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Working with Immigrant Children in Schools: Applying a Multi-Tiered Approach

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ABSTRACT

Immigrant children in the U.S. may face unique barriers that impede their success in school. School counselors are particularly well-positioned to implement interventions and advocate for immigrant students. A multi-tiered system of support is one way to organize a school counseling program that differentiates support for all students, creating a more equitable and inclusive school environment. This manuscript provides a conceptual tiered approach to support immigrant children to address a gap in the literature and inform school counseling practices.

KEYWORDS

Immigrant; school counselor; MTSS; multi-tiered system of support

In 2017, 27% of children in the United States (U.S.) were either born in the U.S. to a foreign-born parent or born outside of the U.S. (Child Trends, 2018). Although all children receive educational support from schools (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2016), immigrant children may have particular needs based on their experiences as immigrants. However, educators may not receive specific training to understand and work with immigrant populations' unique needs (Goodwin, 2002). School counselors work with all children in their building, providing them the optimal position to connect immigrant families with resources, provide supportive interventions, and advocate to dismantle barriers to academic success. One way schools conceptualize support services for all students is through multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), which offers a tiered approach to addressing the needs of students (Sugai et al., 2019). Much like a comprehensive school counseling program, MTSS provides all students with services tailored to the level of intervention based on their individual needs, from schoolwide support and advocacy to targeted individual interventions (Sugai et al., 2019). This article intends to discuss the needs of immigrant populations and provide a culturally sustaining conceptual framework for meeting the needs of immigrant students within the comprehensive school counseling program through the lens of MTSS. In this paper, we define immigrant children as children born outside of the U.S. or first-generation immigrants born in the U.S. to at least one foreign-born parent. Whereas legal organizations may only define immigrant children as those born outside of the U.S., we urge school counselors to consider that the immigrant experience of their caregivers

influences children born with at least one foreign-born parent. These children will still need academic, career, and social-emotional support different from a child who has two or more generations in the U.S.

The unique needs of immigrant children

Although most schools have language acquisition programs for students entering the country, language skills may not be the only need of immigrant children. Immigrant children may experience trauma before they arrive in the country due to losing loved ones or civil unrest in their family's country of origin (Kaslow, 2014; Villalba, 2009). Once they arrive in the U.S., traumatic events can continue, including separation of families due to deportation and experiencing racism and xenophobia (Schmitt et al., 2014; Shoichet, 2018). Depending on the intersectional identities of immigrant families, the immigrant experience may look different in the U.S. Their race, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, educational attainment, and other identities can play a part in their experiences once they arrive in the U.S. Changes in family dynamics, including documentation status, can also impact the academic success of immigrant children.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and trauma

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2019) defines Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) as potentially traumatic events such as experiencing abuse or neglect, witnessing community or in-home violence, or ecological factors that impede youths' sense of safety and stability. Children who experience food insecurity, live in poverty and under-resourced communities, and encounter prolonged stress are at higher risk for ACEs. Marginalized racial and ethnic groups are at higher risk for ACEs, often experiencing multiple and ongoing ACEs throughout childhood. ACEs are linked to health, academic, and social outcomes (i.e., mental health illness, substance abuse, physiological health issues, education attainment, and employment opportunities) (CDC, 2019).

Immigrant youth and families' acculturative stress aligns with ACEs, as they encounter socio-ecological factors that impede their stability in an unfamiliar culture and community (Cano et al., 2015). For example, families often struggle to find viable employment and health care (Beehler et al., 2012), potentially resulting in youth feeling pressured to work after school instead of attending school (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010). Also, immigrant youths may struggle to establish safe, supportive, and nurturing interpersonal interactions (Beehler et al., 2012). These stressors are compounded by adverse and traumatic experiences a student or family has faced in their native country and during their migration process, such as enduring dangerous physical conditions, witnessing or experiencing abuse and violence, and living in war zones (Rasmussen et al., 2012). After settling, immigrant children may experience discrimination and marginalization because of their racial and ethnic identities. Researchers have found discrimination to be the strongest isolated predictor of immigrant psychological, social, and physical well-being (Hwang & Ting, 2008).

