

Psychological Well-being of Adolescent Immigrant Students

Recommendations for School Practice

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Cultural relocation not only impacts the parents, but also the children of immigrants, and often in very different ways. Little is known about the children of immigrant and refugee families, even though they have a visible presence in schools and communities and eventually will form a significant portion of society in the United States. Even less is known about the subjective aspects of the children's experiences, including their modes of ethnic or national self-identification, perceptions of discrimination, future aspirations for adult futures, self-esteem, and psychological well-being. Research is lacking on how these factors may be related to more objective indices of the immigrant children's experiences, such as language shifts from the mother tongue to English in educational contexts.

This article explores the connections between psychological well-being and the linguistic and cultural

practices of schools, and identifies strategies that would provide institutional and educational support for immigrant and refugee adolescents as they navigate a bilingual and bicultural world. Based on work in the field, we suggest the importance of considering factors such as the reason for departure from the native country, linguistic and cultural barriers, ethnic support services, the process of acculturation, and intergenerational conflict.

Psychological Well-being and School Practice

While some attempts to study first generation immigrant families have been made, such research is hampered by the lack of mental health professionals and educational researchers who are invested in exploring the impact of bilingual, bicultural experience on psychological well-being. This is compounded by the stigma that is attached to mental illness. Many immigrant families

attribute problems solely to political causes and discrimination, rather than considering the impact of acculturative problems that all immigrants must cope with in their new environment.

Currently there is little literature available addressing self-identification as it relates to bilingual, bicultural adolescents, let alone immigrant youth. In their work in the field, the authors have found that educational resources are lacking to support the identity construction and academic development of this population. There are not enough professionals working in the field with an understanding of the cultural and linguistic variables impacting immigrant youth.

The recommendations we make are based upon patterns we have seen over many years of work with adolescent immigrants within the public school system of a major midwestern city. Typically, teachers and school personnel in public secondary schools provide recommendations for school-based intervention for students. The insights we offer are based upon our work with adolescents who were referred because of their symptoms of anxiety, reluctance to attend school, truancy, withdrawal from usual activities and friends, low self-confidence, and a sense of helplessness. Over the years the recommended students have been male and female and have included Arab, East Indian, Mexican, and Sudanese youth, all raised in the United States by first generation parents. They were seen by a cultural broker whose role was to help ease the students' transition and adapt to the United States.

Discussion

Immigration is a stressful situation that exposes individuals to a potential state of disorganization requiring a subsequent adaptive response that is not always achieved. Cultural relocation not only impacts the parents, but also the children of immigrants, and often in very different ways. Children must struggle with a cultural relocation of their own as they find a place in a country or cultural geographical situation that might feel more familiar to them than their parents or grandparents. Yet within this struggle they

must metabolize the impact of their parents' strivings and the additional stress this produces. As Elkholy (1977) has noted, the second generation plays a transitional role between the old and the new cultures and is thus often the victim of both.

Although cross-cultural passages vary, there seem to be significant similarities in the psychological processes that they unleash in the person undergoing the journey. This was evident in the common experiences reflected by many second-generation immigrant students and their families, as noted by the cultural broker, over many years of practice. The contributing effect of immigration and acculturation on psychological and physical symptoms often appeared to affect developmental progress. Complaints common to all students were frequently noted. Sleep and appetite disturbances were manifested in lack of appetite and frequent nightmares. Symptoms of depression included helplessness, low self-confidence and shame. Similar concerns were also noted in the families of these students. A sense of helplessness and instability were intensified by their lack of both social support and much-needed information about health and social services. A summary of themes noted as recurring over many years of practice with this population follows.

Trauma in Departure

Many students flee their country of origin in chaos because of war and may arrive in the United States with preexisting symptoms of trauma and depression. If the school lacks an understanding of their pre-immigration history, they may be misdiagnosed.

