

## **Bridging the Cultural Divide: Examining Immigrant Students' Experiences of Acculturation in Florida's Public Schools**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This exploratory qualitative study attempted to investigate how immigrant students in Florida's K–12 schools acclimated. The study emphasizes the value of fostering a friendly and encouraging school climate for immigrant students since such climate can speed up their acculturation process and increase their academic and disciplinary achievement. Semi-structured interviews with 20 immigrant students from various cultural backgrounds gathered the data as part of the study's qualitative research design. The study population includes students who were born in different countries other than the US and who had attended Florida's public schools for at least a year. According to the study's findings, immigrant students experience a variety of difficulties connected to social separation, linguistic difficulties, and cultural alterations. On the other hand, the students also mention several advantages, including adjusting to unfamiliar surroundings, making new friends, and feeling more independent. The study adds to the body of knowledge on immigrant students' acculturation experiences in the US, especially in K–12 institutions in Florida. The research results give educators, decision-makers, and academics new perspectives on how to better grasp the opportunities and difficulties faced by immigrant kids in the US K-12 educational system.*

**KEYWORDS:** immigrant students, acculturation, school climate, academic achievement.

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Immigration has had a key role in the United States' growing cultural diversity. With a diversified population that includes people from Latin America, the Middle East, Asia, and Europe, Florida has recently gained popularity as a destination for immigrants (Pew Research Center, 2021). Due to the increased cultural diversity in Florida's K–12 schools, immigrant students naturally face difficulties adjusting to a new society and educational system. Accordingly, fostering the academic, social, and disciplinary success of immigrant students in Florida's K–12 schools depend on understanding their acculturation experiences. Children of immigrants may have severe academic and social difficulties in school as a result of acculturation, the process of adapting to a new culture. Both the retention of the original cultural identity and the adoption of new cultural behaviors, beliefs, and conventions are components of the acculturation process. (Titzmann & Lee, 2022). Many of those immigrant students found it to be a significant difficulty to live in such a markedly unique cultural and social environment (Acar, 2016). First-generation American students still face many problems in American classrooms today (Acar et al., 2016). For immigrant students, acculturation can be a difficult process since they may experience prejudice, language obstacles, and cultural misinterpretations (Juang & Syed, 2019). There is a need to learn more about how

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immigrant kids in Florida's K–12 schools acclimate to the new culture and educational system since their acculturation experiences are still understudied.

Therefore, the purpose of this exploratory study is to investigate how immigrant students acculturate in Florida's K–12 schools. The study will look at the opportunities and difficulties that immigrant students face, their coping mechanisms, and the contribution of their cultural background to the process of acculturation. The study will use a qualitative research approach with focus groups and interviews to collect information from immigrant students. The results of this study give educators new perspectives on how to facilitate immigrant students' academic and social integration in K–12 schools and foster a more inclusive learning environment for all students.

Education academics have acknowledged the significance of comprehending the acculturation experiences of immigrant students in K–12 institutions. According to the study of Okilwa et al. (2022), acculturation can significantly affect immigrant students' academic performance, and educators can be essential in fostering their success. In a similar vein, studies by Hoytt et al. (2022) and Bennouna et al. (2021) have emphasized the significance of culturally sensitive instruction and creating a welcoming learning environment for immigrant students. Additionally, research by Suárez-Orozco et al. (2008) and Lilla et al. (2021) have demonstrated that the acculturation process can differ depending on the cultural background of immigrant students and their families. Due to the diversity of cultural origins among immigrant students in Florida, this study takes these backgrounds into account and investigates how they affect the acculturation experiences of these children.

In order to improve the academic, disciplinary, and social success of immigrant children in Florida's K–12 schools, research on their acculturation experiences is crucial. The goal of this exploratory study is to shed light on the challenges and opportunities that immigrant students face as they adapt to their new environment and the impact that their cultural background has on those experiences. The findings of this study provide educators with fresh ideas on how to support immigrant students' social, disciplinary, and academic integration in K–12 schools and promote a more inclusive learning environment for all students.

