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Immigrant Parents' Concerns Regarding Their Children's Education in the United States

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A growing body of research suggests that as immigrant families assimilate into U.S. culture, their children's academic achievements and aspirations decline. This article explores possible reasons for this finding from the perspective of immigrant parents from Eastern European countries whose children attend U.S. schools. In-depth, qualitative interviews are conducted with 50 married mothers and fathers who hold professional-status employment. The data are analyzed using open and axial coding approach and three central, recurring themes emerge: (a) Parental Influences: "Education is a must. . . . The sky is the limit"; (b) The Educational System: "Parental guidance and resources are required"; and (c) Sociocultural Influences: "Everything here is about making money. . . . But what about our children?" Supporting, illustrative narratives are presented in connection with each theme to explain the perspectives of these immigrant parents on their children's schooling in the United States, and to add other tentative factors for further research into the decline of the children's academic achievement and aspirations with longer residence in the United States. Implications for family and consumer scientists are presented.

Keywords: *acculturation and academic achievement; Eastern European immigrants; immigrant children and education*

With a continuing flow of immigrants from diverse backgrounds to the United States, researchers are paying closer attention to the effects of assimilation on educational achievements of immigrant youth. In the context of an increasingly global economy and declining wages for workers without college education, academic achievements of immigrants have far-reaching consequences for their future well-being (Gans, 1992; Kaushal, Reimers, & Reimers, 2007; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2007). A growing body of research suggests, however, that as immigrant families assimilate into the U.S. culture, negative changes occur in the academic performance of immigrant youth and children of immigrants. With longer residence in the United States and in successive generations, English-language skills tend to improve whereas work habits and scholastic performance and aspirations decline (Caplan, Choy, & Whitmore, 1991; Jensen & Chitose, 1997; Kao & Tienda, 1995; Matute-Bianchi, 1986; Rumbaut, 1995, 1997; Steinberg, Brown, & Dornbusch, 1996).

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There are a few studies that have begun to examine the processes behind the erosion of human capital, but no definitive answers are available. In addition, extant studies primarily focus on the two largest immigrant groups, those from Latin America and those from Asia. Little research has been done with the less visible but substantial population of immigrants from Eastern Europe, which increased six times after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Communist regime in Eastern Europe (Robila, 2007). Many of today's immigrants from Eastern Europe are young, college-educated people searching for economic opportunities that the disintegrated economies of the former communist states do not provide (Ispa-Landa, 2007; Roberts, Clark, Fagan, & Tholen, 2000). Although the participants of the present study are highly educated, overall Eastern European immigrants in the United States have higher educational attainment than immigrants from other regions and occupy professional positions (Gold, 2007; cf. Nesteruk & Marks, 2009). In addition, although we know much about the experiences of lower income immigrants, we know much less about immigrants in the professional ranks and their families, even though about one third of all legal immigrants to the United States hold professional occupations (Rumbaut, 1997).

The current research is focused on those who belong to *both* of these understudied groups: immigrants from Eastern Europe who are also in the professional ranks. This article addresses this group's reports and reflections about the education of these immigrants' children in the United States. Through doing so, it seeks to provide a deeper, "insider's" look into the processes of acculturation. We also consider possible explanations regarding the relationship between longer residence in the United States and declining academic achievement for children of immigrants.

CHILDREN OF IMMIGRANTS IN U.S. SCHOOLS: NEW OPPORTUNITIES, NEW CHALLENGES

As pointed out by Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2007), immigrants' educational outcomes are not very easily generalized and are as varied as their diverse backgrounds. Although many children of immigrants outperform their native-born peers and are valedictorians and recipients of prestigious scholarships, many other children of immigrants struggle at school and drop out at high rates. At the same time, two trends emerge from recent studies and will be juxtaposed in this review of literature: (a) initial academic success and (b) long-term academic decline among immigrants.

Initial Academic Success Among Immigrant Students

Hard work and determination to succeed have always been among the major strengths and resources of many immigrant groups (Bush, Bohon, & Kim, 2005). Comparing grades, achievement test scores, and college aspirations, the initial trend is that immigrant and second-generation students (native-born children of immigrant parents) generally score higher academically than U.S.-born students of U.S.-born parents (Rumbaut, 1995). As evidenced by a longitudinal nationally representative study, recent immigrants are also *less* likely to drop out of high school than students born in the United States (White & Glick, 2000). These studies find

that under the same conditions of low socioeconomic status and disrupted family structure, recent immigrants are more likely than their U.S.-born counterparts to stay in school. Studies also show that immigrant children tend to dedicate more time to homework and, despite slightly lower reading scores, have slightly higher grades than their counterparts of the same ethnicity in U.S.-born families, at least through middle school (Hernandez & Charney, 1998; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

Familial social capital and highly adaptive achievement-oriented attitudes and behaviors were found to contribute to immigrant youth's academic success, which is especially impressive among immigrant students who escaped impoverished and war-torn circumstances. In a two-year study of Punjabi Sikh immigrants in California's high schools, Gibson (1988) demonstrated that Punjabi immigrant students often outperformed both majority and long-established minority students because they accommodated without assimilating. Although these students learned English, followed American customs at school, and selectively adopted "the good ways of the Americans," thus accommodating the dominant group in some ways, they maintained a strong sense of cultural identity and cohesion. Similarly, children in Southeast Asian refugee families have often demonstrated high academic achievement. Their success has been attributed to the maintenance of cultural values and family practices that include "hard work, education, achievement, self-reliance, steadfast purpose, and pride" (Caplan et al., 1991, p. 139). In most of these families, educational achievement is emphasized whereas television viewing is strictly limited. Children often devote 3 hr to homework each evening, with older siblings tutoring those who are younger. As a result, older children benefit from reviewing school materials. Parents are actively involved in the lives of their children through reading, telling stories, and providing constant encouragement, monitoring, and support (Caplan et al., 1991). Other studies similarly found that retention of the original cultural patterns and ethnic identities were advantageous to the academic success and human capital of children of immigrants (Matute-Bianchi, 1986; Zhou & Bankston, 1996).

