International Journal of Research and Review
[Indexed, Peer-Reviewed Journal]
Volume 13; Issue: 11; November 2026
Website: www.ijrrjournal.com
E-ISSN: 2349-9788; P-ISSN: 2454-2237

Language Barriers, Psychological Stress, and School Belonging Among Migrant Adolescents: A Cross-Sectional Study

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.52403/ijrr.20261101

ABSTRACT

Background: Moving to another country can make school more stressful when adolescents must study in a language they are still learning.
Objective: This study examined associations between perceived language difficulty, psychological stress, school belonging, and sleep difficulties among migrant secondary-school students.
Materials and Methods: A cross-sectional survey was conducted among 120 adolescents aged 14–18 years at two secondary schools in north-western Spain. Forty students were included in each of three groups based on low, moderate, or high perceived language difficulty. Stress, belonging, and weekly sleep difficulties were compared using one-way analysis of variance. Correlations and a chi-square test were also calculated.
Results: Mean stress scores increased from 2.18 in the low-difficulty group to 3.66 in the high-difficulty group, while belonging scores decreased from 4.22 to 2.83. Students with high difficulty also reported more nights of sleep problems (3.45 versus 1.50 per week). Language difficulty was positively correlated with stress ($r = 0.74$) and negatively correlated with school belonging ($r = -0.75$); both $p < 0.001$.
Conclusion: Greater difficulty using the school language was associated with more stress, weaker school belonging, and more sleep complaints. The cross-sectional design did not establish causation.

Keywords: migrant adolescents; language barriers; psychological stress; school belonging; sleep difficulties; secondary education

INTRODUCTION

Starting school in another country is not only about learning new subjects. It often means learning how to speak in class, make friends, understand teachers, and deal with tests in a language that does not yet feel natural. A student may know an answer but still struggle to explain it quickly. These situations can become particularly difficult during adolescence, when students are also trying to build confidence and fit in with their peers. The experience is important for schools because it may affect both education and everyday psychological well-being.

Migration does not automatically lead to mental health problems. Families move for different reasons, and young people bring different strengths, languages, and support networks. However, changing countries can introduce extra pressures. The concept of acculturative stress describes emotional strain connected with adapting to a new cultural and social environment. A review of studies on immigrant youth reported links between acculturative stress and several

mental health outcomes, including anxiety and depressive symptoms.[1] It is therefore useful to look beyond grades and ask how students are feeling while they study.

Schools are an especially important place for this research because teenagers spend much of their week there. A review of school-based mental health support for migrant children found that services can be affected by cultural and contextual barriers, including stigma and difficulties connecting families, schools, and mental health providers.[2] This does not mean that every migrant student needs treatment. Rather, it shows that schools should notice problems early and avoid assuming that all students experience the same situation.

Another concept relevant to this project is school belonging. This means feeling accepted, respected, and part of the school community. A recent review focusing specifically on immigrant adolescents highlighted the influence of friendships, teacher support, family circumstances, and opportunities to use different languages.[3] A wider meta-analysis also found that students' relationships with peers and teachers, along with school safety and emotional stability, are important factors in belonging.[4]

Language difficulty and school belonging may be connected in several ways. Teenagers who feel embarrassed about speaking can avoid answering questions, joining conversations, or asking for help. If they participate less, classmates may not get to know them as easily. On the other hand, patient teachers and supportive classmates may make mistakes feel less frightening. This means the same level of language knowledge could lead to very different school experiences depending on how a student is treated.

Recent research comparing immigrant, refugee, and non-immigrant adolescents has considered whether support from teachers and a sense of school belonging help protect students' mental health and adjustment.[5] Reviews of school programmes for recently arrived young people have also identified promising approaches involving social-emotional support and school inclusion, although the available evidence is still limited.[6] These studies helped shape the idea for the present project: language barriers should be examined together with stress and belonging, instead of being treated only as an academic problem.

The main aim of this study was to investigate whether migrant teenagers who reported greater difficulty using the language of instruction also reported higher psychological stress, weaker school belonging, and more problems sleeping. A secondary aim was to examine the strength of these associations through group comparisons and correlation analysis. The outcomes were treated as self-reported experiences rather than clinical diagnoses.

Three hypotheses guided the analysis. First, students reporting high language difficulty were expected to have higher average stress scores than students reporting low difficulty. Second, students with more language difficulty were expected to report weaker school belonging. Third, the high-difficulty group was expected to report more nights of difficulty sleeping. These questions were relevant because language support and emotional well-being may need to be considered together in schools receiving newly arrived adolescents.

MATERIALS & METHODS

Study design and setting

A cross-sectional survey was carried out at two secondary schools in north-western Spain during September 2026. Both schools enrolled migrant adolescents receiving instruction mainly in Spanish and, for some subjects, Galician. School names were not reported in order to protect the privacy of the participants and institutions.

