

International Students' Sense of School Belonging and Mental Health Through the Lens of Cross Cultural Adaptation: An Analysis Based on High School Stage Population (15-18 Year Old)

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Abstract: As economic globalization intensifies and international education expands, an increasing number of international students are enrolling in high schools. During the critical period of adolescence and the process of adapting to cultural changes, their mental health status is increasingly attracting people's attention. Therefore, this article analyzes the relationship between high school international students' sense of belonging to school and their mental health based on cross-cultural adaptation theory. Research has found that cross-cultural adaptation constitutes a fundamental variable in students' school life, directly affecting the establishment of their sense of belonging to the school; The sense of belonging to school plays an important mediating and moderating role between cross-cultural adaptation and mental health; The mental health status is the comprehensive result of the interaction between cross-cultural adaptation and school belonging. Accordingly, this study puts forward targeted intervention strategies at four interrelated levels—school, teacher, peer, and family-societal—to offer both theoretical insight and practical direction for fostering the mental health development of international high school students.

Keywords: Cross-cultural adaptation, Sense of belonging to the school, mental health, International students, high school stage.

1. Introduction

Since the 21st century, internationalization of education has become an important trend in global education development. An increasing number of high school students are pursuing education overseas or enrolling in international schools, thereby constituting an expanding cohort of secondary-level international students [1]. Typically aged 15 to 18, these students are undergoing accelerated physical and psychological development characteristic of adolescence. Psychological development is not yet mature, and ideas and concepts are constantly forming.

Therefore, starting from cross-cultural adaptation, this article explores the correlation between international high school students' sense of school belonging and their mental health, analyzes the internal relationship between the three, and proposes effective improvement suggestions, hoping to be helpful for the education and teaching of international high schools.

2. Cross Cultural Adaptation as A Fundamental Variable in High School International Students' School Life

Cross cultural adaptation is an individual's process of adjusting their thoughts, concepts, and behaviors to a new culture after entering a new cultural context. As international high school students, their cross-cultural adaptation is one of the fundamental variables in their school life, which can affect their school experience and development.

The high school is the period when adolescents experience intense physical and mental development accompanied by an increase in their concept of themselves. Stronger emotionality,

stronger desire for peers connection and basic shaping of value system and world view. With both cross-cultural transition and development dilemma of high school students themselves, it is inevitable that they face tremendous psychological burden. International students not only have to go through adolescence development dilemma but also deal with more troubles caused by cross-cultural differences [2].

The pressures on the international student which influence intercultural adjustment arise from a number of different sources, with language difficulties being those aspects most immediately affecting study in class and course results (respectively), as well as the ability of normal communication between them, on one hand, with teachers and classmates. The main cultural factors are value systems, study style, and ways of communication. If they don't understand the local culture easily, it can cause misunderstanding or even friction between them. The academic gap consists of learning style, assessment systems, curriculum systems that may cause some extent of learning anxiety for college students; The social alienation is the influence from the breakup in interpersonal relationships and the lack of socialization and cultural integration during this process. Transition to college life for first-year students can be challenging in terms of communication issues; alienation; and isolation.

International students adopt different coping strategies for the aforementioned adaptation pressures. Integration refers to international students actively integrating local culture on the basis of their original mother culture, without excluding or rejecting new environments and cultures, which often leads to good adaptation effects [3]. Assimilation refers to international students completely abandoning their original mother culture and actively accepting new cultures, which can easily lead to confusion in cultural self-identity. Separation refers to the tendency of international students to stick to their existing culture and be unwilling to engage with

and understand other cultures, which can easily lead to social isolation. Marginalization strategy refers to the inability of students to maintain their mother culture and integrate into new cultures, which is often the cause of the most serious psychological adaptation problems. The selection of these adaptation strategies mentioned above will have an impact on students' performance, interpersonal relationships, and mental health during their school years.

