How well do immigrant students do?

– *Immigrants (first and second generation) account for 10% of 15-year-old students in Germany and France and between 21 and 23% in Switzerland, Australia, New Zealand and Canada.*

– *First-generation immigrant students lagged, on average, 58 score points behind their native counterparts in PISA 2006.*

– *However, the performance difference varied greatly between countries, and in some, such as Australia and Ireland, immigrants did as well as natives.*

Significance

In most OECD countries, policy makers and the general public are paying increasing attention to international migration. In part, this is a consequence of the growth of immigrant population in recent years. Between 1990 and 2000 alone, the number of people living outside their country of birth nearly doubled worldwide to 175 million, and many OECD countries now have a sizeable component of first- and second-generation immigrant students. Ensuring that schools meet the needs of these students is important if they are to play a full role in society.

Findings

Among countries with a significant share of first-generation immigrant students (*i.e.*, children born abroad of foreign parents), such students lagged, on average, 58 score points behind their native counterparts in science. This was a sizeable difference considering that 38 score points were roughly equivalent to the OECD average of a school year's difference. Much of this difference remained even after accounting for socio-economic factors.

It should be noted, however, that this average concealed large variations between countries. In Canada, the gap was just 22 points, but it rose to between 77 and 95 points in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Sweden and Switzerland. By contrast, first-generation immigrant students do as well as their native peers in Australia, Ireland and New Zealand.

It is also worth examining the performance of second-generation migrant students (those who were born in the host country but whose parents were born abroad). Such students are more likely to be more fluent in the local language than their first-generation peers and are also likely to have gone through the same education system as their native counterparts. In Canada, Sweden and Switzerland they did better than their first-generation counterparts, but in New Zealand they did worse. And in several countries, including, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands, they still scored 79 to 93 points lower than native students.

In a number of countries, as many migrant children as natives attained the very highest scores in PISA. However, in a number of countries, including Austria, Denmark, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Switzerland, three times more second-generation than native students failed to reach Level 2 on the science competencies scale (at this level, students are likely to face considerable difficulties making their way in the adult world).

What determines the performance of immigrant students? Language is, of course, an issue, but probably of greater significance is family background, both in terms of socio-economic status and levels of parental education. In some immigrant families, parents may have much lower levels of education than the norm, which can greatly restrict to play a supporting role in their children's education.

Definitions

See introduction to this section.

Going further

For additional explanation and background, see Chapter 4 of *PISA 2006: Science Competencies for Tomorrow's World* (Vol. 1, Analysis).

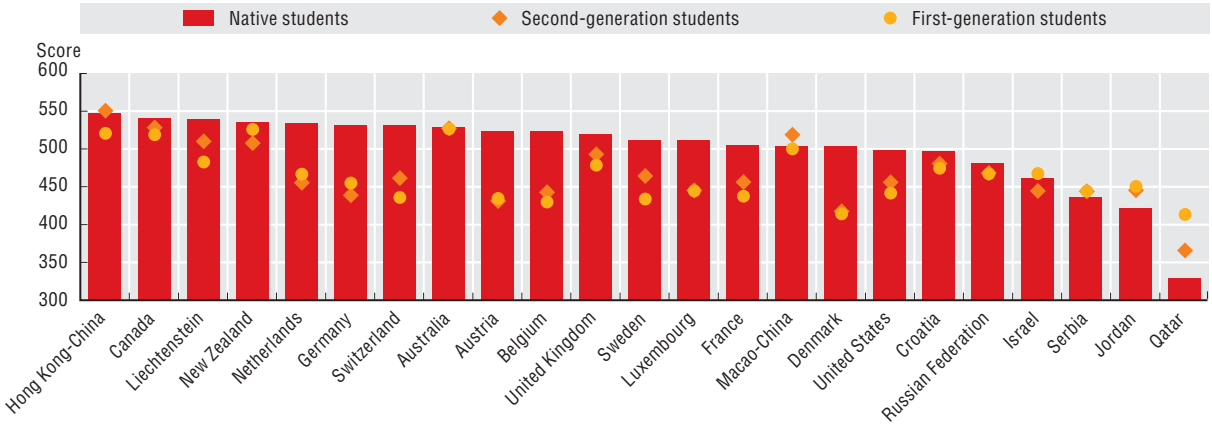
Further reading from OECD

Where Immigrant Students Succeed: A Comparative Review of Performance and Engagement in PISA 2003 (2006).

