immigrants are indeed employed in relatively high-status, professional positions, their own family backgrounds can be of relatively modest origins, indicative of strong intergenerational mobility from grandparent to parent that began in the country of origin (Ho, 2019). Evidence abounds that high-skill immigrants often arrive in the US as graduates of universities from their own countries of origin, ready to pursue graduate degrees. Yet research that closely examines the roots of immigrant intergenerational mobility in the country of destination, which leads to further social mobility via immigration to the west, remains sparse.

This study takes a closer look at the parental contributions of high-skill immigrants in their role of co-educators in the US public education system. In other words, how do immigrant parents tend to view the American public education system and how do they acculturate to its mandates? What do they do to ensure their academic and professional success at a rate higher than what their native counterparts do? Previous studies of immigrant parents have focused on cultural differences between high-skill immigrants and native parents. Few, however, have closely examined the parental capital that enables high-skill immigrant parents to adopt specific attitudes, educational and pedagogical behaviors that go beyond a general emphasis on 'hard work.' This study is particularly interested in high-skill immigrant parents as products of educational systems markedly different from the American one. Using focus group methodology, it seeks to unearth education-specific acculturation patterns as a form of capital that may translate into educational advantages for children.

From Traditionally-Elitist to Egalitarian Educational Systems

Despite their growth and influence, first generation high-skill immigrants remain a relatively under-examined population as they have not traditionally been associated with any particular vulnerability, such as risk of maladaptation or failure to integrate in the country of destination. Although no definite criteria have been identified that can clarify who qualifies as a 'high-skill' immigrant, the cultural consensus is that this category must be in possession of abilities and skills that

industries compete for because such abilities and qualifications are in high demand and difficult to find among the native-born. In practice, more liberal definitions of 'high skill' prevail, which center mainly on the possession of a bachelor's level degree, despite the fact that the number of B.S. degrees in the United States has also been rising. The lack of clarity regarding the type of capital newcomers bring to the American economy - whether cognitive, skill-based, educational or cultural - has led to concerns that immigrants designated as 'high-skill' may not necessarily bring in contributions that could not be fostered in the country of destination, but rather unnecessarily increase competition over middle-class jobs for the native-born population.

Such concerns parallel reservations about the relative adequacy of the US educational system in a globalized economy conducive to transnational living (Suter, 2019). Discussions often betray a sense of apprehension that certain features of contemporary American culture, educational system or both, may lead to inadequate numbers of highly-qualified job market candidates and implicitly a need to import foreign labor in certain industries and economic sectors. The origins of competence in the qualifying foreign labor remain superficially examined. Most explanations have centered on immigrants' advantageous socio-economic background in the country of origin or the psycho-social predispositions of the "immigrant personality" towards independence, grit and determination, which may cause the most fit members of sending societies to self-select for the rigors of seeking a better life abroad (Polavieja, 2018). Such inborn traits are believed to explain the immigrant paradox (Feliciano, 2017) which allows many newcomers to achieve in the country of destination despite structural disadvantages related to culture, language, and relative socio-economic position. As parents, high-skill immigrants pass down these forms of capital to their children which in turn facilitate their academic and professional success.

A much less discussed form of parental capital that high-skill immigrants may endow their children with is the parents' own educational experience in the country of origin as reflected in the type of educational system they were exposed to growing up. Education researchers have identified important distinctions between core assumptions of the progressive American educational agenda and those of other countries where traditionalist-elitist elements often still prevail (Alexander, 2001). Caught between egalitarian commitments to make education accessible to a highly diverse student body (Condron, 2011) commercialization pressures (Molnar, 2018)

and the western tradition of encouraging creativity and independent thinking in students (Nowacki, 2013) American public schools tend to experiment heavily with reforms (Haas, 2014). Curricula and pedagogies are continuously negotiated as educators struggle with consensus over standards and definitions of academic excellence.

