



Do children help their immigrant parents integrate? Children's school friends and their parents' social ties

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The diverse friendships that children form at school lead to greater opportunities for social mixing for their parents.

Background

Social ties can be a source of advantage: friends and acquaintances share information, help us find jobs, and can help us support our children. Because those who immigrate leave their family and friends behind, they often have smaller local social networks, which can hinder them and their children and reduce their own sense of belonging.

A common way for parents to develop new social ties, however, is through their children's school. School provides a hub of structured social mixing for children, leading to the development of new and more diverse friendships – these friendships in turn may bring their parents together.

Moreover, through school fetes, parent associations, and open evenings, schools can provide a direct avenue for parents of different backgrounds to meet.

There is a body of research that demonstrates how the ethnic mix of schools influences the size and composition of children's friendship groups. What is less known is how schools, and the friendships that children develop in their classrooms, might influence pupil's parents.

The research: pupil social networks and parental ties

Our study uses German data from the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study in Four European Countries (CILS4EU), a survey of 15 year-olds in German schools. In addition to gathering a wide range of information on their families, attitudes and academic lives, pupils were asked to identify their five closest friends in their class, as well as

which of their classmate's parents their parents also called or saw socially outside of school. This social network data was collected again a year later, allowing us to assess how the development of friendships for children might influence the development of social ties for their parents. Extensive information on the national origins, language ability, and economic situation of the pupils enabled us to further examine whether this influence might differ depending on the immigrant origins of the children.

Findings

1 Are immigrant parents and their children more socially isolated in schools in Germany?

To answer this question, we looked at each child in the classroom and measured how many other pupils chose that child as a friend, as well as how many pupils that child nominated as a friend; we did the same for each child's parents.

We found that immigrant-origin children had just as many friends as their non-immigrant peers: all children reported slightly more than 3 close friends on average. Immigrant parents, however, were significantly more isolated, with about 65% fewer ties with other parents in their child's classroom than non-immigrant parents.

Moreover, although ethnicity shaped the social ties of both children and their parents, this social segregation was much stronger for parents. Whereas pupils with immigrant parents were twice as likely to nominate another pupil of their same national origin as their friend, the parents themselves were four times as likely to have a social tie with an immigrant parent of the same background.

Pupils with no immigrant parents were also more likely to nominate others with no immigrant parents as friends. This tendency, again, was much more pronounced in the social ties of their parents.

2 Does the development of friendships between pupils influence the development of social ties for their parents?

To answer this question, we turn to social network methods that allow us to simulate how the social networks of parents and children – and the relationships between them – evolve over the course of a year. These methods provide an estimate of the effect of forming or dissolving a friendship between pupils on the social tie formation or dissolution of their parents (and vice versa). They also allow us to hold constant other factors that might influence whether two parents form ties, for instance whether the parents speak the same language or have similar occupations.

The results suggest that a friendship between two pupils is a much stronger predictor of whether a social tie will develop between their parents than ethnicity, language or even shared religion.

3 Are cross-ethnic pupil friendships less likely to lead to parental social ties than same-ethnic friendships?

Whether pupil friendships actually help parents become less segregated rests on whether parents are willing to form ties across ethnic lines, once the opportunity

presents itself. Our earlier analysis shows that parents, in general, develop ties when their children are friends, but it is still possible that immigrant parents specifically reach out to those who share their national origin. If the barriers between parents from different backgrounds are too great, then they will not benefit from the larger and more diverse social networks of their children.

To examine this, we allowed the effect of pupil friendships on parental ties to differ depending on the ethnic make-up of the friendship. We separated pupil friendships where the pupils had (1) immigrant parents of the same national origins, (2) immigrant parents of different origins, (3) neither pupils had immigrant parents, and finally where (4) an immigrant nominated a non-immigrant and (5) vice versa.

We found that a pupil friendship is equally likely to lead to a parental tie regardless of the ethnic composition of the friendship. Although same-ethnic friendships are more likely to form in the first place, when cross-ethnic friendships do develop between pupils, they also lead to social ties between parents. This suggests that parents are open to forming social ties across ethnicities to support the friendships of their children.

Helping kids help their parents: policy implications

Our research suggests that school policies that facilitate cross-ethnic friendships among pupils can have powerful impacts on the social networks of their parents too. For instance, in the absence of the integrative power of pupil friendships, only one in 17 immigrant parents would get together or call a non-immigrant parent from their child's class; thanks to the opportunity to connect that child friendships present, one in seven immigrant parents will connect with a non-immigrant parent in their child's class. These informal social connections can provide valuable information on navigating life in Germany, help to find work or change jobs, and help immigrant parents to support their children in school and beyond.

Our research finds that the degree to which pupils and their parents are connected to others outside of their own national origin group varies considerably across schools, suggesting that the formation of such ties is, at least in part, amenable to school policies and structures. Policy makers concerned with social cohesion might therefore wish to pay attention to schools as a source of upward integrative influence for immigrant parents.

Other information

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