IEA POLICY BRIEF

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# Too scared to learn? Understanding the importance of school safety for immigrant students

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## SUMMARY

School safety is an important factor in schools. Data from the IEA's Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) indicate that perceptions of school safety are directly related to academic success. School safety seems to be particularly relevant for immigrant students, as their perceptions of safety appear to be more strongly related to academic success; meanwhile, research has revealed that immigrant students often report feeling less safe in schools. Using data from TIMSS, this brief explores immigrant students' perceptions of school safety in comparison to their native-born peers in more depth. Immigrant students' perceptions of school safety appear to be more closely linked to achievement, and may also thus be more strongly related to student well-being and aspirations. It is crucial that teachers and principals are sensitive to school safety and school climate if inclusive and equitable quality education is a target. Evidence supporting which countries are providing the safest environments for immigrant students and whether safer schools are associated with higher achievement will be of interest to policymakers around the world.

## CONTENTS



## INTRODUCTION

Globally, immigration has increased significantly in recent years, adding to the diversity and complexity of national educational systems (United Nations, 2015). Immigrant children often face additional educational challenges, including learning in a new language and scholastic preparedness, as well as understanding and managing cultural differences. Providing the best educational environment for these students is a goal for most nations, yet many immigrant children face additional obstacles. For example, Chavatzia, Engel, and Hastedt (2016) found female immigrant students were statistically underrepresented in the educational systems of some countries. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recently reported international statistics for school-related violence, and, while millions of students have experienced bullying, "immigrant bullying" accounted for more than 25% of student reports (UNESCO, 2017, p. 17). Victims of school violence often report negative effects on their mental and physical health, and generally have lower levels of educational achievement than students that do not experience violence (UNESCO, 2017).

With regard to school achievement, immigrants tend to underperform in most international assessments. For example, Hastedt (2014) found that students with an

immigrant background performed less well in the majority of countries that participated in the IEA's Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). Further, he found that, for mathematics, the achievement gap between grade 8 immigrants and native students had increased steadily since TIMSS 1995, to a gap of more than 30 score points in TIMSS 2007; this could be interpreted as an achievement gap equivalent to one school year of learning based on the TIMSS 1995 findings.

Given that research has repeatedly demonstrated that immigrants tend to underperform in international assessments and also tend to report feeling less safe in school (an underlying factor that may be linked to underperformance), we aim to further examine school safety and the achievement of immigrant students from different countries around the world. Based on TIMSS 2011 data, the analysis presented in this brief provides a cross-national examination of the experiences of immigrant students and how their perceptions of school safety are associated with achievement. Such analyses may help policymakers from around the world better understand which countries are providing the safest environments for immigrant students and to what extent safer schools are associated with higher achievement.

**School safety: the challenge?**

Research has indicated that school climate[1] and student perceptions of school safety are strongly related to student achievement (Shumov, & Lomax, 2001). As shown by Chen, Rubin, and Li (1997), children's social functioning and achievement are bidirectionally related; better social behavior has a positive effect on achievement, and higher achievement has a positive impact on social behavior.

School violence and aggressive behavior, often focusing on immigrant students, was the subject of several previous studies (Boers et al., 2010; Uslucan, 2008; Wittenberg, Reinecke, & Boers, 2009). Wallner, and Stemmler (2014) concluded that burdens experienced by immigrant students, such as deficits in language, the potentially stressful circumstances of the migration process, and experiences with exclusion, lead to lower achievement levels. The amount of violence and peer delinquency experienced by immigrant students appears to be strongly related to the school type (Wallner & Stemmler, 2014) and becomes more prominent in non-academic tracks.

But violence in schools remains an often underestimated problem. Benbenishty, Astor, and Marachi (2006) found that teachers and principals assessed the problem of violence in schools as being less serious than their students' perceptions. Ben-Arieh et al. (2009) studied the relationships between safety, home–school relations, and student well-being, and found that there were significant differences in the perspectives provided by children, parents, and teachers. Safety is one of the basic components of student well-being; violence has direct effects on student well-being, and therefore school safety is not just an important factor in understanding variations in achievement but can be seen as a prerequisite for well-being throughout life (Ben-Arieh et al., 2001, 2009).

