

# IMMIGRANT STUDENTS AT SCHOOL IN SPAIN: CONSTRUCTING A SUBJECT OF STUDY

Francisco JAVIER GARCÍA CASTAÑO,<sup>I</sup> María RUBIO GÓMEZ,<sup>II</sup> Ouafaa BOUACHRA<sup>III</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

### **Immigrant Students at School in Spain: Constructing a Subject of Study**

This article discusses the various contexts of the public education of immigrant students in Spain, bringing together the relevant body of literature from more than ten years of research. It provides a description of the distribution of immigrant students at the national and local level, elucidating an analysis of the perception and management of immigrant students within the Spanish education system, presenting the different types of classroom assistance provided for these students and the pivotal role of language management in school. The article concludes by presenting critical approaches to the problems discussed.

KEYWORDS: immigrants, education, migratory policy, integration, research

## IZVLEČEK

### **Učenci priseljenci v šoli v Španiji: konstrukcija raziskovalnega subjekta**

Članek se posveča raznolikim kontekstom javnega šolanja učencev priseljencev v španskem izobraževalnem sistemu. V obravnavo je vključena obsežna relevantna literatura, ki je nastala v več kot desetih letih raziskovanja. Članek na ta način ponuja opis distribucije učencev priseljencev na nacionalni in lokalni ravni; pojasnjuje analizo percepcije in obravnavanja učencev priseljencev v španskem izobraževalnem sistemu; predstavlja različne vrste učne pomoči v razredih in osrednjo vlogo obravnave vloge jezika v šoli. Članek zaključuje predstavitev kritičnega pristopa k obravnavanim problemom.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: priseljenci, izobraževanje, migracijska politika, integracija, raziskave

<sup>I</sup> PhD in Philosophy, Professor, Migration Institute, University of Granada (ES)18151 Ogijares, Granada, ffgarcia@ugr.es.

<sup>II</sup> PhD in Social Anthropology, Researcher, Migration Institute, University of Granada, (ES)18151 Ogijares, Granada, mariarubio@ugr.es.

<sup>III</sup> PhD candidate in Social Anthropology, Researcher, Migration Institute, University of Granada, (ES)18151 Ogijares, Granada, ouafaa@ugr.es

## INTRODUCTION

Since the early nineties, there has been a substantial increase in the immigrant population in Spain, as well as a growth in the number of family members of established immigrants arriving from other countries. The growth in this population has led to the popularisation of discourse on interculturalism in various contexts (school, research, policy, etc.). The arrival of immigrant students in Spanish schools is still perceived as somewhat problematic. One of the reasons is that difficulties emerge with communication, as immigrant students generally speak languages other than the official school language. However, if we analyse these supposed problems, we discover that many of these so-called new conflicts in schools are neither new nor relevant to the educational community. Since 1990, scientific research has been developing in Spain to explain what happens to new students (usually identified as immigrants) enrolled in educational institutions in Spain.

This article presents a review of the research on this topic from 2000 to the present.<sup>1</sup> The available literature is organised into four themes:<sup>2</sup> 1) studies that provide statistics of the phenomenon to demonstrate the concentration of new students in some centres; 2) research focused on activities designed to welcome new students and special programmes aimed at such students; 3) studies explaining the teaching methods of the principal official school languages; and 4) studies on the success and/or failure of students in the Spanish education system. Our literature review is drawn from a database containing more than 300 references in Spanish and Catalan, to which we add a register of doctoral dissertations completed at various Spanish universities. We would like to stress that our approach does not aim to provide a bibliometric analysis of the scientific accounts in the field, nor does it provide contextualisation of this research and its literary production in Spain. We do not intend to discuss the entire body of research on social and cultural change in Spain as a consequence of the changes in demographic dynamics and the education system. Rather, our aim is to organise the research in this field of study around the most recurrent themes regarding education and immigration in Spain.

