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Acculturative Stress Counseling with Immigrant High School Students, Identity Development, and School Belonging

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**Acculturative Stress Counseling with Immigrant High School Students, Identity
Development, and School Belonging**

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A Capstone Project submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the Master of Science Degree in

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

CAPSTONE PROJECT

Acculturative Stress Counseling with Immigrant High School Students,
Identity Development, and School Belonging

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

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Has been approved by the faculty advisor and the CE 695 – Capstone Project

Course Instructor in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

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Abstract

The literature review investigates how acculturative stress relates to the ethnic identity development and feelings of school belonging of immigrant high school students and how school counselors can use this information to facilitate acculturative stress focused counseling to support student needs and development. The literature review first synthesizes information on acculturative stress, experiences of immigrant high school students, and suggestions for acculturative stress focused counseling to explore how school counselors can approach the topic of acculturative stress with their immigrant high school population. Specifically, the literature review explores the ethnic identity development of immigrant high school students and the role feelings of school belonging has on their mental health and outcomes. The review ends with suggestions on what school counselors should look for when implementing acculturative stress focused counseling as well as limitations and future research in the field of acculturative stress counseling.

Keywords: acculturative stress, ethnic identity development, school belonging, immigrant high school students, school counseling

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Acculturative Stress Counseling with Immigrant High School Students, Identity Development, and School Belonging

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2020), by the year 2028, the “foreign-born share of the U.S. population is projected to be higher than at any time since 1850” and by 2030, immigration is “projected to become the primary driver of population growth” (pp. 9, 13). With this projected data of increased immigrants in the U.S., education systems should begin considering interventions that can best support immigrant students and their unique circumstances. The term *first generation immigrant* will refer to those immigrants who were born outside of the U.S. and immigrated to the U.S. whereas *second generation immigrants* will refer to those born in the U.S. but have both sets of parents being first generation immigrants. When referring to *immigrant high school students* (IHSS), this study will include students of both first- and second-generation immigrant status under this label.

Regarding the social emotional needs of students, school counselors may encounter an increased number of IHSS facing acculturative stress in their homes and at school. In short, acculturative stress encompasses various behaviors and symptoms related to the process of acculturation such as anxiety and depression. Additionally, acculturative stress has shown to impact student mental health, academic achievement, and feelings of school belonging (Berry et al., 2006; Koenka et al., 2020). The literature review explores acculturative stress and how it can impact the experiences of IHSS in their ethnic identity development and feelings of school belonging. Finally, suggestions on what school counselors can use regarding acculturative stress counseling with their IHSS will be presented at the end.

Review of Literature

Immigrants are people who come to a country to take up permanent residence often due to reasons such as conflict or political unrest in their country of origin. When immigrants begin to settle, they may face many cultural and social issues related to acculturating into the dominant, majority culture. The concept of *acculturation* was originally derived from cultural anthropology and defined as the cultural changes that occur when groups of individuals with different cultures come into contact (Berry, 2008). Berry (2008) points out that acculturation is not only assimilation but a mutual process that can change all groups that are in contact. These groups can often be referred to as the majority or host group and the minority group. During the acculturation process, it is common for groups and individuals to experience psychological stresses which can be referred to as *acculturative stress*.

Williams and Berry (1991) define acculturative stress as a concept used to refer to the stress in which:

The stressors are identified as having their source in the process of acculturation, often resulting in a particular set of stress behaviors that include anxiety, depression, feelings of marginality and alienation, heightened psychosomatic symptoms, and identity confusion (p. 624).

The acculturative stress behaviors and symptoms listed can have negative impacts on immigrant youth and their outcomes. From a developmental perspective, this can be especially concerning as during adolescence, youth begin exploring and committing to their identity viewed through such identity development models as Erickson and Marcia's psychosocial identity models (Cieciuch & Topolewska, 2017). Given the popularity of Erickson and Marcia's identity models, Yoder (2000) proposes the addition of socio-cultural barriers, such as racism and socio-cultural

limitations affecting those of a minority or marginalized class and gender, to one's identity formation. Yoder's (2000) proposal is particularly relevant concerning the identity development of immigrant youth as they can be marginalized in their acculturating communities. Additionally, Williams and Berry's (1991) work explicitly mentions how acculturative stress includes identity confusion and feelings of marginality.

For high school counselors, this presents a concern of how and how well IHSS are coping with acculturative stress in the home and at school. Specifically, a question that school counselors may pose is what interventions could be done to reduce acculturative stress symptoms for IHSS populations. A potential starting point is the use of small groups which have been shown to be an effective intervention with multicultural students as it provides the benefits of building universality and self-efficacy (Havlik et al., 2020). Further suggestions will be presented on how school counselors can help IHSS recognize and cope with acculturative stress and how that may impact their ethnic identity development and school outcomes. Before getting into those supports and interventions, it is important to conceptualize acculturative stress and overall, the concept of acculturation.