No More Failures: Ten Steps to Equity in Education (2007).

Figure S.6. **Performance of immigrant students in science in PISA 2006**

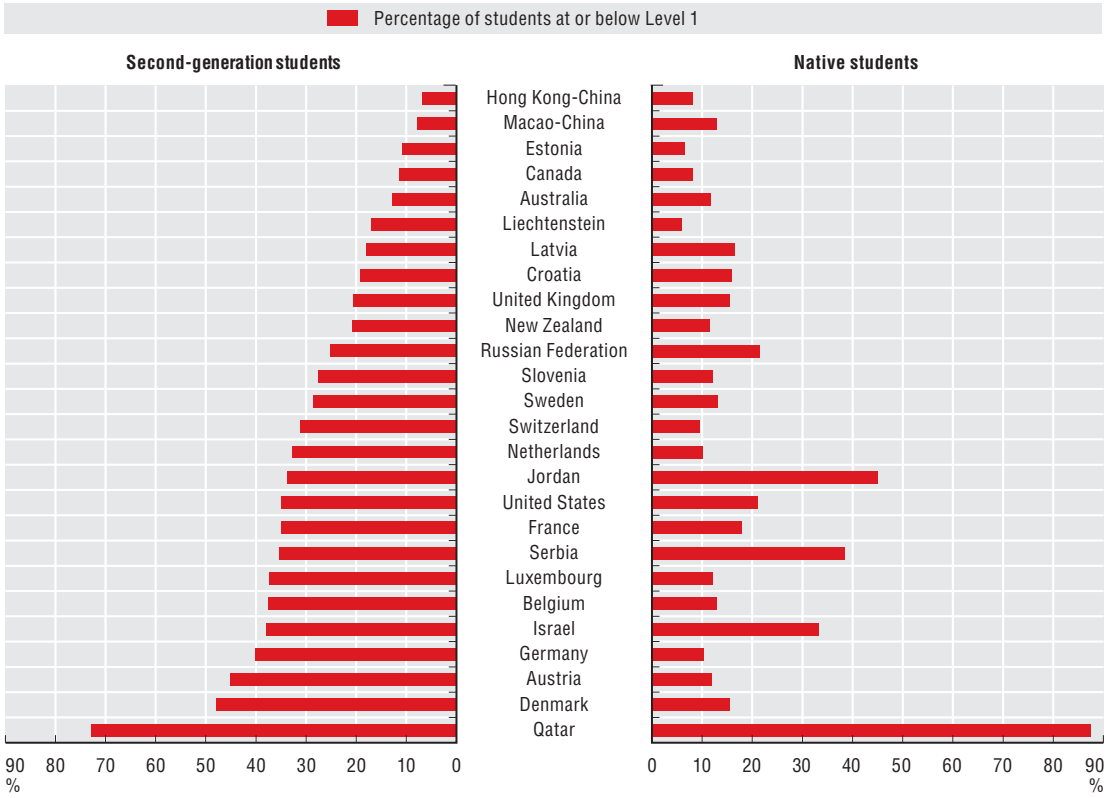
This figure shows the performance of first and second-generation students compared with native students.



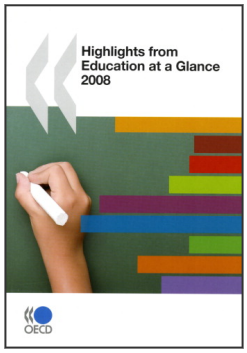
Source: OECD (2007), *PISA 2006, Science Competencies for Tomorrow's World, Volume 1: Analysis*, Table 4.2a, available at *http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/141848881750*.

Figure S.7. **Percentage of immigrant students who perform poorly in PISA 2006**

This figure shows the proportion of second-generation and native students with the weakest scores (at or below Level 1) in science in PISA 2006.



Source: OECD (2007), *PISA 2006, Science Competencies for Tomorrow's World, Volume 1: Analysis*, Table 4.2b, available at *http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/141848881750*.



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