

SOCIAL SKILLS AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT OF ADOLESCENT IMMIGRANTS IN SCHOOL SETTINGS

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Fecha de recepción: 7 de junio de 2011

Fecha de admisión: 20 de octubre de 2011

ABSTRACT

Like many other European countries, Portugal has during the last decade, seen an increase in immigration, which has resulted in a need for more research focusing on the impact of immigration amongst the younger population who face multiple challenges in their host country.

The aim of the present study was to examine the relation between social skills, academic achievement and a range of family characteristics in a sample of 98 school adolescent immigrants in the region of Algarve, Portugal. The Self-report Form of the Social Skills Rating System was used and data was gathered about the students' academic achievement and family related variables such as: parental employment and qualifications, number of years in the country and family structure.

The results show some interesting group differences between first- and second-generation adolescent immigrants in their perceived social skills in terms of Self-control and Cooperation, with the second generation group reporting significantly lower levels on these two subscales. Although no group differences were found in terms of academic achievement, there was for all the adolescents a significant positive correlation between academic results and their reported levels of Assertion and Self-control. On the other hand, school retention amongst these adolescents was negatively associated with levels of Empathy. The results are discussed in relation to social skills intervention in school settings.

Key-words: Adolescence, Immigration, Social Skills, Academic Achievement.

INTRODUCTION

The percentage of immigrants living in Portugal has increased significantly during the last decade, in the year 2000 there were, for example, over 207.000 immigrants from non UE European countries increasing to over 449.000 in 2004 (ACIME, 2005). The Algarve, specifically, has the second

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highest percentage of immigrants in the country, only preceded by Lisbon (ACIME, 2005). One in four children born in the Algarve in the year 2008 is a child of an immigrant woman. The proportion of children of immigrants has multiplied by five between 2000 and 2008. If immigrants were not considered, the birth rate in the Algarve would be in decline, instead of rising (Fig. 1).

Similar increasing immigration rates have been observed across Europe (Strohmeier & Schmitt-Rodermund, 2008). This surge in immigration levels has led to a need for more studies about how these population groups are adapting to their host countries, in particular the youngest generation, who may present specific vulnerability factors in the process of social-cultural adjustment.

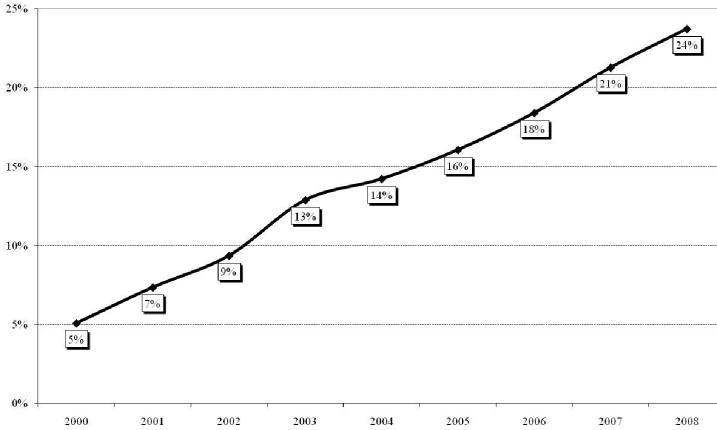


Figure 1. Proportion of children of foreign mothers on the total births in the Algarve from 2000 to 2008. Source: Hospitais do Algarve (2008)

Adolescence is a period of enormous challenges and a very important time in terms of emotional development and social identity. Some of the difficulties faced during adolescence can be exacerbated amongst immigrant groups. Immigrant adolescents like their native-born peers face a set of challenges concerning social relationships, psychological well-being, academic achievement and identity formation in addition to high challenges in terms of acculturation (Strohmeier et al., 2008). Social acculturation in immigrants may increase the risk or exacerbate some possible vulnerability factors (Sam, Vedder, Liebkind, Neto & Virta, 2008). These youngsters are, for example, at higher risk of facing discrimination (Huynh & Fulligni, 2010) and victimization (Ortega-Ruiz & Rodrigues-Hidalgo, 2008).