## PRESENCE AND DISTRIBUTION OF NEW STUDENTS IN SCHOOLS

A considerable amount of research focused on new students begins by highlighting the presence of such students in schools, and the recent relative growth in their numbers, in order to claim subsequently that there is a need to study this phenomenon more closely. However, at the national level, there is a lack of specific demographic studies analysing the evolution of this growth, contrasting historical facts and offering criticism of the available research. In this sense, the Centre for Educational Investigation and Documentation (CIDE) made global approaches to the process of enrolling foreign students in Spanish schools between 1991 and 2003.<sup>3</sup> A report based on a comparative analysis conducted by Eurydice (2004) was published in 2005, providing statistical updates based on data from the Ministry of Education and Science (CIDE 2005). This analysis indicates that there is a clear perception of a significant presence of an immigrant student population in Spanish schools and that this presence is considered permanent.

Another example is that the annual report of the Economic and Social Council of Spain detailed information on immigrant students' schooling at different educational levels (Consejo Económico y Social de España 2003). This annual report draws clear conclusions about the demographic and sociocultural

1 The literature on this subject has been discussed in García Castaño et al. (2000) and García Castaño and Pulido (1993). Terrén (2004) has also examined the relationship between immigration and cultural diversity in education.

2 Please note that the relationship between families and school, for which there is significant scientific research, is not discussed here for reasons of space.

3 Centro Investigación y Documentación Educativa 2002, 2003a, 2003b.

significance of this phenomenon that state that the following situations exists in Spain: 1) a drop in the number of indigenous students and an increase in the number of immigrant students; 2) a significant presence of immigrant students in compulsory education; 3) a general decrease in the number of university students (both indigenous and immigrant), as well as low enrolment of immigrant students in tertiary education; and 4) a higher concentration of immigrant students in the public-school system.

There are also critical studies that go beyond a mere description of the phenomenon of the immigrant population in Spanish schools. For example, Aparicio (2003), García Castaño and Capellán (2002a, 2002b) and García Castaño et al. (2005) have provided statistics for the growth in the number of immigrant students in Spanish schools, concluding that “the categorization of students under the nationality criteria does not only quantify the differences, but finally turns out to be a discrimination mechanism of included and excluded students from the area called ‘intercultural education in schools’”. (Aparicio 2003: 40)

### The concentration of new students in Spanish schools

There is agreement in the literature reviewed that immigrant students in Spain are concentrated in public schools. Two explanations have been presented: a “culturalist” explanation (i.e. religious and socioeconomic)<sup>4</sup> and an economic explanation (i.e. a lack of resources means it is difficult to enrol new students in private schools). In these studies, we find a shared notion of the ambivalence that characterises the compulsory education system, depending on the school’s ownership, which is reflected in the diversity of nationalities in schools identified as public, and a lack of diversity in private schools.<sup>5</sup> At the state level, the problem of the concentration of immigrant student populations in Spanish schools was detected some years ago in the report by the Economic and Social Council (2001). This report offered a plan of action which included the following two measures: 1) avoiding the concentration of nationalities in certain public schools; and 2) creating a special mechanism of reserved places at private schools (although various researchers had already identified this as a solution). Aja (2000) has studied the spatial concentration of immigrant students in certain schools and neighbourhoods, as well as the flight of indigenous students to schools without immigrants. According to this author, this unequal distribution is caused by a lack of effective local policies.<sup>6</sup> He states that the supposed freedom to choose a school is limited by the education planning criteria and remedial education policies fixed by the local administrations (Aja 2000: 72). Conversely, Sánchez Núñez (2006) examines a similar situation in Andalusia and notes that unequal distribution of immigrant students in public and private schools also depends on the differences in the immigrant students’ backgrounds. He believes cultural (religious) factors explain the unequal distribution of nationalities in Spanish schools, despite recognising that such an explanation is limited to certain contexts. However, the notion of dualism (public-private) in the education system is not exclusive to the studies mentioned.

The IOÉ Collective (2002a) confirms the tendency of the indigenous Spanish population to “move towards” private schools, while immigrant students enrol in public schools, which led Fernández (2003) to conclude that public schools are being gradually converted into schools for the poor. This situation is caused by the construction of differences in which “a vertical differentiation is no longer possible

4 Juliano highlights the influence of socioeconomic circumstances faced by the families of students when selecting a school for their children: “they tend to choose schools in their residence area and according to their economic resources tend to gather in degraded zones with a lack of services and a high level of conflict.” (Juliano 2002:494)

5 Spain also has “government-subsidised private education”, which works similar to private schools.

6 Claret (2004) explains that the concentration of foreign students at certain schools has been considered an error in educational administration since 1994, when an official government newsletter was published that recommended avoiding having more than 15 percent immigrant students.

