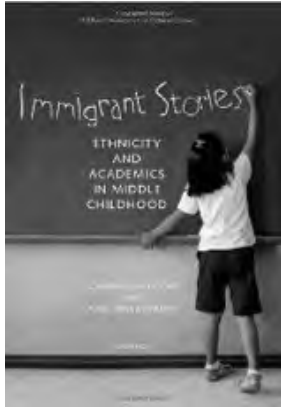


**December 2011 – Volume 15, Number 3**

<b>Immigrant Stories: Ethnicity and Academics in Middle Childhood</b>		
<b>Author:</b>	Cynthia Garcia Coll & Amy Kerivan Marks (2009)	
<b>Publisher:</b>	Oxford University Press	
<b>Pages</b>	<b>ISBN</b>	<b>Price</b>
288 pages	978-0-19-517459	\$39.95 USD



In a three year, longitudinal study, Garcia Coll and Kerivan Marks examine the cultural, psychological and academic development of U.S. middle school students from three immigrant groups: Cambodian, Dominican, and Portuguese. These diverse groups living in East Providence, and Providence, Rhode Island represent a cross-section of the current wave of immigration. The authors note that the “immigrant story” in America is often represented as one large story. In contrast, *Immigrant Stories* highlights the importance of examining specific cultural factors in more fully understanding academic performance for second-generation immigrant adolescents.

Coll and Kerivan Marks employ mixed methods including teacher, parent, and student interviews and ethnographies along with student achievement data to investigate the often overlooked and differing role played by ethnolinguistic identity in the academic success or failure of middle school students. The authors argue that ethnolinguistic identity may influence student success in school even more than more often-researched variables such as poverty and family composition. In fact, group identity may play as large a role in the developmental and academic outcomes for children of immigrants as other structural opportunities (i.e., schools, neighborhoods). The way in which the three immigrant groups were examined, and the subsequent results show that there is no one “immigrant story,” but instead each immigrant group must be treated as a very much separate entity.

The Cambodian community studied is a very small community in Providence, Rhode Island. The population is estimated at 4500 members in a city of 150,000 residents. The Cambodian immigrated to Providence as a result of displacement due to war in their home country, and Providence being designated as a federal resettlement site. The community is concentrated in what is generally considered the poorest section of the city. The authors note that since resettlement was not guided by earlier migration waves, the traditional ethnic enclave and the following of ethnic based institutions that help immigrants acquire resources, does not exist for the Cambodian community. Unlike other immigrant communities, the Cambodian tend to have less contact with their home country and there is little evidence of a cultural renewal.

The factors affecting the success of Cambodian children in school are somewhat similar to other ethnic groups, but vary in some striking ways. Evidence is seen of the “immigrant paradox,” defined by the author as a phenomenon in which, for Latino and Asian populations in this country, individuals who are poorer and less acculturated to the US display more favorable outcomes than more highly acculturated or native born individuals from the same ethnicity or the white population. In other words, children whose mothers have been in the U.S.A. less time, and generally have fewer economic resources, perform better in school. One difference however, is that in contrast to the Dominican population studied, those children which identify themselves more strongly as Cambodian, tend to do better in school. In any case, having just a few extra resources improves the academic outcomes of these children.

The Dominican community, in contrast with the other two studied, is more of a vibrant and growing community. The population has grown from a small number in the 1960s to over 15,000 in the year 2000. There are regular arrivals and exchanges in the population from both the Dominican Republic and other northeastern cities. The population has a very strong family network, creating a transnational community, which has not ended its ties with its home country. The ties that are maintained include frequent contact and travel to and from the Dominican Republic to attend family functions, such as weddings and funerals. There exists an extensive network of businesses that facilitate the exchange of money to the Dominican Republic.

Dominican academic attitude and achievement are unique to the other groups presented. For example, Dominican youth who placed strong personal importance on their identity as Dominican had lower academic achievement. Also, children who preferred to play with non-Dominican children showed better academic attitudes. The authors made sure to note that these findings occur in the context of students attending schools with a high percentage of white peers. Unlike the Cambodian youth, for the Dominican students, the higher the amount of acculturation, the better the academic attitude, and the greater the level of academic success.

The final group observed was Portuguese immigrants. The Portuguese community has grown in New England, with several waves of migration, dating back to the 1880s during a search for jobs in the whaling industry. Immigrant waves have continued, with a peak in the late-1960s. This tail-end of Portuguese immigration is mostly comprised of residents of the

Azores islands, and due to improving conditions in the Azores, only the poorest and least educated continue to immigrate. The Portuguese immigrants benefit from several factors over their fellow immigrant groups. First, they have features similar to the majority population, white skin color for example. This along with a well established Portuguese speaking community, with many different supports such as church groups, Portuguese-owned businesses and the like, allow these immigrants to easy access to many opportunities, unlike the Cambodian and Dominican groups. The authors note that recent immigrants can choose to become a part of the Portuguese community, or alternatively to blend into the dominant culture after acquiring language skills.

The large, and well-established Portuguese community helps to explain the academic outcomes and factors that affect these outcomes. Unlike the Cambodian and Dominican students, cultural attitudes and school settings do not seem to play a role in academic achievement. Though Portuguese children reported high levels of pride in being Portuguese, no effect was seen, either positive or negative on academic attitudes or achievement. The negative influences on academic achievement in the Portuguese community are mainly the lower education level of the parents, and the subsequent lack of involvement in education due to a language barrier. Parents find it difficult to meet with teachers. This was illustrated by the parents' year of immigration being the greatest factor in family influence on academic attitude and achievement.

Overall the message of this book for ES/FL educators and their colleagues is that ethnicity and cultural identity uniquely influenced the developmental contexts for academic performance of these three immigrant populations, and most likely all immigrant populations. As an educator of middle school students, *Immigrant Stories* opened my eyes to a thinking about how my students' cultural identities and attitudes impact their academic performance and, more specifically, as their teacher what my role is in that connection. For instance, one study reviewed in the book found that teachers' expectations of their students linked to better student performance regardless of school quality. Teachers who did not view social-economic status as a barrier had students whose academic achievement was higher. As a teacher in a rural, lower-income public school whose population includes the children of migrant workers, this message was a reminder that both my expectations of my students and their cultural identities have a powerful and direct impact on their achievement. While *Immigrant Stories* was written with a U.S. audience in mind, my colleagues in non-U.S. contexts perhaps would also benefit from such a message.

**Reviewed by**

Travis Flippin  
Chatham County Schools, North Carolina  
<tflippin@chatham.k12.nc.us>

Copyright © 1994 - 2012 TESL-EJ, ISSN 1072-4303  
Copyright rests with the authors.