Neto (2001) studied the degree of satisfaction with life among adolescents with immigrant background and the factors that may be related to the level of satisfaction with life among them, and found out that sense of mastery and control of their lives was the most important factor. Gender, self-esteem and living in an ethnically homogeneous neighborhood were also found to be predictors of satisfaction with life.

The developmental path of immigrant adolescents occurs in a context of acculturation. Depending on its characteristics, this process of acculturation may, or may not, promote the development of their identity, facilitate relationships with peers, and encourage a transition to a professional career or to higher education (Johnson, 2007; Fry, 2007; Fuligni & Hardway, 2004; Berry, 1980). Also, adolescent acculturation may have effects on risk behaviours, increasing substance abuse and sexual risk behaviors (Brindis, Wolfe, Mccarter, Ball, & Starbuck-Morales, 1995).

However, studies across different countries and focusing on different immigration groups have not been unanimously about the possible negative impact of immigration. In other words, adapting to a new culture and country may not lead to behaviour difficulties in adolescence. Some studies have in fact pointed to some positive outcomes amongst first-generation immigrant youths in terms of social-cultural adjustment (Sam et al., 2008), levels of happiness (Felix & Pinto, 2010) and mental health (Neto, 2009). Differences in results highlight the complexity of variables associated with group and individual factors that moderate the process of adaptation and acculturation (Sam et al., 2008).

Nevertheless, immigration is a stressful process (Pavlopoulos, Obradavic, Dalla, Takis, Papathanassiou, & Masten, 2008) associated, in the case of adolescents, with challenges regarding the adaptation to the school context, peer group, the cultural and social environment. The school environment has been the focus of attention in this stage of development as it constitutes an important developmental context (Pavlopoulos et al., 2008) impacting on social identity and behaviour. Some studies have focused particularly on school achievement among immigrant adolescents and differences have also appeared across studies. A recent large scale study of 13-year-old immigrant adolescents in Canada revealed that these groups presented significantly lower academic results than their non-immigrant counterparts (Queen's University, 2010).

Adolescents face enormous challenges in emotional development but schools can play an important role in providing the conditions that may facilitate social and emotional learning during this stage (Larson & Brown, 2007). Programs aimed to promote students' social skills including establishing and maintaining positive relationships, setting and achieving positive goals, making responsible decisions, and constructively handling interpersonal situations can have very positive outcomes both in terms of development as well as academic achievement (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger, 2011). Indeed, social skills have been found to be a significant predictor of future academic functioning (Malecki & Elliot, 2002) and to be associated with later achievement in life (Lleras, 2008).

The present study is mostly an exploratory correlational study, which main aim is to understand the possible relationships between immigrant adolescents' school achievement and adjustment, their perceived social skills, important in social-cultural adaptation and a wide range of family and immigration related variables.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

A total of 98 adolescents took part in the study, ranging in age from 12 to 18 years of age ($M=15,3$; $SD= 1,6$), with 52 girls and 46 boys in the sample. All were students in schools in the Algarve and care was taken to include different geographic regions.

Sixty-six adolescents were first-generation and thirty two second-generation immigrants. Regarding their country of origin, they were from Africa ($n= 40$), Brazil ($n=28$), Eastern European countries ($n=12$) and other countries ($n=18$), which reflects the present general immigration patterns in Portugal (see ACIME, 2005).

Regarding family structure, 26 of these adolescents were from single-parent families while 69 lived in a two-parent family and 3 adolescents lived within another family structure.

In terms of their parents' educational level most had primary school education (46% for fathers and 45% for mothers) and similar was also the fact that almost half of the fathers and mothers had untrained qualifications (50% and 48% respectively). Maternal age ranged between 28 and 57 years ($M= 41$, $SD= 5,7$) and paternal age between 30 and 57 years of age ($M=43,9$; $SD=5,9$).

INSTRUMENTS

Data collection involved the completion of a questionnaire administered to the adolescents in the school context together with the Self-report Form from the Social Skills Rating System.