Participants and sampling

The study included 120 first-generation migrant adolescents aged 14–18 years who had entered a Spanish secondary school after moving from another country. The mean age was 15.79 years (standard deviation 1.11), and the mean period of residence in Spain

was 3.56 years. Quota sampling was used to recruit 40 students reporting low language difficulty, 40 reporting moderate difficulty, and 40 reporting high difficulty. The balanced groups allowed direct comparisons but were not intended to represent the population distribution of language proficiency.

Questionnaire and measures

A brief anonymous questionnaire was administered. The first section recorded age, years living in Spain, and students' perceived difficulty using the language of instruction during lessons, group work, and tests. Students selected one overall language-difficulty category and rated difficulty on a five-point scale. Categories were used for group comparisons, and the five-point measure was used for correlations.

Psychological stress was measured using short statements about feeling tense before class, worrying about speaking, feeling overwhelmed by schoolwork, and finding it difficult to relax after lessons. Responses ranged from one (never) to five (very often), and an average score was calculated. School belonging was measured through statements about feeling accepted, having someone to talk to, and feeling comfortable joining activities; higher scores indicated stronger belonging. The items were designed specifically for this study and were not a validated diagnostic instrument.

Sleep difficulty was recorded as the number of nights during the past seven days when the student had trouble falling asleep or sleeping well, from zero to seven nights. The questionnaire also asked for a one-to-five rating of perceived teacher support, used to describe the sample. Sleep problems were treated as self-reported experiences, not diagnosed insomnia. The use of short questions made the study easy to understand, although it also limited how much detail each measure could capture.

Procedure and ethics

Participants and their guardians received written information explaining the study's aims, the voluntary nature of participation, and confidentiality. Guardian consent and student assent were obtained before students completed the anonymous questionnaires during a supervised school period. Participants were not asked for names or identity numbers, could skip questions, and were informed that they could stop at any time. A school counsellor was available if a question caused discomfort.

The study protocol was reviewed by an Institutional Research Ethics Committee under approval number SREP-2026-014. School permission was obtained before recruitment, and only anonymised questionnaire responses were included in the analysis.

Statistical Analysis

The data were entered and analysed using Python 3.13 and the SciPy statistical library (version 1.17.0). Numeric variables were summarised as means and standard deviations, and categorical variables as counts and percentages. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) compared stress, school belonging, and nights of sleep difficulty across the three language-difficulty groups. Pearson's correlation measured associations between the five-point language-difficulty score and each outcome. The chi-square test compared the proportion of students reporting difficulty sleeping on at least three nights per week. All tests were two-sided, and $p < 0.05$ was considered statistically significant.

RESULT

A total of 120 adolescents participated, with 40 in each language-difficulty group. Mean age was 15.79 years and mean time living in Spain was 3.56 years. Baseline characteristics are summarised in Table 1. Average age was similar across groups, while the mean five-point language-difficulty score rose from 1.45 in the low-difficulty group to 4.41 in the high-difficulty group.

Table 1. Characteristics of the participants by perceived language difficulty

Characteristic	Low (n=40)	Moderate (n=40)	High (n=40)
Age, years	15.70 ±1.02	15.93 ±1.25	15.75 ±1.08
Time in Spain, years	3.18 ±1.48	3.79 ±1.68	3.72 ±1.42
Language difficulty (1–5)	1.45 ±0.30	2.87 ±0.29	4.41 ±0.38
Perceived teacher support (1–5)	3.69 ±0.59	3.58 ±0.70	3.32 ±0.66

Note: Values are mean ± standard deviation. Language difficulty and teacher support were rated from 1 to 5.

Students who reported high language difficulty also reported higher stress and weaker school belonging. Mean stress was 2.18 in the low-difficulty group, 2.81 in the moderate group, and 3.66 in the high group. Belonging showed the opposite pattern, decreasing from 4.22 to 2.83 across the low- and high-difficulty groups. Both group differences were statistically significant ($p < 0.001$; Table 2).

Table 2. Group comparisons for perceived stress, school belonging, and sleep difficulty

Outcome	Low (n=40)	Moderate (n=40)	High (n=40)	ANOVA F	p value
Stress (1–5)	2.18 ±0.56	2.81 ±0.46	3.66 ±0.51	83.53	<0.001
Belonging (1–5)	4.22 ±0.41	3.46 ±0.45	2.83 ±0.46	99.57	<0.001
Sleep (nights/week)	1.50 ±1.04	2.40 ±1.01	3.45 ±1.04	36.09	<0.001

Note: Values are mean ± SD. Sleep indicates nights with difficulty sleeping per week. ANOVA = one-way analysis of variance; all F statistics have 2 and 117 degrees of freedom. Higher stress or sleep values indicate more difficulty; higher belonging means stronger inclusion.

Students in the high-difficulty group also reported sleep difficulty on more nights (mean 3.45 nights per week) than the low-difficulty group (mean 1.50). Reporting problems on at least three nights was more common in the high group (32 of 40 students, 80.0%) than in the low group (9 of 40, 22.5%). This difference was statistically significant on the chi-square test ($\chi^2 = 26.87$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.001$). The numbers and percentages are presented in Table 3, rather than repeated in a graph.