[...] and a horizontal one is being searched for" (Fernández 2003:249). However, recent research offers analysis of new situations in which the dichotomy between private and public schools is broken.<sup>7</sup> Based on ethnographic research conducted in schools in a suburb of Granada, Andalusia, García Castaño et al. (2012) follow the evolution of indigenous and foreign student populations over several years to find that only a few public schools had larger populations of immigrant students than the private schools that were situated in the same area. The flight of the indigenous population from schools in which immigrant students are concentrated is largely connected with what Franzé (2003) terms a "culturalist" vision of immigration, according to which children with immigrant backgrounds are conceived as bearers of a cultural difference attributed to their ethnicity.

This difference makes them visible as the principal agents of educational difficulties and allows ethnic origin to be converted into a new and powerful indicator of academic quality and social climate in schools. However, this problem can be interpreted from another perspective. In a study of a district in Barcelona and its foreign population, Aramburu (2005) claims that there is no statistical correlation between the decrease in enrolment of indigenous students and the presence of an immigrant student population in schools. However, the recurring argument of both the media and the parents in this district differs from what Aramburu claims the statistics show, because there is a strong perception of immigrant students as a group that is creating the deterioration of the school, as well as conflict and violence.

## WELCOME ACTIVITIES AND CLASSROOM ASSISTANCE FOR NEW STUDENTS

While there is an abundance of proposals on how and what to do in order to provide welcome activities for new students, there is a major lack of analysis and research on this issue. However, we offer a set of reflections on the subject. Essomba (2006) examines several aspects involved in the education of immigrant students that may condition the reception processes (i.e. welcome activities). These are late enrolment, language, a tension between the educational culture of the immigrant students and the Spanish school or a tension between the educational, family and economic cultures. Other determining factors are found in the host society, such as the extent of the school's open or welcoming attitude towards the entire educational community.<sup>8</sup> Cabrera (2003) calls for the global involvement of the educational community, i.e. the teachers, the families and the students, in the immigrants' integration process. In short, an attitude towards the welcoming process that enables the recognition of individual rights and educational practice committed to fighting against exclusion (Montón 2002). Some scholars propose strategies of connection between the community (family) and the school. Miró (2003) argues for the placement of welcome tutors (one for each educational stage), welcome peers and intercultural mediators. However, the issue of reception involves other considerations. Navarro (2003) claims that the majority of schools are not prepared to conduct welcome activities in an appropriate manner, especially if a student arrives outside of the official enrolment periods. Not many references were found on the development of welcome activities in the sources analysed. Therefore it is crucial to assess what is being done with new immigrant students in order to place them within the educational structure. The mechanisms of such assessments are of great importance, as is the concept of "the other" in considering certain factors about new students: their skills, their learning processes and their potential contributions to the school's routines (Palaudàrias 2001). It can

7 See Benito and González 2008; García Castaño and Carrasco Pons 2011; García Castaño and Olmos 2012.

8 There is a certain plurality of opinion concerning the recommendations for schools' welcoming plans. There are those who argue that all schools should introduce their own tailored "welcome programme for new students" (Molina 2002) and those who prefer a global plan for education in values (Cabrera 2003).

be said that immigrant students have been converted into a paradigm of cultural diversity, while the strategies designed by schools to educate such students can be defined as strategies of differentiation. According to García and Granados (2002), the idea that diversity should be approached with specificity constitutes a contribution to exclusion through a symbolic ghettoisation and an increase in institutional xenophobia.

### Special-assistance classes for new students

Research in the area of providing special-assistance classes for new immigrant students remains scarce and incomplete, focused particularly on criticising the special classes to assist and welcome immigrant students to a school. The most well-known special classes in Spain are Workshops for Educational Adaptation and Learning Basic Skills (TAE) in Catalonia, and Temporary Classes of Linguistic Adaptation (ATAL) in Andalusia, which is now used throughout Spain.