By contrast, traditionalist public educational systems prevalent in non-western countries tend to be less concerned with inequalities in access and outcomes and more dedicated to identifying the maximum number of students who can rise to the rigors of an elitist curricula, whether through innate ability or intense practice of rigorous material (Alexander, 2001). Although these are public educational systems open to all citizens, curricula and pedagogies remain fundamentally exclusivist as they draw on traditionally established disciplinary canons. At the risk of remaining cognitively inaccessible to a large number of students of lower ability, this approach can favor students of higher ability from relatively modest backgrounds as it equips them with substantive educational and cultural capital necessary for significant social mobility (Wälde, 2000). The schools' use of high quality educational material with rigorous content, in the form of textbooks and workbooks written by disciplinary experts, can compensate for the absence of parental educational capital in the case of students from less advantageous socio-economic backgrounds. They also further reinforce competence among students of middle and upper-middle class origins by facilitating easy parental access to curricula, which transforms parents into an extra set of educators or tutors at home. Regardless of family background, high-skill immigrants often count among former students who were successful within the confines of such *democratically-elitist* educational systems (Peffley, 2007).

Education-Specific Acculturation Strategies Among High-Skill Immigrants

Traditionally, immigration has been defined as a rational choice that individuals make in search of a better life. Their adaptation to host culture was conceptualized as a straightforward process of change that resulted in complete assimilation to the culture they chose to join. Berry (2003) challenged this view by advancing a bi-dimensional model of acculturation that simultaneously considered immigrant's orientation towards home culture and receiving culture. As immigrants formulate accept/reject responses towards the two respective cultures, four distinct

acculturation strategies emerge: *assimilation* (embrace host culture, renounce home culture), *integration* (balance home and host culture), *separation* (maintain home culture, reject host culture) and *marginalization* (reject both home and host culture). The doubly-negative attitudes of the latter increase the immigrant's risk of psychological maladjustment; however, marginalization is relatively infrequent as individuals cannot maintain a sense of self outside a group (Schwartz & Zamboanga, 2008). Domain specificity theory recognizes that these strategies tend to vary across distinct life domains, as immigrants may be selective in rejecting, retaining, and adopting specific aspects from both cultures, such as seeking assimilation in organizational culture while opting for separation in family or educational matters (Keefe & Padilla, 1987; Arends-Toth & Vijver, 2006). Acculturation strategies are processes, not outcomes, but over the long term immigrants settle into a stable pattern of adaptation that encompasses both psychological well-being and socio-cultural competence, and may range from "well-adapted" to "poorly adapted" (Berry, 2006).

Despite developments in migration and acculturation theory, traditional models have remained influential in empirical research in education. As a result, foreign-born parents are often treated as a monolithic population to be contrasted with the native born. Moreover, due to the traditional emphasis on gender and race-ethnicity as fundamental dimensions of diversity, immigrant parents' acculturation strategies tend to take a back-seat in the evaluation of school diversity. For example, American schools with a certain percentage of African-American students may appear similarly diverse with schools where a mixture of African-American backgrounds and first generation African ancestry exists; yet the intersection of race-ethnicity with original national culture can create more complex dynamics and implicit conflict-generating mechanisms.

Finally, because immigration is routinely defined as a rational choice, studies may fail to pay attention to the differential adaptations of foreign-born parents to school environments, risking to miss much about the immigration experience, persisting cultural contrasts, and attempts at cultural survival. Thus, differences related to salience or resilience of original culture identity can be easily overlooked or attributed to variations in personality type (Van Oudenhoven & Benet-Martínez, 2015). Such omissions may also prevail in the light of recent propositions that cultural differences are becoming less relevant due to cultural hybridization phenomena driven by globalization (Pieterse, 2015). Highly-skilled foreign-born

parents may be particularly prone to this homogenizing effect as public and policy discourses portray them as the "best and brightest" immigrants (Batalova & Lowell, 2007), equipped with the abilities, intellect, skills and even politico-ideological views that should allow them a relatively unproblematic adaptation to the western home-school partnership model.

