

## PROMISING PRACTICES: PREPARING CHILDREN OF IMMIGRANTS IN NEW YORK AND SWEDEN BY CAROLA SUAREZ-OROZCO, MARGARY MARTIN, AND MIKAEL ALEXANDERSSON.

Global review of programs “that prepare students from immigrant backgrounds to be active and empowered actors in the multicultural, global contexts of their receiving nations.”

---

This paper—written by C.Suarez-Orozco, M. Martin, and M. Alexandersson—is a chapter in a book, *The Children of Immigrants at School: A Comparative Look at Integration in the United States and Europe*, edited by Richard Alba and Jennifer Holdaway and published by the Social Science Research Council and New York University Press (2013).

The purpose of this chapter is to “illuminate overt curricula and programs that prepare students from immigrant backgrounds to be active and empowered actors in the multicultural, global contexts of their receiving nations.”

As the title indicates, curricula and programs in New York City and Sweden are the focus of examination. On the surface, the two areas could not seem more different. Half of the students in New York City public schools—the largest school system in the United States—have an immigrant parent and nearly ten percent arrived in the United States within the past three years. Sweden, on the other hand, is relatively new to large numbers of immigrants from countries outside Northern and Western Europe. As a nation, however, Sweden has taken a much larger proportion of refugees as compared to native population than has the United States.

At the same time, the authors find that in both contexts there are significant barriers to immigrant students gaining skills and opportunities commensurate with their native abilities. While both areas have policies promoting educational opportunity, each has severe impediments to reaching that goal. In the United States as a whole and in New York specifically, the vast majority of these students are in woefully inadequate school settings that also lack comprehensive efforts to address the special needs of immigrant students. Sweden has an explicit policy of equal access to education for all students, investing heavily in schools and in their most challenged students. However, once these students graduate, they encounter low glass ceilings and other challenges that make it difficult to obtain appropriate employment. Further, each nation is engaged in contentious debates about immigration..

The authors, then, set out to find and analyze curricula and programs in each context that provide useful, productive responses to the special needs of immigrant students. They sought schools with high proportions of students from immigrant families as well as reputations for innovation and high rates of student success on standard performance indicators. Their key questions for research were: What school-based practices are integrated in innovative, “promising” school settings to ease the transition and integration of immigrant-origin youth as well as foster and enhance their academic performance? They located two schools in New York City and two schools in large cities in Sweden as research sites.

The researchers engaged in ethnographic fieldwork as the primary data collection strategy to assess innovative school practices, student-teacher relationships, intercultural understanding among all participants, as well as impediments to the implementation of the practices.

New York City, with its high proportion of immigrant students, has been impacted by various educational reform efforts, including the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) which mandated standards-based educational practices. This program has helped identify sub-populations of students not well served in schools, but the requirement that schools focus on limited tasks not necessarily aligned with skills needed in college and the world beyond is unresponsive to the needs of these populations. The act focuses on those who fit the term “Limited English Proficient” and testing of these students has often resulted in not really helping students

do the long-term hard work of learning a second language. Additionally, a New York City program called “Children First” often results in English Language Learners (ELL) being held back from advancement. Much of both of these programs has put pressure on teachers to “teach the test.”

Two high schools in New York City, both known as innovators, were studied. World Citizen High School is part of a city-based network of schools exclusively serving newcomer immigrant youth. One key mark of success by these schools is that while the city public school graduation rates of ELL is less than 25% (2006) the network sends 90% of its students to college within seven years of entrance. Key to the curriculum is the fact that language skills are best learned in context; learning English as a second language is integrated in all content areas. The school operates on five core principles: “commitment to heterogeneity, language and content integration, autonomy and democracy, one model for all, and schooling beyond the four walls.”

Progressive High School is a sixth-to-twelfth grade school and is a member of the Progressive Coalition Network (PCN.) All network schools are committed to small class sizes and project-based, student-centered learning. This school, among others who pioneered this type of schooling are renowned for the use of student portfolio assessment and student exhibition. The school prides itself on demonstrating student success on traditional standard testing through the use of “context-based” curriculum rather than more traditional methods. Graduation rates are significantly higher for these students as compared to the city as a whole and an equally high percentage of students move onto college.

Two schools in Sweden were also studied. The proportion of Swedish students who are immigrants (13.8% when report prepared) is much lower than New York City and the nation has experienced several significant shifts in attitudes toward immigrants in general (in part due to periods of rising tides of immigrants arriving in the country). Still, the prevailing belief in equal educational opportunity for all resulted in a focus on special services initially, but later in the 90’s there was a shift to the concept of “integration” which resulted in less help for students to retain first languages while learning a new one. This is only one example of how shifting attitudes and various school reform efforts impacted immigrant students and the wider immigrant population.

Ekadasi Skolan Gymnasium is located in a large city in central Sweden and serves almost exclusively immigrant-origin youth (mostly refugees). The students mostly reside in suburbs (which unlike the United States are not necessarily areas of high income and social privilege). Technology integration is at the heart of the curriculum—all students receive laptops for use during the school day. Individual learners, engaged in many collaborative activities, are at the center of all pedagogical efforts.

Bergslagen Gymnasium is located outside one of Sweden’s largest cities. The school reorganized its curriculum in 2005 under two broad concepts: Passions and Problem-Based Learning. Passions are programs that resemble magnet-school activities in the United States. Problem-Based Learning privileges active hands-on learning instead of a traditional reliance on textbooks alone. Teachers work in teams, meeting often to develop instructional materials, organize content and goals of assignments, and review challenges and achievements of individual students. The school has a special program for recently arrived immigrants and refugees.