Peralta (2000) reflects on the educational reality of Moroccan secondary-school students and provides a detailed description of the TAE. The study asserts that the idea of a multicultural school is still an example of wishful thinking. Ortíz (2005) examines ATAL in the Andalusian province of Almería,<sup>9</sup> stressing the manner in which the Spanish language and its promotion and use are converted into a system of discrimination for these students. Pérez and Pomares (2002) explain that the reason for providing the special classes is the lack of principal-official-language skills among the immigrant student population.<sup>10</sup> Some scholars defend these classes (Feria 2002) by arguing that they create necessary connections between the world of social exclusion and the educational integration environment. However, the measure is criticised for its segregationist nature. Bonal (2004) and Palaudàrias (2001) demonstrate the risk of isolating new students, arguing that it aggravates the difficulty of establishing relationships between immigrant students and the indigenous students, and Jiménez (2004) states that language acquisition comes through interaction with peers.

### Teaching Language in Schools

The arrival of immigrant students with a native language other than Spanish has created new challenges and forced the need for certain aspects of the education system to be resolved.

[...] the educational system of the state deliberately ignored their minorities as a part of an explicit policy targeted at the creation of nations and of an interest in unity based on one culture [...] the children from minority communities enter the educational system and end up being treated as strange due to the most obvious and immediate factor which is the inability to use their mother tongue and a need to communicate in an unknown language. (Mar-Molinero 2001:80)

In order to achieve linguistic diversity, Spain's Autonomous Communities have created diverse activities within education programmes, called intercultural education (these are generally conducted in special classes held outside of ordinary classes). These activities have been supported by legislation, according to which the student's duty to learn the official school language is connected to their social and cultural integration (Aguaded 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Cara Rodríguez (2003) and García et al. (2012) provide a detailed description of ATAL in Almería.

<sup>10</sup> Montón (2003) examines language-learning mechanisms and teacher training to facilitate new students' transition from welcome classes to ordinary classes.

The Law on Quality of Education [...] states that: 'the first essential step is to reinforce the study of the language in order to facilitate for the students in such situations the appropriate development of their educational process in the shortest time possible'. It can be observed that the declared willingness to integrate the immigrants into the educational system has to pass through the language. (Tarrés 2004:7)

There is a great deal of research that questions the relationship between the immigrant students' command of the official school language and their integration into the education system. Soto (2000) believes that the degree of linguistic distance can express the degree of integration difficulty. However, the central focus in the studies we reviewed was not on the degree of integration as related to the command of language, but rather the attempt to understand how the new language can be acquired by immigrant students at school. At present, all special classes are strictly centred on linguistics, which according to Carcedo (2000), is not sufficient, as immigrant students should be familiarise with the entire cultural universe of the language and classes should consider the three dimensions introduced by Carrasco (2001a): linguistic distance; linguistic hierarchies (according to the position of each social group); and situational use of diverse languages. Many studies<sup>11</sup> recognise not only the linguistic issues in the process of second-language acquisition but also cultural and linguistic diversity in the classroom, relationships between students or the linguistic and cultural baggage that immigrant students carry. As Vila (2000a) affirms, these factors boost new students' self-esteem and make the integration process easier.<sup>12</sup> These studies insist on the need to create the possibility of a multilingual school once multiculturalism is recognised and stereotypes related to the immigrant population are changed. Once this is achieved, the school is then constructed as a fundamental space that promotes positive self-image and high self-esteem among immigrant students.