Foreign-born parents' acculturation strategy, however, is an important dimension of their identity as it reflects intense efforts to maintain a positive sense of self in the process of cultural adaptation. According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), individuals build a sense of self by placing themselves in myriad cultural, racial, national, ideological and other types of categories with various degrees of salience. As immigrants come in contact with the receiving culture, they can experience a sense of threat to their original culture identity which may be intensified by perceptions of host culture's superior ranking in the global hierarchy or by pressures of dominant free-market ideologies (Stephens, 2016).

Perceptions of inter-group hierarchy can shape acculturation strategies through identity management (Petriglieri, 2011). While some immigrants may resort to identity deletion or concealment in order to assimilate, others may seek to balance significantly different cultural loyalties in an attempt to maintain biculturalism; yet others may resist host culture values by separating into homo-ethnic enclaves; finally, a few will build a purely individuated or marginalized identity.

When it comes to education-specific acculturation, classical adaptation patterns may be observed in the way immigrant parents adapt to American school culture. When pursuing assimilation strategies, immigrant parents may see American education as an opportunity for children to be educated in a non-elitist system that parlays educational content into easier-to-digest material and encourages children to express themselves without reservation. By contrast, high-skill immigrant parents shaped by democratically-elitist educational cultures may feel compelled to adopt a separation strategies as they may perceive the egalitarian American educational system as inadequate, particularly when child-entered pedagogies may lead to a lowering of academics standards to accommodate a wide range of abilities and learning-styles. Separation strategies taken to an extreme may result in parental 'tigerization,' frustration with the American education, intensive parental or commercial tutoring, and insistence on traditional pedagogies that yield maximum academic performance (Jiménez, 2013).

Methodology and Data Analysis

The study employs focus group methodology which is an informal discussion among a group of selected individuals about a particular topic (Wilkinson 2004). This methodology has recently started to gain popularity in research of diverse social groups and in cross-cultural research due to its open, collective nature that enables in-depth discussions between a relatively small number of people, typically between 5-8 individuals, and who also share certain social or cultural experiences (Liamputtong, 2011). The method is also conducive to in-depth observations on one specific area of interest. This allows participants to discuss the topic in greater detail and to explore and clarify their points of view due to the 'group effect.' (Stewart, 2007; Halcomb, 2007). The moderator plays a major role in obtaining accurate information from focus groups participants.

Participants for the study were recruited through a mix of author's personal contacts and the snowball sampling technique. Participation criteria included being a first-generation immigrant parent of at least one public-school enrolled child, from a household where at least one partner held a college degree and worked in a professional capacity. A total of seven participants were recruited. Three were from Romania, one from Trinidad-Tobago, one from Serbia, one from Columbia and one from China. All of them were women although many included their husbands' views as well. Prior to the focus group meeting and in-depth interviews, participants signed a consent form and provided additional demographic information. The focus group lasted approximately 2 hours and was recorded. A total of seven participants were recruited for the focus group. A combination of focus group methodology and in-depth semi-structured interviews was used to collect participants' perspective on their children's experience in US public schools. The author conducted additional separate interviews with all respondents, taking notes on emerging themes.

Questions were formulated to highlight participants' acculturation process to the American public education system and to identify their perceptions, behavior, motivations and conflicts during this adaptation process. Participants engaged in a dialogue spurred by 13 general, open-ended questions. Topics included parental involvement in children's education, volunteering at school, academics and curricula, homework, extra-curricular activities, standardized testing as is relates to program placement and admissions, family-school communication and collaboration, family

integration into school culture and impact of children's education on the quality of life of parents' and that of the family, in general.

The purpose of this inquiry was not to generalize findings to a larger high-skill immigrant population but rather to enable in-depth discussion of education-related topics as seen through the eyes of high-skilled immigrant parents, as a shared social and cultural experience.

The audiotape-recorded group discussion was be transcribed to enable data analysis. I used a combination of qualitative content analysis and grounded theory for coding and analysis. Three analysts performed an interpretive reading of the transcript to identify both manifest and latent content and then developed a coding frame through discussion and consensus, based on the frequencies of relevant categories.

