

Educational and cultural challenges of bicultural adult immigrant and refugee students in Australia

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We report the relationship between the cultural and educational challenges of immigrant adult students. Thirty-five recently arrived adults in a bridging course completed a self-administered, online computer interview to rate their exploration and commitment to their heritage and Australian cultures, and express their experiences with their own challenges (size and effect of challenges, people who helped them deal with their challenges). Students' biggest challenges differed in relation to their bicultural identities (their cultural identities for both heritage and Australian cultures): money and school tasks for the more bi-culturally committed; English and personal skills for the less. Students who were more bi-culturally committed appeared to experience some advantages in their experiences with their challenges. How newly arrived immigrants develop their bicultural identities can have implications for how they address their challenges, and find a place for themselves within the new culture and their heritage culture.

Introduction

Adult immigrant and refugee students encounter many challenges as they start their education in Australia. Some newly arrived adults find their challenges overwhelming and drop out of classes. Others handle the same challenges with resilience and success (Centre for Multicultural Youth 2008). The challenges of immigrant newcomers include difficulties associated with entry into a new culture and difficulties directly associated with their educational experiences. In a multicultural environment, cultural challenges often revolve around finding a place and a personal identity in both heritage and Australian cultures (Lawrence, Brooker & Goodnow, in press). Educational challenges for immigrants often revolve around developing the English and learning skills needed in adult education. These difficulties are faced by migrants (Townsend 2008), refugees (Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture 2007), and international students (Ang & Liamputtong 2008). Little is known, however, about how these newly arrived adult students actually handle their challenges, and less is known about how their cultural and educational challenges may be related to each other.

Our aims were to document the challenges encountered by immigrant and refugee adults early in their Australian education. We focused on the prevalence and size of challenges these students experienced when studying in a specialised bridging program, and on the students' approaches to handling their challenges. Students' approaches involved their feelings and activities at school, and their perception of the supporters who could help. We also focused on the students' development of 'bicultural identities' as part of their acculturation into Australian society. We could then ask how immigrant students' development of a bicultural identity related to their educationally-oriented challenges.

Encountering challenges

A challenge is a specific type of difficulty (e.g. a situation, an elusive skill, a social conflict) that arises in a person's life, sometimes uninvited. The challenge demands that the person engage with the specific difficulty to try to gain mastery over it (Lazarus & Folkman 1984). Several researchers have made distinctions between difficulties that are seen as 'challenges' in this sense of invitation to engagement, and those difficulties that are seen as 'threats' (Lazarus & Folkman 1984; Williams, Cumming & Balanos 2010). The key to the difference lies in the person's approach in either attempting to master the difficulty or in retreating from its threat. According to Williams and colleagues, people who perceive a difficult situation as a challenge and work on it actually fare better than people who see the same difficulty as threatening.

Although challenges are difficulties, they are associated with actual or potential rewards and gains. This is particularly the case when challenges are seen as small rather than as large and overwhelming. Small challenges are easier to overcome, involve less risk, and offer safer opportunities to practise new skills or to access new resources (Azmitia & Cooper 2001; Fergus & Zimmerman 2005; Lazarus & Folkman 1984).

People do not always handle their challenges solo. Teachers and colleagues can fill motivating and supportive roles for students. Cooper (1999), for instance, described how some ethnic minority students used social support to help them succeed. Educationally successful students reported feeling driven to either prove gatekeepers wrong (e.g. teachers or community members who believed they would fail), or to succeed on behalf of their supporters (e.g. teachers and supportive family members). Social networks, whether provocative or supportive, aided them in their successful activities.

Achieving bicultural identity

A *bicultural identity* (as opposed to a *monocultural identity*; Lawrence et al., in press) is a person's sense of self in relation to more than one culture, in an environment where multiple cultures co-exist. Immigrants and refugees, for instance, live their daily lives in interaction with their ethnic, heritage culture and in interaction with the mainstream Australian culture.

Finding a place (a 'cultural home'; Lawrence, Benedikt & Valsiner 1992) within both cultures allows newcomers to adapt to their new surroundings, while maintaining their previous cultural values and resources as part of their acculturation process (Laosa 1999; Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga & Szapocznik 2010). To date, researchers have tended to focus on people's identification with their ethnic culture. Schwartz et al. (2010), however, recently pointed to the importance of also developing an identity with the mainstream national culture.