The influence and efforts of school staff to create a safe atmosphere that encompasses acceptance and motivation for students from linguistic minorities within the school would undoubtedly contribute to immigrant students' linguistic development and therefore, social and educational integration (Martín 2000). The role of teachers is pivotal in the process of integration through language acquisition, but some researchers highlight that teachers are not always equipped to facilitate this process (Vila 2000b).<sup>13</sup> The literature reveals contradictory views on the relationship between the stage of enrolment of immigrant students and their language acquisition. Vila (2000a) believes that if an immigrant student has recently enrolled at the kindergarten or primary-education level, there are fewer difficulties in principal-official-language acquisition than for a student who has enrolled directly into secondary compulsory education. However, Maruny (2002) claims that the most influential factor is not the stage of enrolment, but the education level of the immigrant students. It is arguable that the problem of integration does not lie in the student's command of the principal official language, or in the stage at which the immigrant student joins the education system, but in the principles upon which the education system is built. That is, we have to consider whether the school adheres to policies that promote monolingualism and monoculturalism (intending to homogenise the school population) or policies that aim to provide an equal level of education for all students<sup>14</sup> (diversifying the school both culturally and linguistically).

11 See Carrasco 2001b

12 Vila (2000a) states that we must consider that language learning is related to the active participation of students in social interactions with their peers, which means that any policy that creates segregation in ordinary classes (by having immigrant students study language or any other content away from the rest of students) will make language acquisition difficult.

13 It seems worthwhile to mention here the research conducted by Broeder and Mijares (2003) in Madrid within the framework of the European Cultural Foundation, which assesses the vitality and status of languages spoken by immigrant students at school.

14 Vila (2000b) believes that difficulties are created by the fact that the education system targets each stage and not potential individual problems.

## **Educational Success and Failure: Achievements of New Students**

Over the past twenty years, there has been a considerable amount of scientific literature regarding the presence of migrant populations in schools that focus on educational success or failure. However, studies conducted in Spain are still scarce and generally examine the relationships between “educational trajectories” and “socioeconomic contexts”—the ethnocultural factors or language and schooling conditions in the countries of origin of migrant students.

## **EDUCATIONAL TRAJECTORIES, SOCIOECONOMIC CONTEXT AND COUNTRY OF ORIGIN**

A great number of scholars assert that educational failure is neither the immigrants’ fault, nor the fault of their children, but rather a result of the unequal socioeconomic situation of excluded groups. Carrasco (2004) presents the model presented by John Ogbu and supplements it with critical analyses of the concept of accommodation/assimilation and on students’ motivations, attempting to create an alternative to the usual explanation of minority students’ deficient school performance that centre on psychological causes and cultural hypotheses, “which camouflage the real fundamentals of the problem” (Carrasco 2004: 45). However, we also see other approaches such as that of Franzé (2000) who refers to inequality in educational opportunities without attributing the key cause to ethnocultural factors. Massot (2001) and Fernández (2007) emphasise that what is practised within schools is a clear ‘methodological nationalism’, an attempt to homogenise, classify and interact with students depending on their nationality or ethnic background. However, Lovelace (2002) states that school is a very small part of an entire society that determines the success or failure of students, emphasising that the correlation between the success (understood as labour insertion and citizenship) and family framework of each subject is absolute, while the influence of the school on the individual’s future is minimal. Here we find a wide explanatory consensus among researchers. In all the studies reviewed, there are references to the necessary relationships between the school, the family and the influence of educational processes.

A particular line of the relationship between family and educational failure can be found in studies that attempt to compare the educational trajectories followed by both parents and their children. Aparicio (2003) shows that children of both Moroccan and Dominican immigrants do not reach the level of compulsory studies. However, while for the Moroccan students in the study the level of education attained constituted a considerable step forward from that achieved by their parents, for the Dominican students, the level of education attained constituted stagnation, and for a significant proportion, a step backwards. Conversely, the majority of Spanish students tend to greatly surpass the level of education achieved by their parents.

### **Language as an explanation for educational failure**

Despite having mentioned the value and significance of the principal official school language in the educational trajectory of immigrant students in Spain, we should also note the existence of some studies demonstrating the correlation between native language and educational failure. For example, Bullejos (2002) ascribes the educational failure of Arabic-language students from Ceuta to their native language. However, other studies offer empirical evidence that command of language is not a determining factor of educational performance. Thus, Fernández and Sánchez (2003) stress that the question should not be reduced to a mere linguistic factor because other, equally important elements are also

in evidence, for example, the persistence of a single hegemonic curriculum, family environment, personal or family uprooting or possibilities of pedagogical innovations. The most critical research strives to discover multi-causal explanations. Carabaña (2007) claims that immigrant students can have three types of difficulties: language (which is overcome in a few months); the stage of arrival (which can be dealt with in the same way as with indigenous students who do not show significant progress in their academic achievement); and cultural distance (which is irrelevant in childhood but can emerge in adolescence). He analyses reports from the Programme for International Student Assessment (2000, 2003, 2005) and states that non-Spanish speaking immigrant students have better educational results than those whose mother tongue is Spanish, irrespective of their parents' cultural competence.

