

Compensatory Disadvantage in School: Immigrant Children and the Relative Age Effect.

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Abstract: This paper uses the relative age of pupils as a natural experiment to study how ethnic inequalities in educational performance are produced. We argue that, compared to native born parents, immigrant parents are less able to compensate for the educational disadvantage of their children. Consequently, the compensatory disadvantage hypothesis predicts that exogenous ‘shocks’, such as being relatively young, are more detrimental for the educational performance of immigrant children than for children of native parents. We test this hypothesis using a regression discontinuity design with the French sample of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA 2006-2012). We find that students, who are born just before the cut-off date for entering primary school, are 11 percentage points more likely to repeat a grade. In line with the compensatory disadvantage hypothesis, this risk is significantly higher for children of immigrants, even when adjusting for parental socioeconomic status.