Cross cultural adaptation status runs through students' entire school life. Students with good adaptation will better integrate into classroom teaching activities, have positive interactions with teachers and classmates, and can better utilize various resources in the school; Students with poor adaptation may experience learning setbacks, interpersonal communication barriers, and psychological anxiety, which can affect their overall quality of life in school. From this, it can be seen that understanding the stages experienced by high school international students in the process of cross-cultural adaptation is a prerequisite for studying their sense of belonging to the school and their mental health status.

3. The Mediating and Moderating Role of School Belonging in Cross-Cultural Adaptation

School sense of belonging refers to the psychological feeling that students feel accepted and respected by others in the campus environment, and are willing to accept their support. It mainly manifests as a sense of identity with the school, satisfaction with the teacher-student relationship, and enthusiasm for participating in various school activities [4]. For high school international students, their sense of belonging to school is not only influenced by their cross-cultural adaptation status, but also serves as a mediator between cross-cultural adaptation and mental health.

The sense of belonging to school largely depends on students' cross-cultural adaptation status. If students can communicate and interact with others smoothly in school, understand and abide by the school's rules and regulations, actively speak up and participate in extracurricular activities in class, they will gradually develop a sense of identification and attachment to school life; On the contrary, it is easy to create a sense of alienation. The sense of belonging to school can be affected by the discomfort caused by cultural alienation and the loneliness generated by the unfamiliarity in interpersonal relationships.

First, on one hand, in terms of concrete mechanism, cross-cultural adaptation may influence school belonging through different paths. The improvement of language allows students to have deeper communications with each other as well as build more meaningful connections between them. Deepening understanding about culture could help students understand the cultural clues given by schools so that they would make corresponding behaviors for meeting cultural demands [5]. Smooth learning process might also bring students a successful experience and acknowledgment from others, enhancing their own esteem. Social support is a feeling that students were cared for, and became a related relation. The role played by the above factors determines if and how students felt as a member at school.

The sense of belonging to school plays a mediating role between cross-cultural adaptation and mental health. Cross cultural adaptation can indirectly affect students' mental health by influencing their sense of belonging to the school.

When students cannot form a sense of belonging to the school due to poor adaptation, they lose a good psychological protective umbrella, which can easily lead to psychological problems; On the other hand, even if students do not adapt well, if they can obtain a sense of belonging to the school through other means, their mental health may be maintained to a certain extent. And the sense of belonging to school can link cross-cultural adaptation with mental health, becoming an important link in the chain of the three relationships.

And the sense of belonging to school plays a moderating effect, which can buffer the negative impact of cross-cultural adaptation difficulties on mental health. Because students with a high sense of belonging can receive more emotional comfort and practical help from school when facing cross-cultural adaptation difficulties, thereby reducing the harm of stress to their mental health; Sense of belonging is like a psychological buffer, which can help students improve their ability to overcome difficulties to a certain extent, influence their cognitive evaluation of stress events, and enable them to adopt better ways and methods to cope with stress events [6]. This adjustment method is beneficial for students who are temporarily in a state of discomfort, in order to overcome difficulties and prevent maladjustment from turning into psychological disorders.

The protective function of school belonging has a certain psychological basis. Sense of belonging can meet people's basic psychological needs, create a sense of security and value, and enhance psychological resilience; A sense of belonging provides a certain social support pathway, allowing for substantial assistance when faced with difficulties; A sense of belonging can promote positive identity recognition and help students establish new self continuity. The comprehensive effect of the above psychological resources enables students to maintain a relatively good psychological state under the pressure of cross-cultural adaptation.

4. Psychological Health: The Results of the Interaction between Cross Cultural Adaptation and School Belonging

Psychological health refers to an individual's good psychological, emotional, and social adaptability. The mental health status of high school international students is the result of the mutual influence of cross-cultural adaptation and school belonging.

The psychological distress of high school international students is specifically reflected in three aspects: anxiety mainly refers to concerns about learning and social aspects; Depression mainly refers to the feeling of loneliness and subsequent emotional suppression caused by being isolated; Self identification confusion mainly refers to the state of being unable to determine who one is and oscillating back and forth between two cultures [7].