The IOÉ Collective (2003) finds the following explanations for such educational failure: late enrolment, difference between the academic level of Spanish in Spain and in the system in their country of origin, language and dialect comprehension problems, and a lack of qualities or willingness to be in a new school. However, there are other studies based on empirical research that do not attribute significance to these factors. Pamiès (2006) states that the academic results of Moroccan immigrant families do not necessarily stem from the period spent in the education system of the country of origin, the command of language at the school level or the stage of school enrolment. This contradicts the idea expressed by researchers<sup>15</sup> that suggests that in Spain, the later the student enrolls in the education system, the lower their level of success will be. Besalú et al. (2002) provide one of the most comprehensive approaches to this question, providing a multi-causal explanation of the success and failure of immigrant students. Their research examines the educational success and failure of African students in schools in Girona between 1998 and 2001. The conclusion is that there are various aspects related to integration such as the social/community context, family context, and the students' individual context.

## FINAL REMARKS

The problems involved in immigration and education are clear. While this topic is not new to social science, there is a need to ensure that research on the education of immigrant populations is approached holistically and afforded the analysis necessary to attain full comprehension of the phenomenon and encourage pedagogic discourse on the internal analysis of schools that provide education to immigrant students. We claim that an attempt to build an educational context that allows immigrant student populations to prosper within the education system implies the obvious assumption that immigrant students *are students*, which is why we must include them in studies on immigrant groups. By avoiding essentialising this group, the "other", we are able to examine important aspects such as the inequalities caused by the attribution of ethnic status to such groups and the effect on this group of socioeconomic conditions. Moreover, if we situate immigrant students in social contexts corresponding to their age groups—childhood and adolescent—we can contribute to explanations that connect educational phenomena with sociocultural relations.

Here, we highlight that some of the supposed problems attributed to educating immigrant populations are in fact problems that have always been present in schools, and that it is too easy to erroneously and unfairly blame new students for difficulties that arise from the lack of adequate provisions for integration within educational institutions and the education system. Any line of enquiry should shed light on the construction of differences and their effect on inequality. Research should be cautious while analysing immigrant student populations by their nationality and ensure that any such research serves as a methodological device rather than creating differentiation to explain inequality. Researching of education of immigrant students must branch out from the school to enable full understanding of

<sup>15</sup> See Aja (2000) and Siguan (2000).



the school. The first approach to achieve this is to improve on the statistical studies that presently exist. The second approach is to ensure that sources of research are not limited to educational administration. We believe that an accurate description of a phenomenon in quantitative terms requires an unequivocal demographic vision. State resources should be used to obtain the information needed to compare education figures, but there should be a principal focus in research on surveying small territories in order to observe the dynamics of schooling. Many explanations for the concentration of immigrant populations in certain schools claim that these concentrations are natural, as immigrant parents tend to send children to schools located within their own neighbourhood. However, local statistics reveal that immigrants live in more than one neighbourhood, in areas that provide a diversity of public and even private schools.

Finally, we emphasise the manner in which language has been converted into a professional and political argument to create measures to assist new students. Such measures are relatively recent and we should be aware of what type of educational trajectories are followed by immigrant students who have participated in specific methods created to assist the processes of learning the principal official language of a school. It would be of great interest to discover whether such students have been successful in their education. In researching the aspect of language in the education of immigrant student populations, information about the level of the students' native-language development must be considered. Language as an instrument of communication appears in various contexts of interaction. This means that thoroughly researching language in the context of the education of immigrant students will require research outside of the school to gain an understanding of the dynamics of language usage in immigrant students in various scenarios of interaction.

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