## DATA

The IEA's TIMSS data provides an opportunity to compare the mathematics and science achievement of immigrant students with that of non-immigrant students over a twenty-year period. TIMSS has assessed grade 4 and grade 8 students' mathematics and science achievement every four years since 1995 in an increasing number of countries and education systems; more than 60 in the 2015 cycle. We analyzed the TIMSS 2011 grade 8 mathematics achievement[2] data in this study (data and documentation files from completed IEA studies are available from http://www.iea.nl/our-data).

In TIMSS, questionnaires are administered to students, their mathematics and science teachers, and school principals. Students were asked if they were born in the country where they are currently living, and whether their mothers and fathers were born in the country. This enables researchers studying the TIMSS data to identify first- and second-generation immigrant students. Students were also asked whether they felt safe at school; the response categories were strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree. For our analysis, we combined the categories strongly disagree and disagree into one category, and similarly we combined agree and strongly agree into one category to increase readability and reduce complexity.

## RESULTS: THE IMPORTANCE OF SCHOOL SAFETY FOR MIGRANTS

Our analysis found that, in many countries, students with an immigrant background feel less safe in school than non-immigrant students. Student achievement data confirms that in most countries there is a clear statistically significant difference between the achievement of students who strongly agree or agree that they feel safe in school and students who strongly disagree or disagree with this statement. It is also noteworthy that this difference is larger and more defined for students who are first-generation immigrants (see Table 1). Further, our analysis indicated that first-generation immigrant students were statistically significantly less likely to answer that they felt safe at school than native students. For six countries, this was also true for second-generation immigrant students.

1 School climate, school safety and the absence of violence and physical harm are not interchangeable but strongly related and analyzed in the cited research jointly. Consequently, these terms are used in this brief. The analysis presented in this brief is about students' perceptions of feeling safe in schools rather than "objective" measures of school safety. In TIMSS, principals and teachers also responded to questions related to school safety and school climate, and analysis of their responses showed similar patterns (see Hastedt, 2014).

2 Reasons for this choice and more background can be found in Hastedt (2014).

*Table 1: Percentage of students who agree or strongly agree that they feel safe at school*