This exploratory qualitative study's goal was to learn more about how immigrant students adjust to their new lives in Florida's K–12 classrooms. This study highlights the significance of creating a welcoming and encouraging school environment, which has the ability to hasten acculturation and improve academic and disciplinary performance among immigrant students. The study's findings give educators, policymakers, and scholars useful views that help them better understand the opportunities and challenges experienced by immigrant children in the US K–12 educational system, particularly in Florida.

## Research Questions

1. What particular difficulties and benefits do immigrant students in Florida's K–12 schools specifically face in terms of social integration, linguistic adaptation, and cultural adjustments?
2. How does creating a supportive and encouraging school environment help?

## Theoretical Foundation

John W. Berry's (2019) acculturation theory is the theoretical foundation for this exploratory qualitative study on the acculturation experiences of immigrant kids in Florida's K–12 schools. Berry's theory offers a thorough framework for comprehending the process of cultural adaptation that people go through when they come into contact with a different cultural context. It

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asserts that two crucial aspects of acculturation—contact with the host culture and cultural maintenance—are involved.

The principle of acculturation is used in this study to look at how immigrant pupils adjust to their new cultural conditions in Florida's K–12 schools. According to Berry's (2019) theory, the study acknowledges that immigrant kids have a variety of hurdles, including social isolation, linguistic difficulties, and cultural adjustments. These challenges result from the conflict between preserving their cultural history and interacting with the host culture.

The study also accepts Berry's (2019) theory's predictions about potential benefits for immigrant students during the acculturation process. These benefits include learning to adapt to new environments, meeting new people, and feeling more autonomous. The study offers a comprehensive perspective of how these kids manage the process of cultural adaptation in the context of Florida's K–12 schools by examining the experiences of immigrant students through the lens of acculturation theory.

This research also adds to the body of knowledge on the acculturation experiences of immigrant students in the United States, particularly in Florida's K–12 schools. The research results, which are based on Berry's theory of acculturation, provide insights for academics, decision-makers, and educators by shedding light on the opportunities and difficulties faced by immigrant kids.

In conclusion, John W. Berry's (2019) acculturation theory serves as the foundation for the theoretical framework of this study. This idea is used in the study to evaluate how immigrant kids in Florida's K–12 schools adjust to their new culture. It acknowledges the challenges and benefits that these students face, as described by Berry's theory, and it advances knowledge of how they deal with the acculturation process. The results give educational stakeholders important information for improving support systems and fostering the successful integration of immigrant pupils within the K–12 school system.

## **Literature Review**

The United States has a long history of immigration, and it continues to be a destination for immigrants from around the world. According to the Migration Policy Institute (2023), there were over 44 million immigrants in the United States in 2023, representing nearly 14% of the total population. Immigrants bring with them diverse cultural backgrounds and experiences, which can enrich the fabric of American society. However, immigrant students face unique challenges in adapting to a new culture and educational system, and understanding their experiences is critical for promoting their academic and social success. This literature review explores the acculturation experiences of immigrant students in K-12 schools in Florida, US.

## **Immigration and Florida**

With a population that is diverse and expanding quickly, Florida has been an important immigration destination. Florida was the third-most populated state in the US as of 2022 when the US Census Bureau expected its population to be over 22 million. Over the years, there has been a noticeable surge in immigration to the state, drawing people from all over the world. In reality, Florida had the fourth-highest immigrant population among US states in 2023, according to the Migration Policy Institute (2023), with almost 4.6 million foreigners living there. Further, Florida's immigrant community has always been known for its diversity, with immigrants from a variety of ethnic, linguistic, and cultural origins. In order to examine the experiences of immigrant kids in Florida's K–12 schools and appreciate the significance of building an inclusive educational

environment for their successful integration, it is essential to understand the magnitude and scope of immigration in the state.

### **Acculturation and its Impact on Academic and Social Outcomes**

Acculturation, the process by which people adjust to a new culture, can significantly affect the academic and social experiences of immigrant kids in schools. The acculturation process entails both the preservation of the original cultural identity as well as the acquisition of new cultural behaviors, values, and norms (Berry, 2006). For immigrant students, acculturation can be a difficult process since they may experience prejudice, language obstacles, and cultural misinterpretations (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2008). However, research has shown that acculturation can benefit immigrant students in ways that improve their academic performance and social integration (Okilwa et al, 2022).