Barriers to accessing services

Immigrant youth in the U.S. are at an increased risk for mental health concerns, including depression, anxiety, conduct disorders, substance abuse, and posttraumatic stress disorder (Beehler et al., 2012). Previous scholars purport that immigrant youth from various ethnic backgrounds encounter similar acculturative stress, compounded by intersecting identities such as country of origin, economic status, race, religion, and gender (Patel et al., 2015). In addition to the high rates of trauma exposure among refugee and immigrant youths, most face barriers to accessing adequate mental health services and support (Beehler et al., 2012; Fawzi et al., 2009). These barriers are typically structural/practical, knowledge, attitudinal, or relational. Immigrant families often lack financial resources and time to seek out and engage in counseling services. They often lack mental health literacy (Hampton & Sharp, 2014). They are overwhelmed with acculturative stress, making it challenging to give attention to and recognize mental health concerns (Wang et al., 2019b).

In addition to practical and knowledge barriers, cultural beliefs of self-reliance shape help-seeking behaviors among immigrant families and youth. Depending on the family's country of origin and cultural background, they may perceive mental health in various ways (Kugler, 2009). Some cultures believe that mental health support is reserved for individuals suffering from chronic and severe illnesses (Kugler, 2009). In these cultures, seeking mental health support is stigmatized.

Regarding school counseling, immigrant youth and families may be unfamiliar with the school counselor's role and how they can support them. In many cultures, it is respectful for a family to remain distant from their children's school. These families may believe that the school has the sole authority and responsibility to provide their child with an education, and they should not interfere in the school's process (Kugler, 2009). Additionally, culturally and linguistically diverse students and families often have difficulty trusting they can share their needs in a safe environment or communicate in a most comfortable way (Beehler et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2019a). Immigrant children and families may fear seeking support due to their immigration and documentation status (Aganza et al., 2019; Chenet et al., 2010).

School counselors and immigrant families

School counselors also have an ethical obligation to support immigrant families. The ASCA Ethical Standards (2016) state that school counselors advocate for equal rights, appropriate public education access, and school counseling services that affirm students' diverse identities. Additionally, school counselors provide parents and guardians with accurate, comprehensive, and relevant information in a manner that is caring and consistent with the legal responsibilities to the student and parent (ASCA, 2016). For immigrant families to have equitable access to education and success in schools, school counselors must consider the social-emotional needs unique to immigrant populations' experiences. Not all immigrant youths will need the same services, but school counselors can tailor interventions within a comprehensive school counseling program to support the needs of students. Thus, particular tiered school counseling interventions could target the needs of immigrant youth and their families.

A tiered framework for school counselors to support immigrant populations

School counselors are uniquely positioned to decrease the gaps in access to mental health support for migrant and immigrant students (Sullivan & Simonson, 2016). Specifically, school counselors can use the multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) framework to structure their care for immigrant populations in their schools. MTSS is an umbrella term used to organize academic, behavioral, and social-emotional support for all students in a school (Sugai et al., 2019). Using a tiered approach to a comprehensive school counseling program provides the opportunity for school counselors to differentiate their support through whole-school prevention for all students and intensive, more targeted interventions to students who need it (Ziomek-Daigle et al., 2016).

In MTSS, Tier 1 refers to schoolwide preventative support systems. These systems can include schoolwide advocacy efforts, professional development, classroom instruction, and parent workshops in school counseling. In Tier 2, interventions are designed to meet the needs of a group of students who require additional preventative support. School counselors may utilize small groups, consultation with teachers, staff, and families, and coordinate referrals to external providers to support students' wellness (e.g., mental health, medical, health supports). In Tier 3, interventions are more individualized, including individual counseling and crisis support. Tier 3 may also include consultation and collaboration with teachers and families to address more severe academic and mental health concerns (Goodman-Scott et al., 2015). [Figure 1](#) and the following sections suggest ways school counselors can include tiered considerations in their programs to support immigrant populations. We recognize that these recommendations may not be exhaustive or inclusive of all possible interventions; however, we hope they can serve as a starting point to continue building on the importance of identifying proper interventions for working with this population. The framework we provide is based on extant literature on interventions that have shown to be effective.

