Multilingualism, Identity, and School Achievement: Separating Evidence from Ideology

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The OECD's PISA research has shown that in many European countries, educational achievement of first and second generation students from migration backgrounds is significantly below the average of the host country. The Table below presents PISA 2003 and 2006 data on the reading achievement of first and second generation (Gen 1 and 2) 15-year old students of migrant background from selected European countries, as well as Australia and Canada. In this Table, 100 points represents one standard deviation.

	PISA 2003 Gen 1	PISA 2003 Gen 2	PISA 2006 Gen 1	PISA 2006 Gen 2
Australia	-12	-4	+1	+7
Belgium	-117	-84	-102	-81
Canada	-19	+10	-19	0
Denmark	-42	-57	-79	-64
France	-79	-48	-45	-36
Germany	-86	-96	-70	-83
Netherlands	-61	-50	-65	-61

Some of the differences in achievement can be attributed to socioeconomic factors but differences remain even after the effects of socioeconomic variables are removed.

What are the causes of these differences and what can schools do to close the achievement gap?

In a number of European countries, two overlapping explanations, reflecting ideology rather than research evidence, have been proposed by policy-makers and some researchers. In the first place, students' underachievement has been attributed to the 'fact' that migrant-background communities refuse to integrate into the broader society as evidenced by their presumed failure to learn the host country language and their retention of cultural traditions from their country of origin. The leaders of France, Germany, and the United Kingdom (Sarkozy, Merkel, and Cameron) have all articulated this perspective between 2010 and 2015 and labelled it 'multiculturalism', which Chancellor Merkel recently (December 2015) described as a sham.

The second explanation, most forcefully expressed by German sociologist Hartmut Esser (2006), attributes students' underachievement to the use of the home language (rather than the host country language) within the family. This pattern of home language use is frequently seen as reflecting an unwillingness to integrate fully into the host society.

The presentation will examine the research evidence in relation to these two claims. Neither claim stands up to critical examination. The ideological nature of the first claim is immediately evident in the fact that immigrant students' school performance is far superior in Australia and Canada in comparison to most European countries. Both Australia and Canada have official national policies of multiculturalism.

The claim that home use of a minority language will cause academic difficulties is also refuted by the research evidence from the PISA data and from numerous other research studies.

The presentation will advance an explanatory framework for understanding patterns of school achievement among minority group students that highlights the **response of schools** to language differences, socioeconomic factors, and societal power relations as the crucial factor in determining academic success or failure.

Reference

Esser, H. (2006). *Migration, language, and integration.* AKI Research Review 4. Berlin: Programme on Intercultural Conflicts and Societal Integration (AKI), Social Science Research Center. Retrieved from http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.376.2951&rep=rep1&type=pdf