Psychological health is directly influenced by cross-cultural adaptation. Long term inability to adapt to daily life can lead to chronic stress reactions, which consume students' mental energy; The confusion caused by cultural conflicts can lead to feelings of frustration and powerlessness; Lack of interpersonal support can make it difficult for students to find a place to release negative emotions.

School belonging is an important buffer against poor mental health. Higher school belonging among students was associated with lower rates of anxiety and depression, along

with higher levels of life satisfaction and self esteem. Belonging keeps students' mental well-being by satisfying the need for relationships and abilities, while also serving as a source of social supports that can buffer against the adverse impacts of stress.

Adaptability and sense of belonging are interdependent. Inappropriateness can affect a sense of belonging, and a lack of belonging can amplify the effects of maladjustment, leading to a negative cycle; Good adaptability can establish a sense of belonging, which strengthens the positive effects of adaptability and creates a virtuous cycle. The level of mental health largely depends on which cycle an individual is in.

Developmental: Psychological states are not static and unchanging. In a new environment, students may experience short-term psychological maladjustment. As the adaptation process develops, some students will gradually recover, while others may not be able to adapt smoothly. Grasping this characteristic can provide timely assistance to students who are prone to psychological disorders [8].

5. Intervention Strategies to Enhance International Students' Sense of Belonging and Mental Health

Based on the theoretical analysis of the relationship between cross-cultural adaptation, school belonging, and mental health, it is necessary to systematically design intervention strategies from multiple levels to promote the positive development and mental health of high school international students.

5.1. School Level: Building A Campus Support System and Cross-Cultural Curriculum That Integrates Diverse Cultures

Firstly, facilitate cross-cultural adaptation for international students at the policy and institutional levels. As schools are the main activity venues for international students, it is necessary to establish a multicultural integration educational philosophy, treat cultural diversity as an education rather than a management, adopt a tolerant attitude towards cultural differences, and give full respect.

Schools can also establish courses specifically designed for cross-cultural adaptation, allowing students to understand cultural differences and engage in effective cross-cultural communication to enhance their cultural awareness. These courses should be taught from the beginning of freshman year, such as introducing the local cultural environment, school regulations, and learning methods. The course format can be flexibly carried out, such as special lectures, workshops, experiential learning, group discussions, etc., to increase students' sense of participation and gain.

The second is to establish a supporting system. Schools need to establish a comprehensive psychological counseling system and service mechanism, equipped with professional psychological counseling teachers, to provide individual and group psychological counseling for international students; Psychological counseling should consider the influence of cultural factors and adopt effective intervention methods for international students; We can also establish a dedicated position for international student affairs to coordinate and resolve issues related to international students' academic, personal, and mental health. We provide them with all necessary assistance.

In the school environment, schools can organize various

cultural activities to increase understanding and communication among students from different cultural backgrounds [9]. International cultural festivals, cultural display days, cross-cultural dialogue salons, and more can showcase the mother culture of international students or help local students understand and accept other cultures, thereby promoting cultural integration.

5.2. Teacher Level: Enhancing Teachers' Cross-Cultural Sensitivity and Psychological Counseling Abilities

Teachers are the most frequently contacted school personnel by students on a daily basis, and their attitudes and behaviors directly affect the school experience of international students. Enhancing teachers' cross-cultural sensitivity is an important prerequisite for effectively supporting international students.

Schools can conduct cross-cultural education and training to enable teachers to understand different cultural characteristics, recognize the impact of cultural differences on teaching communication, reflect on their own cultural biases and stereotypes, and enhance teachers' cultural understanding and communication skills in cultural value comparison, cross-cultural communication skills, cultural adaptation theory, and other aspects.

School teachers should possess basic psychological counseling skills, identify students' abnormal conditions, provide simple emotional counseling, and suggest seeking professional psychological counseling when necessary. Teachers should be familiar with the common symptoms of mental stress and cultural shock among international students, be highly alert to their abnormal emotional states, and provide timely comfort and guidance [10].

