Children, education and migration: Win-win policy responses for co-development

Jeronimo Cortina

ABSTRACT

Among the many challenges that the world faces today, one is of particular relevance to international migration and development. The world faces significant demographic changes affecting the future developmental prospects of both developed and less developed countries. More developed countries are simultaneously facing low fertility rates and ageing populations, while less developed countries, in contrast, are experiencing higher birth rates and a significant “youth bulge.”

The fiscal, social, economic and political implications of these imbalances are obvious for both developed and less developed countries, while the policy interventions to attenuate these impacts, however, are not so obvious. More developed countries, for instance could increase productivity levels, significantly increase the age of retirement and eligibility for benefits and could potentially use other tax revenues to fund benefits. For less developed countries the policy choices are basically reduced to interventions seeking to increase the rate of economic growth in order to incorporate younger generations into the labour market and to expand the state's capacities to provide basic social services such as health and education.

One of the single most accommodative policies that could potentially address these challenges is international migration. On average, migrants tend to be young people seeking for the most part better economic prospects to support their families. Migrants moving from countries with high unemployment rates, and dire prospects to better their lives, to countries with an increasing ageing population and low fertility rates could not only balance out these demographic imbalances but also improve the developmental prospects of both developed and less developed countries.
Introduction

Migration has the potential to deliver many positive benefits for development and poverty reduction and to contribute to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals as well as shape the post-2015 development agenda. Given the new contours of the global economy—in which human capital accumulation is the prime engine of economic growth for countries and of social mobility—international migration by itself is not going to solve countries' developmental challenges. In order to realize migration's positive developmental impacts and to minimise some of the challenges and inequities created by the complex relationship between migration and development, countries need to invest in migrants' human capital development and capabilities. This will help ensure that both migrant sending and receiving countries' demographic and developmental prospects are considered and will also create triple-win co-development policy responses for migrants and their families, countries of origin and countries of destination.

Based on a meta-analysis from the latest OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (OECD 2010, 2011), this research note will explore and compare some of the educational outcomes of migrants and native-born students and suggest policy recommendations to maximize migrants' educational achievement. Educational achievement is of significant importance for countries' global competitiveness. If countries want to be competitive, they will need a well-educated and prepared labour force. Educational achievement is also important for migrants' social integration in host societies, for countries' labour market outcomes and ultimately for countries' developmental prospects.

The rest of this research note is organized as follows: Presentation of a statistical profile of international migrant children, adolescents and youth in order to contextualize the magnitude of the issue; presentation of PISA's main results pertaining to education and migration, and presentation of the main policy recommendations and challenges ahead.

International Migrant Children Adolescents and Youth: A Statistical Profile

Many children, adolescents and youth migrate accompanied by either their parents or guardians but many more migrate unaccompanied and are thus more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Others are born to migrant parents or migrated with them as infants, and face significant risks of being excluded from provision of social services such as education.

Education is one of the most important social and economic "equalizers" available to policymakers. Education is of extreme importance given that today's students will become tomorrow's leaders, workers, entrepreneurs and parents. Their education and human capital formation is thus vital for their upward social mobility and for the host countries' developmental prospects.

Globally, there are some 33 million international migrants under the age of 20 (compulsory education on average entails children and adolescents between the ages of 6 and 18), which represents around 16 per cent of the total migrant population of 214 million (see Figure 1 for distribution).
Figure 1. International migration of children and adolescents. Source: Migrantinfo.org
Note: Includes foreign born and foreign citizens. Foreign born refers to persons born outside the country of enumeration. Foreign citizen refers to persons who do not have the citizenship of the country of enumeration. Scales are drawn using Jenks natural breaks to reflect the nature of the distributions.
Sixty percent (20 million) of the total migrant population under 20 years of age reside in less developed countries, while 40 per cent (13 million) reside in more developed regions. Among young people, male migrants outnumber female migrants in all areas of the world. Globally, there are 94 female migrants for every 100 male migrants under the age of 25. Migrant females are least numerous in less developed countries in comparison to more developed countries. For every 100 male migrants under 25 years of age in less developed countries, there are 93 female migrants, while in more developed countries for every 100 male migrants there are 96 female migrants (see Figure 2).