| Country | 1st generation immigrant | | | Native born student | | 2nd generation immigrant | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | % | SE | | % | SE | % | SE | |
| Macedonia | 68 | 2.7 | ↓ | 84 | 0.9 | 80 | 2.5 | → |
| Botswana | 70 | 3.0 | ↓ | 84 | 0.7 | 70 | 2.2 | ↓ |
| Ukraine | 76 | 5.1 | ↓ | 88 | 0.8 | 85 | 1.9 | → |
| South Africa | 74 | 1.4 | ↓ | 85 | 0.8 | 83 | 2.2 | → |
| Jordan | 74 | 2.1 | ↓ | 84 | 0.9 | 83 | 1.2 | → |
| Malaysia | 64 | 2.6 | ↓ | 74 | 1.1 | 77 | 2.9 | → |
| Sweden | 82 | 1.6 | ↓ | 92 | 0.4 | 93 | 0.8 | → |
| Israel | 76 | 2.6 | ↓ | 86 | 0.8 | 84 | 1.3 | → |
| Georgia | 76 | 4.5 | ↓ | 85 | 1.0 | 75 | 3.3 | ↓ |
| Syria, Arab Republic of | 82 | 1.6 | ↓ | 91 | 0.6 | 88 | 3.8 | → |
| Palestinian National Authority | 77 | 2.2 | → | 85 | 1.0 | 86 | 1.6 | → |
| Finland | 84 | 3.8 | ↓ | 91 | 0.6 | 88 | 2.2 | → |
| Morocco | 83 | 2.1 | ↓ | 90 | 0.4 | 89 | 2.0 | → |
| Ghana | 80 | 2.7 | ↓ | 87 | 0.9 | 87 | 2.2 | → |
| Italy | 73 | 2.9 | ↓ | 80 | 1.0 | 77 | 2.7 | → |
| Iran, Islamic Republilc of | 81 | 3.0 | ↓ | 88 | 0.6 | 83 | 4.1 | → |
| Hong Kong, SAR | 71 | 1.8 | ↓ | 77 | 1.4 | 74 | 1.6 | → |
| Oman | 80 | 1.1 | → | 85 | 0.8 | 82 | 1.7 | → |
| Kazakhstan | 80 | 2.8 | → | 85 | 0.9 | 83 | 3.0 | → |
| England | 80 | 2.3 | → | 85 | 1.1 | 85 | 2.1 | → |
| Chile | 83 | 3.7 | → | 87 | 0.8 | 87 | 4.0 | |
| Hungary | 77 | 3.9 | → | 81 | 1.1 | 80 | 2.7 | → |
| Lebanon | 77 | 1.8 | → | 81 | 0.9 | 82 | 2.7 | → |
| Chinese Taipei | 62 | 3.5 | → | 66 | 1.2 | 69 | 3.4 | → |
| United States | 77 | 1.7 | → | 80 | 0.7 | 79 | 1.1 | → |
| Indonesia | 89 | 1.2 | ↓ | 92 | 0.6 | * | | |
| Norway | 89 | 2.4 | → | 92 | 0.5 | 93 | 1.4 | → |
| Saudi Arabia | 78 | 3.3 | → | 81 | 0.9 | 82 | 2.2 | → |
| Slovenia | 69 | 4.8 | → | 71 | 1.1 | 71 | 2.2 | → |
| Tunisia | 82 | 3.5 | → | 84 | 0.9 | 82 | 3.8 | → |
| Thailand | 91 | 3.2 | → | 91 | 0.5 | * | | |
| Singapore | 85 | 1.2 | → | 84 | 0.7 | 85 | 1.0 | → |
| Russian Federation | 79 | 2.9 | → | 78 | 1.0 | 77 | 2.3 | → |
| Armenia | 85 | 2.0 | → | 84 | 0.8 | 84 | 2.2 | → |
| New Zealand | 86 | 1.0 | → | 85 | 0.6 | 86 | 1.2 | → |
| Canada (Alberta) | 89 | 1.7 | → | 88 | 0.9 | 86 | 1.4 | → |
| Canada (Quebec) | 87 | 1.5 | → | 84 | 0.9 | 85 | 1.7 | → |
| Australia | 89 | 1.2 | → | 86 | 0.8 | 85 | 1.3 | → |
| Canada (Ontario) | 92 | 1.1 | ↑ | 88 | 0.9 | 89 | 1.1 | → |
| United Arab Emirates (Abu Dhabi) | 83 | 1.4 | ↑ | 79 | 1.4 | 83 | 1.0 | ↑ |
| United Arab Emirates | 85 | 0.7 | ↑ | 80 | 0.9 | 83 | 0.7 | ↑ |
| Qatar | 80 | 1.1 | ↑ | 75 | 1.3 | 78 | 1.6 | → |
| Bahrain | 82 | 1.5 | ↑ | 76 | 1.4 | 83 | 1.5 | ↑ |
| United Arab Emirates (Dubai) | 88 | 0.8 | ↑ | 80 | 0.8 | 85 | 1.3 | ↑ |
| Turkey | * | * | | 90 | 0.5 | 87 | 2.5 | → |
| Honduras | * | * | | 89 | 0.8 | 81 | 3.3 | ↓ |
| Lithuania | * | * | | 78 | 1.0 | 74 | 2.4 | → |
| Table average | 79 | 0.5 | ↓ | 83 | 0.1 | 82 | 0.5 | ↓ |

*Notes*: SE = standard error, ↓ = significantly less than native students, → = no significant difference from native students, ↑ = significantly more than a native student, * = not enough data for a reliable estimate.