The questionnaire covered a wide range of issues concerning: family structure, parents' marital status, number of children in the family, number of years living in the country for the students as well as both parents, parental education and labour situation, country of origin and legal status. Information regarding school and course attended by the target students was also collected. In the present study academic competence was assessed through two different but related measures: average grades (calculated based on the grades of the main subjects) and retention rates. In Portugal schools grades are on a 5 point-scale.

The Social Skills Rating System (SSRS) was originally developed by Gresham & Elliot (1990) and provides a comprehensive picture of social behaviors, in reference to typically-developing students. The Student Form of the SSRS is a self-report rating scale of social skills and includes the following different subscales: Cooperation, Assertion, Self-control and Empathy.

PROCEDURE

School boards were contacted and agreed to participate. Informed consent of parents was required through a letter sent home through the children. Participation was voluntary and no compensation was offered. Instruments were filled in the classroom context and one investigator was present in order to answer any questions concerning the questionnaires' content.

RESULTS

Several aspects of the results need to be highlighted here. To start with, it was interesting to observe that no significant relation was found between family related variables and the students' academic performance and social skills.

Parents of these adolescents were very different in terms of the number of years living in Portugal, which reflects the fact that the sample included both first- and second-generation immigrants. So, we were also interested in exploring possible group differences regarding first- and second-generation in relation to social skills, academic related variables, including average results, school retention and school absence.

The results showed only group differences concerning their reported social skills in terms of Self-control and Cooperation, with the second generation group reporting lower levels on these two subscales. For Self-control there was a mean difference of 1,46, t-test 2,73 ($p < .01$) and for Cooperation we found a mean difference of 1,82, t-test 2,6 ($p < .05$). No other significant group differences were observed for other variables.

Correlations were calculated amongst the main variables studied, table 1 and 2 shows coefficients amongst social skills and academic results, school absence and retention.

There was for all adolescents a significant positive correlation between academic results and their reported levels of Assertion and Self-control. It was also shown that school retention was negatively associated with levels of Empathy.

Table 1. Correlation coefficients amongst school related variables

	School Retention	Average Grades	School Attendance
School Retention	----	-.172	.202*
Average grades		----	.03
School Attendance			---

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Table 2. Correlation coefficients amongst social skills and school related variables

	Assertion	Empathy	Cooperation	Self-control
School Retention	-0.066	-.263*	-.016	-.128
Average grades	.216*	.119	.155	.373**
School Attendance	-.11	-.248*	-.094	-.051

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study showed some interesting results regarding first- and second-generation group differences in terms of perceived social skills, with the second-generation adolescents reporting lower levels of Self-control and Cooperation.

It is interesting to observe some apparently advantages for the way first-generation immigrant adolescents perceived their social skills, which is in accordance to other studies who found some advantages for this generation youth in terms of their socio-cultural adaptation, school adjustment and behaviour problems (Sam et al., 2008).

Intervention programmes in schools should, therefore, be more sensitive to the adaptation process of second-generation students, despite the fact they were born and raised in the host country, as Strohmair & Schmitt-Rodermund (2008) argue, they may show different patterns of social-cultural adaptation from first-generation immigrants.

A second interesting result relates to the positive associations between social skills such Assertion and Self-control and academic results. Social skills such Self-control and Assertion have been found to be positively associated with academic performance by previous studies on other non-immigrant populations (Mansfield, Pinto, Parente & Wortman, 2009; Rice, 2006). It seems important to better understand those pro-social skills that may have the greatest impact in the process of adaptation to the challenges that may be more directly linked to school performance in order to develop intervention programmes specifically target to promote them.

Finally, this study was only exploratory in its nature and results ought to be analysed with some care as future research is needed to verify in greater detailed the associations observed between some of the variables studied and to also compare these with data from non-immigrant adolescents. Outcomes from studies on immigrant groups are always part of a complex set of variables including specific cultural, individual and developmental factors that interact in a complex way.

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