Among other explanations for the academic success of recent immigrants are the self-selection factor, parental optimism, and "dual frame of reference"—found in immigrants across nationalities and socioeconomic circumstances. First, in terms of self-selection, voluntary international migrants tend to be predisposed and motivated to adapt well to the host country (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Second, despite the probability of being nearer to the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder, immigrants tend to be optimistic about the future of their families and children and tend to *expect* upward mobility; often they see this self-fulfilling prophecy realized. Such parental attitudes influence their children's academic success and are valuable resources for immigrant students (Kao & Tienda, 1995). Furthermore, many immigrants benefit from a cross-cultural perspective or "dual-frame of reference in comparing their current circumstances with those in their homeland" that enable them to draw from the coping strategies of multiple cultures when challenges arise (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2007, p. 245).

In summary, research indicates that hard work, determination, collectivistic family values, cultural strengths, retention of ethnic identity, parental involvement, and optimism are all protective factors that contribute to *initial* academic achievement among the children of immigrants. We now turn to a body of literature that is less encouraging.

Long-Term Academic Decline Among Immigrant Students

Although children of more recent immigrants are influenced by their parents' proeducational views and motivation (Duran & Weffer, 1992), across time and generations, the immigrant family strengths previously discussed appear to wane in influence. The process of assimilation into American culture and increased residence in the United States has been linked to a decrease in academic achievement and aspiration among immigrant children, and with overall decline of well-being (Hernandez & Charney, 1998; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2007).

In a study of more than 5,000 eighth- and ninth-graders who were immigrants or children of immigrants, Rumbaut (1997) found that "over time and generation in the U. S., reading achievement test scores go up, as does the amount of time spent watching television, but the number of hours spent on homework goes down, as does GPA" (p. 33). Steinberg and colleagues (1996), who found similar results in their national study of more than 20,000 adolescents, note that the longer an immigrant family has lived in the United States, the more its children begin to resemble the "typical" American teenager, who spends more time hanging out with friends, dating, and being among "peers who value socializing over academics" and who is "academically indifferent, or even disengaged" (p. 99). Thus, the more immigrant students "Americanize," the more they adopt a lax attitude toward education. Although this finding of declining academic achievements and aspirations across time and generation has been corroborated by other researchers (e.g., Caplan et al., 1991; Jensen & Chitose, 1997; Kao & Tienda, 1995; Matute-Bianchi, 1986; Rumbaut, 1995; Sue & Okazaki, 1990), few studies investigated *why* this is the case.

Thus, given immigrants' initial academic achievement, why is there a subsequent academic decline, particularly in light of increased language ability? Waters (1997) inquires, "What are the particular social factors that dissipate social capital of the immigrants over time?" (p. 80) and suggests: (a) weakening of ties between immigrant parents and their children and isolation of nuclear families once in the United States, (b) decreased parental supervision because of long work hours, (c) conflict between immigrant and American disciplinary practices and subsequent erosion of parental authority, (d) residential concentration of immigrants in the inner city with poor-quality neighborhood schools, and (e) racial discrimination and related pessimism about future success. Although Waters's study provides valuable insights into the risk factors for academic achievement and aspirations among immigrants from the Caribbean residing in New York, it is important to explore reasons for academic decline among other immigrant groups as well. For example, what factors play a role among more educated populations of immigrants (e.g., immigrant professionals) who possess more resources and thus are able to place their children in better neighborhoods, schools, and after-school programs? Does the process of erosion of human capital have similar characteristics for White ethnic groups who, because of skin color, do not face the additional challenge of race-based discrimination?

The research we present in this article (a) describes *how* parents, who are immigrant professionals from Eastern Europe, perceive education and their children's experiences with the educational system in the United States and (b) offers explanations *why* there is a relationship between longer residence in the United States and declining academic achievement for children of immigrants. To explore these issues, a qualitative approach was chosen and used.

METHOD

Qualitative research methods can facilitate the study of culturally diverse families in the context of their social environment (Sherif Trask & Marotz-Baden, 2007) and allow one to paint a vivid picture of a family by presenting narratives that capture the insights, meanings, conflicts, emotions, and motivations of its members (Ambert, Adler, Adler, & Detzner, 1995). Asking research participants open-ended questions gives them a "voice" to describe their lived experience of immigration and parenting (Sussman & Gilgun, 1997). The purpose of the larger study from which these data are drawn was to examine the experiences of immigrant professionals from Eastern Europe raising children in a new sociocultural environment of the United States (Nesteruk, 2007), a topic that lends itself to symbolic interactionism. Thus, consistent with symbolic interactionism theory (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993), we were not looking for objective facts but rather were interested in how participants construct their own realities, interpret their new circumstances, and make meanings of their experiences of parenting during and after immigration.

Data Collection

The participants for the study were recruited through a combination of newspaper advertising, personal contacts of the first author, and snowball sampling. The criteria for participation were (a) first-generation immigrants from Eastern European countries, (b) married couples with children, (c) a professional occupation for at least one of the spouses, and (d) a minimum length of residency in the United States of 5 years to ensure familiarity with U.S. culture. We purposively sampled because of gaps in the literature regarding both highly educated immigrants and immigrants from Eastern Europe. The first author conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 50 participants. Half of the interviews were conducted in person and half over the phone (with out of state participants). Prior to the interview, each participant signed a consent form and filled out a demographic information sheet. Interviews typically lasted about 60 minutes and were recorded. Although attempts were made to recruit couples, it proved difficult due to participants' busy schedules. Overall, there were 16 couple interviews and 18 individual interviews, mostly with mothers.