Achieving a strong identity in one's heritage culture can help people to develop greater inter-cultural awareness, proactive coping with discrimination, and improved psychological well-being (Phinney, Jacoby & Silva 2007; Rivas-Drake & Hughes 2008; Umaña-Taylor, Vargas-Chanes, Garcia & Gonzales-Backen 2008). To describe how people develop that cultural identity, Phinney (1989) drew on Erikson's (1968) concept of ego-identity and Marcia's (1993) processes of exploration and commitment. Phinney developed and revised a Multi-group Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM-R; Phinney 1989; Phinney & Ong 2007) to assess people's cultural identities in terms of their exploration and commitment activities. These activities can be experienced in different ways. A person may have, for example, no experience of either exploring or committing to a culture, or s/he may explore what the culture involves without making any commitment, or s/he may both explore and commit to that culture.

Phinney (1989) saw these exploring and committing activities as appearing and progressing in a particular order. She argued that ethnic minority adolescents who had achieved their ethnic identity had first explored their ethnicity and then committed to their ethnic culture. Syed (2010), however, found that progression patterns were far more complex, especially in college students.

The study of bicultural identity development is also more complex than asking only about a person's ethnic identity. In a multicultural environment, most people do not have the luxury of excluding one or the other culture from their consciousness. We took the more realistic approach of asking immigrant adults how they were exploring and committing to both their heritage and Australian cultures. Developing some form of identification with the mainstream culture as well as their heritage culture can ease the strains and conflicts of immigrants' transitions (Fuligni, Witgow & Garcia 2005; Ogbu 2004).

Challenges for immigrant and refugee adults in Australian education

Like all adults in Australia, immigrant students must achieve a certain level of education if they are to move on to sustainable and rewarding employment. Unlike other adult students, however, immigrants are not typically continuing their education or 'returning to school'. Many are starting their adult education, or restarting it after disruption. Most refugees and some immigrants arrive with limited English. Some have formal qualifications that are not recognised by Australian authorities, but others have no experience of formal education (CMY 2008).

Some challenges for newly arriving students relate directly to their cultural experiences, for example, dealing with racism and discrimination (Ang & Liamputtong 2008; Mestheneos & Ionni 2002). Other challenges relate indirectly to their cultural experiences, for example, poor housing in low socio-economic areas, limited transport and crowded medical facilities (Earnest, Housen, & Gillieat

2007). Immigrant and refugee adults often feel 'shut-out' from either their ethnic or the wider community as they struggle to build social networks and support systems that will help them in their new environments (McMaster 2007; Townsend 2008).

The challenges that newly arrived adults face can have a serious impact on their educational experiences. Students living in poverty often cannot afford fees or materials, and thus miss out on services that could otherwise support their study efforts (e.g. access to computers, libraries, public transport). Those with a poor grasp of English, or with serious gaps in their schooling, may find barriers to develop new and supportive friendships, miss important social nuances in class, and experience difficulty in completing assignments to the standards of their class peers (Sidhu & Taylor 2007; Suarez-Orozco, Gaytan et al. 2010).

Students who find ways of dealing with their challenges productively are better placed to progress through their early educational experiences into college or university. They are also better positioned to find meaningful places for themselves within the new culture. To provide adequate services and support, educators and counsellors need to know the challenges faced by adult immigrant students early in Australian education, and how their cultural and educational challenges may relate to each other.

The present study

We asked students about their explorations and commitments in relation to both their heritage and Australian cultures, about the type and size of any challenges they encountered early in their Australian education, and about their approaches to these challenges (in their feelings and activities at school and their social support). Our approach involved using a self-administered, online computer interview that gave students control and privacy to reflect and report

on their challenging experiences within a supportive, well-informed research environment (Lawrence, Dodds, & Brooker, 2010).

Methodology

Participants

Participants were 35 students (19 women, 16 men) attending a college for recently arrived immigrants in a suburb of Adelaide. The college caters for the specific needs of adult immigrant students who are beginning their education in Australia.

The mean age for the 35 students was 23.5 years ($SD = 6.9$). Only three were older than 30 years. They represented 60% of 58 students invited to participate at class sessions. Non-participants included students absent on the interview day or declining to participate (19), and four who did not complete the online interviews. They came from regions with recent histories of substantial conflict and war: Central and East Africa (14), South Asia (11) and the Middle East (10). Most (32) had lived in Australia for less than five years. Three older students had been in Australia for more than nine years, and their presence in the classes indicated that they had not yet been able to move on in their education or employment. Most (31) had been to high school, two had completed university degrees and 14 had never completed high school studies. Of the four who had only experienced primary school, three had not completed it.