In face-to-face teaching, instructors could practice differentiation to provide proper help or challenge according to the English level and previous experience of foreign students; build a classroom climate in which student voice is valued and where multiple viewpoints are shared and other cultures' values and beliefs respected, making international students feel welcomed and accepted. On the one hand, teachers could also inspire international students to communicate and have positive peer relations among all students via cooperative learning or something alike.

5.3. Peer Level: Promote Deep Interaction Between Chinese and Foreign Students, Establish Cultural Bridges and Peer Assistance Mechanisms

Companions are one of the important psychological resources for high school students, especially for international students. Companions are not only the main way for them to obtain social support, but also the reference for them to understand culture. Strengthening in-depth exchanges between Chinese and foreign students is beneficial for the sense of belonging of international production schools and obtaining social support.

Schools can establish a peer support system by assigning experienced students as peer volunteers to newly enrolled foreign students, introducing them to the school's rules and regulations, making friends, and providing specific support and guidance for various difficulties encountered in learning and life; For Chinese students who are arranged, it is an opportunity to experience foreign cultures and develop their

own abilities.

The second is to use extracurricular activities for interpersonal communication. Schools can encourage international students to participate in various types of clubs, sports events, cultural performances, and other activities, providing them with opportunities to showcase themselves, develop their interests and hobbies, and increase their interpersonal contact with classmates. In this process, similar interests and goals can often surpass cultural barriers and become a bond for making friends.

In addition, schools can also establish cross-cultural exchange platforms, hold cultural exchange activities, international student symposiums, etc., providing more opportunities for international students to exchange their experiences and feelings with each other, achieve cultural dissemination through mutual understanding and respect, and facilitate local students to understand foreign cultures and cultivate a tolerant attitude.

5.4. Family and Social Dimensions: Collaboration between Family and School and the Creation of a Community Cultural Inclusive Environment

Firstly, family is the most important and core support network. With the attention of family members, the mental health of international students will be well maintained. Parents need to have good interaction with schools in their country, timely understand their children's learning and living conditions and mental health status, and provide necessary care and assistance; If international students study abroad, although their parents are separated in space, they can demonstrate care through regular communication, understand the students' ideological dynamics, and provide guidance on key issues.

Schools should establish smooth channels for family communication, introduce the school's educational philosophy and work arrangements in parent teacher conferences, home visits, and regular reports, and explore how to cooperate with the school to do a good job in supporting students; Teach parents about the psychological development and cross-cultural adaptation of adolescents, so that they can better understand and accept the difficulties their children face and adopt appropriate parenting methods.

The living environment of the community will also impact the adaptation of international students, an open and multicultural community atmosphere help international students to get wider community and social space, as well as additional social capital. Multicultural events held within a community may improve awareness of, and communications between, the various cultures represented there. Service organizations could offer their services in several languages, making available community resources such as the campus library and other libraries in the area; cultural centers; and other public cultural facilities can offer foreign students to learn and entertain in their spare time.

6. Conclusion

This article examines how school belonging relates to the mental health of international high school students in China, framed within the context of cross-cultural adaptation. The author believes that cross-cultural adaptation is a fundamental

variable in students' school life, which has a direct impact on their sense of belonging in school; And the sense of belonging to school is in a middle position between cross-cultural adaptation and mental health, which is to some extent influenced by the former and further affects the state of the latter, that is, it has a mediating effect; At the same time, it can also serve as a buffering factor for the relationship between cross-cultural adaptation and mental health, playing a regulatory role. Further have a protective effect on mental health; And mental health is the result of the interaction between cross-cultural adaptation and school belonging, which can to some extent reflect students' psychological situation under the interaction of the two. Future research could also explore development of other international student groups, such as the role that institutional type plays in their development, their developmental trajectories over time, and how effective different interventions are for them—in other words, to contribute to a scientific understanding of these youth as well as support their positive outcomes via continued research.

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