

A COMMENT ON:
“Goals and Gaps: Educational Careers of Immigrant Children”
by Michela Carlana, Eliana La Ferrara, Paolo Pinotti

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HOW CAN WE PROMOTE economic mobility for immigrant children, who often face many disadvantages compared to their native peers? What can our educational systems do to better enable all children, regardless of family background, to more fully pursue their academic potential? These are fundamentally important questions throughout the world, and “Goals and Gaps: Educational Careers of Immigrant Children” sheds unique light on them through a randomized control trial with first- and second-generation immigrant children in Italy.

In Italy, as in many other OECD contexts, children make important decisions about their educational trajectory prior to entering high school. Specifically, they can choose an academic or technical track—which prepares them for higher education—or can instead select a vocational track—which prepares students for blue collar type jobs that do not require university education. The study begins by uncovering an intriguing phenomenon: high achieving immigrant boys are less likely to enter the academic or technical tracks than native boys with the same test scores. This same gap is not observed for girls.

The authors worked with the Italian Ministry of Education and several foundations to evaluate a program called *Equality of Opportunity for Immigrant Students*, which provided career counseling and tutoring aimed at aligning the aspirations of high achieving immigrant middle school students with their ability. The program targeted the top ten immigrant students at schools in five large northern Italian cities. The study documents that the intervention led immigrant boys to enter academic and technical high schools at the same rate as academically similar native boys. There was no effect on immigrant girls, who already entered the academic and technical tracks at rates similar to native girls. The study provides evidence that increases in academic motivation and teacher recommendations about track choice are plausibly important mechanisms.

This study suggests many fascinating avenues for ongoing research. In this comment, I touch briefly upon several issues that are likely to be particularly relevant to thinking about the broader scaleup of this very promising program. There are three primary actors involved in the high school track decision: students, parents, and teachers. The study’s intervention focuses primarily on the students, whereas these comments speculate on some interesting possibilities that the study raises about the role of parents and teachers in this decision.

One puzzle highlighted by the study is why the track choices of immigrant boys relative to native boys initially are quite different from the choices of immigrant girls relative to native girls. One possibility is that this could result from different parental expectations for boys and girls, which themselves vary by cultural background and income. Economic considerations would be particularly salient for boys, if parents are more likely to rely on their boys to become breadwinners, versus aspiring for their girls to marry high earning peers. Immigrant families may be more likely to anticipate that they cannot afford the delay in wage earning that would result if their sons pursued higher education.

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The study uses large-scale educational survey data to document that the share of individuals who are not in education, employment, or training four years after high school graduation is actually higher for those who completed the vocational track versus the technical/academic tracks. However, it is not clear to me that this share is what is most salient to families. What may be more economically relevant is earnings (both their level and stability) in the decade or so following graduation. The vocational track provides skills to enter the job market immediately—even if a substantial share of graduates nevertheless remains unemployed. It would also be relevant to better understand the stability of earnings by track. If many entry level jobs following university offer only temporary contracts—providing less perceived stability than blue collar trades—this additional risk may make vulnerable immigrant families view higher education as an even less viable option for their sons. If these economic factors—or families’ perceptions of them—remain unchanged, one concern is that the students nudged into the higher track may still decide to forego higher education at higher rates than natives, or drop out before completion due to the economic pressures that their families are facing. More generally, how student aspirations interact with economic realities and perceptions of these realities is likely to be central to the as-yet unobserved long-run returns of the program.

Teachers are also likely to play a role—perhaps a very substantial one—in which track students choose. In this context, teachers make a non-binding recommendation about which track the students should select, during the middle of grade 8. The treatment led them to increase their recommendation for boys. I worry that immigrant students may be disadvantaged, perhaps significantly, due to biases by their teachers. One concern is that teachers, aware that they are being studied in a program to improve immigrant students’ aspirations, could make higher recommendations due to experimenter demand effects. If the program were scaled up and such adjustments disappeared, the impact of the program could be blunted. While it is indeed relevant that teachers only adjust their recommendations of the high track upward for boys in treatment schools, with no similar effect for treated girls, I am not sure that this fact alone can fully rule out the possibility of demand effects. Teachers’ stereotypes about immigrants may interact with gendered stereotypes, for example if the stereotypical immigrant jobs are blue collar trades dominated by males or if immigrant boys are viewed as more likely to be troublemakers than immigrant girls. Because immigrant girls are just as likely to pursue the high track as native girls to start with, teachers may have had limited scope to adjust recommendations for high achieving girls upward.

One piece of suggestive evidence for this potential hypothesis is a paper by the study authors and Alberto Alesina: “Revealing Stereotypes: Evidence from Immigrants in Schools.”¹ Like the current study, it is set in Italian middle schools, and finds that math teachers give lower grades to immigrant students compared to native students with the same performance on blindly graded standardized tests, particularly if the teacher is revealed to be more biased by an IAT test. This is a deeply troubling finding. To be clear, I am not suggesting that the change in teacher recommendation would explain the entire result, but it does raise an issue to consider should the program be scaled up.

The program was administered by career counselors with graduate degrees in psychology and significant experience with counseling immigrant children. The contrast with some teachers, particularly those who might score higher on bias metrics, is likely to be substantial. To scale the program up, teachers might need to play a more central role in

¹Alesina, Alberto, Michela Carlana, Eliana La Ferrara, and Paolo Pinotti. *Revealing stereotypes: Evidence from immigrants in schools*. No. w25333. National Bureau of Economic Research, 2018.

the career counseling, as professional career counselors who work with immigrant children are likely to be scarce. This raises the question of whether teachers simply were not giving the right career counseling to immigrant boys—but could do so with the proper training, time, and curriculum—or if there is something more fundamental about having an external, highly trained career counselor as a role model.

A final factor that seems relevant to understand before further scaleup is how the students who choose the higher track perform. The study compares the subsequent performance in high school of treated students as compared to control students. Ideally, we would also like to understand how the treated and control students perform relative to their native Italian peers. This may matter, both for the likelihood of entering university and for mental health outcomes.

I learned a substantial amount about this centrally important issue through the exceptionally careful work documented in this study and am extremely grateful that such talented scholars are examining this question of fundamental importance to the lives of so many families. While scaling such programs is always challenging, I am excited by the potential the study shows for a feasible approach to increasing opportunities for immigrant children.

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