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Families, schools, and major demographic trends in the United States

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Abstract

The ability of schools to serve young people may be jeopardized if their approaches to parental involvement do not evolve to reflect the growing diversity of their students brought on by long-term demographic changes.

C. Wright Mills argued for the value of studying human lives at the intersection of personal biography and societal history.¹ Unfortunately, owing to disciplinary constraints, studies that do equal justice to both sides of this intersection remain uncommon. Scholars from more macro-oriented fields have effectively elucidated patterns of social, cultural, and economic change and their effects on individual outcomes while demonstrating less awareness of the developmental processes underlying those affected outcomes. Scholars from more micro-oriented fields have effectively elucidated important developmental processes and their links to proximate ecologies of everyday life, but they have been less likely to engage broader conceptions of context, such as populations, stratification, and history.² This imbalance prevents more fully formed theoretical models of human life. Increasingly, however, scholars studying youth are making significant progress on this front, with Rainer Silbereisen leading the charge.

Social change

According to Silbereisen, social change is a “change in the typical characteristics of society, such as social structures and institutions, norms, values, cultural products, and symbols.”³ Research on short-term change—the aftermath of events that are fairly specific and concrete—is exemplified by Silbereisen’s studies of the implications of German reunification for transitions into adulthood, as well as studies of the life course effects of the Great Depression, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, and the breakup of the Soviet Union.⁴ Of course, *short term* is loosely defined in the sense that such events may be long in the making and have aftermaths that extend into the future. As natural experiments with more distinctly demarcated before and after periods, short-term social changes attract a great deal of attention from scholars. In contrast, long-term change—gradual evolutions of societal structure, composition, and culture or social upheavals that play out over time—can be more

difficult to study because it is usually less concrete and requires longer-term data collection. Examples of long-term social changes studied in relation to development include geopolitical struggles in the Middle East and Northern Ireland.⁵ More common, however, is research on slowly unfolding demographic trends, for example, increasing fertility and decreasing mortality rates in postindustrial societies.⁶

Although long-term social change is challenging to study, it is theoretically important because its effects are not immediate and it is not usually powered by major social institutions.⁷ Another challenge is that individuals are often only vaguely aware of long-term social changes and do not fully consider how they might be affected personally. As a result, changes in everyday norms and customs can lag behind long-term social change, contributing to stratification by setting up social disconnects that favor some groups over others. As such, youth may lose out when their ecological contexts do not change on pace with the broader societal contexts in which their ecologies are embedded. To illustrate this point, we focus on demographic trends in the United States that are shaping an ecological transaction of American youth—family-school connections to fuel the intergenerational transmission of inequality.

More so than in other countries, American parents are expected to be highly visible in schools and to supplement school activities at home. Such connections are thought to keep everyone aware of students' needs, provide parents a venue to advocate for children, and give teachers at-home support for their efforts. They also have symbolic value in that they are perceived to signal something about the values and motivations of the actors in each context.⁸

More problematic, research has pointed to the tendency for many schools to have assumed scripts for family-school connections that are grounded in middle-class (and white) values about parenting. Consequently, working-class and poor parents (especially racial/ethnic minorities) may not live up to the expectations of school personnel. Because the parents are perceived as less supportive and involved than they actually are, their children may be penalized. In contrast, children from middle-class homes are rewarded for having parents who engage in behaviors that make them more visible in schools and demand more attention from school personnel. This is precisely why family-school connections are promoted by policies targeting socioeconomic disparities in achievement.⁹ We argue that long-term demographic trends may be exacerbating such problems beyond the usual suspects of class and race. In particular, immigration and family change make the working model of family-school connections valued in so many schools seem especially out of touch with the reality of today's families, in turn putting at risk the futures of increasingly large numbers of children and youth.

Immigration

The immigrant population in the United States has grown and diversified considerably since the reform of immigration laws in the 1960s. Lower-skilled immigrants from Latin America and higher-skilled immigrants from Asia have predominated, gradually altering the racial/ethnic composition of the population, particularly the student population. These changes

have contributed to cultural tensions in American education and in the political arena more generally.¹⁰

Overall, Latin American immigrants and, to some extent, their Asian counterparts are less likely than other parents to engage in the visible school-based components of family-school connections, such as volunteering. Certainly socioeconomic constraints and language barriers factor into these patterns, but cultural misunderstandings also matter.¹¹ For example, the *educación* value among Latin American immigrants—which prioritizes parallel rather than interactive partnerships with schools, with parents guiding moral development and schools leading academic learning—may be misconstrued by school personnel as parental disengagement, and positive values imparted by such parenting to children (for example, respect for authority) may be out of step with school cultures that reward entitled behavior. As another example, Asian immigrants often take an active approach to managing education—training children at home and securing supplemental supports like Saturday school—that is outside the boundaries of school and therefore unseen by school personnel, who in turn view them as distant.¹² Although connected to socioeconomic status and language, cultural misunderstandings reflect a lack of familiarity with the way American schools work on the part of immigrant parents and a lack of understanding of the many ways that immigrant parents can be engaged on the part of school personnel. Such misunderstandings add a new twist to long-standing ideas about family-school connections and inequality.