Acculturative Stress

Acculturative stress was earlier described as behaviors that include various symptoms such as anxiety, depression, psychosomatic symptoms, and identity confusion (Williams & Berry, 1991). Studies have shown that a greater exposure to acculturative stress predicted significantly more withdrawn, somatic, anxious, and depressed symptoms, especially in immigrant adolescents (Sirin et al., 2013). Choy et al.'s (2021) study on migrants attributed three key sources contributing to their acculturative stress: low education or skill set, host language proficiency, and financial hardship. In addition, Bae (2020) found multicultural youth are more

likely to experience psychological distress and poor subjective well-being due to factors related to language, racial discrimination, and prejudice. Despite this, Bae (2020) also found those with a high level of bicultural identity, where both identities are seen as compatible, tend to adapt better to a new culture while improving cognitive flexibility and alleviating acculturative stress. However, those unable to accommodate the cultural differences between their ethnic culture and mainstream society are more likely to experience acculturative stress. With evidence that points to how acculturative stress can negatively impact immigrant youth and students, it is important to identify models that can frame the acculturation process. One of the more notable models is Berry's four-fold model of acculturation.

Berry's Four-Fold Model of Acculturation

Berry's four-fold model of integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization is an acculturation framework that identifies the stage of where one resides in their acculturative process and specifically, compares individuals with their group and larger society (Berry, 2008). Berry (2008) describes each of the four stages, or strategies of acculturation, as follows: *integration* is characterized as the individual having interest in maintaining their cultural identity while actively participating and seeking relationship with the larger society and its networks; *assimilation* is characterized as individuals not wanting to maintain their cultural identity in favor of another culture such as the host culture; in contrast, *separation* is when the individual only wants to maintain their cultural identity and avoids interaction with larger society or others outside of their group; *marginalization* is characterized as those with little interest in cultural maintenance and those who avoid having relationships with others which Berry attributes to discrimination or exclusion. Overall, these acculturation stages can be used to perceive how well

people maintain both their own culture and identity while considering the degree to which they participate with others outside of their group and larger society (Sam & Berry, 2013).

Regarding the empirical evidence of using this model, research through the years supports that those in the marginalization stage had poorer mental health and negative outcomes whereas those in the integration stage had the most positive effects (Choy et al., 2021). Furthermore, Choy et al. (2021) state how integration, as an acculturation strategy, can reduce the negative effects of discrimination and the perception of discrimination while also promoting positive ethnic identity. In all, this information supports how Berry's integration strategy of acculturation can lead to better mental health and overall positive outcomes for IHSS as well as be mediated by acculturative stress. Therefore, it is important to consider ways to promote Berry's acculturative strategy of integration among IHSS in hopes of building positive outcomes and alleviating acculturative stress. Additionally, those who are interested in working with IHSS should also consider where students are developmentally (Ward & Kagitcibasi, 2010). In particular, the ethnic identity development of IHSS and how it relates to their school experience can be important to understand in helping them with acculturative stress.

Experience of Immigrant High School Students

Ethnic Identity Development of Immigrant High School Students

Adolescence is an age where identity formation is an important endeavor that is influenced by multiple factors seen through such developmental theories by Erikson and Marcia (Cieciuch & Topolewska, 2017). Of the developmental theories, Marcia's concepts of identity *commitment* and *exploration* are important to understand as they respectively characterize "the degree of personal investment the individual exhibits in a course of action or belief" and "a period of engagement in choosing among meaningful alternatives" (Cieciuch & Topolewska,

2017, p. 36). These two constructs have been used extensively to observe how individuals form their identity and have had empirical support over time (Cieciuch & Topolewska, 2017). In relation to working with high school students, it is important to note how cultural variables influence one's identity development such as how and how well one explores and commits to an identity.

Nelson et al. (2018) identified that during ethnic-racial identity (ERI) development of youth, both parents and peers play a significant role in their identity commitment and mental health. Specifically, ERI commitment and exploration were predictive of more positive mental health among youth of color which is influenced by peer interactions and communication. Nelson et al. (2018) also state that ERI commitment, as opposed to exploration, is more closely associated with psychological adjustment of youth. Additionally, Syed and Juang (2014) found that ethnic identity contributes to a sense of identity coherence in ethnic minority college students which in turn can help predict psychological functioning. Therefore, a strong sense of identity can lead to better mental health for IHSS. Whether moderated by family and peers, these studies highlight the importance of cultivating an environment that allows youth to commit to their multicultural identity.