Interview Questions

The participants were asked 20 open-ended interview questions related to topics of adaptation to the host country, changes in the family as a result of immigration, participants' perceptions of the differences of raising children in their countries of origin and in the United States, the adjustments they had to make in a new context, education and language issues, relationships with children and conflict, and cultural identity and acculturation. One of the interview questions directly asked parents for their explanations to the following question: "Researchers have found that longer residence in the U.S. and the second generation status are connected with declining academic achievements and aspirations among children. Why do you think that happens?"

The theme of education also emerged in the process of the interviews, often in response to the following questions: (a) What are your goals for your child(ren)? (b) What are the benefits and the challenges of having your children grow up in

this country? (c) What adjustments did you have to make as a parent in the United States? and (d) How would you say American culture influences your family? The participants' responses to these interview questions provided additional insights into the unanswered question of students' declining academic achievement over time and generations in the United States. Although education was not the primary focus of the first author's larger initial study, the participants' narratives and commentary on the topic were sufficiently prevalent and salient to warrant an entire study on education.

Data Analysis

Following verbatim transcription, interviews were analyzed consistent with grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Open coding and axial coding were performed to identify the most salient and frequently mentioned themes. Open coding is a process of identifying and developing concepts in the interview data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We used a combination of line-by-line and sentence or paragraph coding. We then continued with axial coding that allows for making connections between categories. Numeric content analysis of the coding concepts was performed for each interview, resulting in a notecard with an at-a-glance summary of the concepts that occurred most frequently (Marks, Nesteruk, Swanson, Garrison, & Davis, 2005). Summary notecards from the interviews served as a useful tool for across-interview coding. After close examination and scrutiny, the concepts were narrowed to a manageable number. In the end, the most salient and frequently mentioned concepts and themes in the interview data were identified.

Reflexivity

Researchers' experiences influence data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Patton, 2002; Sussman & Gilgun, 1997). In the spirit of self-awareness, we report that the first author is an Eastern European immigrant (from Ukraine) and is a married mother. Her insider status as an immigrant professional and parent facilitated recruitment of the participants and helped them feel more comfortable when discussing their experiences. The second and third authors are also married parents but are both U.S. natives and provided contrasting and complementary perspectives.

Description of Participants

Fifty immigrant parents from the following Eastern European countries were interviewed: Romania (14), Russia (14), Ukraine (12), Bulgaria (5), Poland (1), Belarus (2), and Bosnia (2). These families had resided in the U.S. between 5 and 21 years ($M = 14$ years), in various regions and states. Fathers were between 34 and 56 years old ($M = 41$), mothers were between 31 and 50 years old ($M = 40$). In total, participants had 66 children (half girls and half boys); slightly over half of all children were born in the U.S. Children's ages ranged from infants to 26 years old ($M = 11$ years).

Participants were highly educated and overrepresented in STEM disciplines (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics). Half of the participants had PhDs (all but two terminal degrees were obtained in U.S. universities), 2 MDs, 17 MBA/MA/MS/MSW, 5 BSs, and 1 had a high school education. Employment

included: university (18), industry/business (17), medical field (3), non-profit organizations (2), self-employed (5), stay-at-home mother/student (5). Average family income - over \$100,000.¹

FINDINGS

All of the participants discussed the importance of education, both on a personal level and as parents. Their perspectives will be presented in Theme 1, titled Parental Influences: "Education is a must. . . . The sky is the limit." Participants' explanations related to a connection between longer residence in the United States and declining academic achievements and aspirations among children of immigrants will be discussed in Theme 2 (Educational System: "Parental guidance and resources are required.") and Theme 3 (Sociocultural Influences: "Everything here is about making money. . . . But what about our children?").

Theme 1. Parental Influences: "Education Is A Must. . . . The Sky Is the Limit"

Based on the parents' responses, the most important goal they have for their children is to get a good education. As these immigrant professionals continuously emphasized, education was intrinsically important for them growing up in Eastern Europe. Subsequently, these parents' core concern as they raise their families in the United States is that quality education must remain central in their children's lives. These parents do not view education solely, or even primarily, as a means to establish a "career and be successful" professionally and financially. As they explained, the significance of quality education for these parents is *at least* as tied to seeing their children become "a good person" with a sense of purpose, "to find[ing] his place in life," and to leading "an interesting life [surrounded by] interesting people." Fathers, like these two, stated:

*Boris:*² In the old [communist] system where we come from, good education was everything! It was a big goal. Our goal for kids is to get a good education.

Vladimir: We put all [our] efforts for them to have a good life, and it is not possible without good education. Education is a great emphasis in our family, with my son and with my daughter, both. We try to give them all opportunities to improve and to go further.

As we proceed, we will see that the "good life" described by Vladimir is not simply one of monetary success. Under the communist regime, the rewards of education and professional status in Eastern Europe "were cultural rather than financial," because some manual jobs were much better paid than "teaching and medicine" (Roberts et al., 2000, p. 69). Based on participants' reports, much of the parents' motivation for desiring education for their children relates more to personal development than it does to finances.

Eva: The goal is to have [our son] educated and to make a *good person* of him. All we do is to give him some direction, to make him a good person, not just [to say], "Go, make money."

Oleg: Education is a means of establishing your life, not only financially or materialistically, but basically in a very broad [but rich] context.

The majority of the parents in the study said they immigrated to the United States because it allowed them to continue their scientific research *and* provide for their

families; there were both personal–intrinsic and pragmatic–financial reasons for their decisions. The disintegrating socialistic economies of Eastern Europe failed to provide good jobs for most of its scientists, thus leaving their skills unused. After the fall of the Communist regime in Eastern Europe and the collapse of the Soviet Union, many people used their newly acquired freedom of movement to leave homelands torn by socioeconomic crisis and high unemployment rates (Lobodzinska, 1995; Roberts et al., 2000; Robila, 2004, 2007).