Additionally, before school counselors can provide adequate interventions to support immigrant populations in their schools, they must reflect on their own biases and values related to immigration in the U.S. (Ratts et al., 2016). Self-awareness is a critical component of providing interventions. This paper does not provide an exhaustive exploration of school counselors' personal biases, but the authors acknowledge this limitation as a vital component of the work needed to support immigrant children in schools. For more information on activities related to developing self-awareness, please see [Better-Bubon et al., \(2022\)](#) article that details critical self-reflection for school counselors through an MTSS framework.

Tier 1 approaches to supporting immigrant populations

In conceptualizing a tiered approach to supporting immigrant populations, the Tier 1 level should serve all students in the school building (Sugai et al., 2019). In providing Tier 1 interventions, school counselors can support reviewing their school's policies, procedures, and practices to ensure they value the diversity immigrant populations bring to the school community while also providing access to the dominant culture.

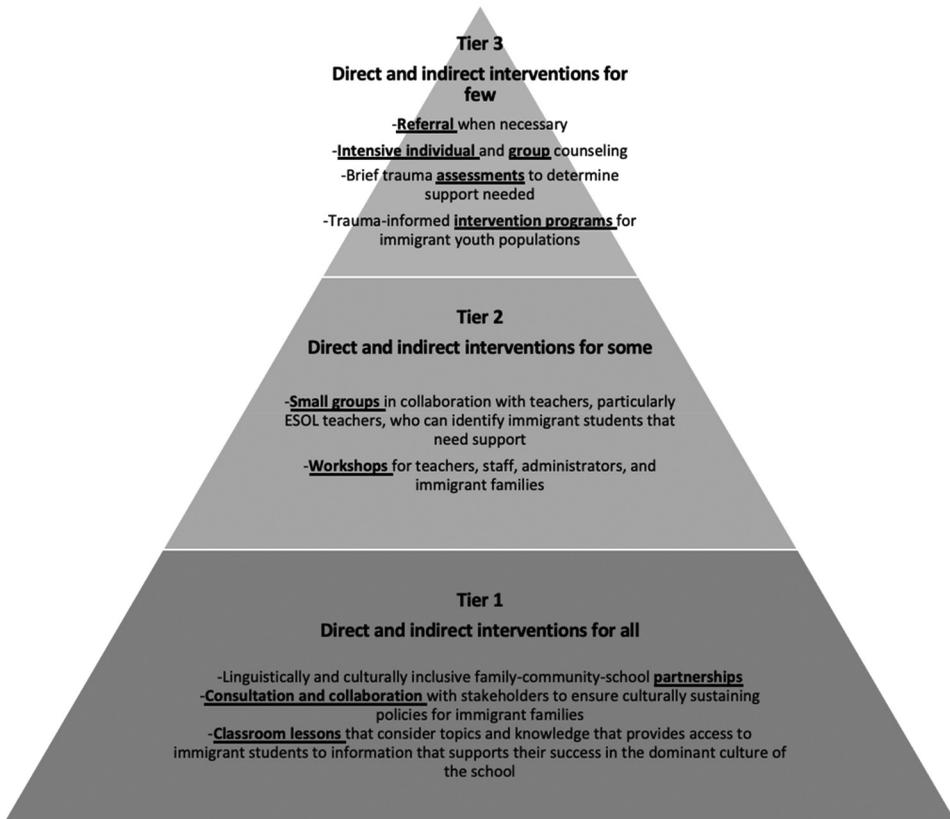


Figure 1. MTSS interventions for working with immigrant students.

This practice is otherwise known as culturally sustaining pedagogy (Alim & Paris, 2017). In Tier 1, the review of data will help inform policies and procedures as well as interventions.