Procedures and materials

Students worked through the online computer interview in class sessions at the college. The interview was programmed to ask initial and follow-up questions, and to give participants a variety of activities (ratings, map construction, typed in open-ended comments). Two trained researchers and one or more teachers were present to assist and debrief students. Assistance included explaining questions and typing answers if students requested help.

Cultural identities. After entering demographic details, students rated how much they agreed with MEIM-R items (0 = 'strongly disagree', to 4 = 'strongly agree'; Phinney and Ong 2007). The MEIM-R contains three items about a person's cultural exploration (e.g. 'I have spent time trying to find out more about my cultural group') and three items about a person's cultural commitment (e.g. 'I feel a strong sense of attachment to my cultural group'). MEIM-R items for Australian and heritage cultures are listed in Table 1.

Challenges. Students next constructed concept maps showing in diagrammatic form the type and size of challenges they experienced, with their emphases (Novak & Cañas 2006). We provided 11 potential challenges and allowed students to generate others. The 11 challenges were developed in pilot studies with immigrant and local students. They were: English language, money, family, health, skills, time management, discrimination, other peoples' expectations, culture, school tasks and school rules. Students located any of these challenges in one of two labelled spaces: an inner central space where they could place their big challenges, and an outside, peripheral space where students could place their small challenges.

Approaches to challenges. Students then typed their open-ended responses to two questions about their approaches to their biggest challenges: 'How do your challenges make you feel about school?' and 'How do your challenges affect what you do at school?' Two researchers independently coded each open-ended response as either 'positive', 'negative' or 'neutral'. Inter-rater agreement was high, with complete agreement on 83% of 35 comments about feelings (Kappa = .68), and 91% of 35 comments about activities (Kappa = .86). We also asked students 'Does anyone help you with your challenges?' and provided checklists of family (e.g. parents) and non-family people (e.g. teachers) for them to tick as their helpers.

Findings

Students' bicultural identities

The students were developing bicultural identities in their explorations of their heritage and Australian cultures. They also were making commitments to one or both cultures, but these commitments involved greater variability. The group had a higher mean rating of cultural identity for their heritage (3.04, $SD = 0.54$) than for the Australian culture (2.74, $SD = 0.60$), $t(33) = 2.82$, $p = .01$. The two cultural identities, however, correlated reasonably, $r = .40$, $p = .02$.

Two subgroups with different patterns of cultural identity

Two subgroups emerged from our analyses with different patterns of bicultural identity in their ratings of MEIM-R items. Subgroup differences were particularly related to their commitments to one or both cultures. The subgroups, however, differed only in their ratings of their bicultural identities. They did not differ in age, gender, cultural group, length of time spent in Australia, total education prior to Australia, or college course.

One subgroup of 22 students we called Biculturally Exploring and Committing, and the other group of 12, Biculturally Exploring without Committing. Table 1 shows the mean ratings of the six items that these subgroups gave to each item for each culture, together with the subgroup overall mean ratings.

Table 1: Mean ethnic and Australian cultural identity scores for two subgroups of 22 Exploring and Committing and 12 Exploring without Committing students

MEIM items	Group mean rating (standard deviation)	
	Biculturally Exploring and Committing	Biculturally Exploring without Committing
<i>Commitment items:</i>		
I understand what membership of ... means to me		
• my ethnic culture	3.41 (0.50)	2.58 (0.79)
• the Australian culture	3.05 (0.72)	2.17 (0.94)
I feel a strong sense of attachment to:		
• my ethnic culture	3.32 (0.65)	2.42 (0.90)
• the Australian culture	3.18 (0.40)	2.00 (0.85)
I have a strong sense of belonging to:		
• my ethnic culture	3.23 (0.75)	2.67 (0.78)
• the Australian culture	3.00 (0.87)	1.50 (0.80)
Overall commitment score:		
• my ethnic culture	3.32 (0.51)	2.56 (0.43)
• the Australian culture	3.08 (0.46)	1.89 (0.61)
<i>Exploration items:</i>		
I have often done things that will help me understand:		
• my ethnic culture	3.27 (0.63)	2.75 (0.75)
• the Australian culture	3.18 (0.59)	2.33 (0.78)
I have spent time trying to find out more about:		
• my ethnic culture	3.14 (0.83)	2.92 (0.79)
• the Australian culture	2.82 (1.01)	2.75 (0.62)
I have often talked to other people to learn more about:		
• my ethnic culture	3.09 (0.75)	2.75 (0.87)
• the Australian culture	2.82 (1.01)	2.75 (0.97)
Overall exploration score:		
• my ethnic culture	3.17 (0.62)	2.81 (0.44)
• the Australian culture	2.94 (0.61)	2.61 (0.68)
Overall cultural identity score:		
• my ethnic culture	3.24 (0.53)	2.68 (0.36)
• the Australian culture	3.01 (0.47)	2.25 (0.49)