Although education did not always or typically “pay” in the former Soviet bloc, the immigrant parents in this study found that education and aptitude in the “hard” sciences like physics, chemistry, engineering, mathematics, biology, or medicine *does* pay in terms of salaries and job availability in the United States. They therefore view these occupations as “safe,” and fully intend to steer their children toward them—parents’ motivations are certainly financial as well, at least in part. Daniel explained:

I will encourage [my daughters] to become whatever they want: a medical doctor, or a physicist, or a mathematician.

Another couple from Ukraine who both work in the chemical industry “expect certain things,” such as having their now-4-year-old son to become an engineer. A similar push toward technical occupations can be found in the research with Asian immigrant parents, who do it to offset future discrimination (Li, 2001; Sue & Okazaki, 1990).

When asked whether their goals for the children would be different if they had stayed in their home countries, participants unanimously answered “No.” In their view, goals regarding quality education for their children are based on core values that did not change as a result of immigration. However, a key difference lies in the pathways through which educational and occupational goals can be reached. One parent summarized: “There are much more opportunities and options [in the U.S.]” The following quotes similarly illustrate the unbridled optimism of the first-generation immigrant parents interviewed.

Eva: The sky is the limit. Definitely, this country is that good. What is on that road depends on you, how strong a person you will become [depends on you]. [In the U.S.], opportunities for our son are way better than in our country. We came here to give him more choices than one. In [Bosnia], plenty of young people are smart . . . but they don’t have jobs. We do not want that [to] happen to him.

Ovidiu: The goals [for our children] would be the same. But there are more opportunities to achieve them here. Compared to Romania, they will have more opportunities, because of the way the society is here. . . . In Romania, there is more corruption, less economic development, less opportunity to get into a good university. Here, they can live their life how it is supposed to be lived, without making compromises.

It is noteworthy that these parents (who are well-paid professionals) are in a particularly advantageous position to help their children succeed academically. They are aware that their family’s educational and financial situation provides an array of opportunities that are not available to many other U.S. families, including most immigrant families. A mother named Galina, a university professor, explained:

[T]here are much more opportunities here. There are opportunities, probably not for everybody, everywhere, like if you do not have any money and you are in a bad place and you are stuck with a bad school. But for people like me who have [a] certain

income and education, I think [our son] has more choices. If I do not like the public school, I can afford to send him to private school. I can afford to spend time with him because my job will allow me [to]. I can afford to have a tutor so that [my son] can have everything.

Galina's reference to families who "do not have any money and . . . are in a bad place and . . . stuck with a bad school" summarizes the plight of many immigrant families. However, in spite of their financial and occupational advantages, Galina and the other immigrant parents interviewed are frustrated with the quality of education. Factual or not, in their perception, the quality of education in the United States is low (especially in middle and high schools), as described in the next theme—a theme that captures some explanations regarding children's academic decline, in spite of the parents' decidedly proeducation views and available resources.

Theme 2. Educational System: "Parental Guidance And Resources Are Required"

Despite their optimism about opportunities for their children in the U.S. in general, many immigrant professionals are not pleased with the quality of the United States' educational system, especially in middle and high schools. The participants perceive that U.S. secondary education has weak curricula and low expectations, especially in mathematics, physics, and chemistry. Schools in Eastern Europe, at least in the past, were known for their rigor, intensity, and solid academic core (Isipa & Elliott, 2003; Postlethwaite, 1988). At the time when study participants were in secondary school, schools offered uniform opportunities regardless of the socio-economic status of the students. In contrast, in the U.S., immigrant parents encounter an array of public and private schools that offer widely differing qualities of education. Other significant cultural differences were apparent to our participants, as described below.

First, many of the parents emphasized that elementary schools make learning fun and engaging, and that there is an effort to give their children individual attention and to help build children's self-esteem and confidence. Because immigrants from Eastern Europe grew up under the Communist regime, which stressed the collective over the individual, they appreciate the individual-friendly environment in the U.S. (Nesteruk & Marks, under review).

Snezhana: When we were growing up Bulgaria, we were one of the class. I remember teachers always telling me – you are not special, you are just one of the group, you are nothing. This was part of the socialism, the idea that you grow up as a part of the collective. I grew up with an idea that I'm a number, I'm not special, I don't have any special skills.

Larisa, who had similar experience growing up in Russia, juxtaposed her experience with that of her child's U.S. education and shared her appreciation for it.

There is a lot of thinking that goes on [in U.S. school]. It's very free form, relaxing and fun, whatever job you did, the teacher will say "good job," "you tried hard." So there is a lot that goes into nourishing self-respect, building confidence, and [building] a healthy individual.

However, many participants reported that this focus on self-esteem can become excessive. One parent shared a story how her son's teacher praised their 4th grader for being "wonderful" at cutting shapes and being able to use scissors,

while the parent wanted to know what she and her husband could do to help him get better at multiplying numbers. She reported that she had to listen for half an hour about how "valuable her son was to the class," while all she wanted was to get honest feedback and constructive criticism from the teacher about her son's academics. This example illustrates different expectations on the part of teachers and immigrant parents, and also reflects a commonly reported communication difficulty that stems from cultural differences with respect to straightforwardness. A teacher's reluctance to offer constructive criticism may be confusing to some immigrant parents, discouraging further communication. Another parent explains:

We were having communication difficulty with the teachers. I'm trying to get the message across, but they are not getting it. They are stunned when I say, "Okay, I get it – all is wonderful, but tell me what the problems are and what we should work on with my child." And they are not used to the straight conversation, they don't like it. So, they keep telling the kids that they are unique, and this is a problem.