Findings

Data analysis revealed four main themes related to immigrant parents' experience of their children's education in public schools: perceptions of weakness in academics; redefining parental involvement; perceptions of natural competitiveness and hierarchy formation; and family quality of life. These themes emerged as parents inevitably contrasted their children's school experience in the US with the educational experiences, they had growing up in their home countries. Explanations for findings draw on the cultural, political and historical contexts of participants' home countries.

Perceptions of Weakness in Public School Curriculum and Pedagogy

The most prevalent theme that emerged from the entire conversation was the perception that American public schools perpetuate a culture of 'lite' academics that fails to challenge students to ensure maximum competence, particularly among students of higher natural ability. This was unsurprising in the light of respondents' higher socio-economic background and first-generation immigrant status, which have been associated with a tendency towards competitiveness. Parents felt the public-school system may pay lip-service to academic excellence while teaching relatively facile content that caters to students of naturally lower ability. As participants drew parallels with their own educational experiences, there was a sense of discomfort that students rarely get a chance to complete complex or

challenging work, even in “gifted and talented” or “advanced” classes or that more challenging materials are difficult to procure.

> The problem is it is very hard to find challenging assignments…most of the sites you go, they just give them work like 2+3, 5+8…I want a problem to make him think and finally arrive at 5+7 [.....] He once came from school with a piece of paper which actually had some interesting problems that made him think, really nice, like we used to have them…; but then you look at the paper and you don’t know where that sheet is coming from…there’s no footnote …so when I go the parent-teacher conference I’ll have to ask her – where did you get this from?

A lack of curriculum transparency emerged as another chief concern among participants, despite acknowledgement of time-consuming weekly blogs and emails teachers routinely write to keep families updated on general topics and school events. Parents expressed the desire to be directly involved in their children’s learning process; however, as schools often failed to make use of expert-authored quality sources such as well-written textbooks and workbooks, they often did not know the details of what exactly is being studied at school at any given point in time beyond a general topic. Parents expressed concern with the difficulty of following along, understanding the expected learning outcomes or the highest disciplinary standards their children could master for any particular unit. By invoking the traditional and functional simplicity of consistent textbook use, parents placed their children’s experience in perspective, especially as they compared it to their own educational experiences growing up in their home countries when their own parents were able to provide help by examining subject details available in the textbook.

> …One of the things I DON’T like here is that it is very hard as a parent to know what it is that they do at school. They just get home with papers, they don’t have actual textbooks and notebooks where you can just follow what they do during their days at school, their progress from the beginning to the end. I mean you can kind of do if you look at the date, but it’s not the same thing. You can maybe put them in a folder but it is different from what we grew up with - with everything in a notebook where you can see the progress…for me this is difficult. Adrian had a test a few days ago and I had to go and look through all the papers and kind of put together everything he came home with on that subject and study again based on that, but that was about it. Having textbooks would have been very helpful.

Even when schools did adopt a textbook or other centralized source of information, parents felt it was rarely used, often kept in class, and assessments did

not necessarily reflect the knowledge available there. Instead, teachers tended to rely heavily on alternative internet-based resources of obscure provenance such as various hands-outs, leaflets or notes students were expected to take in class based on materials parents could not see. In participants' view, this pedagogical method is neither student-centered nor parent-friendly. This made home-based reviewing difficult in the absence of a well-formulated, logical and cohesive sequence of disciplinary canon that families could conveniently access at home. Parents felt that a quality centralized source of content for every discipline would foster a culture of in-depth study at home and personal responsibility. This would also make it easy for parents to refer to the detailed textbook content to help clarify concepts or skills that children may fail to understand in class. Children would thus be able to master the highest level of standards, or at the very least, be aware of what those are and why they may not have been able to meet them.

Although there were concerns with academic substance in STEM, Language Arts and Social Studies areas alike, the former elicited most attention from parents. Several participants expressed the wish that schools favored less rote work and more applied word problems that would challenge students to think logically, make complex connections, and work through several steps.