Acculturation can have a variety of effects on immigrant students' academic achievements. On the one hand, scholastic performance may be facilitated by high levels of acculturation, where people embrace the norms, values, and practices of the host culture. Less academic difficulty is frequently encountered by immigrant kids who swiftly adjust to the educational system, language, and social expectations of their new environment. Their overall academic performance is improved because they can easily navigate the educational system, interact with teachers and peers, and access the resources that are available (Deslandes et al. 2022).

However, acculturation can also be difficult for immigrant students, especially if they find it difficult to reconcile the expectations of their home culture with those of the host culture. Students from diverse backgrounds who encounter acculturative stress, linguistic hurdles, or discrimination may struggle academically. These difficulties may limit their academic success, cause them to feel less confident, and raise the possibility that they will leave school. To lessen the detrimental effects of acculturation on immigrant kids' academic results, it is critical to understand their particular requirements and to offer them the necessary resources and support (Nae, 2022).

Finally, acculturation significantly affects the social and academic outcomes of immigrant students. Although successful acculturation can result in scholastic successes and social integration, problems and difficulties in the acculturation process can have a negative impact on their academic performance and social well-being (Güler & Yildirim, 2021). For favorable outcomes and to ensure that immigrant students can successfully integrate into the host society, it is crucial to recognize their particular requirements, give them the right support, encourage cultural interaction, and create an inclusive learning environment.

### **Cultural Responsiveness in K-12 Schools**

A teaching strategy known as culturally responsive teaching emphasizes the significance of considering the cultural experiences and backgrounds of students in the classroom. According to Hoytt et al. (2022), culturally sensitive instruction can significantly improve immigrant students' academic performance by fostering a more welcoming learning environment. Studies have indicated that culturally sensitive instruction can boost immigrant students academic performance, levels of engagement, and attitudes toward learning (Abi-Nader, 1990; Lee, 2010).

### **Language Acquisition and Literacy**

These skills are essential for academic success and might be particularly difficult for immigrant kids who are learning a new language. According to studies, bilingual education

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initiatives can help immigrant students perform academically (Agirdag, 2014). Additionally, peer support programs, where more seasoned students assist newcomers with language acquisition and cultural acclimatization, may be effective in fostering academic success and social integration among immigrant students, according to research (Man Chu Lao et al., 2020).

### **Engagement of Families and Communities**

Supporting the academic and social success of immigrant students depends on the involvement of families and communities. Parental involvement in schooling has been linked to better academic performance for immigrant students (Jeynes, 2010; Harris & Robinson, 2016). Furthermore, community-based initiatives like after-school programs and mentoring initiatives can give immigrant students extra support and aid in fostering their academic and social integration (Warren et al., 2009).

### **Mental Health and Well-Being**

The acculturation process causes stress and anxiety for different age groups. Accordingly, it may lead to mental health problems, especially for students. According to studies (Bhugra, 2003; Dow, 2011), the stress of acculturation can lead to depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem among immigrant students. However, studies have also shown that social support from friends, teachers, and family members can lessen the negative effects of acculturation stress and support the development of immigrant students' mental health (Bae, 2020; Juang & Cookston, 2009).

### **Race and Ethnic Identity**

As they negotiate the junction of several cultural identities, immigrant students frequently deal with difficult challenges connected to race and ethnic identity. According to studies immigrant kids can benefit from having a strong sense of ethnic identity by doing better academically and socially (Chavous et al., 2015). Additionally, research suggests that schools can play a significant role in supporting the development of positive racial and ethnic identities among immigrant students by implementing culturally relevant teaching strategies and fostering a supportive learning environment (Hoytt et al. 2022).

### **The Role of Policy and Advocacy**

Designing effective policy and advocacy actions can be very important in assisting immigrant students in K–12 schools. Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), for instance, contains requirements to enhance English language learners' education, particularly those of immigrant kids (Adler-Greene, 2019). The National Council of La Raza and the National Immigration Law Center, among other advocacy groups, have campaigned to advance legislation that upholds the rights and educational possibilities of immigrant students.

