

3-1-2009

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## Recommended Citation

Maldonado, J. M., Kushner, J. D., Barr, J., & Korz, K. (2009). Ethnic Identity and Acculturation of English as Second Language Learners: Implications for School Counselors, *Michigan Journal of Counseling*, 36(1), 13-23. doi:10.22237/mijoc/1235865720

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# Ethnic Identity and Acculturation of English as Second Language Learners: Implications for School Counselors

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*Ethnic identity and acculturation are significant issues of English as Second Language students in the intermediate grades. Research has encompassed acculturation and ethnic identity as two distinct elements that differentiate particular ethnic groups. The present study investigates acculturation and ethnic identity and their correlation across groups. This article presents a measure of ethnic identity to understand the relationships to demographic variables. The results of this research study support significant correlations between total ethnic identity of ESL students and identity achievement.*

*Key Words: Ethnicity, immigration, second language learners, acculturation*

Identity is a crucial part of an individual's self-concept as defined by Tajfel (1981) and thus influenced by theoretical areas of: (a) racial identity; (b) ego identity; and (c) ethnic identity. According to Lee (2001) significant increases in multicultural populations have given importance to understanding the commonalties and differences of racial and ethnic groups. Several research studies (Phinney, 1990, 1992; Pugh & Hart, 1999) have examined the role of ethnic identity, which pertains to the sense of belonging to an ethnic group and the thoughts associated with that particular ethnic group (Rotherman & Phinney, 1987). Acculturation and ethnic identity have been argued to have reciprocal relationships and are associated with immigrant people transitioning to a new society. Van de Vijver and Phalet (2004) indicate that in recent times there have been significant changes in population migration and labor mobility that have forced people to move to other countries other than their place of origin. The immigration process is often an arduous and difficult one, which brings division from recognizable cultural and social institutions.

According to Gibson (2001) acculturation can be defined as "the process of cultural change and adaptation that occurs when individuals from different cultures come into contact with each other" (p. 19). As noted in Phinney, Horenczyck, Liebkind, and Vedder (2001) acculturation is a process of adaptation along two important dimensions: (a) the adoption of ideals, values, and behaviors of the receiving culture, and (b) the retention of values, ideals and beliefs from the immigrant person's country of origin. Berry (2001) found that two central issues of acculturation are (a) the degree to which individuals have contact outside their group and (b) to the degree which individuals want to give up or maintain their cultural attributes. Furthermore, he suggests that there is a mutual relationship of exchange between majority and minority cultures and outlines four acculturation strategies. The strategies are (a) integration, representing an interest in maintaining one's heritage culture and being involved with other cultures, (b) assimilation, representing desired involvement with other cultures, not with heritage culture, (c) separation, representing only desired involvement with one's heritage culture, and (d) marginalization, representing rejection of both cultures (Berry, 2001). The focal point

is the process of acculturation for English as Second Language students whose primary residence is a foreign country.

### ***English as a Second Language Students***

There has been momentous growth in the United States of students whose primary mode of communication is not the English language. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2000), there is significant population growth of English as second language learners in public schools nationwide. According to Berliner and Biddle (1997) by the year 2020, U.S. demographic projections estimate that only 50 percent of school-age children will be of European-American descent. In addition, Branigin (1996) indicates that by the year 2030, language minority students will represent 40 percent of the students in U.S. schools. By the year 2050, the total U.S. population will have doubled from its present levels, with approximately one-third of the increase attributed to immigration.

Vaughn, et al (2006) found that English language learners are the fastest growing group in the U.S. public schools and Spanish speaking students represent the highest number of ESL students. The U.S. Department of Education (2002) indicates that there are four million students with limited English proficiency and nearly 80 percent identifying as Latino and another 20 percent representing other languages. In addition, ESL students account for 10.5 percent of the population in U.S. elementary schools. As a result, teachers, administrators, and school counselors face challenges and obstacles addressing the specified needs ESL students face in the school environment.