Identifying immigrant families in the school

School counselors can identify immigrant families to ensure that all communication is intentionally inclusive of the needs of their student population. They can begin this process by reviewing information typically collected when families first register their student with the school system, such as the birth country of students, the preferred language of correspondence, and prior school enrollment records. Although these approaches may not identify all immigrant populations, they may be used as an advocacy tool for school counselors to address the need for multilingual correspondence from their schools. This data can also help school counselors justify framing their interventions to include the unique needs immigrant families may face, as described in the previous sections. It is also important to note that school counselors should not use this data to call out immigrant families but to inform their current interventions by including services and information that would address their particular needs.

Advocating for children and adolescents with data

After identifying students, school counselors may collaborate with stakeholders (i.e., leadership, families, students, and community members) to review and identify schoolwide policies, procedures, and practices that support immigrant families. School counselors can collaborate with stakeholders to examine immigrant populations' access to navigate the school's dominant culture. As this examination occurs, school counselors may broach changing policies and practices that do not provide a safe and welcoming environment for immigrant populations. An example of a culturally sustaining approach could be providing parent information sessions in languages all families can understand, during times when many families are available and in community spaces accessible to the families they serve.

Additionally, school counselors can collaborate with leadership to determine if policies assume that children should conform to the dominant culture instead of incorporating the values of the student body's cultural makeup. One prevention approach that schools could implement is Culturally Responsive Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (CR-PBIS). In one study, school leaders practiced CR-PBIS by including students, families, and community members in a learning lab to develop a collective consciousness of the impact of school discipline on the diverse populations in the school as well as the community outside of the school (Bal et al., 2018). School counselors can teach students the skills to collect their own data to better understand how policies and procedures should change to be more culturally inclusive. In a school in the southeastern region of the United States, a school counselor and community partner facilitated interviews where students interviewed Spanish-speaking caregivers to understand how the school could alter its policies and procedures to be more inclusive of their needs (Edirmanasinghe & Blaginina, 2019). Scholars have also suggested that school counselors may advocate for more culturally supportive and personal ways of collecting data altogether. Focus groups and one-on-one phone calls with parents can be more culturally relevant to immigrant families than a traditional survey. The use of more personal approaches to data collection can help school counselors establish a relationship that shows the value of families' voices in the school's decision-making process (Gonzalez et al., 2013).

Using interpreters to support immigrant populations

School data may also reveal that schools need to provide more resources and support for families in languages they feel more comfortable using. The practical and ethical use of interpreters is critical in creating a schoolwide culture of inclusivity and proactive support. Providing correspondence in languages families can most clearly understand and providing services to students who are English Language Learners (ELL) is mandated in the U.S. (Office for Civil Rights, 2015). Well-prepared school counselors who work with interpreters can build functional bridges between youth, their families, and the school. Including interpreters in sessions has been shown to change the essence of the counseling relationship by providing the counselor with a clearer understanding of the needs of youth and their families (Wright, 2014).

Interpreters can assume roles such as information *conduits* (Dysart-Gale, 2005), *advocates*, or *cultural brokers* (Tribe & Keefe, 2009). Although some researchers recommend that the interpreters serve as a conduit and offer a literal translation (Paone & Malott, 2008), others note that English idioms can confuse children and families with limited English proficiency. The process of literal translation can reflect cultural insensitivity regarding those nuances. On the other hand,

the advocate's role, in which the interpreter speaks for the client, can facilitate a sense of shared understanding. However, the interpreter acting as an advocate may assume a leadership role that risks undermining or distorting the school counselor's message (Rousseau et al., 2011). Cultural brokers can bridge the gap between the counselor and student or family by ensuring a shared understanding of broader contexts, such as culturally relevant practices, U.S. culture, and school policies (Tribe & Keefe, 2009). The availability of trained cultural brokers, however, may be limited. Although counselors may be tempted to seek help from native language speakers, many bilingual counselors and other professionals may not have the technical training to effectively serve this role (García & Ortiz, 2006).

Ideally, when working with interpreters, school counselors will ensure that the interpreter understands the context of psychosocial, emotional, and academic support relevant to the student's age and background. Therefore, specific recommendations for school counselors begin with seeking training to inform their work with interpreters and gain practice in conducting pre-session briefs with interpreters. Pre-session briefs can help the school counselor clarify a) the interpreter's role, b) the purpose of the meeting, and c) expectations of school counseling sessions in general, including the potential reliance on encouraging emotional openness from youth.