Two other issues are important to raise here. First, immigrant children in the United States often do better academically than their peers from nonimmigrant families, especially when looking within specific racial/ethnic groups and taking socioeconomic status into account. This immigrant paradox, however, is weaker in the early years of education, especially among Latin American immigrants. Because family-school partnerships are critical during this period of education, the problems that immigration poses for family-school partnerships play some role in the educational risks of young children from immigrant families. These early risks could then suppress the magnitude of the immigrant paradox in later stages of the educational career and therefore limit the ultimate educational success of immigrant children.¹³ Second, many Western countries have been grappling with the increasing diversification of immigration in recent years. The growth of the Middle Eastern and Arab immigrant populations in several European countries, including Germany and the Netherlands, is one example.¹⁴ Cross-national comparisons of the developmental outcomes of immigrant children, however, often reveal more similarity than difference.¹⁵ Thus, the implications of immigration for family-school relations and youth functioning could generalize outside the United States, especially to countries in which family-school connections are similarly emphasized.

Family change

Declining marriage and remarriage, delayed marriage and fertility, and increasing cohabitation and divorce over the past thirty years have resulted in more “fragile families” in the United States—alternative family forms (for example, single-parent and stepparent homes) and more unstable structures with an inconsistent second parent.¹⁶ For example, 41 percent of births are now to unmarried women, a third of households with children are

headed by a single parent, and a tenth of today's two-parent households have only one biological parent.¹⁷

The implications of family change for family-school connections need to be better understood. Unpartnered or unstably partnered parents have finite resources that need to be carefully allocated to help children—money, of course, but also time, energy, and feelings of efficacy, which may be strained by lack of a social support, a “missing” second parent, or work demands that constrain parents from committing to school partnerships regardless of their values or motivations.¹⁸ Partner instability among parents can also stress the family system as relationships are forged and broken, creating variation in parental monitoring and academic support and leaving school personnel with no consistent contact at home.¹⁹

Through parental stress, economic instability, and other mechanisms, growing up in fragile families can interfere with children's academic progress at multiple stages of development while also affecting many other domains of adjustment and functioning. The disruptions in family-school connections likely linked to family change on the population level could play a role in these implications of family structure and instability for individual youth.²⁰

As with immigration, considering how these patterns extend outside the United States is also important. Many Western countries have been grappling with the rising diversity of family structure. In particular, the dramatic rise in nonmarital fertility has not been confined to American shores.²¹ Yet what appears to be a similar trend differs substantially in reality. For example, although European children are also increasingly likely to be born to or raised by unmarried parents, they are much more likely than American children to stably live with both of these parents as they grow up, with their parents partnered, if not legally married. Thus, nonmarital fertility comes with great risk for family instability in the United States but less so elsewhere.²² Consequently, the implications of family change in the United States for family-school partnerships and, through this link, young people may not be as generalizable outside the United States as the implications of immigration, especially in countries in which family-school partnerships are less central to the ways schools work.

Conclusion

These examples illustrate how, over long periods of time, the composition of the population of American families has changed. Yet an institutional context (the educational system) has not necessarily changed to reflect this new population it is serving. Consequently, transactions between school and home are likely to be out of sync for many families until the system catches up with the population. Realigning these transactions therefore could be a useful target of policy interventions aiming to reduce disparities in education and general development related to these major demographic trends.

As one example of such an intervention, the National Council of La Raza, a U.S. Latino advocacy group, has education programs recognizing the potential for immigration-related disconnects between parents and schools. These programs, such as Lee y Seras, organize parent workshops to help demystify the American educational system for immigrants and workshops for teachers and care providers serving immigrant communities to help educate

them about Latin American culture. The point is for families and schools to understand each other.²³ This idea of familiarizing each side of the family-school partnership with the constraints and expectations of the other is a useful model for thinking about how to serve other new segments of the student population.

Developmentally significant connections between social change and ecological transactions are one way to study the intersection of biography and history and speak to the value of crossing disciplinary lines. Developmentalists tend to put the lives of young people front and center, but scholars like Silbereisen also force them to consider how these lives play out against a much larger backdrop that extends far beyond proximate ecological contexts. Perhaps this is his greatest legacy: showing how much developmentalists have to learn from other traditions but also how much scholars from those traditions have to learn from developmentalists.

Notes

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