

**UCLA**

**InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies**

**Title**

Review: Unequal Origins: Immigrant Selection and the Education of the Second Generation  
by Cynthia Feliciano

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/19z6k14k>

**Journal**

InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies, 3(2)

**ISSN**

1548-3320

**Author**

Yeung, Fanny PF

**Publication Date**

2007-07-09

**DOI**

10.5070/D432000594

Peer reviewed

**Unequal Origins: Immigrant Selection and the Education of the Second Generation** by Cynthia Feliciano. *The New Americans: Recent Immigration and American Society*. New York: LFB Scholarly Publishing LLC, 2006. 190 pp. ISBN 1593320876.

This book is a part of LFB Scholarly Publishing's series, *The New Americans: Recent Immigration and American Society*. *Unequal Origins* focuses on local, domestic implications and influences of the country of origin, particularly for second-generation immigrants and their education. Given that education enables social and economic mobility, research can provide insights on different pathways in education and can help us understand why certain ethnic second-generation immigrants "succeed" by joining the mainstream middle class and why others "fail," trapped in impoverished situations. By exploring the influences of immigrant selectivity—"how immigrants' characteristics compare to those remaining in the country of origin" (p. 3) —we may begin to better understand some of these differences. Additionally, Feliciano's use of the "hour-glass economy, characterized by many jobs at the high or low extremes, and few jobs in the middle" (p. 19) helps us conceptualize the challenges immigrants face as industrial work opportunities are squeezed out of the United States marketplace. The book is timely in that it comes to print in the midst of political and nation-wide discussions regarding immigration, education, and employment.

The research findings in this book challenge many popular perceptions that immigrants are less educated than their native US counterparts and that those who immigrate are the less desirable citizens of their country of origin. In fact, the author portrays "the story of the immigrant generation...[as] one of educational polarization, with substantial percentages of immigrants at both the bottom and the top of the educational distribution" (p.11) and sheds light on those at the top of the distribution. The story not often told is of self-selected immigrants who are defined as those who are "generally positively selected—or more educated than the other populations in their home countries" (p. 13). Immigrants who make this journey, documented or not, generally select themselves, are more willing to work in different positions, and are more flexible than US natives. The author's findings also suggest that the distance of the home country in relation to the US further increases the probability of self-selection given that longer journeys contain "greater travel costs and psychological costs in moving to another country" (p. 52).

*Unequal Origins* is organized systematically, with a different research study embedded within each chapter. Findings established in one study are incorporated in the next and utilize different data sets for each proposed study. This cumulative process enables a deeper and richer conceptualization of ethnic differences among second-generation students and of their educational

experiences. A theoretical overview of existing literature provides explanations for ethnic group differences in educational outcomes. Much of the book employs a segmented assimilation theoretical framework when analyzing how cultural and structural characteristics are linked to educational outcomes. Segmented assimilation contrasts perceptions of straight-line immigrant adaptation and introduces alternatives that include upward, downward, or stagnant mobility (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Portes & Zhou, 1993; Zhou, 1997). Feliciano introduces two other levels of assimilation that contribute to the theory of segmented assimilation: immigrants who are able to experience “rapid economic advancement within a strong ethnic community by using the ethnic group membership as a source of beneficial social capital” (p. 18), and those who experience downward mobility or permanent poverty, particularly if children of immigrants fail to graduate from high school or college. Factors that may influence their assimilation include both cultural (values, beliefs, and attitudes) and structural (class and background structures) characteristics. There are also complex political and economic circumstances that influence immigration flow and selectivity and that can shape educational aspirations and expectations among second-generation youth. Feliciano includes analyses of whether or not education is reproducing societal inequalities through class reproduction or if it is in fact enabling mobility between generations.

This book contributes to the limited research available on second-generation immigrants and their education. Feliciano examines an overlooked segment of the immigrant population and her analysis encapsulates immigrants’ diverse countries of origin, particularly those who have higher levels of education. She focuses on educational outcomes, which have been established as strong predictors for eventual economic success and which are recognized outcomes in adulthood in multiple countries. Feliciano draws on the findings of prominent researchers, including Portes, Rumbaut, Stanton-Salazar, and others, to conduct quantitative analyses on numerous datasets. She addresses the question of how immigrants’ origins and their situational contexts influence educational attainment in the second generation. She also contributes an interesting level of analysis on group-level characteristics to better extrapolate the complexities of education, immigration, and children of immigrants. A variable of interest is the families’ socioeconomic status, particularly since disparities here often persist across generations.

