Effects of Group Counselling on the Multicultural Identity and Sense of Belonging of Adolescent TCKs in a Chiang Mai International School Setting

Marilyn Diane Brigitte Algava[1,*]
Veerawan Wongpinpech[2]

*(**Received:** October 30, 2024; **Revised:** April 16, 2025; **Accepted:** April 17, 2025)*

Abstract

Due to their cross-cultural lifestyle, adolescent Third-Culture Kids have unique developmental needs, namely, integrating their various cultural identities and building a sense of belonging wherever they live. The present study aimed to assess the effects of group counselling on the multicultural identity and sense of belonging of adolescent TCKs in a Chiang Mai international school setting. A group counselling programme was designed to help the members to explore their cross-cultural experiences and develop a more integrated cultural identity and a stronger sense of belonging. Using a quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test treatment-control group design, participants (N = 18) were randomly assigned to either the experimental group or the control group and participated in a school-based group counselling programme consisting of 10 sessions, each lasting 50 minutes. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, dependent t-test, and independent t-test. Results of the statistical analyses following the group counselling intervention showed a trend towards significance between the pre-test and post-test identity integration scores, as well as an almost significant difference between the pre-test and post-test sense of belonging scores of the experimental group. In addition, compared to the control group, the experimental group showed a significantly higher integration score and a sense of belonging score, which trended towards significance following the group counselling intervention. These findings offer promise for the development of school-based group counselling interventions designed to help adolescent TCKs to integrate their cultural identities and increase their sense of belonging. However, practical steps should be taken to increase the effectiveness of such interventions, and further research is needed.

Keywords: Group counselling; Multicultural identity; Sense of belonging; Adolescent Third Culture Kids

[1,*] M.S. Student in Counselling Psychology, Psychology Department, Faculty of Humanities, Chiang Mai University (Corresponding author) E-mail: marilyn.algava@gmail.com
[2] Assistant Professor Dr., Psychology Department, Faculty of Humanities, Chiang Mai University E-mail: veerawan.w@cmu.ac.th

Introduction

Third Culture Kids (TCKs) are children and adolescents who have lived and grown up in multiple countries for a significant period of time. The term “Third Culture Kids” was first coined in the late 1950s by the US sociologist and anthropologist Ruth Useem. Originally, TCKs were children of missionaries, diplomats, military personnel, or corporate employees working overseas (Pollock et al., 2017).

More recently, as a result of globalisation, we live in an interconnected world and benefit from the Internet, global communication, easy international travel, and opportunities for international careers (Bochner, 2006). Consequently, the profile of TCKs is evolving. This population now includes students who move internationally to have a better life—for example, a Chinese child who comes to Thailand with their stay-at-home mother whilst their father works back home, or a teenage Korean national who is sent by their parents to study at an international school to improve their English skills. Globalisation also accounts for the increased number of international schools and TCKs worldwide (Bochner, 2006; Pollock et al., 2017). According to the ISC Research group (2020), there was a 343% increase in the number of international schools between 2000 and 2020, and a 587% increase in the number of international students globally from 2000 to 2019. Eastern Asia is the second largest sub-region for international schools, and data from Thailand’s Office of the Private Education Commission (2019) show that the number of students enrolled in international schools almost doubled between 2015 and 2019. In light of these figures, it is likely that a cross-cultural lifestyle will eventually become the norm. It is therefore important to recognise that the more we understand this growing multicultural TCK population and their developmental challenges, the more we can support their growth and anticipate the challenges many more may face in future.

Most empirical work on TCK populations has focused on adult TCKs who are Caucasian US citizens. This not only neglects TCKs from other racial, ethnic, and national backgrounds—who are increasing in number—but also overlooks the benefits of studying younger TCKs during their developmental years as they navigate acculturation challenges. This study is therefore grounded in the premise that adolescent TCKs living in Asia are an understudied population deserving of greater scholarly attention and intervention.

‘TCK’ is more than a definition—it is an experience that significantly impacts human development. The third culture is neither the home culture nor the host culture; it represents the shared experience of cross-cultural living (Pollock et al., 2017). TCKs constitute a unique

population with specific experiences and developmental needs. Since they spend some of their formative years in changing sociocultural environments, they must cope with the developmental process of acculturation (Oppedal, 2006), which impacts their sense of multicultural identity and belonging.

Being an adolescent TCK presents its own set of developmental challenges. Like all adolescents, they must contend with significant physical, emotional, and cognitive changes, form a coherent sense of identity, and fit in with their peers as they become more autonomous (Hazen et al., 2008; Erikson, 1968). However, unlike their monocultural peers, adolescent TCKs must undergo the process of acculturation each time they move to a new cultural environment. This affects their emotions, cognition, and behaviour. Acculturation fosters some level of cultural competence and internalisation (Huynh et al., 2018), and plays a crucial role in how adolescent TCKs negotiate their multicultural identity—which in turn affects their long-term adaptation (Berry, 2006; Oppedal, 2006). Evidence shows that the way multicultural individuals manage their cultural identities can predict psychological well-being. Specifically, the more integrated their cultural identities, the more successful their adaptation (Berry, 2006), and the greater their well-being (Huynh et al., 2018). Moving to a new country—or undergoing a cross-cultural transition—can cause acculturative stress (Berry, 2006). The different cultures to which TCKs are exposed may sometimes appear contradictory, and their sense of multicultural identity may become conflicted (Yampolsky et al., 2016). For instance, having to simultaneously navigate opposite cultural values such as individualism and collectivism can be both confusing and stressful.