What this mother, and other parents, mean by "problem" is that children may get used to invariably positive feedback and "expect to have their ego stroked" all the time. Parents are worried that this pattern may damage their children's motivation to truly excel (Nesteruk & Marks, under review).

As children move on to the higher grades, parents report feeling that not enough is done to utilize the children's potential and advance their academic skills. Parents of older children in the study are unpleasantly surprised to learn that chemistry and physics classes do not start in seven grade, as they do in Eastern Europe. Many are also displeased that the level of mathematics is not high. In addition, they discover that children actually have a choice regarding what classes to take, and often homework is not required. This is a radically different system compared to what the parents experienced. In short, the excessive freedom and the lack of a standardized curriculum reportedly make many parents uncomfortable. In their view, U.S. school curricula are inferior to those of their native countries and some consider the U.S.'s poor pre-university education to be a disadvantage of immigration. Especially parents of older children feel "alarmed" that their children are not being challenged enough at school. A father from Romania explained,

Daniel: The kids are much smarter and have much more potential than teachers here challenge them [to develop]. From 5th grade to high school here teachers just ask them to repeat what they've done in the second grade, add numbers, [do a] few fractions, and so on. They don't challenge them at all. But kids have the ability to absorb a lot of information, and the communist system gave it. [In contrast, teachers in Romania] probably even put too much knowledge into kids' heads. They may have overdone it, but nevertheless the challenge was there. I'm very *afraid* that my daughters will spend between 5th grade and 12th grade [in American schools being bored] when they [should be] developing their minds! That's something that *scares* me.

As the last quote illustrates, participants acknowledge that there may have been excesses in the curriculum they themselves experienced. Scholarly assessments indicate that many Eastern Europeans schools may struggle with curriculum overload that may alienate students (Ispa & Elliott, 2003). Despite the potential downside of a demanding curriculum, several participants appreciated that it provided a strong intellectual challenge. They also suggested that the lack

of challenge in U.S. schools had negative effects on their children, one of which was boredom.

George: The problem we have with the school system is that we don't see it [as] challenging enough. We have a lot of days when our son comes back from school more rested than he was in the morning! He has so much energy, as if he went and took a nap, and this year he told us that he gets *bored* at school. He finishes every assignment way before the other kids.

A mother in another family said that her son had an aptitude for science and math, but was "not engaged" and "not challenged enough." At 12 years old, he rebelled and every morning was whining, "I don't want to go to school, it's boring there, there is nothing for me to do there, I'm bored." His parents sent him to private school with a more challenging curriculum. They report that since the change, they have not heard him complain about school.

Several parents in the study reported going to school and asking teachers to challenge their children more, "to give them extra work." Doing extra work and taking advanced classes helped some families solve the problem. Other parents were dissatisfied with the response they received from teachers who, as one parent claimed, "are only worried about getting good *average* grades for the entire class and don't care if they lose advanced kids along the way." Below is a related story from a mother of two who works as a computer scientist.

[I observed a class] during Education Week, when parents are allowed. They were doing additions in second grade, and were asked to do additions up until 20, so kids make their own examples. They do 3+2, 11+5, whatever. The teacher checks for work, and comments, "Good job, Johnny," "Great job, Mary." And there is a boy [from an immigrant family] who added something like 345 plus 786 and got the answer. The teacher looks at that and says, "Okay, but I asked you to add up to 20. I need a calculator to check that." And she walks away from that child! No encouragement, no "That's great Johnny, you went beyond what was required!" Nothing! She was just annoyed that she needed a calculator to check his answer, and pretty much scolded him - don't stick out. I felt bad for him! I saw my son in this boy.

Considering the perceived lack rigor of curriculum, as well as teacher-related obstacles, many parents report that they "have to compensate [for] the system, and it takes a lot of effort," including time, money, knowledge, and discipline. While some parents in the study were content with advanced and "gifted" classes their children took in public schools, others chose private education that reportedly provides a "strict regiment of homework and assignments." Still others were not sure that private school education was better than public, because "you pay money and teachers sell you a product and try to keep you happy." Several participants reported tutoring their children at home after work. This is not an easy thing to do: coming home after a day of work and having to make a "grumpy teenager see that he has much to learn" is hard. One couple from Poland is an example of parents who utilize all the resources they can afford—private school, tutors in several subjects, music lessons, and clubs to give the best and most well-rounded education to their children.

We cannot [change this educational system], so we pay top dollar to send both of our children to private school. I am also taking my son to the physics club taught by another immigrant father who started this club with several other immigrant parents

who were not happy with the education and wanted their kids to learn more. We are doing it for the second year, but there is some reluctance there because this is not part of the school requirement, and no other kids at school are doing it. So, these children are hesitant and unwilling to participate. They don't see the connection [to their future success].

Parents in the study spoke about a need to be committed to go against the flow and to challenge their children's understandings of what is *really* "cool" and help them resist peer pressure that values socializing over intellectual knowledge. They stated how they try to motivate their children, emphasizing the connection between their hard work now and future success. Oleg, a university professor and father of two, explained: "Although we may not know what our kids *want*, we know what we can do in order for them to come to the point where they should be." Patricia, a mother of two and an engineer in the computer industry, spoke about globalization and competition in a "shrinking" world:

I know that my kids and other kids are competing against immigrants like myself. *So although this school district may be the best, I don't care about it.* They will be competing with kids from Mumbai, or China, or from somewhere else. There is no end to the human talent there. It is as simple as that—*children have to be ready to compete.* And this is what we do as parents now.