Although the book is designed for an audience that is already familiar with immigration and education issues, it would have been helpful to provide the distinctions between migrants and immigrants, emigration and immigration in the introduction. To the untrained eye, these terms may appear to be used interchangeably, without clarification from the author on how she intends them.

In her discussion of immigrant selectivity, Feliciano does not include involuntary immigrants, particularly those who were forced to move to the United States as a result of slavery or through historical land acquisitions. Readers who rely solely on this book for information on this topic may be left to wonder whether there are contemporary involuntary immigrants, for example political refugees, and how their experiences differ. Additionally, the perspectives of immigrants who are less formally educated are not included. For example, what about less educated Asian immigrants who are “less selective” —what do their educational trajectories look like?

Also not included were experiences of Black immigrants from countries of origin other than Jamaica and Haiti, and in certain data sets, the West Indies (see Waters’ (1994) article “Ethnic and Racial Identities of Second-generation Black Immigrants in New York City”). Research findings did not conclude that there were significant differences between Black immigrants and other ethnic groups, which may imply that the outcomes for this group of immigrants are optimistic. However, the differentiations among Black immigrants are important if society labels, stereotypes, and treats them similarly to native Blacks.

Feliciano discusses how “students’ personal educational aspirations and expectations and those of their parents’ are important predictors of educational attainment for minority youth” (p. 66). London (1992) offers an additional interpretation of parents’ aspirations for their children which proposes that many parents, particularly those who do not have a college education, transfer their personal unmet aspirations for higher education to their children. Children will often internalize this goal, making it difficult to decipher whether it is their own aspirations or their parents’. Another interesting consideration would be the influence of political policies of various countries, like China’s one-child policy, and how parental influence and aspirations (or unmet aspirations) influence children’s educational outcomes. Further research in familial relationships and influences in shaping educational aspirations would be beneficial, given that aspirations are important in mediating future success.

In Chapter 4, “Immigrant Origins and Second-Generation Ambitions”, the author highlights an interesting finding in relation to bilingualism: “fluent bilingualism has been associated with such favorable educational outcomes...yet the most educationally successful group, Asians, are the least fluent bilingual[ly]” (p.76). Latinos were found to be the most bilingual at 70 percent of the sample, while Asians reported only 30 percent fluently bilingual. Feliciano does not offer substantial interpretations of these findings, which might have addressed how various circumstances and variances in the language acculturation process can influence educational outcomes, for example, how country of origin influences language and how the structure of bilingual education maintains native languages.

*Unequal Origins* takes a sociological approach to understanding the ethnic and socioeconomic disparities among children of immigrants and how they affect various educational outcomes. The book's title and its focus on the selectivity of the countries of origin suggest that it may have been appropriate to include discussions on transnationalism, defined by Lam & Rosario (2006) to be various types of global connections and relationships that influence identity development, immigrant adaptation, and trajectories of children of immigrants. This book provides a good overview of the context of second-generation immigrants and their educational experiences. The analyses of immigrants as a group, as opposed to individual experiences, offer valuable insights into this population. The author's optimism is much appreciated as it frames children of immigrants in a more positive light, unlike the deficit model that implies that immigrants' culture and language serve as disadvantages to their overall development and educational and economic outcomes.

### References

- Lam, E., & Rosario, E. (forthcoming). *Digital literacy and transnationalism among adolescent immigrants in the U.S.* Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- London, H. B. (1992). Transformation: Cultural challenges faced by first-generation students. *New Directions of Community Colleges*, 80, 5-11.
- Portes, A., & Rumbaut, R. G. (2001). *Legacies: The story of the Immigrant second generation*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Portes, A., & Zhou, M. (1993). The new second generation - segmented assimilation and its variants. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 530, 74-96.
- Waters, M.C. (1994). Ethnic and racial identities of second-generation black immigrants in New York City. *International Migration Review*, 28(4), 795-820.
- Zhou, M. (1997). Growing up American: The challenges confronting immigrant children and children of immigrants. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 23, 63-95.

### Reviewer

Reviewer Fanny PF Yeung is a doctoral student in the Graduate School of Education and Information Sciences at the University of California, Los Angeles and a graduate student researcher at the Student Affairs Information and Research Office. Her current research interests focus on access to success and student retention in higher education for first-generation college students, children of

immigrants, and former participants of outreach programs. She is also involved in a research project examining students' ethical beliefs and behaviors in college.