Several studies regarding ethnic identity and acculturation of ESL students have been conducted to reveal various conclusions. Canagarajah (2004) found that there are many conflicts in cultural identity and the learning of a language. Furthermore, Norton-Pierce and Toohey (2001) indicate that fundamental language learning is constructed using social formations, communities and individual identities. Language develops along with social and cultural identity. The race-gender experience theory suggests intersecting gender and racial boundaries affect language proficiencies as a result of different language experiences, environments or norms (Lopez, 2003). However, McCarthy, Giardina, Harewood, and Park's (2003) study revealed that ESL learners struggle against a Eurocentric interpretation of culture, history, and social practices making acculturation more difficult to obtain. Additionally,

Bourdieu (1991) found that knowledge, history, and cultural traditions of minority groups are excluded in the educational curriculum.

Therefore, it has been found that the dilemma for ESL learners is whether to resist or conform to the dominant cultural norms and traditions (McKay & Wong, 1996). This struggle is difficult as ESL learners are fearful of giving up cultural identity but also fearful of rejection by their peers. Vaughn et al. (2006) found that ESL learners desired to learn the English language while still preserving their own cultural identity. In addition, students whose parents enjoy higher socioeconomic status are more likely to identify with their parents' nationality than are their poorer co-nationals/co-ethnics (Rumbaut, 1996).

A recent study has also demonstrated that mentoring positively influences ESL students. Roysircar, Gard, Hubbell, and Ortega (2005) found that mentoring assists ESL students in developing both their sociolinguistic and sociocultural abilities; otherwise, they may default to separation or marginalization, even if they prefer to integrate with the U.S. society.

In the aforementioned studies, various counseling research investigations have been conducted to help counselors assist ESL learners with the acculturation process. Research shows that the role and function of the school counselor is critical when working with immigrant students (Pederson & Carey, 2003). Roysircar-Sodowsky and Frey (2003) found that school counselors can assist and help prevent stressors that interfere with academic functioning in ESL learners. A variety of methods can be employed by schools and school counselors to assist ESL students. For example, the use of individual and group interventions provided by a counselor who speaks the students' native language can facilitate communication and enable students to express and deal with their emotional issues more effectively (Thorn & Contreras, 2005). A subsequent study by Ajayi (2006) revealed that poor performance of ESL students can only be addressed when the language learning curriculum and instructional practices align with the students' needs, interests, and expectations. Furthermore, Toffoli and Allan (1992) found that devising a school counseling curriculum that addresses the emotional realities of ESL students will promote greater self-understanding and better coping skills.

Further research indicates that intensive training for school counselors may improve their understanding of multicultural families and cultural barriers to language

development. McCall-Perez's (2000) study found that enhancing professional preparation of counselors to work with ESL students showed positive effects on student outcomes through increased English literacy, improved mastery of academic content and skills, and smoother transitions through and beyond high school. The study further indicated that there are specific strategies school counselors can use such as developing collegial relationships and dialogue with ESL students.

Other researchers, Clemente and Collison (2000), describe a multilingual training approach for counselors that can be implemented in counselor education programs. Ingraham (2000) proposes a Multicultural School Consultation (MSC) framework for selecting the appropriate approach when working with culturally and linguistically diverse families. The MSC framework is a guide to assisting parents of bilingual students by implementing culturally appropriate school-based practices that can be utilized by both internal and external consultants using a variety of models (e.g., behavioral, ecological, instructional, mental health).

Research has revealed practical strategies to help counselors working with ESL students. Cross-cultural consultation is a subset of multicultural consultation that happens when consultation occurs across cultures (Ingraham, 2000). Furthermore, Tarver-Behring and Ingraham (1998) define cross-cultural consultation as "a culturally sensitive, indirect service in which the consultant adjusts the consultation services to address the needs and cultural values of the consultee, the client, or both" (p. 58). Rogers (2000) identified a Multicultural Cross-Cultural Model with six cross-cultural competencies: (a) understanding one's own and others' culture, (b) developing cross-cultural communication and interpersonal skills, (c) examining the cultural embeddedness of consultation, (d) using qualitative methodologies, (d) acquiring culture-specific knowledge and (e) understanding of and skill in working with interpreters.