Three participants with older children proudly shared that their children graduated as valedictorians, and went to prestigious universities. Upon graduation, some had multiple job offers. Other parents in the study may have had less success to report for many reasons, one being that as immigrants they had to spend a lot of energy ensuring that they completed their own graduate degree and found a job. Overall, the narratives of immigrant parents revealed that they had to learn to navigate an unfamiliar educational system. They had to stay involved, motivate their children to work hard, and find their own ways to give their children a better education and a better life.

Theme 3. Sociocultural Influences: "Everything Here Is About Making Money. . . But What About Our Children?"

In the two previous themes, we have seen that education has a high value for these immigrant professionals. These parents face new challenges in the host country that reportedly make it "harder and harder to motivate" their children academically. What are these challenges and messages in the United States that may be undermining children's academic achievement and motivation? First, from the parents' perspective, education is not valued as much in the United States as it was valued in their countries of origin. In Eastern European countries, education (as a highly desired and vital goal) was supported and promoted on all social levels, including family, school, community, and national levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1970; Pearson, 1990; Roberts et al., 2000; Robila, 2004). However, in their new social environment these parents are confronted by what they call powerful "undermining" influences from mass media and a "culture of celebrity obsession."

Valentina: I think most of [the] children [in the United States] are getting confused with the media reports that [imply], "You don't have to be educated . . ." This culture of celebrity obsession, [where] you don't have to go to college to make money, just

look at those Hollywood movies. That's a wrong message sent by the media and by the society. In Russia, the tradition was to have an education, it was prestigious.

The parents in this study grew up in a closed society that was tightly controlled by the communist government. Communist morality prescribed citizens to put the collective interest above personal concerns and urged citizens not to concern themselves with material possessions (Ispa & Elliott, 2003). In the "old" system neither parents nor children were "trained to be consumers by advertising" (Pearson, 1990, p. 82). Although the parents in our study were not socialized to be ad-driven consumers, their children *have* been, creating something of a generational break—a break that bleeds into both the relative value of education and the reasons *why* education is valued.

Immigration to the United States involves a transition to living in a democratic state and a free market economy where the dollar rules. Although these parents embrace and welcome many American freedoms and opportunities—indeed they immigrated, in some measure, because of these open doors—they are also confronted with the negative aspects of relatively unlimited freedom, television, advertisement, and the cumulative influence of these factors on their children. One father portrayed this challenge as follows:

I don't like the pressure that comes from the media that is put out here. It is not controlled, and probably should be not controlled in a democracy or free state, but *everything* here is about money, and making money, and being rich. [Marketers] want everything to be commercial, to overcommercialize all the aspects of the life. *And [what about] our children?* You see, we did not grow up in this kind of environment where everything was for sale, and [the goal was] to make money, and [for] the child to grow up with the idea that this [item or product] is fashionable, and this is what was shown on TV, so I should buy that. [There is an] overcommercialism in all aspects of life in the U.S. [They tell you that what matters is] looking good . . . if you don't look good, you have to [buy their products] because television [is] projecting into the kids' mind[s] the idea that you should live [a certain way]. You see, we were not guided in our life by television. Mostly the way we lived, we got our models from the family [and] books. We read a lot of books, way, way, way more than [children now]. Literature, drama, everything. And we got our role models not from TV, not from a show where every 5 minutes it breaks and sells you Pepsi, Coke, shoes, or whatever. *I don't like it a lot.* You might say, "Okay, you can avoid this in the society if you are smart." Well, you can probably unplug the TV, but the kids still go to school with other children, and they hear about these things, so you cannot actually. If you live in this society you have to go with whatever they put on television, with whatever the kids get out from this media.

This father's sense of agitation and frustration are apparent, and similar concerns were prevalent among other parents. Parents reported that because of what their children see on television, many of their children want to be basketball and football players, or pop stars, primarily because these high-profile people are paid exceptionally well. It is troubling for these parents that their children grow up surrounded by the "wrong role models" that point to the possibility of a "decent lifestyle without being educated." Below are two representative quotes from a mother from Russia and a father from Romania:

Tatiana: [Immediately on arrival to the United States] children are more subjected to this immigrant mindset of their parents that you need to establish yourself in this country, you need to work hard, you need to study, you need to get a good job. And then,

after some time, they realize that maybe it is not necessary. [They] see [people like] Britney Spears, she is [financially] established and she didn't go to college.

George: Our son says, I want to play American football, or be a football coach, NFL coach. Why? Because he [will] make like 5 million dollars a year. I say, "[Son], think about something else." "[OK], I want to be a businessman." "Why?" [I ask]. "Because Donald Trump [is a businessman and he] is a billionaire." We are trying to tell [our son] that money is not everything. You have to have your education. But when you look at TV, [everything] you see is about money [and fame] . . . everything translates into money. From houses, cars, girls, and whatever. He is not starting to look at a career because he likes to do it, the only question is, can I make a lot of money out of it?

Other parents also speculated that growing up in the United States, children take a lot of material things for granted and thus "the drive is not there." Although the children want even more comforts than their parents have, they want to get there through different means—by paths that involve "less studying, less knowledge, and more of a street-smart sort of thing." Large-scale quantitative research indicates that "the longer a child of immigrants has lived in this country, the lower the importance he or she attributes to school grades and the more his or her school-work habits approach the (low) average of the general student population" (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001, p. 215). The participants of the present study provide illustrations of this process, showing how parental authority diminishes while the influence of peers and media swells. A father named Vladimir reported:

The second generation, who were born here, are reluctant to [accept] persuasion from their parents [that education is important for future success] because they feel like a part of *this* society and they trust more their friends than [they trust] their parents, who are not a part of this society. [Second-generation students] are [a] local product.

Daniel, a father who is a university professor, stated:

In this country there are very smart kids and big achievers. But the average [U.S. kid] has an attitude towards education which is below the average attitude in Eastern Europe. So the average has a way lower attitude, lower engagement into education. Look at the education, we get these kids [as freshmen] here at the university, they don't do anything in high school, so they come [to the university] with very little . . . not very well equipped.