Building school-family-community partnerships

When reviewing best practices in working with immigrant populations, researchers and practitioners also recommend building partnerships that connect the school with families and community resources. School counselors are positioned as cultural mediators to help bridge relationships between schools, families, and communities to connect them with community resources (Portman, 2009). These partnerships between the school, families, and communities can help immigrant populations understand their role in their child's educational experience and better understand the school and community services to support their child. These partnerships can also allow participants to examine policies, procedures, and practices described in the former section.

School counseling classroom instruction considerations

Classroom instruction in school counseling at Tier 1 is provided to all students, including those who do not identify as immigrants. School counselors can deliver Tier 1 classroom instruction which includes information on succeeding in the dominant culture (Alim & Paris, 2017). Information on policies and practices related to documentation status in all classroom instruction ensures that youth who may not feel comfortable sharing their status or their family members' status still receive the knowledge they need to access various postsecondary options. In considering the social-emotional needs of immigrant children, school counselors can utilize a community wealth approach in their comprehensive school counseling program, highlighting the unique assets each student brings to the community. School counselors can also deliver a curriculum that helps all students develop resiliency skills to respond to potential discrimination and racism that may impact their school experience (Schwallie-Giddis et al., 2004). School counselors should also consider teaching students, especially those who identify with privileged identities, the value of diverse classrooms, and supporting students when they witness discrimination or racism.

Trauma-informed practices

Trauma-informed practices can be integrated across all tiers, but school-based, evidence-based, comprehensive programs for immigrant youth have demonstrated successful outcomes. The Cultural Adjustment and Trauma Services (CATS; Beehler et al., 2012) centers trauma-informed and cognitive-behavioral approaches to reduce symptoms of depression, problematic behaviors, and posttraumatic stress disorder among first- and second-generation immigrant children. The CATS has also demonstrated success in improving daily functioning, healthy coping skills, grades and attendance, and positive peer and parent support (Beehler et al., 2012). The CATS model involves case management support and school-based counseling and advocacy to address the cultural and social-emotional needs of immigrant children, their families, and their communities (Beehler et al., 2012). An exploration of effectiveness found that higher quantities of cognitive-behavioral therapy and support increased healthy behaviors, and the use of coordinating services decreased symptoms of PTSD (Beehler et al., 2012; Stein et al., 2003).

Integrating considerations for immigrant populations into Tier 2 interventions

School counselors can support immigrant youth in various ways using a Tier 2 level of supportive interventions. For instance, small groups can assist immigrant youth through multiple means, including providing a supportive space (Chen et al., 2010). Yalom and Leszcz (2005) express that group counseling has the therapeutic power to impart information while instilling hope in participants and helping them recognize the universality of needs and concerns. To assist in this process, school counselors can recruit teachers to identify students who may be experiencing difficulties and benefit from attending a small group. Teachers in English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programs, in particular, often form close relationships with immigrant youth and their families. Small group topics could include psychoeducational materials and resources on transitioning to life in the U.S. and information affirming the various ways that individuals experience new cultural encounters and expectations. Small groups create a space that allows for the distribution of information that closes social and cultural capital gaps without singling out children due to their status as immigrants in general or for holding a particular immigration status (i.e., Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, undocumented, refugee, asylees, or from mixed-status families).

González-Ramos and Sanchez-Nester (2001) provide an example of a 10-week, small group designed for 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade Latinx immigrant students in the school's bilingual class. They assert that the group in their model can be utilized with other immigrant populations, given its universal and generic qualities. Teachers, school staff, and administrators completed referrals for the group. The group met weekly for 1 hour during the school day. The counselors utilized drawing materials to facilitate discussions on the students' experiences in their home countries, the transition to life in the U.S., and their post-migration adjustment.