Following a cross-cultural transition, TCKs re-evaluate their cultural identity in contact with a new community that may perceive them as foreign (Pollock et al., 2017). As a result, they may feel rejected. Unlike their parents, whose sense of belonging is usually tied to a geographical location, TCKs mostly derive their sense of “home” from relationships with family and friends (De Waal & Born, 2021). Unfortunately, TCK friendships are often short-lived due to the high-mobility lifestyle, and their monocultural peers may struggle to relate to their unique cross-cultural experiences (Tanu, 2018). Consequently, adolescent TCKs may feel uncertain about where they truly belong. The need to belong is a fundamental human need (Hagerty & Patusky, 1995; Maslow, 1943). When fulfilled, it promotes growth and self-actualisation; when thwarted, it contributes to maladjustment and poor mental health (Maslow, 1943). Research suggests that a lack of belonging can lead to hopelessness and depressive symptoms (Fisher et al., 2015).

Thus, acculturation is a developmental process for adolescent TCKs, whose key tasks include gaining cultural competence in each of their cultural environments, integrating different cultural domains, and fulfilling their need to belong across different cultural groups (Oppedal, 2006; Pollock et al., 2017). In other words, developing an integrated multicultural identity and a sense of belonging is essential for their healthy development.

There is strong evidence in the literature supporting the effectiveness of counselling groups for adolescents, including within school settings (Malott et al., 2010; Steen, 2009; Yusop et al., 2020). However, research on counselling groups tailored to TCKs remains limited. Studying the effects of group counselling for adolescent TCKs could therefore contribute significantly to knowledge in those fields of study.

Adolescence is a time for developing both personal and social identity, with peer relationships playing a pivotal role. Group counselling emphasises interpersonal relationships within a growth-fostering environment built on trust, respect, warmth, and acceptance—made possible through the group process (Trotzer, 2006). In this process, members form relationships by sharing experiences, exploring emotions, engaging in self-reflection, and giving and receiving feedback in a safe and supportive setting. As the group progresses and members feel validated and valued, group cohesiveness develops, fostering a sense of belonging and contributing to adolescent growth (Corey, 2011; Trotzer, 2006; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Participation in school-based counselling groups could therefore offer adolescent TCKs the opportunity to connect with peers who share similar cross-cultural experiences and challenges. This may help them to feel understood and validated, and enable them to cultivate a sense of belonging within a supportive community of fellow TCKs. Group counselling is also a flexible and practical intervention: its content can be tailored to address a wide range of psychological issues (Crespi et al., 2006) and adapted to the specific needs of the target population (Corey, 2011; Malott et al., 2010). Accordingly, adolescent TCKs participating in such groups could explore their cross-cultural experiences and cultural identities through customised activities. In essence, school-based group counselling may serve as an ideal therapeutic intervention to address the developmental needs of adolescent TCKs. The group process can foster growth and belonging, whilst the group content can be designed to encourage exploration and integration of their cultural identities and enhance their sense of belonging to both their cultural groups and the broader TCK community. The present study therefore aims to assess the effects of group counselling on the multicultural identity and the sense of belonging of a sample of adolescent TCKs studying at an international school in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

Objectives

To assess the effects of group counselling on the multicultural identity and sense of belonging of adolescent TCKs in a Chiang Mai international school setting

Literature Review

Third-culture Kids (TCKs) are young people (up to age 18) who have lived in two or more cultural environments for a significant period of time, meaning they undergo one or more cross-cultural transitions. A cross-cultural transition is the experience of relocating to a new culture, adapting to a new sociocultural environment, and undergoing psychological and sociocultural changes from the prolonged exposure to another culture. These transitions can negatively impact TCKs' identity development and belonging needs; that is, their cultural self may become confused and conflicted due to their experiences across multiple cultures, and they may lack a stable sense of belonging. Consequently, adolescent TCKs must navigate not only the typical developmental changes associated with adolescence, but also the complex task of exploring and integrating their multiple cultural identities whilst building a sense of belonging.

A multicultural individual is someone who is familiar with, identifies with, and has internalised two or more cultures to some degree, meaning that their self-concept incorporates elements of multiple cultural identities. Such individuals may negotiate their cultural identities in three different ways: they may categorise their identities (i.e., identify solely with one culture and reject the others); compartmentalise them (i.e., maintain separate cultural identities and express them depending on the sociocultural context); or integrate them (i.e., develop a congruent identity composed of complementary cultural components from all their cultures).

A sense of belonging comprises two subjective experiences: (1) feeling valued, needed, and accepted by others; and (2) fitting in one's environment or being in harmony with others through shared or complementary characteristics.