Ethnic Support Services

Helping to familiarize students and families with American values and institutional practices (such as health care systems) may lessen some of their stressors and allow families to feel a sense of empowerment. Furthermore, if students are able to meet with a cultural broker on site, they can be validated and thus feel less afraid. The "sameness" of the cultural broker allows students to feel connected and validated rather than merely isolated and different.

Cultural and Linguistic Barriers

A classic example of cultural misunderstanding is the referral of Arab-American students for evaluation due to concerns regarding dyslexia and eye-hand coordination. Since students educated in the Arabic language write from right to left it may seem that they are confused and disoriented. Furthermore, lack of expertise with the English language and inability to express frustrations, isolation, and disappointment often contribute to

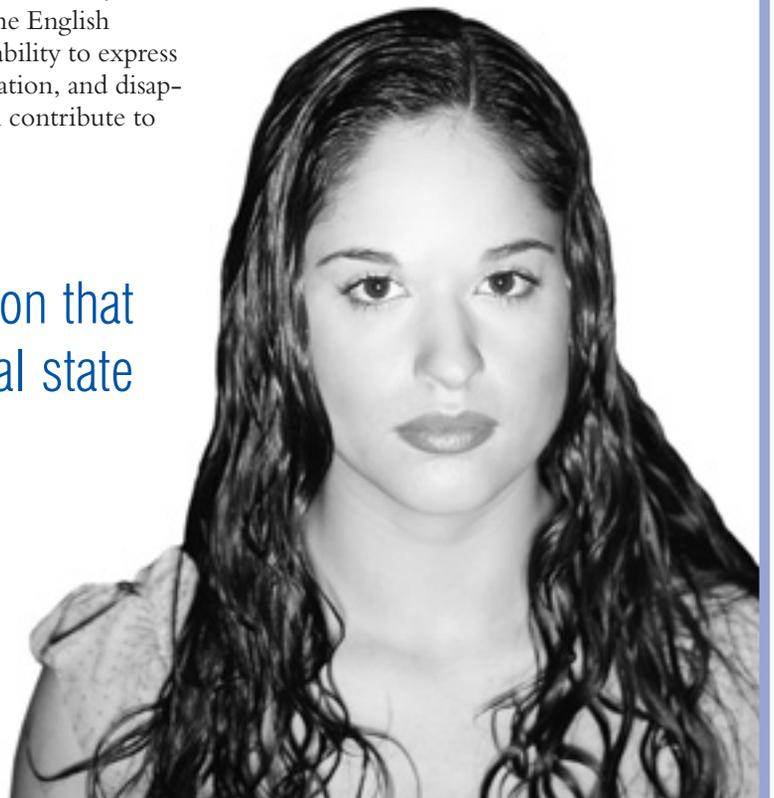
psychological misdiagnosis. Since they are not linguistically equipped to express how they feel, they may express their chaotic feelings by withdrawing, not doing homework, and acting out until they are suspended.

Process of Acculturation

Students' feelings of shame can be culturally equivalent to guilt or family burden and may intensify with each inappropriate referral and misdiagnosis. Similarly, they may struggle with feelings of being inferior to their American peers. Such feelings are not only symptoms of depression, but also of acculturation.

Students frequently report that they are "not the same as everyone else" due to their physical and linguistic dissimilarity with the majority culture. They may feel as if they are caught between two worlds, but are not truly accepted in either. Although they may feel different and unaccepted in the United States, they know it would be impossible to return to their home countries. As they began to internalize the societal values and standards of the dominant White middle-class culture, their perception of themselves and their ethnic origin shifts many times as they struggle to

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explore the internal conflict generated by divergent cultural belief systems.

Intergenerational Conflict

Students, especially those from Arab backgrounds, struggle with the need to be autonomous versus the need to be dependent. At home, they are often encouraged to depend on their parents and making any independent decisions can be seen as disrespectful and culturally inappropriate. At school, they are often seen as immature and unable to make decisions due to their “dependency.” The conflicting messages of home and school may create a sense of inner emptiness and confusion, as well as a drive to accommodate each culture by endorsing a false self.