Small groups can also be offered to school staff and administrators in workshops, highlighting topics such as the cultural implications of immigrant student populations in the school and promoting multicultural reflection and attendees' competence. Through these Tier 2 interventions, counselors can practically exercise this role using small groups and workshops designed to promote an inclusive and transcultural competent space for immigrant children and their families.

Trauma-informed Tier 3 services

A subset of children who demonstrate significant academic and social-emotional challenges may need Tier 3 support. Tier 3 supports focus on intensive individual and small group counseling, consulting on behalf of students and utilizing referral services (Sugai et al., 2019). At the Tier 3 level, school-based, trauma-informed practices may include assessment, support, targeted interventions, and evaluation.

School-based trauma assessments and interventions

Trauma assessments successfully used in school settings to examine exposure to trauma include the Traumatic Events Screening Inventory-Child Report Form (TESI-CRF-R) (Ford et al., 2002) and the Trauma Symptom Checklist Child Version- posttraumatic stress subscale (TSCC-PTS) (Briere, 1996). These assessments can help the school counselor examine if in-school supports will assist students or if a referral to community-based counseling is appropriate. Although there are several evidence-based treatments for traumatized youth, cognitive behavioral-based interventions have the advantage of time and financial feasibility. Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS) (Stein et al., 2003) has been used with students from 5th grade through 12th grade. It is most common and applicable in the school setting as a Tier 3 intensive intervention (Nadeem et al., 2018). CBITS has demonstrated success in reducing symptomology of PTSD, depression, and unhealthy behaviors while increasing coping skills, academic outcomes, and overall functioning among youth from various populations and settings in the U.S. and internationally, including immigrant youth, linguistically diverse youth, and youth exposed to violence, war, and natural disasters (Nadeem et al., 2018; Yohannan & Carlson, 2019). An additional school-based intervention for 1st through 5th graders, *Bounce Back*, was developed collaboratively with national experts to include the developers of CBITS, community mental health providers, school district personnel, and school stakeholders (Langley et al., 2015). Both interventions are designed for students who have witnessed or experienced traumatic life events, including school and community violence, abuse, and natural or human-made disasters.

Conclusion

School counselors can act as advocates and support immigrant families in schools. They must conceptualize the needs of immigrant children holistically, considering the interventions and the policies that need to change to dismantle barriers to immigrant student success. Using the MTSS framework provides a tiered perspective to support immigrant populations.

In Tier 1, school counselors can review data to challenge policies and procedures, build authentic relationships and collaborate with stakeholders, and deliver classroom instruction that teaches all students to be culturally sustaining. They can also develop genuine connections with families and community stakeholders to enlist their perspectives in decision-making processes. If youth need more targeted support, school counselors can provide Tier 2 interventions. These interventions include developing and facilitating small groups and educating families on the school counselor's role and their rights within the education system. In situations where children need more intensive mental health support in schools, Tier 3 interventions can occur. School counselors can infuse evidence-based and trauma practices into their counseling to help immigrant youth succeed in their classrooms, provide referrals within the community for students and families and develop trusting relationships to dismantle the stigma surrounding mental health services.

Psychoeducation about trauma can increase youths' mental health literacy about the connection between brain, body, and behavior and reduce stigma about seeking mental health services (Perry & Daniels, 2016). CBITS group counseling, coupled with individual sessions that use narrative work can provide immigrant youth the opportunity to share their lived experiences and expand school counselors' understanding of immigrant youth and families' encounters with acculturative stress, race-based and ethnic discrimination, xenophobia, and trauma. School counselors should be mindful not to dismiss student narratives of racism, xenophobia, and discrimination when working with immigrant youth on cognitive restructuring.

Although this tiered approach to supporting immigrant populations includes many recommendations for school counselors, it is not all-encompassing. School counselors will need to build their self-awareness around their biases and values regarding immigration and immigrant communities (Ratts et al., 2016). It is important to note that school counselors cannot dismantle policies and procedures that are inherently discriminatory against immigrant populations if they are not aware of their privileges and how these same policies and procedures may have advantaged them. Once school counselors self-reflect, they will be better prepared to advocate with and for their immigrant youth.

Disclosure statement

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