Table 3. Reporting sleep difficulty on three or more nights per week

Language difficulty	≥3 nights, n (%)	0–2 nights, n (%)	Total
Low	9 (22.5%)	31 (77.5%)	40
Moderate	18 (45.0%)	22 (55.0%)	40
High	32 (80.0%)	8 (20.0%)	40

Note: Sleep difficulty was a self-reported item, not a clinical diagnosis. Chi-square test: $\chi^2(2) = 26.87$, $p < 0.001$.

The correlation analysis showed the same general pattern. Perceived language difficulty was positively associated with stress ($r = 0.74$, $p < 0.001$) and nights of sleep difficulty ($r = 0.59$, $p < 0.001$), and negatively associated with school belonging ($r = -0.75$, $p < 0.001$). These associations did not establish whether language difficulty caused the other outcomes.

DISCUSSION

This study explored whether migrant students who found the language of instruction more difficult also experienced more stress and weaker connections to school. Both patterns were observed. The association with sleep problems was also significant, although sleep may be influenced by many factors outside the classroom.

One reason language barriers might be related to stress is that school requires students to communicate almost constantly. Understanding a textbook is only one part of the work. Students may have to respond immediately in class, explain their ideas during group projects, and complete tests under time pressure. It is possible to understand the subject and still feel anxious about making a mistake in the school language. This may explain why language

difficulty was connected with stress rather than only with academic performance. Previous research has identified acculturative stress as relevant to immigrant youth's mental health, although it includes many pressures beyond language alone.[1]

The pattern for belonging may be especially important. School is not just a place where lessons happen; it is also where teenagers make friendships and develop confidence. When students struggle to join conversations, they may feel that everyone else already knows how the school works. Research on immigrant adolescent belonging highlights social relationships and supportive school environments, which suggests that feeling accepted may matter as much as formal language instruction.[3] Wider school-belonging research points in the same direction, with peer support and teacher relationships among the factors linked with stronger belonging.[4]

This does not mean students who speak less confidently always have poor relationships. A welcoming class may help someone participate before their grammar is perfect. Teachers can also explain difficult vocabulary, give students time to answer, or let them prepare a response in pairs before speaking to the whole class. These small changes may reduce pressure without lowering academic expectations. They may also help classmates understand that language fluency and knowledge are not the same thing.

The association with sleep was important because it linked school experience with students' daily well-being outside lessons. Worry about participation or homework might affect how easily an adolescent falls asleep. However, this explanation cannot be confirmed by a cross-sectional survey. Sleep is also affected by screen use, family routines, homework, health, and the stress of moving to a new country. The questionnaire did not measure these factors in enough detail to separate their effects.

Previous studies on school adaptation and mental health among immigrant and refugee adolescents have examined teacher support and belonging as possible protective resources.[5] The present study did not test whether these resources prevent stress, but it raises a related question: could stronger support from teachers and friends be associated with lower stress among students who face similar language difficulties?

A practical implication is that schools should not wait until a student has very poor grades before offering support. Asking a teenager whether they feel comfortable speaking, whether they have someone to ask for help, and whether they feel included could reveal difficulties that grades alone would miss. Mental health support for migrant young people also needs to consider language and cultural access, as described in a review of school-based services.[2] A review of school adjustment programmes found some encouraging results, but also noted gaps in the evidence, so schools should evaluate new approaches rather than assume every programme will work.[6]

Several limitations should be considered. First, participants came from only two schools, and quota sampling created equally sized language-difficulty groups, so the results should not be generalised to all migrant adolescents. Second, the stress and belonging questionnaires were brief and study-specific rather than formally validated measures. Third, the analysis relied on self-reported experiences, which can be affected by memory and personal interpretation. Fourth, the survey did not examine discrimination, family support, previous language experience, or academic achievement in enough detail. Finally, the cross-sectional design did not show whether language difficulty preceded changes in well-being.

Further research should include more schools, a broader recruitment method, and validated psychological measures. Interviews could help explain which classroom situations create the most pressure and which forms of teacher support are useful. Following students over time would also make it possible to examine whether

stress and belonging change as language confidence improves.

Overall, the findings suggest that learning the school language and feeling accepted at school are connected aspects of adolescent adjustment. Support should allow students to demonstrate their knowledge while their language skills are still developing.

CONCLUSION

Migrant adolescents who reported greater difficulty using the school language also reported more psychological stress, weaker school belonging, and more nights with sleep difficulties. These associations were consistent across group comparisons and correlations. Language support and a welcoming school environment may therefore be relevant to adolescent well-being. However, the restricted sample and cross-sectional design mean that the findings cannot establish cause and effect.

Declaration by Authors

Acknowledgement: None

Source of Funding: None

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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How to cite this article: Polina Shkolnyk. Language barriers, psychological stress, and school belonging among migrant adolescents: a cross-sectional study. *International Journal of Research and Review*. 2026; 13(11): 1-6.
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.52403/ijrr.20261101*

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