Group counselling refers to a therapeutic setting that facilitates interactions between a group leader and group members. It enables various forms of interaction, expression, and self-exploration. Group counselling combines group content (e.g., treatment protocols, activities) and group process (i.e., here-and-now group dynamics), both of which contribute to members' psychological growth. This format of counselling could benefit the TCK population, as it can address their unique developmental needs. Participating in a group with TCK peers from the same school may offer opportunities to connect with others who share similar life

experiences. Through the group process that emphasises trust and acceptance, members may begin to cultivate a sense of belonging within a new, supportive community. Additionally, the group content can be tailored with relevant activities to help participants to explore and integrate their different cultural identities and enhance their sense of belonging.

The group counselling programme in this study is a short-term, school-based intervention designed to address the specific developmental needs of adolescent TCKs—namely supporting the integration of their multiple cultural identities and enhancing their sense of belonging. To achieve this, the programme incorporates both targeted group content (i.e., activities focusing on cross-cultural transition, multicultural identity, and belonging) and group process (i.e., fostering supportive interpersonal interactions in a safe environment). The programme follows a staged model of group development: an initial stage, during which trust is established (first session); conflict resolution and working stages, during which any interpersonal conflict is addressed, group cohesiveness develops, and members actively engage in group work (middle sessions); and a termination stage, during which members reflect on their progress and learning, and say their farewells (last session). The group comprises nine members and meets for 10 sessions, each lasting 50 minutes. The programme is described as school-based in that it was delivered on the school premises with the school's logistical support, but it remained an independent intervention not embedded within the formal curriculum or administered by school staff.

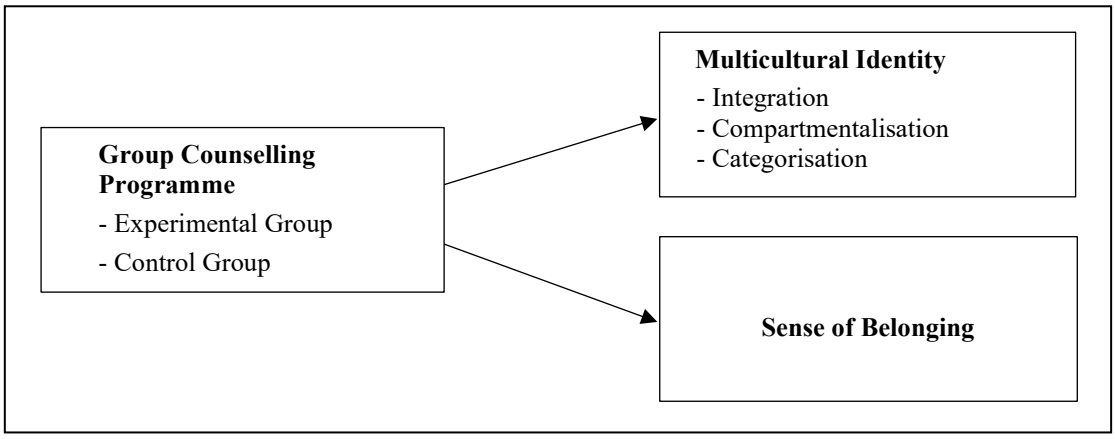

Figure 1. Research Framework

Research Methodology

Population and Sample

The research population consisted of Third-Culture secondary students from an international school in Chiang Mai during the 2023/2024 academic year.

Using the software G* power version 3.1.9.4 (Faul et al., 2007) to determine the sample size for a one-tailed matched-pairs *t*-test, the power was set at 0.80, the effect size at 0.63 (Keles & Idsoe, 2018), and the significance level at $p < .05$. This calculation yielded a required total sample size of 18 participants.

Purposive sampling was used to select participants according to specific criteria aligned with the research objectives. Subsequently, the participants were randomly assigned to either the experimental or control group using simple random sampling, in order to facilitate comparisons between independent groups.

Accordingly, the sample consisted of 18 secondary-level TCKs (11 males, 7 females), aged 13-18 ($M = 15.2$, $SD = 1.29$), who were enrolled at an international school in Chiang Mai during the 2023/2024 academic year. Participant demographics are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographics of the Participants

Demographics	*Experimental (n = 9)*	*Control (n = 9)*
Gender, n (%)	Male 5 (55.6%), Female 4 (44.4%)	Male 6 (66.7%), Female 3 (33.3%)
Age, M ± SD	15.4 ± 1.13	14.9 ± 1.45
Citizenship, n (%)	Chinese 3 (33.3%), Binational 3 (33.3%), South Korean 2 (22.2%), Burmese 1 (11.1%)	Chinese 5 (55.6%), Binational 1 (11.1%), Burmese 1 (11.1%), Indian 1 (11.1%), Filipino 1 (11.1%)
Ethnicity, n (%)	East-Asian 5 (55.6%), South-East Asian 2 (22.2%), Biracial 2 (22.2%)	East-Asian 5 (55.6%), South-East Asian 2 (22.2%), Biracial 1 (11.1%), South-Asian 1 (11.1%)
Religious Affiliation, n (%)	None 5 (55.6%), Christian 3 (33.3%), Buddhist 1 (11.1%)	None 4 (44.4%), Christian 3 (33.3%), Buddhist 1 (11.1%), Taoist 1 (11.1%)

Inclusion Criteria

Research participants were recruited based on the following criteria:

- They were third-culture secondary students enrolled at the international school.