In connection to Berry's acculturation theory, Berry et al. (2006) point out that by encouraging immigrant youth to retain both a sense of their own cultural identity while establishing close ties with the larger society, immigrant youth can be led towards integration. Again, this stage in Berry's four-fold model (2008) shows the most positive mental health outcomes. On the other side, Bae (2020) found that bicultural identity has a negative effect on acculturative stress for adolescents who are unable to accommodate their cultural differences between that of their ethnic culture and of mainstream society thus becoming more likely to

experience intense acculturative stress. In this instance, acculturative stress and bicultural identity are significant predictors of multicultural adolescents' subjective-wellbeing (Bae, 2020). Ultimately, these studies highlight how crucial it is to allow multicultural youth, such as IHSS, an environment to explore and ultimately commit to their unique, ethnic identity which can support their acculturation process and mental health. One of the most significant environments to consider supporting IHSS is school.

Immigrant High School Students' Feelings of School Belonging

As referenced in Koenka et al.'s (2020) study on school belonging, feelings of school belonging refer to a student's sense of being accepted, valued, and encouraged in the school social environment. Feelings of school belonging have been shown to positively impact students' academic, social, and psychological development, with recent studies highlighting how it can have a mediating role in ethnic identity affirmation (Koenka et al., 2020). International students from differing countries expressed positive attitudes about their current school where diversity is valued and peers established encouraging relationships (Bartlett et al., 2017). In addition, those international students that tapped into personal resources of optimism, refugee resilience, and self-reliance responded best to socio-emotional stress (Bartlett et al., 2017). However, in a study that focused on the relationship between trauma and internalizing symptoms among newly arrived migrant and immigrant students, Thibeault (2017) found that school belonging was not a moderating factor between acculturative stress and internalizing symptoms. Thibeault (2017) suggested that the school where the study took place was especially effective in supporting their immigrant students, even those who had trauma history and mental health problems; thus the concept of school belonging was not necessarily an influential factor. Despite this finding, Koenka et al. (2020) found that school belonging plays a mediating role in ethnic identity

affirmation and academic motivation. Therefore, a school environment that cultivates student belonging can have an important role in the ethnic identity formation, mental health outcomes, and academic achievement of their immigrant students.

Acculturative Stress-Focused Counseling

Oppositional Themes

For a school counselor working with IHSS, it will be important to understand Berry's four-fold model (2008) and the various acculturative themes in the immigrant student's life. Howarth et al. (2013) describe acculturation as a socially constructed, ongoing dynamic process that can be viewed through a series of oppositional themes: cultural maintenance versus cultural contact, identity inclusion versus exclusion, and institutionalized ideologies versus agency. In following Howarth et al.'s (2013) work, the oppositional theme of *cultural maintenance versus cultural contact* allows individuals to discuss and share their cultural experiences and intercultural relationships. This theme can challenge an individual to negotiate their identity given the various contexts the individual is in contact with such as how to behave in a status quo setting. The oppositional theme of *identity inclusion versus exclusion* can relate to acculturation preferences between one's family, such as parents, and the individual (Howarth et al., 2013). An example is a student's desire to fit in dominant society but due to outside factors such as racism and discrimination, one's family discourages them from connecting with that community thus building the conflict of inclusion versus exclusion. The final oppositional theme of *institutionalized ideologies versus agency* covers how the social structures and institutions of society shape how cultural identities are perceived thus influencing acculturation behavior and practices (Howarth et al., 2013). An example of this theme is how an individual could build personal agency by resisting various aspects of both one's own ethnic culture and mainstream

culture and then choosing to wear clothes that best expresses the individual's identity outside of their ethnic and mainstream culture. In other words, they decide what is best for them based on their individual beliefs rather than rely on society or their ethnic culture.

With Howarth et al.'s (2013) oppositional themes and Berry's four-fold model (2008), a school counselor can create discussions among IHSS that describes their experiences within those themes or stages. Questions such as: *When have you felt that you were included?* or *How has social media impacted your identity development?* are some example conversation starters a school counselor can pose to their IHSS. Additionally, assessing where students feel they belong on Berry's four-fold model (2008) can be helpful indicators in where they are in their acculturation process. This can be useful in describing some of their behaviors and management of their mental health. Overall, the oppositional themes are reflections of the dichotomous acculturative process an IHSS may go through when forming their ethnic identity in a majority society (Howarth et al., 2013).