Additional studies have revealed the importance of involving many stakeholders to help assist ESL students with the struggles of acculturation. Roysircar, Gard, Hubbell, and Ortega (2005) found that immigrants and ESL students should be mentored by counselors, teachers and friends. Another study found that school-based consultation that incorporates the parents, families, and teachers maximizes cultural understanding (Ochoa & Rhodes, 2005). For Latino students,

Arriagada (2005) found that a relationship between assimilation, family and language can have important implications for their future academic and economic success. Finally, Clemente and Collison (2000) found that the development of a teamwork approach between ESL staff and school counselors allows for more open and frequent communication to improve services to their students. The purpose of this recent study was to determine if the grade level and gender of ESL students influences their ethnic identity. It was hypothesized that there would be a significant correlation between ethnic identity and ESL students.

### **Research Questions**

The first purpose of this study was to understand the relationship between ESL students' ethnic identity and two demographic variables, grade level and gender. The second purpose was to interview the school counselor and an internship student to access information as to counseling strategies and techniques with the ESL student population. These two research questions called for a mixed methods research design. For the quantitative method, a survey was utilized as a measure of ethnic identity. For the qualitative method, the researchers asked general interview questions: (1) Are there specific counseling strategies that you utilize for ESL students? (2) How does this counseling strategy differ from working with non-ESL students? (3) What types of counseling techniques work effectively with ESL-students and their parents? (4) How are consultation procedures used with other professional counselors to assist ESL-students? (5) How is a diverse school guidance program implemented and measured in your school for ESL students?

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

A total of 37 students (25 male and 12 female) who were enrolled in the English as a Second Language Program at a suburban public school participated in this study. The students ranged from primary grades to intermediate grades (4-8) and parental consent forms were distributed and collected with signatures from both students and parents. These students represented the immigrants in the ESL program. The students were primarily from Mexico and El Salvador identified as children and adolescents given the elementary and intermediate are in one school. This suburban school where the data was collected had a student population of approximately 250 students. For the interviews, the counselors were identified as the participants. The

researchers collaborated with the school district ESL supervisor, school counselor, and internship student to conduct the research study.

See Table 1 (Appendix)

### **Procedures**

Parental informed consent forms were distributed and collected for this research study. All forms were translated into the parents' native language and the researchers initiated follow-up phone calls. The Phinney (1992) Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) was used to assess affirmation, belonging, commitment and out-group ethnic orientation. Out-group orientation reflects an individual's inclination to acculturate to the dominant culture and ethnicity. These characteristics are central to the formation of ethnic identity and the process of acculturation. The MEIM is a 20-item measure of acculturation that utilizes a 7-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. The Cronbach's alphas for reliability have been reported by Phinney (1992) on a high school sample as .81 for the overall ethnic identity scale, .75 for the affirmation/belonging subscale, .69 for the ethnic identity achievement subscale, and .71 for the other group orientation scale. The scales are designed to use correlations and inferences to reflect ethnic identity formation. The measure, a single page document contained directions for administration and the instructions for research participants. The method for data analysis was a quantitative research design. The analysis included data from the survey on the ethnic identity of ESL students and their relationship to gender and grade level within a public school environment. Research participants were not given individual reports; however, the study also utilized qualitative research techniques, which were intended to provide an in-depth analysis of ESL students and the counseling strategies and techniques used for this school population.

### **Results**

In order to understand the construct of ethnic identity, the total ethnic identity score of the MEIM was correlated with its subscales (affirmation-belonging, identity achievement, ethnic behaviors, and other group activities) across grades and gender. These analyses were conducted to understand the developmental changes in ethnic identity and to understand gender differences in the construct of ethnic identity. Differences between Grades

Prior to analyses being conducted, students were grouped according to their grade level. Students in the fourth and fifth grades were pooled together to create the elementary grade sample of 18 students. The students in the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades were pooled together to create the secondary grade sample of 19 students. A Pearson correlation was then conducted between the total ethnic identity score and the 4 subscales (affirmation-belonging, identity achievement, ethnic behaviors, and other group activities) for each grade sample. For the elementary grades, total ethnic identity was significantly correlated with identity achievement ( $r = .88, p < .01$ ) and other group activities ( $r = .52, p < .05$ ). For the secondary grades, total ethnic identity was significantly correlated with affirmation-belonging ( $r = .72, p < .01$ ), identity achievement ( $r = .77, p < .01$ ), and ethnic behaviors ( $r = .61, p < .01$ ).