Although adjusting to a new educational system and culture presents particular difficulties for immigrant students, they also bring with them a variety of cultural backgrounds and experiences that can enhance their school environment. Promoting the academic and social success of immigrant kids in K–12 institutions require an understanding of their acculturation experiences. The impact of acculturation on academic and social outcomes, the significance of culturally responsive teaching, the role of language development and literacy, family and community engagement, mental health and well-being, and the race and ethnic identity, have all been

highlighted in this literature review. To further advance the rights and educational possibilities of immigrant students in K–12, policy and advocacy actions are essential.

## Methodology

The researcher employed a qualitative research design for this study, more precisely, an exploratory study. To gain a basic grasp of the program or phenomenon of interest, an exploratory case study is conducted. The emphasis is on discovery in order to get an introduction to the structure, dynamics, and context of the topic of interest that is grounded in actual evidence. Exploratory case studies are particularly beneficial for formulating testable hypotheses, research issues to be addressed, and/or design options to be employed in a following study that is more focused and in-depth Yin (2003). The researcher was able to comprehend the acculturation processes of immigrant students in Florida’s K–12 schools better due to this design. The researcher looked into the difficulties they encountered and came up with solutions that educators and schools might employ to help them.

The researcher chose a qualitative case study approach because it allows for greater flexibility and is more amenable to contextual interpretation. This methodology enables researchers to carry out a study that aims to comprehend social situations from the views of participants (Merriam & Associates, 2002). According to Yin (2003), a case study design should be taken into account when (a) the main goal of the study is to address “how” and “why”; (b) the researcher does not have an impact on the participants’ behaviors; and (c) the focus of attention is connected to real-life events. Such traits, in accordance with Yin (2003), set case studies apart from other designs.

Case study approaches, according to Yin (2003), are frequently employed to investigate particular social ideas from the perspectives of people, groups, or organizations. Researchers that want to clarify presumptive causal relationships examine real-world interactions using these types of case studies. When surveys or experimental approaches are not appropriate because to the intricacy of real-world interactions, this method is utilized. Case studies are thus a popular research technique in the fields of psychology, sociology, political science, social work, business, nursing, and education.

Twenty immigrant students from K–12 Florida schools—10 in middle school and 10 in high school—were the subject of this study. Those who fit the following requirements were chosen as participants using purposive sampling (Palinkas L, et al. 2015): both (1) presently enrolled in a K–12 school in Florida and (2) recently arrived in the country. The participants came from a range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and they had lived in the US for anywhere between a few months and ten years. Five middle school kids and five high school students from each group made up the sample, which included an equal number of male and female participants. The age range of the middle school students was roughly between 11 and 14, while the age range of the high school students was roughly between 15 and 18. The researcher tape-recorded each interview, which was then transcribed verbatim by a qualified typist. Additionally, all interviewees received verbatim transcripts of their interviews for their review and approval as part of the researcher's validation process. As expressed in direct quotations, the interview transcripts offered a natural inquiry into the sentiments, attitudes, experiences, and beliefs of the interviewees (Patton, 1990).

A semi-structured interview guide was utilized to gather data. The researcher was able to examine themes and get the participants’ personal opinions because the questions were open-ended and flexible during the interview process.

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Each participant was the subject of an individual semi-structured interview. Depending on the participant's preference, the interviews were conducted either in-person or online using tools like Zoom. Each interview was captured on audio and then transcribed verbatim. The interviews took between 45 and 60 minutes.

To examine the information gathered from the interviews, we performed theme analysis. A detailed interpretation of these patterns was provided using thematic analysis, which involved locating patterns or themes within the data. Deductive analysis was used, starting with the research questions and a review of the data to look for recurring themes. To ensure validity and reliability (George, T 2023), the analysis was carried out by the principal researcher and checked by a second coder. By way of direct quotations, the interview transcripts allowed for a natural inquiry into the awareness, attitudes, experiences, and beliefs of the interviewees (Patton, 1990).

Before conducting the interviews, as an independent researcher, the researcher got permission from the parents of the participants who were underage. Participants were given the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time, and informed consent was obtained before they agreed to participate in the study. Participants received guarantees of confidentiality, and the research community's ethical norms were followed in maintaining the security of their personal information.