> I also think math is not strong enough… especially if we try to compare to what we did growing up; they start early with letters and number understanding but by second grade they do the same thing they did in kindergarten. We had a lot of work problems in the textbook, a collection of problems and exercises, so you could practice a lot at different levels. That's where I think the Math works, whereas here they throw a problem here and there but …it's mostly mechanical 9+5, not much thinking…

The related theme of methodological diversity for basic skills emerged as a rather controversial aspect. Some participants felt that schools spend too much attempting to teach one basic skill, such as multiplication or long division, in a variety of ways in order to address all "learning styles" or to make students understand the theoretical subtext of the skill in question. According to one mother, this was not in the best interest of most students as it could exacerbate confusion, slow down the learning process, and waste time that could be better spent on practicing more complex material that could make use of, but is not limited to, the basic skill in question.

> A lot of times we try to reinvent the wheel here and it's like we are thinking so much about multiplication …but then they end up missing the point. This can make it harder for the children that are not so good at Math and don't enjoy to take too many steps. They use so many metods to try to explain in all ways one simple operation that in the end, children are completely lost and they also waste a lot of time because they could have gotten there from the beginning quicker, so they could focus on something harder, the problems that really stretch their brains.

Upon further dialogue, however, the group appeared to seek a silver lining for the perceived 'softer' model of American public schools. There were some conflicting views about the desirability of an educational system that makes concepts easier for children to understand by "bringing them down to their level", one mother argued.

Redefining Parental Involvement

Another important topic that emerged from the conversation was the concept of parental involvement. Cultural differences in definition and perception of parental involvement informed how parents viewed the issue. Participants generally agreed that in their home-countries, parental involvement referred mainly to a parent's active participation in the child's learning process, which largely resembled tutoring. This may involve following the curriculum closely, practicing skills with the child, and verifying mastery of knowledge and skill at the most advanced level for the grade, whether the school taught the subject at that level or not. Where parents lacked the expertise or specialization to help, they could compensate by referring to well-written textbooks, You Tube tutorials, or solutions to problems provided at the end of workbooks. In many ways, participants' conceptualization of being an involved parent equated that of being a second teacher, at home.

Participants contrasted their conceptualization of parental involvement with what they felt native-born counterparts understand by 'parental involvement.' In their view, native-born parents perceived parental involvement in different terms, which included a generally positive and supportive attitude towards children's academic performance as assessed by schools, volunteering at children's school, and driving children to a variety of extra-curricular activities.

> Mostly involvement is "I am at school, I volunteer". I think it's good to be involved but in the real sense - give him the tools to succeed, then make him want to do well, the drive has to come from him. I agree in second grade you kind of have to sit down

> with them, but I think that's exactly what most parents don't do here. It's mostly foreign parents who sit down with the kid, make sure the homework is done well and send him at school with all assignments well done…here most parents when they are involved they do so during the school hours more than after school hours, with volunteering and everything.

Even when some parents stated they do volunteer at school, they saw this as an opportunity to further help their own children rather than provide a service to the community. This was mainly because parents seemed to be skeptical about the utility of parent-conducted volunteering activities at school.

> I have volunteered a couple of times with my son…with my daughter but not much…because volunteering means going in and helping the teacher with busy work; for me volunteering is going to class to see how my kid does, how he responds to the teaching ways here …I want to be in the class to help the teachers make sure children do well in school instead of helping the teacher cut out papers or other materials…I don't know…I just want to feel like I am participating in the class instead of cutting out papers for the class...

In participants' view, the native approach to volunteering had several negative consequences. Some believed that elementary schools' reliance on parent volunteers may lead to the manufacturing of a culture of student dependence on a large number of adults in the classroom setting. One mother argued this can encourage the belief that every child requires individual, personalized attention at all times. While this perspective was acknowledged as a lofty ideal, participants felt it can be unrealistic and unsustainable in a public school setting where students must be expected to keep up with teacher's instructions independently. Participants also tended to converge on the idea that children should be instructed at home on how to pay attention to teacher's explanations for the entire class, which would permit schools to achieve more with fewer resources.