See Table 2 (Appendix)

### **Differences between Gender**

A Pearson correlation was conducted between the total ethnic identity score and the 4 subscales (affirmation-belonging, identity achievement, ethnic behaviors, and group activities) for each gender. For females ( $N=12$ ), total ethnic identity was significantly correlated with identity achievement ( $r = .92, p < .01$ ). For males ( $N=25$ ), total ethnic identity was significantly correlated with affirmation-belonging ( $r = .73, p < .01$ ), identity achievement ( $r = .72, p < .01$ ), and ethnic behaviors ( $r = .63, p < .01$ ).

See Table 3 (Appendix)

### **Qualitative Interviews**

The qualitative interviews were conceptually based on the research questions presented earlier in the study. Overall, there was a consensus between the school counselor and the internship student that demonstrates a significant demand for specialized counseling techniques for students in English as a Second Language Programs. The results from the interview questions are presented and discussed below.

*Question One.* The first interview question addressed the need for specialized counseling strategies for students in English as a Second Language Programs. Results from this interview question yielded support for counseling techniques that incorporate knowledge and competence with the Latin American culture, family, and language dynamics that are integrated

within the ethnic identity of the ESL students in this study. Specific needs and preferences of the various Latino subgroups should be based on characteristics of language, socioeconomic status, country of origin, and level of acculturation (Maldonado, Ascolese, & Aponte, 2009).

*Question Two.* The second interview question addressed the differences between traditional counseling techniques and those, which are specifically used with ESL students. Results from this interview question demonstrated significant support for professional counselors to understand and

effectively incorporate a thorough understanding of Latin American family dynamics and interdependence as central components. Familismo is a significant value for the Latin American culture emphasizing loyalty, reciprocity, strong bonds, and interdependent functioning. (Andrés-Hyman, Ortiz, Añez, Paris, & Davidson, 2006).

*Question Three.* The third interview question delved into the types of counseling techniques that work effectively with ESL students and their parents. Overall agreement described a counseling approach that was client-centered and focused attention on involving the entire family in the counseling treatment plan. Much emphasis on empowering parents, demonstrating warmth and empathy were also described as essential for success with ESL students and their parents. The mission for professional counselors who will encounter fast-growing population is to develop “evidence-based, culturally sensitive interventions” (Bernal & Sáez-Santiago, 2006, p. 121). Culturally appropriate interventions should include awareness of culture, knowledge of norms, language, lifestyle, and customs; an ability to distinguish between culture and pathology; and the capacity to integrate all of these dimensions when counseling (2006).

*Question Four.* The fourth interview question addressed the specific consultation procedures with other professional counselors to assist ESL students and their parents. Results from this question illuminated the importance for community resources and counseling professionals who are able to speak Spanish for

U.S. residents who are limited in English-language proficiency are less likely to seek and receive needed mental health services (Alegría et al, 2007). Spanish-speaking clients with professional counselors of similar ethnic identity and language resulted in lower dropout rates, more treatment sessions, and improved therapeutic outcomes for clients.

communication. Also indicated was the continuation of professional services from family support centers, teachers, administrators and the child study team.

*Question Five.* The final question targeted the emphasis of resources within a school counseling program that addressed the needs of ESL students and their families. Results from this interview question demonstrated a need for more resources incorporated into the school counseling curriculum, specifically for ESL students and their families. The need for further collaboration with administrators to design specialized at-risk counseling groups

for ESL students coupled with enhanced partnerships with parents. The use of language is a crucial factor in the counselor-client relationship. Language barriers can often interfere with the therapeutic process and delay the working alliance. Communication patterns between individuals of varying cultural backgrounds involve much more than overcoming the language barrier (Maldonado, Ascolese, & Aponte, 2009). Additionally, U.S. residents who are limited in English-language proficiency are less likely to seek and receive needed mental health services (Alegría et al, 2007). Spanish-speaking clients with professional counselors of similar ethnic identity and language resulted in lower dropout rates, more treatment sessions, and improved therapeutic outcomes for clients.

