

DEMOGRAPHIC CHALLENGES IN A CATALONIA OF EIGHT MILLION PEOPLE

Immigration and school results in Catalonia: a demographic perspective

Jordi Bayona i Carrasco



Children walk to Milà i Fontanals School in Barcelona's Raval neighborhood, May 22, 2025.
Photography by Minna Puerto Vendrell

In the current demographic context, characterised by very low fertility rates and a progressively ageing population due to high life expectancy, migration has become the main component of demographic trends in the countries around us. Catalonia is no exception; the last two decades have seen intense international migratory flows, associated with globalisation. These have been the main component of population growth, leading Catalonia's population to exceed 8 million inhabitants by the end of 2023. [1] Indeed, we are currently in the midst of a second migratory boom, which, like the first one at the beginning of the century, involves accelerating international migration. Consequently, around a quarter (or 24.3% to be precise) of the 8 million residents are foreign-born. The demographic impact we find in certain age segments is even more important, due to migration concentrated in young adult age groups, emancipation and entry into the labour market. Thus, currently almost half of the 30-34 year-olds living in Catalonia were born abroad (46.6%).

Unlike at the beginning of the century, the immigrant population today in Catalonia is much more diverse and established, the result of maturity in the migratory process. Thus, more than two decades after the first boom began, we are currently seeing the arrival into young adulthood of the first cohorts in which the descendants of immigrants make up a significant

proportion, a trend that will multiply in the coming years. An initial analysis of their incorporation into the labour market, employment and levels of education reveal current inequalities related to origin when compared to the indigenous population. This suggests, in line with Alejandro Portes's hypothesis, [2] the existence of a segmented integration process [3], in which the descendant population is integrating into the most disadvantaged social strata.

Due to the age structure of the immigrant population, and because of the coexistence of generations born in the country with lower volumes (often called the *empty generations*), a major part of present and past births are related to migration. Therefore, many of the children living in Catalonia have parents who were either born abroad or who themselves have recently arrived. For example, this is the case for under-fives in 2021: 4 out of 10 are directly related to migration (37.7% are descendants of immigrants and a further 4.3% are foreign-born). As we have already stated, studies, activity and employment will be three pillars to observe the functioning of the integration process. In this article we focus on school: by cross-referencing statistical data to identify descendants over several school years, we will analyse school results in relation to the migratory origin of the students.

Immigration, foreigners and populations linked to migration

Defining a population based on its place of origin, nationality or the origin of the parents requires the observation of different population groups, in terms of both size and sociodemographic characteristics. Although the expressions immigrant and foreigner are often used as synonyms, both terms refer to population groups with different origins and characteristics. Among the underage population in Catalonia, for example, 214,000 people (15.1% of minors in 2021) have a foreign nationality, but paradoxically most of them were born in Spain (58.4%) and therefore have not necessarily migrated. [4] Whatever the case, they are descendants of migrants and retain the nationality of their parents. However, turning to foreign-born children, among minors we find there are 121,000 immigrants, 26.4% of whom have already acquired Spanish nationality or obtained it at birth. Given that access to Spanish nationality depends on origin and, to a certain extent, social class, the use of one or the other criterion includes entirely different population groups and the results obtained are affected by the characteristics of the group selected. On the other hand, when discussing descendants - minors with one or two parents born abroad - the number of minors considered increases to 371,000 (26.8%). If our aim is to analyse school results in relation to migration, we need to take into account both minors who have migrated and the children of migrants, regardless of their nationality. Furthermore, in some cases, these may be totally invisible situations, with minors who were born in Spain and have Spanish nationality, or who have acquired it over the years.

In the recent 2021 census we can identify children born in Spain, but with one parent born abroad, as long as they reside under the same roof. [5] While in 2011 there were about 259,000 minors, representing 18.7% of the population in these age groups, the latest census shows there are around 371,000 children and young people, representing 26.8% of the same age groups. To this figure can be added the 121,000 children born abroad; hence

almost half a million children, out of 1.4 million, have a direct or indirect origin in international migration. This represents more than a third of children (35.4 %), with percentages rising to over 40% in groups below the age of five (Figure 1).



Thus, among the youngest Catalan cohorts there is a very high proportion of the population linked to international migration. When changing the scale and looking at particular municipalities or neighbourhoods, we find a clear increase in these figures. Thus, in municipalities such as L'Hospitalet de Llobregat, Santa Coloma de Gramanet, Salt, Guissona, Manlleu, Calaf and Vic, to give a few examples, or, at the infra-municipal scale, in Barcelona districts such as Ciutat Vella, the proportion of minors of immigrant descent exceeds indigenous minors, the latter understood as having been born in Spain and with parents born in Spain. These figures, which show the high diversity of origins among today's children - very different from only a few years ago - should make us reflect on the continuing validity of using nationality as a criterion when analysing the school situation, and encourage us to explore other approaches.