As a group, Biculturally Exploring and Committing students were exploring and committing to both their heritage and Australian cultures. They gave high ratings (3 = 'agree' or 4 = 'strongly agree') to all exploration and commitment items for each culture. Students in the Biculturally Exploring without Committing group were exploring both cultures, with ratings generally lower than those of the Biculturally Exploring and Committing group. They also gave particularly low ratings to commitment items. As a group, they did not have a sense of belonging to the Australian culture, and did not understand what 'being Australian' meant for them.

Students' experiences of their challenges

The students identified between one and 13 challenges by placing them in the central or peripheral spaces of their concept maps. There was a mean of 7.46 challenges for the sample ($SD = 3.23$), with similar mean numbers for big challenges (3.88, $SD = 2.73$) and small challenges (3.65, $SD = 2.16$). Table 2 shows the number of students who located each of 11 challenges as big (in the central area) and small (in the peripheral area) in their concept maps.

Table 2: Number of students placing 11 challenges as ‘big’, ‘small’ or not challenges

Challenges	Students’ location of challenges in concept maps		
	‘Big’ challenges (central area)	‘Small’ challenges (peripheral area)	Challenges not included in map
English	23	11	1
Money	19	11	5
Personal skills	15	15	5
School tasks	12	8	15
Family	11	12	12
Health	10	10	15
Time management	9	14	12
Discrimination	8	12	15
School rules	8	6	21
Culture	7	16	12
Other people’s expectations	7	12	16

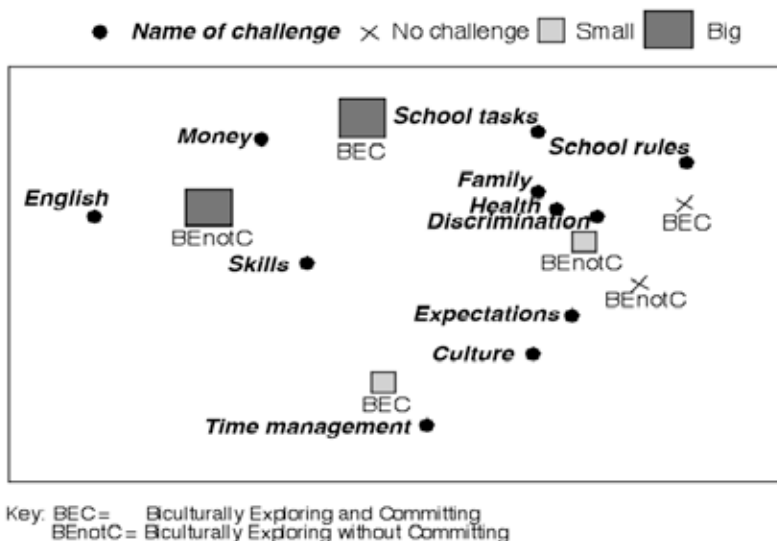
English was the most commonly identified challenge, with 97% of the sample putting it into their concepts maps, and 68% (23) identifying it as a big challenge. School rules was the least commonly identified challenge (for 40%), but it was a big challenge for eight. Culture was a challenge for 66%, but a big challenge for seven of the students.

Subgroups’ different patterns of challenges

We used a Correspondence Analysis to show how the two groups described the size of the 11 challenges (‘big’, ‘small’ or ‘not a challenge’), $\chi^2(50, 374) = 76.25, p = .01$. This form of analysis

yields a two-dimensional diagram (shown in Figure 1) of the relative association of the two groups with different size challenges.

Figure 1: Location of 11 challenges as ‘big’, ‘small’ and ‘not’ challenges, by Exploring and Committing students (BEC) and Exploring without Committing students (BEnotC)



The Biculturally Exploring and Committing group was more closely associated with big challenges of money and school tasks, and small challenges of time management and to a less extent, culture. School rules, discrimination, health, and family were not challenges for this group.

In contrast, the Biculturally Exploring without Committing group was more closely associated with big challenges of English language and their own skills, and small challenges of discrimination, health and family. Culture and other people’s expectations were not challenges for this group.

