

## STUDENT SERVICES STUDENT SERVICES STUDENT SERVICES

# Immigrant Families: Strategies for School Support

*All immigrant students—whether they arrive in the United States with many resources or few—need the support of culturally sensitive educators.*

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Claudia is a 15-year-old who emigrated from the Dominican Republic five years ago. Her teachers have become concerned about her in recent months because of her increased absenteeism, drop in grades, and apparent depression. The school psychologist met with Claudia, who explained that she takes care of her younger sister three mornings a week because her mother—a single parent since Claudia's father was deported—has had to take on a second job. Claudia is also very angry at her mother's restrictions: she is not allowed to socialize with her school peers after school hours and is required to go straight home after school. The school psychologist has tried to arrange a meeting with Claudia's mother, but she seems reluctant to come to the school.

As the immigrant population in the United States steadily increases, so does the need for schools to support immigrant students and their families. Providing support serves the dual purpose of assisting the families and fostering a collaborative home-school relationship that benefits everyone. Principals can work with their student support personnel to understand the issues and identify the resources, systems, and professional development necessary to meet the needs of immigrant students and their families.

### Characteristics and Challenges

Immigrant students are a diverse population. Beyond differences in culture and language, they vary significantly in their experiences as immigrants. Some come from families that sought new opportunities in the United States or immigrated to join other family members; others have left their homelands to escape economic stress or political or religious harassment. Some families have arrived with substantial resources; others have very little social or economic support. And some are already fluent in English, but many are learning a new language and adapting to a new culture at the same time.

Challenges that can affect immigrant students' adjustment often include the acculturation process; rac-

ism and discrimination; immigration status; language difficulties; and school accessibility. Even the most affluent and educated immigrant students will likely face some degree of stress because of differences between their native cultures and new communities in the United States. Adolescents have the added social pressures of trying to fit in to the complex social systems in middle and high school.

### ACCULTURATION

Acculturation is a developmental process of change in which individuals usually adjust to a new culture by merging their native traditions with those of the new culture.

**Possible outcomes.** When individuals integrate into a new culture, they continue to hold on to their cultural identity and also become members of the majority culture. This contrasts with assimilation, the process of giving up original cultural identity to take on the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of the majority culture. Some individuals experience separation—a withdrawal from the majority culture. Most immigrants fall along a continuum from assimilation to separation.

**Acculturative stress.** Immigrants can experience acculturative stress, which can last as long as three or four years and may include such issues as anxiety and depression, identity con-

fusion, and family and school problems. Individual members of a family acculturate at different rates; children and adolescents often acculturate faster than adults. Acculturative family distancing can result when there is a breakdown in communication or incongruent cultural values (Hwang, 2006). Distancing can cause dissension among family members if parents feel that their children are engaging in activities that are not in keeping with their cultural and familial values.

Language can also become a family barrier as immigrant students become increasingly proficient in English or even become English dominant. For some adolescents, acculturation is situational. Their behavior at school might reflect behavior consistent with mainstream U.S. values although their behavior at home reflects their families' cultural traditions.

### **RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION**

Immigrants often encounter social barriers. Immigrants of color often undergo additional stressors because of racism. For adolescent immigrants of color, experiencing racism at school interferes with maintaining a sense of pride in their culture of origin and may be deleterious to their achievement and vocational aspirations.

**Types of racism.** Racism occurs at the institutional, cultural, and individual levels. At the institutional level, racism can occur when laws and policies oppress minority groups. Cultural racism occurs when a cultural group is devalued by the dominant culture. And individual racism occurs when a person displays racist acts and discriminates against another person.

**Perceived discrimination.** In addition to overt racism, immigrant students who lack the skills they need

to interact with other cultural groups may experience increased levels of perceived discrimination, which is associated with depression, anxiety, and identification with negative stereotypes. This can cause the student to withdraw from school socially and emotionally, perform poorly, and adopt negative behaviors.