As Figure 3 shows, there are regional variations among migrants under 25 years of age. The proportion of international migrants under the age of 25 is greatest in Asia (37 percent), followed by Europe (25 percent), Northern America (16 percent), Africa (15 percent), Latin America and the Caribbean (5 percent) and Oceania (2 percent).
Figure 3. Regional distribution of international migrant children, adolescents and youth.

Source: Migrantinfo.org

Note: Includes foreign born and foreign citizens. Foreign born refers to persons born outside the country of enumeration. Foreign citizen refers to persons who do not have the citizenship of the country of enumeration. Scales are drawn using Jenks natural breaks to reflect the nature of the distributions.
Educational Outcomes

Students with an immigrant background

Figure 4 shows the percentage growth of students with an immigrant background (whether as 1st or as 2nd generation) between 2000 and 2009. Overall, the proportion of 15 year-old students with an immigrant background grew on average by 2 percentage points between 2000 and 2009. In some countries, students with an immigrant background constitute more than 5 percent of the 15 year-old student population. In Ireland, New Zealand, Spain, Italy, Canada, the United States, Liechtenstein and Russian Federation, for instance, students with an immigrant background represent between 8 and 30 percent of these countries’ total student’s population.

Given the magnitude of the student population with an immigrant background, investing on their education becomes a matter of social and economic security to ensure fulfillment of the countries’ labour market demands. Smart and timely investments on students’ achievement, in addition, not only increases their chances to improve their future wellbeing but also ensures a smooth school-to-work transition and full, efficient and effective labour market incorporation increasing the developmental potentials of countries.

Smart and timely investments on education not only refer to economic or resource-like investments but also to policies that seek to incorporate both first- and second-generation students with a human rights and gender approach to the school system. Figure 5 shows the proportion of first and second-generation students among OECD and OECD-partner countries. The variation that exists across countries is worth highlighting. For instance, in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates the proportion of 1st generation students more than doubles that of 2nd generation students, while in traditional migrant countries, such as the United States and Germany, the proportion of 2nd generation students is greater than that of 1st generation students (see Figure 5).
The variation between countries in terms of the proportion of 1st and 2nd generation students clearly suggest that one-size-fits-all policy interventions seeking to incorporate students both culturally and linguistically are not likely to be successful. Successful policy interventions are those that will take into account the main differences that exist between native-born students and students with an immigrant background. Taking into account culture and language as a scaffold is not sufficient to ensure students’ successful integration into the education system. Parents’ relative position in the labour market, their skills and the socioeconomic composition of the household also need to be factored into policy interventions to maximize student’s chances to fully integrate into the educational system.

**How are immigrant students doing in comparison to native-born students?**

Human capital accumulation through education has a significant impact on income inequality. Not investing meaningfully and in a timely fashion in education has long-lasting, detrimental effects on inequality reduction, which in turn will affect the entrepreneurial activity, aggregate income and economic development of countries. Investing only in certain populations (native-born students vs. foreign-born students) will create an uneducated and ill-prepared segment of the population that will not be able to compete in the global market or meet the demands of the domestic labour market thus hindering the competitiveness and productivity of the domestic economy as a whole.

Native-born students outperform students with an immigrant background by an average of more than 40 score points (see Figure 6); however, significant variation exists between countries and within countries across time. For instance, in Belgium and Switzerland, the gap between students with an immigrant background and native-born students was narrowed by around 40 points between 2000 and 2009.
There are many explanations behind immigrant background and educational achievement, one of these has to do with the characteristics of the migratory flow; that is, with the socioeconomic characteristics of those who are entering and settling in a destination country. For instance in Australia students with an immigrant background perform better than native born students, while in Canada immigrant students perform as well as native students. One of the plausible reasons why students with an immigrant background perform equally or better than native-born students in Canada and Australia may be given by these countries’ immigration systems, which self-select potential immigrants based on education, skills, etc. This makes immigrant offspring more likely to excel in school given that their parents have the necessary resources to help them fully integrate into the educational system.