> I honestly don't think parents should volunteer at school. I don't think it's necessary, they should volunteer at home…I think that's the problem …kids expecting to have many adults around them at school …then they come home and they expect the same. It's like they cannot do anything on their own because they always have to have an adult around them …so I think volunteering at school…I've done this with my son when he was in kindergarden and 1st grade…and like she said, it's now mostly going in and having to cut paper; so I don't do it , I would rather spend time cooking a meal.

Another participant commented on the creation of an unnecessary 'parental involvement' hierarchy at school. She argued that children whose parents were not able to volunteer due to work schedules tend to feel inadequate and, directly or indirectly, "guilt" the parents into doing so, as they cannot understand why classmates' mothers can volunteer at school while theirs won't.

> The children like you to be there because the other children have the parents there, so it's a vicious circle; my son was very independent since he was 3 years old. He was not very clingy; he was happy when we picked him up; but later he started saying "other parents volunteer, you never come to the classroom." This situation here it's also because a lot of mothers are not working and then somehow they have to find ways to justify their status. In the past, even if they stayed at home, they would be real housewives. They would have the traditional role of a housewife - prepare meals, take care of the house; but now they are SAHM-s and all the involvement must be around the child; so I think they spend more time in the morning at school than preparing a meal for the kid when he gets home; and I think the kid, in the end, doesn't gain much.

Although all respondents admitted to singing up their children for extra-curricular activities, they tended to describe it as an external pressure rather than a practice they, personally, embraced in the interest of ideal child development. Extra-curricular activities were seen as necessary insofar American culture and educational institutions treated them as criteria for selection into a variety of academic programs and for college admissions.

> It depends at what level you want to do [education]…because if you really want to be good you still have to practice at home; I think this is where the challenge is… because kids who are doing well go back home and really learn more. Here the culture encourages kids to play sports and do other extra-curriculars and you kind of find it difficult to manage everything because you know, you're long hours in school, then you have to come home and actually read and…practice what you've learned. […] Sometimes I feel academics somehow it's not really highly prioritized…I think some children are valued more if they do more extra-curricular activities than academics.

Student natural abilities and competitiveness

The discussion generated the view that children's inherited abilities and degree of competitiveness play an important role in the formation of natural

hierarchies in the educational process as well as in life outcomes. Parents discussed the practice of educational 'tracking' which, despite ample critique, continues to exist in various forms in the American public education system. The practice may come in the form of testing students for early placement into separate classes such as on-level, gifted/talented, advanced level or special needs.

Although all respondents in the group had children in gifted/talented programs and advanced classes, they expressed doubts about the necessity of such programs at the earlier stages of education. In their view, complex and challenging academic work should not be the reserve of a high standardized-test scoring elite that made the cut for a certain program. Instead they felt that all children should be exposed to a wide range of academics from the most basic level to the most rigorous material and held to the same high standards.

> I don't think it's fair, I think all children should be exposed to advanced, quality material […] during classroom time; and whoever has the ability or the intellectual capacity to step up to that level, will be most successful.

While they understood that only a minority of students would possess the ability, motivation and home support to meet all expectations, this was seen as a desirable inevitability as everyone would get a chance to be exposed to advanced material, thereby receiving equal opportunity for maximum development. Moreover, all students would at least be aware of academic standards they may or may not be able to reach. In one parent's opinion, such a system would create a more realistic understanding of personal competence among students as they would naturally self-select into their correct ranking percentile over time better than a one-time standardized test could do for placement in an exclusive academic silo.

Another parent felt that the tracking method amounted to unfair mismanagement or rationing of advanced academic content. Many capable students are thus deprived of exposure to higher academic standards due to narrowly missing to score into a limited-seat class that offers higher-level curriculum. Parents viewed this as a breaching of the principle of equality of opportunity.