Implications for Policy and Practice

School based bilingual, bicultural experiences can support adolescents in developing constructs about self and society that affirm diversity and thus promote psychological health if they demonstrate a genuine respect for diverse world views and an appreciation for resources indigenous to specific cultures. Linguistically and culturally responsive education is, therefore, predicated on finding ways to incorporate indigenous resources of helping into strategies for individual and group empowerment. We suggest the following recommendations for schools to consider when shaping educational practice. Schools can play a role in facilitating cultural transformation as well as in identifying internal factors that prompt a re-evaluation of identity and relationship to family and country of origin.

Recommendation 1

Pre-and post-immigration history, including educational experiences in the country of origin, should be provided to the classroom teacher. Educators should be aware of the status of the student’s country of origin, reasons for departure, and manner of departure in order to better understand the student’s world view.

Recommendation 2

Schools should appoint a resource spe-

cialist to help orient student immigrants and their families to the United States school system as well as to available community support systems.

The school’s ability to transmit knowledge of the available resources and support systems, as well as to explain the way the local educational

system works, can impact students by eliminating feelings of isolation and helplessness.

Recommendation 3

Schools should have access to a cultural broker who is bilingual, bicultural and can help immigrant students negotiate the school environment.

Cultural awareness and sensitivity implies that educators need to recognize that immigrant families often may not fit western categories and labels. A cultural broker can alert educators that they need more cultural information to adequately understand immigrant students and their families. In addition, the cultural broker’s awareness of ethnic identity models allows for empathy and validation of the students’ experiences and conflicts without disparaging or dismissing the intensity of the experience.

Recommendation 4

The school should provide an educational program in the student’s native language whenever possible. However, when this is not feasible or practical, a quality ESL program that is respectful of native language and culture and the

innate capabilities of the student should be available.

Monolingual educators should understand the English language limitations of immigrant students. It is imperative to establish connections with immigrant students while language meaning is negotiated. Although education in English is pos-

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sible and can be productive with appropriate modifications, the option of providing an educational program in the student’s native language can be highly beneficial to linguistic, cognitive and academic growth. When English is learned at the expense of the native language, program goals are often manifested as assimilation rather than integration, and ethnic identity may not be well supported.

Recommendation 5

Schools should provide mandatory professional development for all educational personnel on the process of acculturation and identity construction from experts in bilingualism, biculturalism.

An educator must have an understanding of the process of acculturation and the stages involved in order to support students in identity construction. The educator who is not aware of acculturative stress and the acculturation process, in general, would fail to recognize the students’ struggles as a result of that process. A lack of understanding of acculturation stages by educators could result in thinking this process is purely devel-

opmental in nature, rather than integrating American culture into ethnic identity. Educators who are not aware of acculturative stress and the acculturation process in general would fail to recognize these adolescents' struggles. As a result, educational services would not be appropriately established.

Recommendation 6

Schools should hire bilingual, bicultural teachers, teaching assistants, paraprofessionals, and professional support staff in order to provide both role models and support to immigrant students and their families. Additionally, they can help other educators bridge any cultural gaps between themselves and immigrant students.

The educator's ethnocultural similarity to the student develops rapport by reducing obstacles to the student's ability to connect. In the absence of teachers of ethnocultural similarity, the importance of the role of support staff increases.

Conclusion

Linguistically and culturally appropriate education requires that educators learn more than just an immigrant's country of origin or ethnic group. They need to be aware of the profound effects of immigration, which, even under ideal circumstances, influence language, identity, and psychosocial health. Too often schools abdicate their responsibilities that go beyond the academics. Although this may not be by choice, the net effect is the same; a lack of resources allocated to support the development of healthy, well-balanced stable identity in youth. In our complicated world, we cannot afford to ignore the psychological impact on students when the needs of immigrants are either misunderstood or ignored. **NN**

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Reference

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