When we analyzed the average mathematics achievement of students who felt safe in school versus students who did not feel safe in school, we found that, in the vast majority of countries, students who did not feel safe at school performed less well than students who felt safe at school (Table 2). We also found that the achievement difference between these two groups was significantly larger for students who are first-generation immigrants. The most extreme example was Bahrain: the achievement difference between native students who felt safe at school and native students who did not feel safe at school was five score points, while, in contrast, for first-generation immigrant students in Bahrain the achievement difference between students who felt safe and students who did not feel safe was 69 score points. The mathematics achievement differences of second-generation immigrants are generally similar to those of native students, but there were also some countries where we identified significantly larger differences even for second-generation immigrant students (Table 2).

## IDENTIFYING SOLUTIONS FOR SUCCESS

Family and school culture influence success at school, and social background influences success as much as the cultural capital that families can afford for their children. In addition, other processes of socialization (micro processes at school such as peer-contacts, teacher-student relations and positive parental involvement) may lead to a better climate for learning both in and out of school and therefore should not be neglected (Busse, & Helsper, 2007). As the outcomes of the Niederösterreichische Schule in der Schulentwicklung (NOESIS; www.noesis-projekt.at) study in Austria showed, it is important to keep in mind that both teachers and classmates serve as resources for student learning. The mutual support, the common learning, and the ability to obtain additional explanations all have a positive influence on the student motivation. In school, teachers create the learning environment for students; if the relationship between students and their teachers is positive, this fosters a positive climate embracing the joy of learning, and creates a willingness in students to apply themselves (Geppert, Katschnig, Knapp, Kilian, & Hopmann, 2015; Kilian, 2015; Kilian, & Katschnig, 2015; Knapp, Katschnig, Kilian, & Geppert, 2014).

## IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

**Improving school safety for immigrants may increase overall educational performance in many TIMSS countries**

Providing safe schools for all of our students should be a goal of any educational system, and the TIMSS data shows that most students tend to feel safe in school. As immigrant students report feeling significantly less safe than native students, this factor may be linked to their underperformance internationally. Focusing on improving immigrant students' perceptions of school safety may thus increase educational performance within a country, and the policy community should actively identify ways to support these students.

**All schools should work at reducing violence**

A number of approaches have been identified to tackle and reduce violence in schools. Improving communication and openly discussing problems was identified as an important factor (Gay, 2014). Local approaches rather than statewide policies seem to be preferable. The ready availability of social workers may help mitigate violence (Farmer, 1999). Developing social competences, providing assertiveness training in schools, and dedicating time to whole class discussion may also provide important benefits for students (Boers et al., 2010). Previous research has shown that good communication between students and their parents may also lead to a reduction in violence within schools (Balser, Hölzer, & Schulz, 2009; Behrens, Vogelsinger, & Wosnitza, 1995; Grob, & Jaschinski 2003; Schmidt, Oertel, & Melzer 2011). It needs to be acknowledged that the family has a central supportive role for students and can be seen as a place of safety, emotional support and social backing (Ecarius, Eulenbach, Fuchs, & Walgenbach 2011).

Well-considered school programs may help enable schools to create safe and equitable spaces, where all students have the opportunity to learn (Vadeboncouer, Kady-Rachid, & Moghtader, 2014). Creating safe learning environments has been shown to lead to improved opportunities for better student achievement (Gay, 2014).

**Acknowledge students may have different perceptions of school safety, and allocate resources wisely**

Disagreement between the views and aims of policymakers, teachers, parents and students regarding perceptions of school safety may have important policy implications: "If teachers tend to see their schools as having high safety, they may not feel the same urgency to act compared to their students, who may feel much more unsafely. A significant gap between teachers and students may mean that resources for addressing the problem may be directed to less important areas in the children's lives" (Ben-Arieh et al., 2009, p. 347). If schools do not support a shared mission concerning safety and violence at school, disagreements between students, teachers and parents may lead to disruption that will not support better achievement. Olweus (1993) stated that the most important step in creating a culture of safety throughout the school is first for the whole school to recognize the seriousness of the problem.