Students' approaches to their challenges

The 35 students varied in their approaches to their challenges. More made positive comments about how their challenges affected their feelings about school. Twenty students made positive comments (e.g. 'I want to go to school and I am very happy at school, I think I can develop my skills here'). Eight made neutral comments (e.g. 'I'm not feeling bad ... this challenge don't affect my study'), and seven made negative comments (e.g. 'They make me feel like I want to drop out'). Similarly, when describing how their challenges affected their activities at school, more (17) made positive comments (e.g. 'I work hard all work and I manage my time') than neutral comments (5) (e.g. 'It doesn't affect too much my school work'). However, 13 made negative comments (e.g. 'It's hard to write English ... I have trouble with my homework'; 'They make it hard to get to class sometimes').

Subgroups' different feelings about their challenges

More Biculturally Exploring and Committing than Biculturally Exploring without Committing students made positive comments about their feelings (73% > 33%), and fewer made negative comments (9% < 42%), $\chi^2(2, 34) = 6.23, p = .04$. There was a similar trend for students' comments about their activities. More Biculturally Exploring and Committing than Biculturally Exploring without Committing students tended to make positive comments about their activities (82% < 18%), and fewer negative comments (46% < 54%), although this trend was not statistically significant.

People who help students with their challenges

When asked if anyone helped them with their challenges, 32 students answered 'Yes', with the three 'No' responses accompanied by explanations of personal management styles (e.g. 'I have to manage time. When I have an appointment I have to do it after school'). The 32 students identified up to 10 people who helped them ($M = 4.59, SD = 1.68$). Most (97%) identified teachers, followed by friends and

classmates (81%), brothers and sisters (56%), school counsellors and other support workers (53%), parents (41%), extended family (41%), romantic partners (31%) and children (6%).

Subgroups' different helpers

More Biculturally Exploring and Committing than Biculturally Exploring without Committing students identified school counsellors as helpers (71% > 18%), $\chi^2(1, 32) = 8.22, p = .00$, but marginally fewer Biculturally Exploring and Committing students identified extended family members (29% < 64%), $\chi^2(1, 32) = 3.68, p = .06$. These differences were related only to the students' bicultural identities, and not to the number, type or size of their challenges.

Discussion

Our aims were to examine the education-related challenges experienced by newly arrived adult students and their approaches to these challenges, and to analyse how these challenges related to their development of bicultural identities. We were interested in the type of challenges these students encountered, and the relative emphases students gave to these challenges. Developing a bicultural approach to life in a new country can help immigrant students educationally (Fuligni, et al. 2005; Phinney 2006). The development of a bicultural identity, however, also presents immigrants and refugees with its own particular challenges in, for example, handling discrimination and other people's expectations (Ogbu 2004; Oppedal, Roysamb & Sam 2006). As far as we can tell, the specific relationship between educational and cultural attainments and challenges has not been analysed systematically.

Our findings show that these recently arrived adult students were dealing with challenges related to developing bicultural identities in different ways. Their acculturation experiences had the dual focus on their cultural roots and their new, mainstream culture that Schwartz et al. (2010) saw as the normal immigrant experience. They were in

the process of finding places for themselves in two cultures, at least to the extent of exploring them. Some students also were already committing to both the Australian and heritage cultures. Others were exploring what both cultures meant to them, but were unwilling or unable to commit themselves as strongly to either one or both.

According to Phinney (1989), commitment represents an advance over exploration in the development of an achieved cultural identity. It would be tempting to argue that the students who were both exploring and committing (BEC) were more advanced in their acculturation experiences, as Phinney argued for adolescents' ethnic identities. Certainly, it is plausible to see exploration as easier to achieve than commitment, although Syed's (2010) data do not support a straightforward progression. It is too early to make strong inferences about the processes of bicultural identity development for these or other adult students.

Our findings point to the students' current cultural experiences, not to the order in which exploration and commitment are achieved in relation to two cultures simultaneously. We cannot for example, know whether students who explored and committed to both cultures were previously only exploring; or whether students who were only exploring would go on to commit to one or both cultures; or whether the one student who said he belonged only to one culture—the Australian culture—will continue to turn away from his heritage culture. We can say, however, that newly arrived adults' bicultural experiences vary, with at least two orientations: those who commit to both Australian and heritage cultures, and those who do not commit to one or both. Our findings add to the study of acculturation and biculturalism by pointing to this variability in adults' bicultural development, and also by showing how different bicultural orientations are related to educational experiences.