- They volunteered to participate in the programme, with informed consent provided by a parent or guardian.
- They were fluent in English (listening, speaking, and reading).

Exclusion Criteria

Participants were excluded if they were unbale to commit to the full duration of the programme.

Termination criteria

Participants had the right to withdraw from the programme at any time and for any reason.

Research Tools

Instrument Measuring Identity Configuration

The participants' multicultural identity configuration was measured using the Multicultural Identity Integration Scale (MULTIIS; Yampolsky et al., 2016). The MULTIIS is a 22-item self-report instrument designed to assess how individuals with two or more cultural identities organise these identities within their self-concept. Its three subscales reflect the three identity configurations: categorisation, compartmentalisation, and integration. The categorisation subscale refers to a dominant and exclusive identification with one cultural identity whilst rejecting others. The compartmentalisation subscale reflects a conflicting and context-dependent identification, in which identities are kept separate and activated based on sociocultural context. The integration subscale represents a unified, congruent identity that incorporates complementary elements from all cultural backgrounds.

Participants rated each item on a 7- point Likert scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *exactly*). Higher scores indicated stronger endorsement of a given identity configuration. Scores were calculated for each subscale, and the configuration with the highest subscale score was used to categorise each participant's identity configuration.

To establish internal consistency reliability for this study, the MULTISS was administered to a separate sample of 30 randomly selected secondary-level TCKs from another school. The measure demonstrated good to excellent reliability across the subscales: categorisation, $\alpha = .99$; compartmentalisation, $\alpha = .85$; integration, $\alpha = .91$.

Instrument to Measure Sense of Belonging

The participants' sense of belonging was measured with the *Sense of Belonging Instrument—Psychological Experience* (SOBI-P; Hagerty & Patusky, 1995). The SOBI-P consists of two subscales that reflect the dual aspects of the of sense of belonging definition:

valued involvement which measures the degree to which an individual feels valued, needed, or important; and *fit* which assesses the feeling of fitting in through shared or complementary characteristics.

The SOBI-P is an 18-item self-report measure designed to assess the degree to which an individual perceives being valued and fitting with the people around them. Participants rated each item on a 4- point Likert scale (1 = *strongly agree*, 4 = *strongly disagree*). Higher scores indicate a greater sense of belonging.

To assess the internal consistency reliability of the SOBI-P for this study, statistical analyses were conducted using responses of a sample of 30 randomly selected secondary-level TCKs from another school. The two-factor structure was supported and the measure demonstrated acceptable reliability for the valued involvement subscale ($\alpha = .70$) and good reliability for the fit subscale ($\alpha = .87$).

Group Counselling Programme as Intervention

For the purpose of this study, the researcher developed a group counselling programme tailored to fit the needs of the research population. The programme aimed to increase their sense of belonging and shift their identity configuration towards integration.

The group counselling programme consisted of a total of 10 sessions, each lasting 50 minutes. It was designed using the following steps:

1. Relevant theoretical concepts and research on multicultural identity, sense of belonging, and group counselling were reviewed. These informed the development of the group counselling programme, which specifically targeted the multicultural identity and sense of belonging needs of the research population.

2. Based on the reviewed literature, the framework for the programme was designed, followed by the development of activities that formed the group content. These activities were aligned with the research objectives, ensuring that the programme addressed the intended goals.

3. The programme was reviewed by the researcher's advisor and sent to three experts for content validity evaluation. It was subsequently amended based on their feedback.

Data collection

An experimental data collection method was used. The participants (N = 18) were randomly assigned to either the experimental group (n = 9) or the control group (n = 9) through simple random sampling. Specifically, the researcher assigned

each participant a unique number and used a computer programme to randomly generate a number from the list to assign participants to the groups. Data for the two variables of interest (i.e., multicultural identity and sense of belonging) were collected prior to the experimental group counselling intervention using two instruments. The experimental group then received the experimental treatment (group counselling programme) designed to influence both variables. Finally, participants' identity configuration and sense of belonging scores were reassessed after the experimental group completed the group counselling programme.

Data analysis

Data of the research participants were analysed using descriptive statistics to examine relevant demographics, such as gender, age, nationality, ethnic background, and religion.

Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests ($p > .01$) were performed, and as result, normal distribution was assumed for each variable.

Based on this outcome, parametric statistical analyses were applied to all variables in subsequent analyses: dependent *t*-test to compare the difference in identity negotiation and sense of belonging scores before and after the group counselling programme, and independent *t*-test to compare scores between the experimental and control group before and after the group counselling programme.

Findings

Table 2. Pre-Intervention Mean Scores on Multicultural Identity Configuration and Sense of Belonging (Experimental Group vs. Control Group)

Sample Group	*M*	*SD*	*t*-test	*p*-value
Identity Configurations				
Integration				
Experimental Group	4.40	1.60	1.11	.142
Control Group	3.68	1.11		
Compartmentalisation				
Experimental Group	4.33	1.52	1.70	.054
Control Group	3.14	1.48		
Categorisation				
Experimental Group	4.84	1.68	2.42*	.014
Control Group	2.78	1.94		
Sense of Belonging				
Experimental Group	2.59	0.61	-0.97	.173
Control Group	2.84	0.49		

*$p < .05$.