Immigrants, foreigners and descendants at school

School is one of the first places where the integration of younger migrants or descendants of immigrants into the host society begins. Among other possible parameters included in school statistics, the results obtained in different subjects should help us to see how this process is developing in Catalonia. Analysis of inequalities in school performance is not new: it dates back to the 1960s, when the Coleman report, presented in the United States, identified higher rates of school failure among the most disadvantaged social classes. In the case of the immigrant or immigrant-descended population, who usually have poorer outcomes, the existing theoretical debate is whether such low achievement is due to a class issue, i.e. the fact that they are over-represented among the lower social classes, or whether there are other mechanisms that add to the situation, such as racism or discrimination. Such poor results are evident among newcomers. The year of arrival in the country is one of the most significant variables. [7]

In our case, we are interested in finding out, firstly, whether the differences in school results are related to place of birth (both the subject's own and that of their parents) or to factors related to migration, such as the year of arrival in Catalonia. Secondly, in the absence of information on household incomes, we will relate the observed differences to inequality in the territory, based on the characteristics of the neighbourhoods where the schools are located.



Students arrive in the courtyard of Milà i Fontanals School, located in Barcelona's Raval neighborhood, which hosts a highly diverse student body. Photography by Minna Puerto Vendrell

Data on descendants at school

The generally available statistics on school students refer to the nationality of the student, which pushes migration into the background and turns the discussion to foreignness. Due to varying access to information on nationality for different groups of migrants, most Latin American descendants disappear from the observation, while young Africans or Asians, despite having been born here, continue to appear as foreigners. Similarly, in groups with the same origin, those who have arrived more recently or those belonging to lower social classes, for whom obtaining nationality is more difficult (requiring 10 years of continuous, legal residence of their parents), are more likely to remain under observation. However, the PISA report does provide data by origin, although it works with a sample that hinders territorial analysis and obtaining detail on national groups, and generally indicates lower school performance among students of immigrant origin in Catalonia. [8]

In our case, we have adopted a specific use of data from the Catalan Ministry of Education crossed with the population register of Catalonia, provided by the Statistical Institute of Catalonia. This allows us to make a first approximation to these school results. Using data for the school years 2016-2017 to 2020-2021, academic outcomes are analysed in terms of their relationship to the migration process. For this reason, a generational classification is used based on the work of Rumbaut, [9] in which students are classified according to their place of birth and that of their parents. Thus, we will define students born in Spain with

parents also born in Spain as indigenous. Foreign-born immigrants are classified according to their year of arrival in Catalonia and whether they entered the education system at the start or later on. Thus, we use the term generation 1.75 if they arrived before the age of 7, and generation 1 if they arrived above that age. [10] Among those born in Spain, we differentiate between those with both parents born abroad (second generation) and those with one parent born in Spain (generation 2.5), since having a native-born parent usually produces the same results as those with native-born students. [11] The results of the fourth-year compulsory education assessment, which has been carried out continuously since the 2011-2012 academic year, are analysed. The latest assessment available to us is for the 2020-2021 academic year, which was carried out in February 2021 and may therefore reflect the effects of the pandemic. The assessment involved 76,000 students in 1,092 schools, [12] which we have a sample of 50%.

Qualification by origin of migration

Considering, firstly, the nationality of the students, the results achieved by foreign students in four of the subjects analysed (Science, Spanish, Catalan and Mathematics) are always lower than those of students of Spanish nationality, with a difference of around 10 points in all subjects, and with a fairly similar trend over time that maintains the distances (Figure 2). For example, in Mathematics, students with Spanish nationality score 67.6 on a scale from 0 to 100 compared to 57.0 among foreign students. The scores obtained in languages are generally higher than those in Mathematics and Science, irrespective of nationality. The 2020-2021 results show a certain effect due to the pandemic, although there is only a slight decline in Mathematics and Science for foreign students.

Looking at the figures in terms of migration provides a different perspective. Thus, for students with one of the two parents born in Spain, school results were equal to those of natives in the four subjects analysed, differentiating them from the rest of the students of migrant origin. At the same time, the results for the 1.75 and the second generations also match and are similar to those of young arrivals with descendants born in Spain, albeit with values around 10 points lower than those of the two groups mentioned above. Finally, first-generation students have much lower scores, with negative differences of more over 15 points in the four subjects analysed. Continuing with the example above, indigenous students score 69.1 points in Mathematics, an almost identical average to the 68.7 of generation 2.5. The 1.75 and second generations, as already mentioned, have much lower scores, with 59.7 and 59.4 points, with first generation students further behind, with 51.8 points. The difference of 10.6 points when classified by nationality increases to 17.2 points when classified by migration. Similar results are found for the other subjects, as shown in Figure 2.