Another participant argued that while their children's school was keen on celebrating individual student achievement in a variety of non-academic areas, such as 'best runner' or 'first place in the Art contest,' they tended to remain consistently discreet about academic success and rankings. The parent argued that the practice of keeping academic results strictly private was unnecessary and even harmful, as it encouraged a school culture of mystery, secrecy and insecurity among students and

parents alike. This, in turn, accentuated instead of alleviating the self-esteem concerns schools were trying to eliminate through this privacy policy. As all parents in the group grew up with a model of open academic ranking, they tended to agree that it is healthier for children to know how they rank in terms of academic performance compared to other children in school. Not only did they feel this system encourages a sense of healthy competition among students but it also prepares them for the natural competition they will be confronted with later on, in the job market.

Impact on Private Sphere-Related Quality of Life

Despite perceptions of a generally weak curriculum and low expectations for learning outcomes, parents felt their children ended up with large amounts of homework that included too much busy, repetitive yet time consuming projects from which students did not derive much academic benefit. Homework obligations coupled with pressures to sign up children for extra-curricular activities affected family life, in general, and prevented parents from engaging their children in what they felt would be more worthwhile pursuits, including more challenging or in-depth academic work not offered by the school, or various spontaneous, unstructured family activities such as outings, cooking together, playing games, or getting together with friends in the local community.

> I could have them do a lot of extra work because of the books I got back home; however I find it quite challenging because I don't have the time to translate the problems for him and even though he can read in Romanian, sometimes it's a little bit difficult. Then it's also the extra-curricular activities. My son arrives from school at 3 and by the time he does a bit of sports or other activities, I only have so much time in the afternoon because he has his regular home-work from school too. He is willing to do extra and I think I could offer more to him but there is not enough time to supplement with more challenging work.

One participant also expressed reservations about the practice of yearly student shuffling which places students in a class with a new set of classmates each year. Although aware of the school's intent to connect students to a wide variety of grade-mates and to prevent cliquish behavior, parents felt uncomfortable with this policy. Instead, they thought it was important for children to develop deeper and relatively enduring bonds of friendship during their early school years. One complained that by the time the child managed to make a few good friends, the school year ended and friendships were automatically diluted by next year's shuffled

class placement.

In general, there was a sense that children's school life was stressful and took a toll on family quality of life, including time for parent-child bonding, general family well-being, a sense of peace and security about the future, and children's psycho-social development.

Discussion and Limitations

This study reveals the voices of a small group of high-skill immigrant parents who help their children navigate the US public education system to ensure success and maximize life outcomes in a globalized, competitive world. Their stories offer unique insights into immigrant parental motivations and acculturation strategies with respect to the educational domain. Findings place in perspective traditional assumptions about immigrant acculturation strategies, particularly the desirability of assimilation to educational host culture, the successful integration of home and host culture elements, or the failure to incorporate into the educational mainstream with negative repercussions.

Results suggest that recent waves of high-skill immigrants may perceive powerful incentives in the contemporary American cultural landscape to adopt a *separation* strategy when it comes to acculturation to the educational domain (Berry, 2003). They tend to resist host culture structures as they are skeptical about the efficacy of the American public education system and the well-meaning yet questionable egalitarian mandates that inform its policies. These immigrant parents feel American public schools tend to dilute and reduce academic standards to create an egalitarian illusion of success for all children, instead of encouraging as many students as naturally possible to reach the highest standards possible. Immigrants may resort to a defensive *separation* strategy in education even when their families actively participate and successfully assimilate into other spheres of American life.

A *separation* acculturation strategy means many high-skill immigrant parents may be inclined to reject an American identity when it comes to their children's education, as suggested by popular anecdotes about immigrant "Tiger Moms" who do not tolerate the slightest sign of academic failure, unlike their "elephant moms" native counterparts. The significant body of scholarly literature that has accumulated on the academic and professional successes of children of high-skill immigrants also seems to confirm this strategy (Jiménez, 2013). Rather

than opting for assimilation or even integration strategies, such parents tend to resist contemporary America's education-related narratives, values, beliefs and practices. Their *separate* educational identity echoes home culture early experiences and causes them to contest contemporary American notions of academic success, including logistics of home-school partnership, meanings attached to the ideal of education-related equality of opportunity, or perceptions of healthy child development.