The participants report that in some respects, it would have been easier to be parents in their countries of origin. In the United States, they feel a need to be constantly aware and very intentional about protecting their children from destructive messages that come from the U.S. entertainment industry. These immigrants, like many American parents, are alarmed by what they see on television: "explicit sex, gratuitous violence, and aggressive materialism" and "rudeness, crudeness, and disrespect" (Hewlett & West, 1998, p. 153). Indeed, at some level these parents long for the controlled and, in some ways, more child-friendly environments that were characteristic of the former communist Eastern European countries.

Diana: It is harder for us as parents coming from there to have our kids maintain our values. In Romania everybody was being put on the same rail and we all would go in the same direction, but here you have to watch your kids closely. It is easier to direct kids there than here, because here the exposure to [so many other] things is greater.

It is important to note that the family-friendly environment that many immigrant parents long for in their countries of origin may not exist any more. Since the late 1990s, countries in Eastern Europe have been undergoing drastic political, social and cultural transformations that have resulted in various difficulties for families and children. A few participants alluded to the fact that their concerns with sociocultural influences in the U.S. may be as much cultural as generational. Nevertheless, it is many participants' perception that there is a conflict between what they want for their children and what their children want "because our children grow up in this environment."

DISCUSSION

This study gives a voice to an understudied group of immigrant professionals from Eastern European countries—a voice to discuss and explain their experiences of having children in U.S. schools. Our study also provides them an opportunity to contemplate possible explanations of the emerging link between longer residence in the United States and a decline in academic achievement and aspiration among the children of immigrants. The interviews with highly educated parents, who are immigrant professionals from Eastern Europe, reflect their experiences and perceptions regarding children's education in the United States. The themes that emerged shed light on the processes that might be leading to the dissipation of human and social capital among immigrant students. At the same time, participants' narratives explain what is behind the success of children of immigrants who outperform their peers with native-born parents.

First, the participants of the current study continuously emphasize to their children that education is a major goal in life. Education, in their view, is not only a means to establish a person's life financially but it also significantly determines the direction of one's life, including the kinds of people one will meet and work with, as well as the extent to which one can develop his personal talents and potential and become "a good person." Consistent with previous research, these immigrant professionals were found to be highly optimistic about the opportunities that the United States has to offer for their children's future (Kao & Tienda, 1995; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Considering that children are influenced by their parents' attitudes toward education, it may help explain in part why some children of immigrants initially outperform their native-born counterparts in school (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001, 2007). However, to restate previous findings, that initial advantage fades significantly across time.

Even though this study was not designed to analyze the quality of the education system in the United States, a central participant-reported factor in the long-term academic decline was attributed to the lack of challenging curricula and adequate homework assignments in U.S. schools. Comparing the school preparation they received in Eastern Europe to that of their children in the United States, participants lament the underutilized potential of children and use such words as *worried*, *concerned*, and *scared* to describe their feelings about their children's education. Participants report being dissatisfied with schools' "superficial" requirements and weak curricula, especially in the hard sciences and mathematics.³ These findings are consistent with earlier studies of educated immigrants from the former Soviet Union (Kovalcik, 1996), as well as Asian and Latin parents from

various educational backgrounds (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001), who tend to criticize "excessive" freedom and lack of homework and discipline in American schools.

Ensuring quality education for their children is one of the big stressors for immigrant parents in this study, who report that broader society and culture are sending their children messages that undermine children's motivation to study. These parents believe that education is not valued enough in the United States, and the emphasis is inordinately placed on material possessions and financial success; making it difficult for parents, immigrant and native, to convey their deeper values. For many children of immigrants, time left vacant by long parental working hours and a lack of traditional supports like grandparents (Nesteruk & Marks, 2009), is filled with influences from the mass media and pop culture. Immigrant mothers and fathers in our study are trying to make a better life for their children in a new country. Along the way, they have to navigate an educational system and a sociocultural environment different from the ones they grew up in, and they must find ways to successfully guide their children to educational and occupational success. In those immigrant families where parents invest much time and resources, where they "are stricter and insist on kids doing extra work," this harder approach may succeed. However, in families where parents have not done that, as regretfully expressed by one study participant, "*a lot of things are getting lost in the process.*"

CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Previous research on immigrant families in the U.S. school system has primarily focused on the experiences of low-socioeconomic-status immigrant children from Latin America, the Caribbean, and Asia. These studies tend to point to such factors as racial discrimination, poor-quality inner-city schools, lack of parental financial resources, and undocumented status to explain the decline in academic achievements among immigrant students (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2007; Waters, 1997). However valid the racial and financial explanations are, we see from this study of racially White individuals from middle-class families that other factors *also* contribute to academic decline. The sample of the present qualitative work has allowed us, speaking in quantitative language, "to control" for such variables as race, parental finances and involvement, and the quality of the schools children attend. What we found is that new factors emerged—the most prevalent being (a) school system with diverse opportunities that requires concerted parental involvement and additional work and (b) concern with media and environmental influences that promote consumerism, while failing to promote the value of education.

