

## **Demetri in the European Voice (a Publication of the Economist)**

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### **Editorial: The Children that Europe Forgot**

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The number of school-aged children from immigrant families has reached a critical mass in Europe. In cities such as Amsterdam and Rotterdam, one in every two students is a child of immigrants. This will be the norm in much of Europe in the coming decades.

We believe that the education of these children should now rank among our top public policy priorities. Simply put, our schools do not do well enough for them. In data analysed for the Transatlantic Task Force on Immigration and Integration, we found that 15-year-old immigrant students are, on average, one year behind native students. As many as one in four lack functional literacy and numeracy. As European economies increasingly adapt to a global, knowledge-based economy, education translates into employment. A lack of education means a lack of employment, with potential long-term consequences for our societies.

But such averages mask huge gaps between immigrant students' performances in the best and worst countries. For example, the average immigrant student in Germany lags three years behind his counterpart in Canada. We identified three groups of countries – 'champions', 'complacent countries' and 'underperformers'. The champions are New Zealand, Canada, and Australia, where immigrant-native performance gaps are marginal. Immigrant students in "complacent" countries such as the United States, Norway, and Sweden are between a half-year and a full year behind non-immigrants. In countries we describe as 'underperformers', such as Belgium and Germany, immigrant students are at least one-and-a-half years behind.

Most European countries are many years and many smart investments away from closing such attainment gaps. In the UK, analysts predict that it will take until 2053 for an 11-year-old child born to black African parents to close the attainment gap in English and mathematics. A plethora of reasons explain the disparities (including the level of parental education), but our research shows that factors in the home and in society are critical. Immigrants and their children generally are hugely motivated to succeed, and education policy interventions can help put a spark to the kindling.

Our research aims to provide practical recommendations to policymakers. The following are particularly important.

First, immigrant children should enter formal pre-school education before age three. Governments should directly subsidise early education programmes, rather than giving vouchers to parents (vouchers can be confusing and are underused). They should provide

centre-based care with strong outreach to minorities that includes additional help to parents to encourage their children to 'succeed' in schools.

Second, language programmes that relentlessly focus on bringing children into mainstream school life are essential. Bilingualism is an asset, but most immigrant children learn one language at home and the language of society at school. Our research shows that this can undermine achievement. Grounding children in the host language should take priority.

Finally, immigrant children need to be given 'second chances', especially in school systems that force students into an early choice between academic and vocational education. Because immigrant students tend to start school at a linguistic and cultural disadvantage, compelling them to choose a 'track' (usually vocational education) too early may relegate them to a less enriching education. Policymakers must employ a range of tools to avoid this, such as allowing vocational students to switch back to academic schools if they show the potential to succeed.

By following the evidence, governments across Europe can make a real difference to the performance of immigrant students. Yet education is not simply a set of grades and exams; it is a socialising force, crucial to the aim of a cohesive society. Unless we unlock the potential of our children, regardless of where their parents were born, we risk 'balkanising' our societies. We must act now, or we risk undermining all our futures.

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