According to Table 2, before the group counselling intervention, the experimental group and the control group did not differ significantly on integration (t (16) = 1.11, $p > .05$), compartmentalisation (t (16) = 1.70, $p > .05$), or sense of belonging (t (16) = -0.97, $p > .05$). However, the groups differ significantly on categorisation (t (16) = 2.42, $p = .014$).

Table 3. Pre- and Post-Intervention Mean Scores on Multicultural Identity Configuration and Sense of Belonging (Experimental Group)

Experimental Group	*M*	*SD*	*t*-test	*p*-value
Identity Configuration				
Integration				
Post-Intervention	4.74	1.21	0.43	.340
Pre-Intervention	4.40	1.60		

Experimental Group	*M*	*SD*	*t*-test	*p*-value
Compartmentalisation				
Post-Intervention	4.47	0.97	0.19	.427
Pre-Intervention	4.33	1.52		
Categorisation				
Post-Intervention	4.42	1.33	-0.48	.324
Pre-Intervention	4.84	1.68		
Sense of Belonging				
Post-Intervention	2.87	0.72	1.76	.058
Pre-Intervention	2.59	0.61		

*$p < .05$.

According to the results shown in Table 3, the mean score of the experimental group post-intervention increased on integration (t (8) = 0.43, $p > .05$), compartmentalisation (t (8) = 0.19, $p > .05$), sense of belonging (t (8) = 1.76, $p = .058$), and decreased on categorisation (t (8) = -0.48, $p > .05$). These differences were not statistically significant. The group counselling programme had a negligible effect on integration (d = 0.07) and a small-to-medium effect on sense of belonging (d = 0.32).

Table 4. Pre- and Post-Intervention Mean Scores on Multicultural Identity Configuration and Sense of Belonging (Control Group)

Control Group	*M*	*SD*	*t*-test	*p*-value
Identity Configuration				
Integration				
Post-Intervention	3.61	1.21	-0.14	.446
Pre-Intervention	3.68	1.11		
Compartmentalisation				
Post-Intervention	3.41	1.61	0.40	.352
Pre-Intervention	3.14	1.48		
Categorisation				
Post-Intervention	3.38	1.95	1.35	.107

Control Group	***M***	***SD***	***t*-test**	***p*-value**
Pre-Intervention	2.78	1.94		
Sense of Belonging				
Post-Intervention	2.81	0.49	-0.46	.328
Pre-Intervention	2.84	0.49		

*$p < .05$.

According to Table 4, the mean scores of the control group post-intervention decreased on integration (t (8) = -0.14, $p > .05$), compartmentalisation (t (8) = 0.40, $p > .05$), sense of belonging (t (8) = -0.46, $p > .05$), and increased on categorisation (t (8) = 1.35, $p > .05$).

Table 5. Post-Intervention Mean Scores on Multicultural Identity Configuration and Sense of Belonging (Experimental Group vs. Control Group)

Sample Group	***M***	***SD***	***t*-test**	***p*-value**
Identity Configuration				
Integration				
Experimental Group	4.74	1.21	1.98*	.033
Control Group	3.61	1.21		
Compartmentalisation				
Experimental Group	4.47	0.97	1.70	.054
Control Group	3.41	1.61		
Categorisation				
Experimental Group	4.42	1.33	1.33	.101
Control Group	3.41	1.95		
Sense of Belonging				
Experimental Group	2.87	0.72	0.21	.417
Control Group	2.81	0.49		

*$p < .05$.

After the group counselling intervention, according to Table 5, the experimental group had a significantly higher integration score than the control group (t (16) = 1.98, p = .033).

Their sense of belonging score was higher than the control group, but not significantly (t (16) = 0.21, p > .05), the same for compartmentalisation (t (16) = 1.11, p > .05), and categorisation (t (16) = 1.33, p > .05).

Based on the above results, it is worth highlighting that when comparing the pre-test and the post-test scores of the experimental group, which received 10 sessions of the group counselling programme, the data analyses show a trend towards significance for identity integration and an almost significant difference in sense of belonging. This indicates that their multiple cultural identities were more integrated and their sense of belonging was stronger following the group counselling programme. Additionally, when comparing the scores of the experimental group to those of the control group post-group counselling programme, the results show that the experimental group had a significantly higher average score on identity integration than the control group, and there was a trend towards significance for the sense of belonging of the experimental group. In other words, the experimental group had a significantly more integrated multicultural identity and a stronger sense of belonging than the control group after the group counselling programme.

Discussion

This study examined the effects of a school-based group counselling programme on the multicultural identity and the sense of belonging of adolescent TCK participants. Although the results of the statistical analyses were not all significant, this does not necessarily indicate a lack of meaningful change. Given the small sample size and short intervention period, subtle improvements may not have reached statistical significance. Additionally, participation variability in engagement, maturity, or baseline functioning may have influenced individual responses to the intervention. It is possible that outcomes in multicultural identity integration and sense of belonging require long-term group cohesiveness or ongoing support to be significantly impacted. These findings highlight the complexity of evaluating therapeutic interventions in TCK adolescent populations and suggest that statistically insignificant outcomes should not be interpreted as a lack of therapeutic benefit. In fact, the group counselling programme led to positive changes in the variables of interest. Specifically, the adolescent TCK participants developed a more integrated multicultural identity and a stronger sense of belonging.