The participants of the current study may be in a particularly good position to answer the question about declining academic achievements and aspirations with longer residence in the United States. These parents are university professors, physicians, and engineers who highly value education and have high academic expectations for their children. In addition, these parents obtained a solid education in their countries of origin that enabled them to gain admittance into U.S. graduate schools and later secure employment with U.S. companies and universities. Their continued experience with education in the United States and subsequent exposure to the educational system in the role of professors, and as concerned parents, allows ample ground for informed observation and opinion. Consistent with previous studies of

Latin American and Asian immigrant parents, these Eastern European immigrant parents similarly view their children's "Americanization" as a partially negative and undesirable outcome. Ironically, Americanization (assimilation) used to be an aspired goal for immigrants and their children at the beginning of the 20th century. However, many 21st-century immigrant parents *fear* the Americanization of their children. Portes and Rumbaut (2001) conclude:

Overall, parents from all national backgrounds and all socioeconomic levels see the principal danger to their children's well-being and the fulfillment of their own aspirations in an external environment full of premature consumerism, permissiveness, and the alternative role models provided by street culture. Their dominant view of America is that of a dreamland of wealth and opportunity surrounded by many treacherous undercurrents. Only firm parental guidance and strong family and community ties can lead to the hoped-for destination. . . . Parental voices paint . . . [a] complex picture . . . the Janus-faced nature of American society: unmatched educational and economic opportunities coupled with constant multiple threats to family cohesion. (pp. 102, 112)

This statement captures and summarizes two polarized points that echoed across *our* participants' interviews. First, America is perceived as "a dreamland of wealth and opportunity"; however, the society's obsession with wealth as life's primary aim disturbs these parents. For the parents in our study, their children seem to be playing by a new set of rules. As one mother commented, "I don't think that our children are torn between two worlds. We are."

In terms of limitations of the current study, we want to acknowledge that the small, purposive, nonrepresentative sample does not allow for generalization to other immigrant parents. However, this study does allow glimpses into the meaning-making processes that immigrant parents engage in their daily lives (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). Furthermore, the study provides a unique perspective on the link between longer residency in the United States and a decline in educational achievements. In these respects, the study may serve as groundwork for further investigation.

Implications

The findings from outsiders' views about the educational system should be of interest to parents, educators, and policy makers. During the past three decades, it has become evident that the U.S. educational system is failing to prepare a fully competitive workforce. According to a 1983 landmark federal report *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, the average achievement of high school students on standardized tests was lower in 1983 than it was a quarter of a century ago, and American students compare poorly with those in other industrialized nations in many fields, particularly in math, sciences, and engineering (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Since that time, concerns about the educational system in the United States have only increased (e.g., National Center on Education and the Economy, 2006; Strong American Schools, 2008). For example, a nonpartisan campaign titled "Strong American Schools" (2008) compiled the following facts and statistics: 70% of eighth-graders are not proficient in reading, and most will never catch up; every year, more than 1 million students drop out of high school; many of those who do graduate are not ready for college and workplace. These and other facts have led them to name their report *A Stagnant Nation: Why American Students Are Still at Risk* (Strong American Schools, 2008).

At the time when more than two thirds of newly created jobs require college education, the importance of postsecondary education as a means for upward mobility is evident (Gans, 1992; Kaushal et al., 2007; Strong American Schools, 2008). The United States today is a very different society from the one that welcomed southern and eastern Europeans at the beginning of the 20th century, and today's second generation is growing up with fewer opportunities for advancement (Portes, 1996). The same applies to the native-born young people. American parents have to become aware of the competition their children will face in the global, "flat" world, in which American workers are in direct competition with educated workers in any corner of the globe (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2006). Some experts urge U.S. parents to push their children to work harder, insist that they study more, delay gratification, and convey to children that education is crucial to their future. Thomas Friedman (2005), in his national bestseller *The World Is Flat*, states, "When I was growing up, my parents used to say to me, 'Tom, finish your dinner—people in China and India are starving.' My advice to you is: [Children], finish your homework—people in China and India are starving for your jobs" (p. 237).

Family and consumer science educators at all levels should continue to emphasize the connection between academic achievement and career advancement in their classrooms and programs as well as how to become a knowledgeable, informed consumer and avoid common traps for consumers in U.S. culture. Because parental influence is often more important than formal instruction in a child's development, family and consumer outreach educators, especially those employed by the Cooperative Extension Service, through the National Extension Parent Education Model should continue to promote and teach parenting practices most associated with children's academic achievement and educational attainment. Educators and professional organizations of educators, like AAFCS, should continue to advocate for mandatory consumer education. They should also advocate for and sponsor more cross-cultural, multinational research that examines the interface between families and educational systems so that this relationship is better understood.

As parents, educators, and concerned citizens we may do well to reconsider what messages are being sent to our children about education, financial success, life priorities, and values from the society. Because of their dual frame of reference, immigrant parents are able to present their family, educational, and cultural concerns against a rich and comparative backdrop that helps to accentuate both the successes and failures of contemporary America. From these immigrant voices we can learn much about what elements are most appealing—and dangerous—to families who are striving to live the American dream. As we listen to their voices, experiences, and reflections, we are likely to catch brief images that resemble both the best and worst of ourselves—for we have helped create this culture that both attracts and frightens these families as they look to their children's future.

NOTES

1. Immigrants from Eastern Europe overall have high levels of educational attainment and income well above the national median for all foreign-born Americans (e.g., Ispa-Landa, 2007; Robila, 2007). Gold (2007) provides U.S. Census data from 2000, showing that 60% of former USSR-born immigrants hold a bachelor's degree or higher (versus 26% of all foreign-born people) and 73% of USSR-born immigrants are in professional occupations as compared to 54% of all foreign-born people. Also, as a result of USSR's egalitarian educational system, 67% of ex-Soviet women in the United States held engineering or other professional occupations before migration in contrast with only 16.5% of American

women in similar occupations in the 1980s (Gold, 2007). In 2000, 41% of foreign-born Bulgarians and Romanians in the United States were occupying professional positions and 18% were in sales and office work (Ispa-Landa, 2007). Thus, although the participants of the present study are not representative of all immigrants from Eastern European countries, they are representative of many.

2. All names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

3. These comparisons are often based on the parents' countries of origin a generation earlier, when they were growing up. Since the collapse of the communist system in Eastern Europe in 1989, some observers have decried the decline in educational standards (Ispa & Elliott, 2003).

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