### ***School Counselor Implications***

The present study was undertaken to examine the relationship between ethnic identity and ESL students' grade level and gender. The researchers were also interested in counseling techniques and strategies for this specialized population. Ethnic identities were hypothesized to have a relationship with the gender and grade level of ESL students in a public school. In addition, it was hypothesized that counseling techniques used by school counselors were significantly different for this population due to the unique and specialized needs of the ESL student population. When statistical tests examined the relationships between the aforementioned variables, significant correlations were noted between the total ethnic identity of males and females at both the elementary and intermediate grade levels and identity

achievement. These research findings support prior research by Arnett, (1999, 2000), Erickson, (1968), and Kroger, (2000) which indicated that identity is a salient issue related to adolescent development. Furthermore, Hovey (2000) found that immigrant adolescents face obstacles and problems when trying to create a cultural identity that depicts their heritage and culture but also takes into account the normative developmental stages of adolescence. The findings from this study indicate a strong relationship between an individual's identity and their ethnic background and culture.

Accordingly, Jensen (2003) emphasized the importance of the cultural aspects of identity which are drawn from a person's social identity within a given society. As indicated by Padilla and Perez (2003) cultural identity is conceptualized by the relationship between the person and their cultural context, which promotes solidarity between individual identity and their ethnic background. Consequently, immigrant students coming to the United States face myriad issues as the acculturation process is more difficult and distressing for them in comparison to the dominant majority cultural group.

### ***School Counselor Implications***

Adolescence is a time when many changes occur and is a period of transformation and identity formation. Professional school counselors bear the responsibility to integrate their knowledge and skills to foster an adolescent's ethnic identity. However, according to Holcomb-McCoy (2005) school counselors have had limited involvement in the development of ethnic identity development for elementary and intermediate students. This demonstrates a specific need for comprehensive school counseling programs to be proactive and provide interventions for students in ESL programs. As mentioned in the American School Counseling Association (2003) National Model's Personal/Social Domain, part of a school counselor's role is to facilitate growth and exploration of self, which includes the concepts of acculturation and ethnic identity development.

According to Rayle and Myers (2004), current research supports the differences found between minority and non-minority adolescents with respect to ethnic identity development process and overall wellness. With this information, school counselors can begin to assess their program and plan for appropriate individual, small group, and classroom guidance interventions to

improve wellness of all students. Noam (1999) and Phinney (1990) found that one specific area of psycho-educational programming that school counselors can focus on is creating a support system and assist with developmental process of ethnic identity. Concurrently, Zayas (2001) found that minority youth benefit from discussing their struggles with racism and ethnic identity. Moreover, he found that adolescent struggles with ethnic identity become apparent when clarifying issues related to peer-group relations, family relations, and achievement. Specifically, students in the search/moratorium stage of Phinney's (1992) model that display a desire to explore their ethnic background should be given opportunities to do so through class assignments, advisory programs, and counseling groups (Holcomb-McCoy, 2005). Consequently, the focus on ethnic identity development with minority students can affect overall school retention and achievement (Rayle & Myers, 2004). Specifically, school counselors can help their adolescent students better understand their ethnicity and how it affects their personal and academic goals, as well as their relationships with others. Through the use of individual, small group, and classroom guidance interventions, students have the opportunity explore their ethnic identities (i.e., what it means to be Latino living in the Northeast U.S.) and discuss their acculturation experiences and/or differences. As a result of these shared academic settings, all students are able to better understand themselves as well as their peers (2004).