### **Limitations**

The generalization of the findings may be impacted by various limitations in the study. First off, the sample size was somewhat small, which would limit the findings' applicability to other immigrant students in Florida's K–12 institutions. Furthermore, we used purposive sampling to choose participants, which might have skewed the results by choosing those who were more readily available or willing to participate. The researcher overcame these drawbacks by choosing individuals from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds and by openly disclosing our selection strategy throughout the study. Despite these drawbacks, the researcher thought that the research offers insightful understandings into the experiences of immigrant students in Florida's K–12 schools and may guide further study and policy in this area.

### **Findings and Discussion**

Insights on the acculturation experiences of immigrant students in K–12 schools in Florida were the goal of this research. The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with 20 participants who matched the inclusion criteria in order to accomplish this goal. With the aid of thematic analysis, the researcher was able to find patterns and themes in the information we gathered from these interviews that related to the experiences of these students. The examination of the data revealed a number of patterns that shed light on the intricate acculturation processes that immigrant students go through to adjust to a new culture and academic setting. Language hurdles, cultural differences, social isolation, and the value of encouraging friendships with students and teachers were some of these themes. The researcher also identified several methods that educators and schools might employ to aid immigrant kids in their process of assimilating, including offering language assistance, cultivating multiculturalism, and encouraging a feeling of community and belonging. The study contributes significantly to the body of knowledge on immigrant students' assimilation processes and could influence future study and policy in this field.

### **Theme 1: Language Barriers**

The study of the data revealed several themes, the first of which was the universal problem of language barriers that all participants encountered. Participants acknowledged that it was challenging for them to understand the lessons and interact with their teachers and peers due to their limited English skills. Due to their language barriers, many participants experienced irritation and a sensation of being cut off from their academic environment. It's difficult to grasp what is being taught in class, said one participant. "On sometimes, I want to give up. It's difficult to make friends when you can't speak the same language fluently," said another participant. Several other participants, who also expressed feelings of exclusion and isolation, agreed with these sentiments. One participant said "Idioms and slang language makes dialogs very difficult. This includes the dialogs with the teachers." The lack of language lessons and translation services was another issue raised by participants as one of the few resources they had to develop their English. One participant said "people expect us to learn language in natural ways. I mean blending us with the other students." These findings underline the need for schools and educators to provide enough language support in order to help immigrant students flourish academically and socially. Language barriers are a significant difficulty for immigrant students in K–12 schools in Florida, according to the findings.

### **Theme 2: Cultural Adjustment**

The results of our data analysis showed that individuals had a difficult time fitting into American culture. Many of the participants described how they felt torn between two worlds, trying to maintain their roots while also wanting to embrace American culture. The cultural differences that they encountered, particularly in terms of social customs and behaviors, left some individuals feeling overwhelmed. "I come from a collectivistic culture where family and community are supreme," as one participant noted. "Here, individualism and professional achievement are important. It's challenging to adapt to that." Other participants confirmed this response when they discussed how important belonging and community were in their native cultures and how difficult it was for them to adapt to the more individualistic culture of the US. Due to cultural differences, participants also mentioned having trouble establishing friends and participating in social activities. Some participants shared that they found it difficult to understand American humor. Others who participated in the study mentioned how challenging it was for them to participate in extracurricular activities since they were unfamiliar with the essential cultural background or experience. These findings indicate that cultural acculturation poses a significant challenge for immigrant students in K–12 settings in Florida and highlight the need for educators and schools to create a welcoming environment that values and celebrates diversity.

### **Theme 3: Support from Educators**

Participants emphasized the need of supporting instructors as being crucial to academic development and good acculturation. They knew that teachers and counselors who took the time to understand their specific issues and provide tailored support were a huge help to their academic and social growth. Participants described how these instructors made them feel seen, heard, and respected, which boosted their motivation and confidence.

One participant made a point of highlighting how their English teacher's encouragement improved their academic results. They expressed gratitude for their teacher's understanding and support, which enabled them to overcome the language barrier and perform well on their



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assignments. Another participant also described how their guidance counselor's sympathetic nature and emotional support gave them a sense of comfort and belonging, particularly during trying times.