This programme aimed to promote a sense of belonging amongst the group members. The group process was found to play a crucial role in fostering a safe environment where trust,

universality, and group cohesiveness could develop as the sessions progressed. This key finding supports previous theory and research emphasising the importance of group dynamics in the positive therapeutic outcomes of group counselling (Malott et al., 2010; Steen, 2009; Trotzer, 2006; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005, Yusop et al., 2020). Through the interpersonal relationships built within the group, participants felt heard and accepted as their genuine selves, and recognised that their personal experiences mattered. The group members realised that, despite differences in gender, age, nationality, or ethnicity, they shared much in common through their TCK experiences. Prior to the group counselling programme, only a few participants had heard of the term 'Third-Culture Kids,' but most had felt different and as though they did not belong. As they shared their background stories with the group, members instantly connected on an emotional level and experienced a sense of belonging, which aligns with the literature on TCKs (Pollock et al., 2017; Tanu, 2018). The group counselling programme has provided a forum for social support and meaningful involvement, helping participants to understand that they could belong to different cultural groups yet simultaneously fit together as TCK peers. They also began to appreciate the importance of social relationships in fostering their sense of belonging and defining their sense of 'home', supporting the suggestions of Pollock et al. (2017) and Vivero and Jenkins (1999) that the sense of belonging for TCKs develops within relationships, rather than being tied to a geographic location.

The group counselling programme in this study was also designed to promote multicultural identity integration. Before entering the group, some participants mainly categorised their cultural identities and felt that they had to choose one culture over the others, reflecting the conflictual experience of an unintegrated multicultural identity (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005; Yampolsky et al., 2016). These students perceived their different cultures as incompatible, making it difficult for them to integrate seemingly disparate cultural elements. Some only identified with their heritage culture, whilst others rejected their heritage culture, viewing it negatively. This aligns with Tajfel and Turner's (1986) social identity theory, which posits that individuals derive part of their self-concept from group memberships. When a group is perceived as having lower status or being devalued, individuals may distance themselves from that identity to protect their self-esteem. Other participants mainly compartmentalised their cultural identities, feeling and acting more 'Western' at school but more 'Asian' at home. Language played a key role in this experience, as they spoke English with students and teachers but switched to their home language around their family. Whilst some participants found it relatively easy to switch between cultural schemas depending on the context, others felt

particularly conflicted. On one hand, they wanted to embrace their acculturated selves, but on the other hand, they did not want to disappoint their parents. This finding is congruent with previous research on bicultural identity, where family pressure is identified as a factor that complicates the integration of multiple cultural identities (Padilla, 2006). Finally, a few participants had already started the process of integrating their cultural identities, describing their cross-cultural experience as feeling 'international', although none could fully explain what this meant to them.

The concept of multicultural identity was new to most participants. Through group discussions and shared experiences, they learnt that multicultural identity development is a personal, complex, and evolving process. The group counselling programme encouraged them to begin a journey of introspection about their own multicultural identity. Group content focused on acknowledging the various cultural elements that shaped their cross-cultural experiences, acknowledging that these elements could sometimes appear incompatible due to perceived cultural distance. Participants were then invited to identify commonalities between cultures and apply critical thinking to navigate cultural conflict. Finally, they explored their own cultural value systems and considered the possibility of constructing an integrated, all-encompassing identity. This experiential process supported adolescent identity formation, a key developmental task during this life stage (Erikson, 1968). According to Erikson's psychosocial theory, adolescence is the period during which individuals seek to develop a coherent sense of self. For TCKs, who are exposed to multiple cultural frameworks, this process can be particularly complex. The group provided a safe, reflective space in which they could engage with identity-related questions in a supportive environment. This finding aligns with previous research on school-based counselling groups as effective therapeutic tools for fostering ethnic identity exploration and development in ethnic-minority secondary students (Malott et al., 2010; Steen, 2009).

In addition to promoting identity exploration, the group counselling sessions also provided a structured form of social support, both through the group content and the group process. Social support has consistently been identified as a key facilitator of successful adaptation in culturally diverse individuals. In the context of acculturation, support systems have been shown to facilitate the integration strategy—maintaining one's heritage culture whilst also engaging with the host culture—which is associated with the most positive adaptation outcomes (Berry, 1997). Several studies have emphasised that such environments buffer against acculturative stress and promote psychological adaptation (e.g., Oppedal &

Idsoe, 2015; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015). Similarly, in the biculturalism literature, Kang (2018) demonstrated that positive social support significantly enhanced bicultural identity integration and reduced cultural conflict and social maladjustment amongst migrant workers. In this study, the support offered by the group may have enabled the participants to explore, express, and reconcile different aspects of their cultural identities, contributing to the observed increase in multicultural identity integration and overall psychological adaptation.