*Table 2: Average difference in mathematics achievement scores between students who agree or strongly agree that they feel safe at school and students who disagree or strongly disagree that they feel safe in school*

| Country | 1st generation immigrant | | | 2nd generation immigrant | | | Native born student | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Difference | SE | | Difference | SE | | Difference | SE | |
| Bahrain | 69 | 12.4 | ↑ | 21 | 12.2 | | 5 | 6.2 | |
| Thailand | 68 | 36.0 | | * | | | −12 | 9.0 | |
| Norway | 52 | 16.4 | ↑ | 32 | 12.3 | ↑ | 19 | 5.3 | ↑ |
| England | 52 | 18.8 | ↑ | 25 | 16.3 | | 40 | 11.0 | ↑ |
| Botswana | 49 | 18.2 | ↑ | 20 | 11.9 | | 1 | 4.9 | |
| Oman | 48 | 13.3 | ↑ | −3 | 11.9 | | 17 | 6.3 | ↑ |
| Saudi Arabia | 42 | 21.1 | ↑ | 24 | 16.1 | | 9 | 7.9 | |
| Canada (Alberta) | 38 | 13.8 | ↑ | 34 | 9.2 | ↑ | 25 | 4.7 | ↑ |
| Israel | 38 | 18.8 | ↑ | 12 | 11.2 | | 23 | 7.7 | ↑ |
| Hong Kong, SAR | 35 | 9.8 | ↑ | 34 | 7.9 | ↑ | 34 | 7.3 | ↑ |
| Canada (Ontario) | 35 | 17.6 | ↑ | 21 | 8.5 | ↑ | 33 | 5.3 | ↑ |
| United Arab Emirates (Dubai) | 32 | 7.6 | ↑ | 19 | 7.3 | ↑ | 23 | 6.1 | ↑ |
| Qatar | 32 | 8.7 | ↑ | 26 | 9.1 | ↑ | 24 | 7.3 | ↑ |
| Chinese Taipei | 31 | 21.0 | | 14 | 17.9 | | 19 | 5.1 | ↑ |
| Singapore | 31 | 12.1 | ↑ | 24 | 7.9 | ↑ | 30 | 7.2 | ↑ |
| Australia | 30 | 14.0 | ↑ | 47 | 11.8 | ↑ | 47 | 8.0 | ↑ |
| Italy | 28 | 12.7 | ↑ | 22 | 10.8 | ↑ | 18 | 5.0 | ↑ |
| United States | 27 | 9.1 | ↑ | 31 | 7.3 | ↑ | 29 | 3.8 | ↑ |
| United Arab Emirates | 24 | 5.9 | ↑ | 12 | 5.0 | ↑ | 11 | 4.0 | ↑ |
| Canada (Quebec) | 24 | 14.5 | | 26 | 9.7 | ↑ | 23 | 4.4 | ↑ |
| Ghana | 24 | 18.9 | | 38 | 19.5 | | 28 | 8.2 | ↑ |
| Sweden | 21 | 10.7 | | 16 | 9.2 | | 20 | 5.0 | ↑ |
| New Zealand | 21 | 13.6 | | 23 | 14.6 | | 33 | 8.2 | ↑ |
| Palestinian National Authority | 20 | 17.5 | | 3 | 16.3 | | 14 | 8.2 | |
| United Arab Emirates (Abu Dhabi) | 19 | 11.4 | | 6 | 7.5 | | 4 | 6.2 | |
| Chile | 17 | 23.3 | | 47 | 25.3 | | 24 | 4.8 | ↑ |
| Georgia | 17 | 31.1 | | 51 | 31.5 | | 16 | 8.4 | |
| South Africa | 16 | 6.3 | ↑ | 26 | 17.7 | | 9 | 5.3 | |
| Russian Federation | 14 | 20.2 | | 7 | 10.1 | | 18 | 6.0 | ↑ |
| Macedonia | 12 | 19.9 | | −23 | 19.0 | | −21 | 10.1 | ↓ |
| Kazakhstan | 12 | 14.1 | | 31 | 16.0 | | 9 | 8.0 | |
| Armenia | 11 | 14.5 | | 45 | 15.4 | ↑ | 13 | 6.8 | ↑ |
| Ukraine | 8 | 30.1 | | 41 | 13.3 | ↑ | 26 | 8.5 | ↑ |
| Finland | 7 | 18.3 | | 31 | 15.8 | ↑ | 22 | 6.1 | ↑ |
| Jordan | 3 | 16.6 | | 2 | 10.4 | | 12 | 8.1 | |
| Slovenia | 3 | 13.1 | | 6 | 8.7 | | 14 | 3.6 | ↑ |
| Iran, Islamic Republic of | −1 | 27.3 | | 17 | 30.1 | | −18 | 7.8 | ↓ |
| Lebanon | −2 | 10.3 | | 3 | 14.6 | | 3 | 7.4 | |
| Morocco | −11 | 15.9 | | 11 | 22.5 | | −12 | 5.1 | ↓ |
| Tunisia | −11 | 18.9 | | −18 | 18.7 | | −12 | 4.8 | ↓ |
| Malaysia | −14 | 15.2 | | −3 | 16.8 | | −20 | 8.2 | ↓ |
| Syria, Arab Republic of | −16 | 18.2 | | −10 | 37.2 | | −1 | 9.8 | |
| Indonesia | −20 | 22.2 | | * | | | −8 | 8.0 | |
| Hungary | −27 | 26.4 | | 13 | 13.3 | | 16 | 6.8 | ↑ |
| Turkey | * | | | 3 | 35.4 | | 29 | 8.8 | ↑ |
| Lithuania | * | | | 9 | 12.5 | | 15 | 4.6 | ↑ |
| Honduras, Republic of | * | | | 1 | 20.3 | | −2 | 8.5 | |
| Table average | 22 | 3.2 | ↑ | 14 | 2.8 | ↑ | 14 | 1.0 | ↑ |