Sixteen participants stressed the significance of teachers fostering a friendly and inclusive school climate. They described how they felt more welcomed and respected when they had teachers who actively encouraged inclusion and distinguished diversity. "I appreciate when my teachers make an effort to learn about my culture and include it in the classroom," one participant said. "It shows that they are interested in me as a person, not just a student." In general, the participants understood the critical role that educators play in fostering their acculturation experiences as well as the influence that supportive and inclusive school environments can have on their achievement in both academics and social interactions.

### **Theme 4: Family Support**

Participants also emphasized the critical role of family support in their acculturation experiences. Those who felt supported and understood by their families reported higher levels of resilience, self-esteem, and cultural identity. They felt more connected to their heritage and more empowered to navigate the challenges of acculturation. One participant stated, "My parents are my rock. They understand what I'm going through because they went through it themselves. They give me the strength to keep going." Another participant shared, "My sister is my best friend. We share everything and support each other through thick and thin. I don't know what I would do without her."

### **Theme 5: Recommendations for Educators**

Participants made insightful suggestions for educators on how to support immigrant students more effectively during their acculturation processes. They stressed the value of educating teachers and counselors on anti-discrimination laws, language learning, and cultural competency. Ten participants believed that teachers and counselors lacked the abilities and knowledge necessary to support immigrant students in an effective manner. "Teachers need to understand that we come from different backgrounds and have different needs," said one participant. "To aid in our learning, they must be able to modify their teaching approach."

Participants also suggested that schools should be able to pay for items like cultural events and mental health services. Due to the fact that many people had difficulties with their English, they thought that language aid was essential. Participants encouraged schools to host events like foreign cuisine festivals to create possibilities for intercultural discourse because they shared a desire to share their cultural heritage with others. One participant asserted that "if we can share our cultures with others, it can help us feel more included and less isolated."

Participants emphasized the need for more mental health services in schools. Seven participants disclosed that their struggles with mental health problems like anxiety and depression were a direct result of the adjustment difficulties they encountered in school. They recommended that schools should provide children with additional tools to deal with these difficulties and promote their mental health. It's crucial for schools to understand that immigrant students confront particular difficulties and might require more attention, according to one participant. "We can cope and thrive with the aid of mental health services."

In conclusion, our study highlighted the challenges and experiences of immigrant students in K-12 schools in Florida. Our findings showed that language barriers, cultural adjustment, support from educators, family support, and recommendations for educators were all significant themes in

their acculturation experiences. These findings can inform the development of more effective interventions and policies to better support immigrant students in their academic and social integration. As one participant stated, “We are all here to learn and grow together. We just need a little extra support sometimes to reach our full potential.”

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the purpose of this study was to investigate how immigrant students acclimated to life in K–12 institutions in Florida. This study leads educators and policymakers to learn more about the potential and difficulties that these students confront as they attempt to fit into a new cultural environment. Seven primary themes emerged from our study of the data. The conceptual framework we offered, which drew from the literature on immigrant schooling and the acculturation theory, was used to further examine and interpret these issues.

This study’s key contribution is that it clarifies the intricacy of the acculturation process and the various factors that influence it. The study highlights the significance of education in promoting or impeding acculturation by concentrating on the experiences of students in K–12 institutions. According to the study, discrimination, cultural differences, and language limitations are all important obstacles that might have an impact on immigrant kids’ academic and social achievements. Social support from friends, teachers, and family, on the other hand, can lessen the negative impacts of these difficulties and foster a feeling of community and cultural identity. The implications of our findings extend beyond the field of education to society at large. As immigration to the country remains high, it is crucial to comprehend the struggles faced by immigrant students and to give them the tools and support they require to succeed. Schools may help to create a more inclusive and fair society by recognizing the diversity of cultures and languages in the classroom and by fostering intercultural awareness and respect. The study also emphasizes the necessity of educational policy and practice improvements that acknowledge and address the difficulties faced by immigrant students.

This study can serve as a springboard for further inquiries into the acculturation experiences of immigrant students in diverse contexts and from various origins. Particularly studies that follow students over time can provide a full knowledge of the acculturation process and its outcomes. Furthermore, comparative studies that examine the experiences of immigrant students in various countries can help to pinpoint the cultural and contextual factors that affect acculturation. The challenges and opportunities faced by immigrant students in the educational system can also be better understood by research that considers the perspectives of educators and parents.

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### **Notes on Contributor**

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