Asking students to represent their educationally-related challenges in a concept map placed minimal verbal demands on them and was

attractive and easy to use. The task gave students a private, engaging and non-judgmental research environment in which to reflect upon and express their experiences (Lawrence, Dodds & Brooker 2010). It was appropriate for eliciting sensitive information (Bachman 2003; van de Wijgert, Padian, Shiboski & Turner 2000). It yielded distinctive patterns among the challenges of the two biculturally-oriented groups. These groups also reported different ways of responding to their challenges.

The finding that English was the most consistent and largest challenge realistically reflects the importance of language study as a significant gateway to academic and vocational opportunities. Similarly, the lack of emphasis on school rules reflects the efforts of the teaching staff to encourage their students to take control of their own educational experiences and to reduce their adherence to typical school rules. These were adult students, and the school's emphasis on self-managed learning was a part of the students' orientation to Australian adult education.

As well as representing the realities of these students' experiences, the concept map allowed us to relate broader acculturation concepts to their everyday concerns. Previous research pointed to immigrants' difficulties with cultural conflict, isolation from other group members and strains on time and energy (Ogbu 2004; Oppedal et al. 2006). These acculturation issues were represented in the concept mapping task by individual concepts of culture, discrimination and time management. They were among the least emphasised challenges for the students, typically being identified either as small or no challenges. The immediate difficulties of educational and everyday experiences seemed to loom larger than the broader acculturation issues. It appears that these adults thought they could handle their acculturation-related challenges, or at least did not feel overwhelmed by them.

That the acculturation challenges differed for the two groups points to a need to investigate some of the subtle differences in the association of culture and discrimination as challenges for students with different bicultural orientations. It would be useful to explore, for instance, why immigrants who were more biculturally committed did not see discrimination and why immigrants who were less biculturally committed did not see culture as major difficulties.

The distinctive patterns for the two biculturally-oriented groups give a first glimpse at how educational and cultural difficulties relate. That members of the more biculturally committing group were more concerned about money and school tasks suggests they may have dealt with the issues related to the English and study skills that were the major concerns of the less biculturally committed group. They may have arrived with those skills or with better strategies for acquiring them. Here is a link between personal educational and broader cultural concerns that warrants further investigation.

While most students made positive comments about their feelings and/or about their activities at school, the biculturally committed group expressed more positive feelings. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), a positive approach can lead to an easier time overcoming a challenge, because the person sees it as less threatening and more of an opportunity to excel. It would be useful to know if the more biculturally committed were able to handle their subsequent educational experiences as challenges and not as threats. In a follow-up study, we are tracking refugee students through their first year of high school (Brooker 2012). We know of no similar tracking data for adult refugee or immigrant students.

That the two bicultural groups did not differ in the number of teachers or siblings helping them suggests that, regardless of cultural experience, these students had similar access to the major social resources in each part of their lives. This finding agrees with the report of Fuligni et al. (2005) and Phinney's (2006) suggestion that

bicultural students are well supported when they can access resources from both cultural arenas.

The two groups did differ, however, in accessing secondary supports. More of the biculturally committed students relied on school counsellors, and more of the less biculturally committed students relied on their extended family. Although families can be useful resources for ethnic minority students (e.g. Cooper, 1999; Grotevant & Cooper 1998), recently arrived immigrant families often have limited or no understanding of the education system (VFST 2007). Their support can be limited. By not accessing outside help, the less biculturally committed students may be at a disadvantage when dealing with institutions. School support services such as counsellors can provide access to funds, training, information and social networks. Ang and Liamputtong (2008), however, found that Chinese international students did not use university counselling services, because they mistakenly saw them as supports for mental health, rather than for help with accessing task-oriented services.

We add to the study of acculturation and biculturalism by demonstrating that, even in these early stages of immigrants' acculturation, there are (at least) two distinct patterns of bicultural identity development: those who explore and commit to both heritage and Australian culture, and those who explore but do not commit to one or both cultures. These patterns of bicultural development are also useful for educators, because they relate to students' different experiences with personal and educational challenges, and with how students deal with those challenges. Students who were committing to both heritage and Australian cultures seem to have distinct advantages in how they deal with their challenges. The relationship between broader cultural challenges and immediate educational challenges warrants further research and attention by educators. Helping students to develop their bicultural identities may very well

help them to deal with their educational and personal challenges more positively and productively.

Acknowledgement

We wish to thank the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture for their support and funding in the development of this study.

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