*Notes*: SE = standard error, ↑ = students who feel safe in school perform significantly better, ↓ = students who feel safe in school perform significantly worse, * = insufficient data for a reliable estimate.

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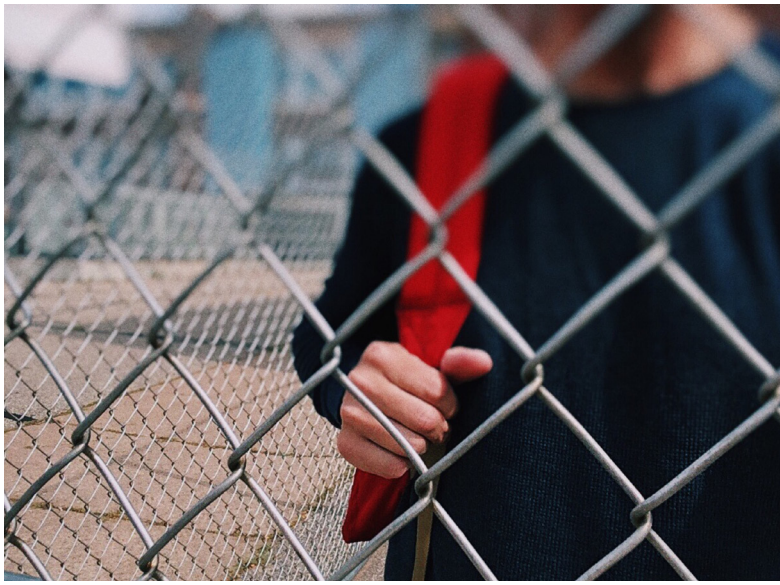

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## ABOUT THE IEA

The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, known as the IEA, is an independent, international consortium of national research institutions and governmental agencies, with headquarters in Amsterdam. Its primary purpose is to conduct large-scale comparative studies of educational achievement with the the aim of gaining more in-depth understanding of the effects of policies and practices within and across systems of education.



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