In addition to the above findings, based on the leaders' observations and anecdotal evidence from the group, it was found that taking part in this group counselling programme resulted in other noticeable developments. Besides gaining greater self-awareness and self-knowledge, participants improved their communication skills by expressing themselves freely, listening to others respectfully, and offering their feedback to the group. This finding is consistent with qualitative results from a study on group counselling to support ethnic identity development amongst adolescents of Mexican descent (Malott et al., 2010), in which participants reported enhanced communication skills. Considering the age range of the participants (13 to 18 years old), the older members could model positive behaviour that was reinforced by the leader. Furthermore, following their cross-cultural transitions, participants had often been encouraged to suppress negative emotions and focus instead on adapting to their new environment and achieving academic success. This group counselling programme provided them with a space not only to process some of their losses, but also to reflect on specific cross-cultural experiences, ultimately promoting personal growth.

Conclusion

To contribute to knowledge about group counselling interventions addressing adolescent TCKs' developmental needs, this study examined the effects of a school-based group counselling programme on the multicultural identity and the sense of belonging of adolescent TCKs attending a Thai international school. Following the group counselling programme, participants in the experimental group developed a more integrated multicultural identity and a stronger sense of belonging; however, most of these positive changes did not reach statistical significance. Nonetheless, the findings highlight the potential of school-based group counselling programmes as a valuable therapeutic intervention for supporting adolescent TCKs in their identity and belongingness development, and they underscore the need for further research on the topic.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study was not without limitations. The first major concern was sample size. Although it was determined using statistical analysis, the small sample may have introduced random variation in the results. Future research should therefore involve larger samples to improve the reliability and generalisability of findings.

Secondly, this was a small-scale exploratory study conducted in the absence of prior similar research. It only began to address the potential of counselling interventions for adolescent TCKs. Further experimental studies are necessary to investigate the effects of school-based group counselling programmes on the developmental needs of this population. In addition, qualitative approaches would be beneficial for gaining a deeper understanding of Asian TCKs—an understudied group—by exploring their identity configuration, sense of belonging, and the meanings that they assign to their cross-cultural experiences.

A third limitation was the time constraint. The intervention lasted five weeks and thus only allowed for short-term effects to be observed. Future evaluation studies should include mid-term outcomes and follow-up assessments at 6 to 12 months post-intervention. Cross-sectional designs could be used to compare identity configuration scores across different age groups before and after the intervention, whilst longitudinal designs could track multicultural identity development over time.

Furthermore, this study focused on students in Grades 9 to 11. Anecdotal observations suggested that emotional and cognitive maturity may have influenced the depth of engagement with the intervention. Younger or less mature students required more time to grasp abstract identity concepts. Future studies should consider including 12^{th-} and 13th-grade students. It is recommended to implement either similar short-term group counselling programmes for 16- to 18-year-olds or extended, longer-term programmes for 13- to 15-year-olds, tailoring the content to their developmental needs. To enhance the effectiveness of short-term group counselling programmes in promoting a sense of belonging amongst younger students, group content should prioritise themes such as cross-cultural transition, loss, and adaptation. In such cases, researchers may consider measuring additional variables, such as grief and resilience.

Finally, future research should also examine the role of various influencing factors on programme outcomes. These include participant factors (e.g., maturity, age, gender, grade level, personality), environmental factors (e.g., family dynamics, friendship, social support,

school climate), and therapeutic factors (e.g., group cohesiveness, universality, level of engagement).

Practical Implications

Despite its limitations, this study highlights the value of school-based group counselling as a viable and useful therapeutic intervention for secondary school TCKs. It has several important implications for those involved in supporting these students.

International schools should actively promote student participation in group counselling programmes. This could involve organising an annual group counselling programme focused on cultural identity exploration and fostering a sense of belonging, integrated as a regular school activity that does not conflict with academic classes or extracurricular commitments. Schools could also host informational events to introduce TCK students and their parents to the objectives and benefits of group counselling.

Secondary teachers—particularly those teaching humanities subjects—should be informed about the psychosocial impact of cross-cultural transitions on TCKs. Beyond encouraging participation in group counselling, teachers can help by creating safe and inclusive classrooms where students feel comfortable sharing their experiences. Incorporating TCK-relevant topics into the curriculum could further support students in understanding and embracing their multicultural backgrounds.

School counsellors, in particular, play a critical role. They should stay up to date with the growing body of literature on TCKs to better tailor their interventions to students' specific developmental needs. Counsellors can provide a safe environment for TCKs to reflect on their identity and belonging and should consider organising meetings with parents or guardians. These meetings can be used to raise awareness about the identity- and belonging-related challenges their child may be experiencing, discuss the benefits of group counselling, and guide parents in providing emotional support at home.

References

Benet-Martínez, V., & Haritatos, J. (2005). Bicultural Identity Integration (BII): Components and psychosocial antecedents. *Journal of Personality*, *73*(4), 1015–1050. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.2005.00337.x

Berry, J. W. (1997). Immigration, acculturation, and adaptation. *Applied Psychology*, *46*(1), 5-34. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1464-0597.1997.tb01087.x

Berry, J. W. (2006). Stress perspectives on acculturation. In D. L. Sam, & J. W. Berry (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of acculturation psychology* (pp. 43-57). Cambridge University Press.

Bochner, S. (2006). Sojourners. In D. L. Sam, & J. W. Berry (Eds.). *The Cambridge handbook of acculturation psychology*. (pp. 181-197). Cambridge University Press.