Baca and Koss-Chionio (1997) and Noam (1999) have found that group work is one mode of counseling that can be an effective way to foster adolescents' ethnic identity development. Specifically, school counselors can plan and implement ethnic exploration groups in which students research their ethnic heritage, discuss their background with others and learn new information about other ethnic groups (Holcomb-McCoy, 2005). They may also facilitate discussion about others' negative racial/ethnic perceptions and/or instances where students may have experienced this racism (Holcomb-McCoy & Moore-Thomas, 2001). After an exploration of feelings associated with encounters of racism, school counselors may employ problem-solving activities such as role-playing to help students handle similar situations in the future. The aforementioned activities can serve as a starting point for students, attaching meaning to their ethnicity and further developing their ethnic identity (Holcomb-McCoy, 2005).

Personal and career goal setting is another way to incorporate ethnic identity exploration in schools. The concept of developing one's ethnic identity can lead to self-realizations that allow students to better understand themselves and what matters to them with respect to their academic, career and personal/social domains (Rayle & Myers, 2004). For example, during a classroom guidance lesson students can discuss their strengths and weaknesses and create a plan for their lives focused around healthy ethnic identities. Additionally, students can specifically identify people and activities where they feel they belong and that foster their ethnic identities in a positive way.

In addition, school counselors can promote the development of healthy ethnic identities through collaboration with professionals in the community that are knowledgeable about the topic. Use of these professionals through the dissemination of free information or inclusion in school presentations can aid to the promotion of wellness and healthy living. Rayle and Myers (2004) add that, "because classroom guidance reaches all students in schools, counselors can use the findings of the current study to introduce, educate and facilitate student discussions, self-awareness, and to teach skills students may need to feel as if they matter to others and themselves, have healthy ethnic identities, and lead lives of wellness" (p. 88). Attention to the areas

addressed by Rayle and Myers will not only lead to students' academic retention and success, but they can also help a comprehensive school counseling program meet the diverse needs of all adolescent students.

Moreover, school counselors need to examine counseling strategies and resources they use and consider possible modification taking into account the importance of adolescents' ethnic identity development (Holcomb-McCoy, 2005). School counseling offices should contain books, videos and other resources representing people of various colors and cultures to promote students exploration and acceptance of their own ethnic background. Additionally, Holcomb-McCoy (2005) found that school counselors should provide opportunities for positive acknowledgement of students' ethnic group membership. During classroom guidance lessons, small groups, and any other school counseling activity, recognition can be given to students' uniqueness with respect to their ethnicity and/or race. For example, Rigazio-DiGilio, Ivey, Grady, & Kunkler-Peck (2005) describe having students construct a family genogram as an effective counseling strategy that allows exploration of cultural/family rituals, expectations, beliefs, and values. These therapeutic interventions can be applied at the elementary level through intermediate grades collaboratively considering the developmental factors.

Finally, school counselors need to advocate for increased cultural sensitivity and competence among all students and staff in their schools (Holcomb-McCoy, 2005). Through their knowledge of Phinney's (1992) model of ethnic identity development and Helms' (1994) interaction theory, they should examine their school's racial climate and counseling program. Consequently, when educators and counselors understand how ethnic identity affects their interactions with students, they will be able to convert their interactions into more positive relationships (Holcomb-McCoy, 2005). Specifically, school counselors can suggest or implement professional development programs for staff about the impact of ethnic identity on student-to-student and student-to-educator interactions thereby creating a sense of community for the entire school population.

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## Appendix

TABLE 1  
Number of participants by gender and grade

Grade	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
4	7	5	12
5	4	2	6
6	10	1	11
7	2	1	3
8	2	3	5
Total	25	12	37

TABLE 2  
Correlations between MEIM subscales and grade levels

	Affirmation- Belonging	Identity Achievement	Ethnic Behaviors	Group Activities
Ethnic identity				
Elementary (4,5,6) n+29	.34	.88**	.33	.52*
Secondary (7,8) n=8	.72**	.77**	.61**	.29

\* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$

TABLE 3  
Correlations between MEIM subscales between gender

Ethnic identity	Affirmation- Belonging	Identity Achievement	Ethnic Behaviors	Other Group Activities
Female n+12	.26	.92**	.22	.25*
Male n=25	.73**	.72**	.60**	.38