The need to distance themselves from an American educational identity arises mainly from perceptions that contemporary America has given up on educational depth, rigor and elegance in order to accommodate increasingly larger masses of students of naturally lower ability. Parents feel they need to defend their children from what they perceive to be academic mediocrity and equip them in private with knowledge and skills that can give their children an advantage on the competitive global market. This education-centered acculturation strategy may reflect a combination of parents' own socio-economic and educational backgrounds in the country of origin. Although high-skill immigrants often come from middle and upper-middle class family backgrounds, many are first generation college-educated individuals of relatively modest origins, who benefitted from equal opportunity policies applied within a relatively traditional and canonical educational system in their countries. These *democratically elitist* public education systems in many non-western countries uniformly emphasize advanced, elite content throughout all grades and among all populations, as a means of mining talent from across the board of the socio-economic spectrum in the interest of accelerated economic development. For example, although educational systems in the former Soviet sphere of influence promoted inclusivity and equality of access to education for students from all walks of life, they did not adapt or modify educational content to accommodate a wider range of abilities. Rather all students were expected to adapt to relatively sophisticated educational content and pedagogy, even at the risk of a high rate of failure among the less well-positioned groups in society.

It is important to emphasize that such results should be interpreted with great caution. Some researchers have argued that because second-generation immigrants now demonstrate educational attainment and income above the median (Feliciano, 2005), and because American culture can have a detrimental impact on immigrants in terms of health and criminality (Antecol, 2006; Sampson, 2008), policy-makers should be more concerned with how to keep America from diluting

newcomers instead of focusing on how newcomers may dilute America. While it is important to acknowledge that some immigrants do indeed bring with them significant familial, educational, cultural, psycho-social and even political capital, which they rely on to act as highly competitive agents in the American society, it is equally important to avoid generalizations about the immigrant population without a solid understanding of what makes certain immigrant categories highly competent to begin with.

First, it is important to acknowledge that, despite the growing percentage of high-skill immigrants in the total immigrant population, most immigrants do not arrive equipped with advantageous forms of capital from their home-countries. On the contrary, similar to mainstream American-born population, most place great hopes in the educational system in their country of destination so they can build such capital for themselves and their families upon arrival. Liberal democracies have often depicted their educational institutions as the "great equalizer" which means it is designed to offer everyone equal opportunity for academic excellence and social mobility. Second, if certain categories of 'capital-heavy' immigrants arrive in their countries of destination as great contributors, already poised to compete successfully, both academically and professionally, it is worth examining in greater depth the particular background aspects that endowe such immigrants with solid capital to begin with. From an educational culture standpoint, it might be worth placing in perspective the educational approaches, policies and pedagogies that countries of destination could adopt in order to offer their native and immigrant populations alike similar levels of competitive educational capital to the ones successful immigrants already possess upon arrival.

It should be again emphasized that such immigrant parents are not necessarily from elite backgrounds but may have benefitted from a quasi-elite education growing up in their home countries with *democratically elitist* educational systems. This later allows them to identify what might be missing in their children's education in the egalitarian public-school systems of the liberal democracies they immigrate to. In consequence, they use their educational and cultural capital to compete with the native-born and low-capital immigrants, who may be losing ground due to a relatively unsophisticated and non-competitive K-12 educational culture. In this sense, not only does the competition between children of capital-heavy immigrants and those of low-capital immigrants or the native-born is not on a level playing field, but the educational advantages provided by high-skill immigrant

parents to their children are likely to become diluted by the third generation.

Evidently, this study does not claim in any way to be reflective of the experiences of any particular group of immigrants in terms of nationality, racial/ethnicity background or other socio demographic markers, including socio-economic status. Due to the small number of participants from a non-representative group of the high-skill immigrant population, no generalizations can be inferred from these findings. However, the study makes an important contribution to the existing body of research on high-skill immigration by suggesting how future researchers could deepen our understanding of the roots and impact of high-skill immigration and the meanings behind the acculturation strategies capital-heavy immigrants adopt in an increasingly globalized world that encourages hybrid identities for maximum global market competitiveness.

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