### **IMMIGRATION STATUS**

The legal status of immigration can further compound stress levels. Although many immigrants have come legally to the United States, many undocumented immigrants have entered the country in recent years. Undocumented immigrants might avoid involvement with mainstream institutions because they are afraid that information will be given to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. Legal immigrants may experience stress about the status of relatives, difficulties arranging immigration for other family members, and dangerous or traumatic events at home.

### **SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION**

Many immigrant students—and their family members—are unfamiliar with the English language. School personnel must understand the factors that influence second language acquisition as well as the normal processes and errors that second language learners exhibit.

### **SCHOOL ACCESSIBILITY**

Poverty and related stressful life conditions—such as dealing with child care, transportation and housing, and government agencies—can create barriers for immigrant parents who want to play an active role in their children's education. Similarly, work schedules and physically exhausting hours can



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impede their attendance at school functions and other school involvement.

Even families that have adequate financial support may encounter some difficulties dealing with cultural differences in the expectations for and nature of parent involvement. Parents from different cultures can have different experiences of dealing with authority, attitudes toward discipline, and expectations about the appropriate role of school in educating and nurturing their children. Moreover, mores about learning problems, mental health and behavioral issues, and help seeking vary greatly among cultures and affect how families behave if schools suggest various interventions.

**SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR ADOLESCENTS**

Immigrant students often think that they are “different”—they may look different, speak with an accent, have limited English ability, or have a name that is difficult to pronounce. Thinking that others have more financial resources, better clothing, and more access to technology can add to immigrant students’ stress.

Some students might need to work to provide for their families or provide child care for younger siblings so that their parents can work, as Claudia did. Many serve as their family members’ translators in the community. Although some immigrant students enjoy that role, others feel frustrated, overwhelmed, embarrassed, or pressured to translate accurately. The added responsibilities can also affect

school attendance. And, as with all adolescents, immigrant adolescents may undergo identity crises about their self-concept, vocational identity, sexual identity, and gender role expectations.

**School-Based Support**

School professionals are poised to provide assistance to immigrant families in a culturally competent manner. Cultural competence entails a three-pronged approach: self-awareness, knowledge of other cultures, and skill.

**SELF-AWARENESS**

To work effectively with immigrants, a staff member first needs to understand his or her own cultural heritage, including its values and immigration history, and must know what cultural values are embedded in his or her

professional practices. For example, individuality and independence are mainstream U.S. values that are likely held by many school professionals, both personally and professionally. Other cultures may not place as much importance on independence and instead give priority to the needs of the group. Developing

self-awareness is not easy because it entails confronting potential biases that have been a part of one’s socialization process.

**KNOWLEDGE OF OTHER CULTURES**

School personnel can learn about other cultures using a variety of strategies, including reading articles and books, watching films that depict the immigrant experience or life in another culture, speaking and interacting

with individuals from other cultures, attending cultural events, and learning the language of the families with whom they work.

School professionals should also understand how immigrant parents’ cultural belief systems relate to parenting and educational practices and expectations. Some immigrants may believe that the teacher is the ultimate authority for educating children and may have learned not to interfere in their children’s education. For example, among Latino cultures it is generally believed that the family is responsible for socializing the child and that the school is responsible for providing formal knowledge.

**FAMILY SUPPORT STRATEGIES**

Supporting immigrant families includes home-school collaboration, linking families with school-based and community services, and providing specific instructional support to meet immigrant students’ learning needs.

**Establish collaborative relationships.** Reaching out and attempting to collaborate with families is the first step. School professionals must remember that immigrant families might not share a philosophy of active participation in schools.

Further, immigrant families in need or in crisis may not consider approaching an outsider for help. Nevertheless, the benefits of home-school collaboration are well established, and culturally competent school professionals can help bridge the differences between the home and school cultures.