The age of arrival also matters for a successful incorporation and consequently for students’ performance. Children who arrived at a younger age tend to perform better than those who arrived at an older age. Figure 7 shows the differences in reading performance after accounting for socioeconomic background between 1st generation students who arrived at age 5 or younger and those who arrived at an age older than 12 years of age.
Figure 7 suggests that younger migrants more easily acculturate, assimilate or incorporate into the host country’s educational system than those who arrived at an older age, who may experience more difficulties in adapting themselves to the new system. Smooth and stress-free incorporation to the new educational system will ensure an effective and efficient transition into secondary and tertiary education and eventually into the labour market.

Relatedly, students who live in a fully-incorporated household and who speak the language of instruction at home also tend to perform better (see Figure 8). This pattern suggests that policies that seek not only to linguistically incorporate students but also their parents will likely payoff in student performance.

Full incorporation also entails full access in terms of opportunities and social mobility to immigrants. Immigrant parents often tend to be less educated than the native-born population and work in low-paying occupations having therefore less educational and economic resources at home than their native-born counterparts. Student performance can significantly be improved and the native-born and students with an immigrant background performance gap reduced simply by improving immigrants’ socioeconomic status (see Figure 9).
Figure 9. Reading performance by immigrant status before and after taking into account for socioeconomic background

Note: Score point differences, which are statistically significant, are marked in a darker color.

Source: OECD PISA 2009 Database, Tables II.4.1

The data analysed in this section clearly shows the magnitude and the economic and social implications of immigrant students' educational performance. This is even more relevant for countries in which the immigrant student population, whether as 1st or as 2nd generation, represent a significant part of the total student population. The incorporation of students with an immigrant background and of their parents not only into the educational system but also into mainstream society constitutes the foundational block for public policy formulation.

Policy Recommendations

Key recommendations derived from OECD’s PISA analysis highlight that educational reforms to maximize the outcomes of children affected by migration should be grounded on a system of rights, equity in terms of access, and opportunities and shared responsibilities among countries of origin, destination and migrants themselves.

The fiscal, demographic and developmental challenges that countries face are exacerbated by the new demands of the knowledge economy. Not efficiently and effectively investing in education, therefore, will be tantamount to forgo countries’ global competitiveness and jeopardize their future economic growth.

As discussed in the previous section, one-size-fits-all policy designs will not be the measure of success. Countries will need to design and implement ad-hoc policies that address the issues at the core; however, policy designs aimed at the education system should consider the following recommendations:

• Broaden the curricula by making them more culturally inclusive: Migrant incorporation into the educational system in particular and into mainstream society in general cannot happen within a rigid and nativist environment. Policy designs need to take into consideration the fact that international migration is truly a global issue whose effects are all around us. It has carved new contours that simultaneously create new opportunities that shape the daily economic, social and political interactions not only between countries but also among migrants, their children and host societies.
• Expanding programs for bilingual education and advocating for culturally-sensitive methods of promoting host country’s language immersion programs for pre-school children and immigrant mothers. Parents that speak the language of instruction can navigate and understand the educational system more efficiently and thus provide guidance to their children. Investing in immersion programs both for pre-school children and their mothers will reduce the costs of poor student performance and, eventually, drop-out rates.

• Tackling structural inequities regarding migrant’s access to education and school funding: Migrants should have equal access to opportunities and access to education and similarly funded schools. Leveling the playfield not only benefits migrants and improves their chances for upward mobility but it benefits society as a whole.

• Promoting a balanced public discourse on migration to address xenophobia, racism and discrimination against migrants and their families: A just and fair society cannot thrive without the inclusion of those who contribute to its growth. Promoting a balanced public discourse on migration is not only the right thing to do but also the right strategy to maximize migration’s developmental impacts.

Endnotes:
1 First-generation students are those who are foreign-born and whose parents are also foreign-born. Second-generation students are those who were born in the country of enumeration but whose parents are foreign-born.

References
• OECD (2011) PISA in Focus 11: How are school systems adapting to increasing numbers of immigrant students? OECD Publishing.