Corey, G. (2011). *Theory and practice of group counseling* (8th ed.). Brooks/Cole

Crespi, T. D., Gustafson, A. L., & Borges, S. M. (2006). Group counseling in the schools. *Journal of Applied School Psychology*, *22*(1), 67-85. https://doi.org/10.1300/j370v22n01_04

De Waal, M. F., & Born, M. P. (2021). Where I'm from? Third Culture Kids about their cultural identity shifts and belonging. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, *83*, 67–83. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2021.04.004

Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity youth and crisis*. W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Faul, F., Erdfelder, E., Lang, A.-G., & Buchner, A. (2007). G*Power 3: A flexible statistical power analysis program for the social, behavioral, and biomedical sciences. *Behavior Research Methods*, *39*(2), 175-191. https://doi.org/10.3758/bf03193146

Fisher, L., Overholser, J. C., Ridley, J., Braden, A., & Rosoff, C. B. (2015). From the outside looking in: Sense of belonging, depression, and suicide risk. *Psychiatry MMC*, *78*(1), 29–41. https://doi.org/10.1080/00332747.2015.1015867

Hagerty, B. M., & Patusky, K. (1995). Developing a measure of sense of belonging. *Nursing Research*, *44*(1), 9-13. https://doi.org/10.1097/00006199-199501000-00003

Hazen, E., Schlozman, S., & Beresin, E. (2008). Adolescent psychological development: A review. *Pediatrics in Review*, *29*(5), 161–168, https://doi.org/10.1542/pir.29-5-161

Huynh, Q.-L., Benet-Martínez, V., & Nguyen, A.-M. D. (2018). Measuring variations in bicultural identity across U.S. ethnic and generational groups: Development and validation of the Bicultural Identity Integration Scale—Version 2 (BIIS-2). *Psychological Assessment*, *30*(12), 1581–1596. https://doi.org/10.1037/pas0000606

ICS Research. (2020). *International schools market growth*. https://iscresearch.com/data/

Kang, T. (2018). Who am I? Migrant workers' bicultural identity integration, social support, and social maladjustment. *Social Behavior and Personality: An International Journal*, *46*(7), 1111–1122. https://doi.org/10.2224/sbp.6645

Keles, S., & Idsoe, T. (2018). A meta-analysis of Group Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) interventions for adolescents with depression. *Journal of Adolescence*, *67*(1), 129–139. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2018.05.011

Malott, K. M., Paone, T. R., Humphreys, K., & Martinez, T. (2010). Use of group counseling to address ethnic identity development: Application with adolescents of Mexican descent. *Professional School Counseling*, *13*(5), 257–267. https://doi.org/10.5330/psc.n.2010-13.257

Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*, *50*(4), 370–396. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0054346

Office of the Private Education Commission. (2019). *Private education statistics*. https://opec.go.th/stat

Oppedal, B. (2006). Development and acculturation. In D. L. Sam, & J. W. Berry (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of acculturation psychology* (pp. 97-112). Cambridge University Press.

Oppedal, B., & Idsoe, T. (2015). The role of social support in the acculturation and mental health of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, *56*(2), 203–211. https://doi.org/10.1111/sjop.12194

Padilla, A. M. (2006). Bicultural Social Development. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, *28*(4), 467–497. https://doi.org/10.1177/0739986306294255

Pollock, D. C., Van Reken, R. E., & Pollock, M. V. (2017). *Third Culture Kids: Growing up among worlds* (3rd ed.). Nicholas Brealey Publishing.

Steen, S. (2009). Group counseling for African American elementary students: An exploratory study. *The Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, *34*(2), 101–117. https://doi.org/10.1080/01933920902791929

Sullivan, C., & Kashubeck-West, S. (2015). The interplay of international students' acculturative stress, social support, and acculturation modes. *Journal of International Students*, *5*(1), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v5i1.438

Tajfel, H., & Turner, J.C. (1986) The social identity theory of intergroup behavior. In S. Worchel & W. G. Austin (Eds.), *Psychology of intergroup relation*. (pp. 7-24). Hall Publishers.

Tanu, D. (2018). *Growing up in transit: The politics of belonging at an international school*. Berghahn Books.

Trotzer, J. P. (2006). *The counselor and the group: Integrating theory, training, and practice* (4th ed.). Routledge.

Vivero, V. N., & Jenkins, S. R. (1999). Existential hazards of the multicultural individual: Defining and understanding "cultural homelessness." *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, *5*(1), 6–26. https://doi.org/10.1037/1099-9809.5.1.6

Yalom, I. D., & Leszcz, M. (2005). *The theory and practice of group psychotherapy* (5th ed.). Basic Books.

Yampolsky, M. A., Amiot, C. E., & de la Sablonnière, R. (2016). The Multicultural Identity Integration Scale (MULTIIS): Developing a comprehensive measure for configuring one's multiple cultural identities within the self. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, *22*(2), 166–184. https://doi.org/10.1037/cdp0000043

Yusop, Y. M., Zainudin, Z. N., Jaafar, W. M. W., Othman, W. N. W., Baharudin, D. F., & Arokianathan, N. (2020). The effectiveness of group counselling: A systematic review. *Journal of Critical Reviews*, *7*(13). https://doi.org/10.31838/jcr.07.13.109