**Provide support services for immigrant families.** School personnel—particularly school psychologists, social workers, counselors, and family liaisons—are instrumental in helping

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## Symptoms and Variables of Acculturative Stress

### Symptoms of acculturative stress:

- Anxiety and depression
- Feelings of marginality and isolation
- Elevated psychosomatic symptoms
- Identity confusion
- Difficulty in school performance
- Family stress

### Variables affecting acculturative stress:

- Reason for immigration
- Socioeconomic status
- Acceptance or prestige of one's cultural or ethnic group
- Opportunity for contact with other cultural groups
- Prior knowledge of the new culture

immigrant families access school and community services, such as:

- Orientation programs for new immigrants
- Free and reduced-price breakfast and lunch programs
- After-school child care programs that provide homework support
- Family involvement programs that support the development of reading and mathematical reasoning
- Parenting workshops and parent support groups
- ESL classes for parents
- School interpreters
- Community-based, culturally based social service agencies.

### SUPPORT SERVICES FOR STUDENTS

Important support services for students include culturally sensitive instructional interventions; social-emotional support services that are provided by professionals who are trained to work with immigrant students; and multicultural vocational exploration and training.

**Culturally sensitive instructional interventions.** Integral to designing

effective instructional interventions is ongoing assessment of students' processes of acculturation. Teachers may also need to contextualize instruction (i.e., making connections with what students already know by linking new information to the students' home culture and community) and consider students' cultural preferences (e.g., cooperative versus competitive; co-narration versus call-and-response versus choral) when designing instructional activities.

Instructional planning for ELLs should make use of differentiated instruction strategies that take into account students' readiness levels, learning style preferences, language dominance, and interests. Strategies include:

- Previewing key academic vocabulary before each lesson
- Scaffolding important concepts
- Contextualizing vocabulary
- Providing photo illustrations and manipulatives
- Providing support or scaffolding materials in the students' first language
- Teaching concepts and vocabulary in the students' first

language through a community volunteer or a proficient bilingual peer

- Providing translated key concepts to preview at home.

**Social-emotional support.** Counseling services can be helpful to immigrant students who experience acculturative stress. Counseling interventions, including individual and group counseling, should be formulated within the context of the student's culture and needs and provided in the dominant language when feasible.

Because immigrant students are often vigilant about how they are being perceived and accepted by others, teachers' and counselors' verbal and nonverbal responses are especially important. Interventions should foster a sense of belonging, acceptance, and respect. Adults must also be mindful of acculturation levels, avoid stereotyping, and remember that diversity exists within groups. Attitudes toward mental health issues can vary, so it is important to determine the perspective of the student and his or her family.

Immigrant students often benefit from self-regulation training, because

self-control is often severely strained during migration and acculturation. Self-regulation training should be aimed at helping students develop goal-setting and problem-solving strategies, as well as to increase self-efficacy beliefs and self-monitoring.

**Multicultural vocational interventions.** Immigrant students who have low socioeconomic status or who are in inner-city schools are at risk for dropping out of school and for having limited vocational options. Such students benefit from culturally responsive vocational interventions that foster awareness of different careers, including those that are under-represented among cultural minorities. For example, minority students tend to avoid mathematics and science

because of limited educational and career planning, poor academic preparation, and low levels of self-efficacy. Therefore, it is essential that school counselors intervene well before decisions are made about important high school courses. It is also important that counselors work closely with teachers to foster integration of career development units into their curricula and to obtain counselors' input when planning speakers and field trips.

### Summary

Immigrant families are a very diverse group and face a number of challenges, depending on how and under what circumstances they arrive in the United States. School professionals are in a position to offer assistance to

immigrant families in need, including home-school collaboration, school-based and community services, and instructional support. Immigrant students can also benefit from social-emotional support services and multicultural vocational interventions. By providing support to immigrant families and students in need, schools ensure that immigrant students not only develop a sense of belonging but also learn in an environment that fosters success and achievement for all. **PL**

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### REFERENCE

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