The origin of the parents is a second aspect to be considered, as it incorporates ostensible differences within the same group, especially in the groups of economic migrants from low-income countries. By way of example, we consider the cases of Moroccans, Pakistanis, Ecuadorians and Argentinians. Thus, for the 2020-2021 academic year, between first-

generation and generation 2.5 students, results fluctuate between scores of 40.5 and 58.4 out of 100, 41.1 and 61.9, 46.2 and 62.2, and 59.0 and 69.2, respectively, for each of the origins. The gap between the two scores ranges from 20 points for Pakistanis to 10 points for Argentines; in the latter case, results for the 2.5 generation reach the same levels as natives. Likewise, if we look at the second generations (the students born in Spain), the results are concerning among the first three groups (54.9, 53.9 and 54.3 points, respectively) compared to a remarkable 66.4 among Argentines.

School performance by income level

Not knowing the income level of the families, the results are presented on the basis of the territory where the school is located, using the small area socioeconomic index (IST) produced by Idescat. This is a composite index constructed for small areas, which summarises in a single value the various socioeconomic characteristics of the resident population. The territory is grouped into quintiles, dividing it into five equal parts according to the IST, showing the scores obtained in Mathematics by migratory origin (Figure 3). Firstly, we can see that inequalities by origin persist in all territories, regardless of income level. We find that first-generation students always have the worst results, while indigenous students (or even in some cases the 2.5 generation) are well above the former. It is in the third quintile where the differences are greatest, rising to 18 points, while they fall at the two ends of the distribution. The second generation usually performs worse than the 1.75 generation, with the exception of the fifth quintile, the one with the highest IST score, which should hold true for the same origin group. To sum up, while among indigenous students, higher income levels for the territory where they study translate into a 6.9-point improvement in school results, among first- and second-generation students, this difference rises to over 9 points, indicating a greater effect of place of study or residence on school results.



Conclusions

It is logical to suppose that, because of their recent arrival, late-entering students do less well at school, either due to the need to adapt to a new school curriculum or new routines, or because of associated language difficulties. This situation is exacerbated when incorporation occurs at an older age, because there is less time to catch up with native students. Indeed, those who arrive at a very young age are almost indistinguishable from second-generation descendants born in Catalonia. Despite this, there is no hiding the fact that the school results of students of migrant origin, but born in Catalonia, continue to show notable differences with respect to the results of native students. These differences range from 7 to 9 points, with the exception of the most socioeconomically well-off territories, where the difference drops to 4.5 points. If the first generation finds it hard to catch up, and only a reduction in differences can be expected, for the second generation it must become a central objective of education policy, especially considering that the proportion of this group in overall student numbers will double in the coming years.

In a context in which immigrant students are once again arriving, due to the second migratory boom, the presence of second generations adds a new element of complexity regarding immigration that was not present in the first boom, which also needs to be addressed. If it is not, we will be faced with a consolidated model of society in which a significant part of the population of immigrant descent occupies a subordinate position on the country's social ladder.

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- 4 — It should be borne in mind that for some places of origin, despite children being born in Catalonia or Spain, there is a movement back to the parents' country of origin, especially during times of crisis, an aspect that is not considered here.
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- 10 — Since the data reference is 1 January, the age of 7 has been taken as a cut-off point. For more details see: Bayona, J.; Domingo, A.; Menacho, T. (2020). "Trayectorias migratorias y fracaso escolar de los alumnos inmigrados y descendientes de migrantes en Cataluña", *RIS, Revista Internacional de Sociología*, vol. 78(1), e150.
- 11 — Those born abroad with parents of Spanish nationality have been removed from the comparison.
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Jordi Bayona i Carrasco

Jordi Bayona i Carrasco is a geographer and holds a PhD in Demography. He is currently a *Serra Húnter* Associate Professor in the Department of Geography at the University of Barcelona and an associate researcher at the Centre for Demographic Studies (CED), where he is part of the consolidated research group *Globalization, Migration and Space*, led by Andreu Domingo. His research focuses on the analysis of migratory flows—both internal and international—as well as the study of immigrant populations: their sociodemographic characteristics, settlement processes, and dynamics of integration. He has addressed issues such as the spatial distribution patterns of migrants, access to housing, participation in the labor market, and presence in the education system.