Small Group Counseling

The use of a small group format for high school students has been an effective intervention for such topics as college readiness and provides such benefits as building universality among students as well as self-efficacy (Havlik et al., 2020). In relation to small groups and acculturative stress, Tavakoli et al. (2009) conducted group assertiveness training and expressive writing on acculturative stress with international college students and found that assertiveness training was well received and benefited students. This highlights how incorporating other topics that teach skills can benefit students in their learning and building of relationships with others. Havlik et al. (2020) also mention that a small-group format is an effective method that can create a space for peers to share their anxieties and receive support.

Furthermore, Havlik et al.'s (2020) study with African American high school students found that the members were able to connect to their personal identities as a source of strength, thus encouraging identity exploration and commitment. This overall encompasses how a small group setting can teach skills, build universality, and encourage the support and formation of one's identity which can be applied in an acculturative stress focused group for IHSS.

Suggestions for Acculturative Stress Focused Counseling

Using acculturative themes and small group counseling are two suggestions school counselors can implement into their acculturative stress focused counseling. To start, the small group setting allows IHSS a place to interact with their peers which has been shown to influence ethnic identity exploration and commitment (Nelson et al., 2018). The small group setting can also be a space where IHSS can share their acculturative experiences while receiving support from other students who may be able to understand or relate to their experiences. In addition, an advantage of a small group at a high school is that it allows IHSS a space in a majority setting, in this instance a school, where students can attempt to connect with the mainstream society. As mentioned by Berry (2008), fostering both a sense of ethnic identity while allowing youth to connect with larger society can instill a sense of integration that can lead to positive mental health outcomes. Additionally, Koenka et al. (2020) state that a sense of school belonging is mediated with ethnic identity affirmation. This in turn can imply how both ethnic identity and feelings of school belonging can have moderating effects on acculturative stress and positive mental health outcomes in which the small group format can tailor its curriculum and process around.

Next, using acculturative themes found in Berry's four-fold model (2008) and Horwarth et al.'s (2013) oppositional themes can be referenced in building a small group curriculum.

Otherwise, those themes and concepts can help school counselors frame the acculturative experiences of their IHSS through such examples as guided discussions or individual counseling. The studies discussed earlier support how Berry's (2008) integration strategy of acculturation provides better positive outcomes and allows for more resiliency against acculturative stress. Therefore, a school counselor can identify ways to foster both an IHSS' identity and contact with the dominant culture in way that the student can feel most integrated within their own group and the larger society. Overall, the use of acculturative themes and small group counseling can be helpful suggestions school counselors can use when considering acculturative stress focused counseling with their students.

Limitations and Future Research

The biggest limitation to these suggestions is the lack of research on the use of acculturative stress focused counseling (Russel & Doucette, 2012). Although there is a wealth of research on acculturation and acculturative stress, it was difficult to find studies where small groups were used to treat acculturative stress in a high school setting with immigrant students. This further encourages future research to be focused on empirically based interventions or curricula that is acculturative stress focused that school counselors can use with their students. As it is projected that more immigrant students will become part of the U.S. education system, it is particularly important to begin studies now in order to accommodate diverse, future students.

Conclusion

With an increasing immigrant population, school counselors should consider ways in which they can best support their immigrant students. The process of acculturation often involves acculturative stress that can have negative outcomes on immigrant youth. Current research on acculturative stress shows that it can be alleviated through such ways as encouraging ethnic

identity development and instilling feelings of school belonging. School counselors should use what is currently known about acculturation theory and ethnic identity development to find responsive and proactive solutions to support their immigrant students through their acculturative stress. The use of acculturative themes and small groups are suggestions that can foster discussion of immigrant experiences and build peer support among IHSS. Although there is not a lot of research regarding the implementation of acculturative stress focused counseling on IHSS, further research that tests out curricula or interventions focused on acculturative stress with immigrant students should be explored to accommodate a diversifying, future student population.

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Appendix: Terms List

Acculturation: changes that occur when groups of individuals with different cultures come into contact (Berry, 2008).

Acculturative Stress: stress behaviors due to the process of acculturation that include anxiety, depression, feelings of marginality and alienation, heightened psychosomatic symptoms, and identity confusion (Williams & Berry, 1991, p. 624).

Berry's Four-Fold Model: an acculturation model that identifies how individuals are acculturating and provides four stages of where individuals are at in their acculturative process. This includes *integration*, *assimilation*, *separation*, and *marginalization* (Berry, 2008).

First Generation Immigrant: immigrants who were born outside of the U.S. and immigrated to the U.S.

Immigrant High School Student (IHSS): students actively enrolled at a high school that fit either first- or second-generation immigrant status.

Second Generation Immigrant: those born in the U.S. but have both sets of parents being first generation immigrants.