The researchers focused on seven key areas: curriculum, pedagogical approaches, school structures, school climate, assessment strategies, educational supports and enrichment outside of class, and preparation for higher education and the workplace.

All four schools utilize interdisciplinary, project-based, and student-centered approaches to curriculum and instruction. All four, in various ways, create and utilize integrated curricula and the Swedish schools place particular emphasis on the integration of technology within learning. Also, all the schools use multiple strategies to assess students as well as preparing them for high-stakes formal testing (where immigrant students can be disadvantaged).

Studies have shown, especially in the United States, that immigrant students as well as others from neglected and disadvantaged racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups are enrolled in the least rigorous institutions. All four schools focus on providing and requiring high-level, demanding course work for all students.

The four schools share a commitment to instructional delivery systems that involve collaborative and cooperative learning. Small group work is the norm. At Bergslagen in Sweden, for example, a high tech open space learning center help teachers use computers as tools or instruments of knowledge similar to using a pen or pencil. This helps facilitate group work. Also, there are many specialists on this staff with skills in dealing with special-needs students as well as several multi-language speakers; teachers also reflect a wide range of ethnic and religious origins.

School structures, both physical and administrative, are often overlooked in thinking and practice in providing optimal conditions for learning. These four schools do focus on preparing students for required testing, but they also stress teacher involvement in curricular development, building on the efforts of multidisciplinary teaching teams responsible for small groups of students.

All the schools work intentionally to create a school climate where students feel welcome, respected, cared for, and safe. Personal relationships among students and teachers are central to creating optimal learning and growth. Students are also encouraged to support each other. Students at the two New York schools, unlike their peers across the United States at other schools serving diverse populations, overwhelmingly reported feeling safe at school.

Student assessment at the schools has to include attention to preparing students for mandatory testing. However, each has developed multiple ways to help students display competency, accommodating different learning styles. Multimodal assessments include student-created video documentaries, graphic novels and other multimedia presentations, as well as classroom presentations using PowerPoint, laboratory experiments, portfolios, as well as traditional papers and exams.

All four provide supplementary academic support for students. Participation in after-school programs is encouraged. Formal and informal homework support and tutoring, enrichment opportunities including field trips and arts-related programs with community partners, and discipline-related clubs are often utilized.

Helping students prepare for the 21st century and a global world is central to the mission of each school. All provide programs to help students apply to university, including a focus on the “soft skills” and workplace behaviors necessary in the outside world. Developing “college pathway knowledge” is especially critical for immigrant students from other cultural backgrounds. The college application process in Sweden is more transparent than in the United States, requiring the New York institutions to be especially mindful of this preparation. In the United States, the cost of higher education is a high bar for most, and the schools provide detailed information and guidance for the students. Progressive High School has an especially strong program in this area, including support for parents. All the schools have specific programs or strategies designed to provide students with opportunities to gain practical skills in preparation for the workplace, including internships and connections to mentors.

The emotional and other challenges of making the transition from one culture to another puts most immigrant students at a disadvantage in schooling. Typically, most students require five to seven years to develop the academic language and skills to be competitive with their native peers. World Citizen High School in New York and Bergslunden in Sweden use innovative strategies to help students address their special academic needs by helping students navigate the cultural transition, providing literacy supports and language-intensive instruction and language-learning accommodations.

Second-language learning is a challenge for many, especially if they have limited literacy in their native tongue. Unlike Sweden, United States schools typically do not have systematic or consistent bilingual or second-language acquisition policies and practices. This puts U.S. students at a significant disadvantage in developing

content literacy. However, at World Citizen for example, teachers receive extensive training in language-intensive methods where language learning is embedded across the entire curriculum. At both World Citizen and Bergslunden, second-language learners are encouraged, even expected, to use their first language as well as their first in learning activities.

The four schools nurture students to be curious and cognitively flexible and to synthesize knowledge across disciplines. Unlike many schools serving immigrant youth, they maintain rigorous standards, combined with genuine caring, to motivate students to excel. In all the schools, the researchers found a commitment to marginalized and disadvantaged students. Also, these schools rely on regular communication between students and teachers, teachers and teachers, and student and students. All are actively engaged in the learning process through real personal relationships.

Despite these progressive and creative commitments and programs, the schools still must deal with the reality of required standardized testing which is not designed with the unique needs of second-language and newly arrived students. In Sweden, unlike the United States, there is a clear recognition of providing systematic services to those with greater need. Still, even there, the results are uneven, thus pointing to an ongoing need for reform in this area for all.

**Suarez-Orozco, Carola, Margary Martin, and Mikael Alexandersson. “Promising Practices: Preparing Children of Immigrants in New York and Sweden. (2013). “The Children of Immigrants at School: A Comparative Look at Integration in the United States and Western Europe.” The Social Science Research Council and New York University Press, 204-252. <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/26919>**



Thanks to generous support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, *Our Neighborhood*, is a compilation of stories and research from the family engagement field. It is intended to be a living repository and guide for STEM Learning Ecosystems and other communities interested in cultivating strong community partnerships to prepare the next generation.

This annotated bibliography was compiled by TIES for *Our Neighborhood*.