

Cultural Identity and Self-Esteem of Indonesian Diaspora Children in Australia

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Abstract

Global mobility and family migration have placed diaspora children in complex developmental contexts, particularly in relation to cultural identity formation and self-esteem. Living at the intersection of cultures requires diaspora children and adolescents to negotiate personal, ethnic, and national identities simultaneously, which may influence their psychological well-being. This study aims to explore the subjective experiences of diaspora children in constructing cultural identity and its relationship with self-esteem. The study employed an interpretative phenomenological qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews with three diaspora children aged 12–15 years living in Australia from multicultural family backgrounds. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings indicate that the lived experiences of diaspora children are dynamic and shaped by length of residence in the host country, age, and family background. Participants with early and prolonged cross-cultural exposure tended to demonstrate more stable cultural identity integration, whereas those in the early phase of migration experienced greater identity confusion and fluctuating self-esteem. Integrated cultural identity was associated with more positive self-esteem, which functioned as a psychological resource in socio-cultural adaptation. Furthermore, family support and school environments played a crucial role in fostering identity integration and a sense of belonging. Participants' narratives also highlighted the need for safe reflective spaces, underscoring the relevance of multicultural counseling in supporting the psychosocial development of diaspora children. This study contributes to the literature by deepening the understanding of the relationship between cultural identity and self-esteem among diaspora children and emphasizes the importance of culturally sensitive counseling approaches in multicultural contexts.

Keywords: diaspora children; cultural identity; self-esteem; cultural integration; multicultural counseling

INTRODUCTION

Global mobility has created new dynamics in the lives of children and adolescents in the contemporary era. Family migration, international education, and transnational mobility have become defining characteristics of the modern social landscape. Since the beginning of the millennium, family diasporas involving children have continued to grow, with UNICEF estimating that nearly 31 million children had been forcibly displaced from their homes by the end of 2017. This phenomenon includes not only children who migrate together with their families, but also those affected by parental migration decisions made in pursuit of better economic and educational opportunities (Oberg, 2019).

Various studies indicate that children and adolescents with migration backgrounds grow up in complex and multilayered social conditions. In some countries, such as Russia, relatively stable diasporas have emerged, characterized by concentrations of migrant families with adolescent children who face adaptation barriers and specific expectations of support (Yudina, 2025). In Southeast Asia, adolescent migration patterns tend to be more dynamic and often continue across generations, resulting in an increasing number of children growing up simultaneously within two or more cultural environments (Chow et al., 2023).

These conditions place diaspora children in a unique developmental position, namely living at a “cultural crossroads.” International education and cross-national experiences provide broad opportunities for self-exploration, yet at the same time introduce complexity in the formation of identity. Longitudinal studies show that studying and living abroad can strengthen commitment to

certain identity dimensions while simultaneously encouraging more intensive identity exploration, depending on social context and individual experiences (De Lise et al., 2025).

Continuous exposure to differing cultural norms, values, and practices makes cultural integration a primary developmental task for diaspora children. They are often required to balance their family's cultural heritage with the demands of the host culture, including language, social relationship patterns, and academic expectations. This process frequently creates an "intergenerational acculturation gap," in which adolescents maintain their heritage language and cultural values within the family environment while adapting to the dominant culture in public spaces (Muhammad & Maya, 2024).

Cultural identity is a fundamental component of adolescents' psychosocial development. Adolescence, particularly between the ages of 12 and 21, represents a critical period for identity consolidation, during which individuals explore social roles, values, and self-meaning. Cross-cultural research indicates that although there are universal themes in adolescent identity development, the expression and prioritization of identity are strongly shaped by the cultural context in which adolescents grow up (Emmott et al., 2025). For diaspora children, cultural identity formation does not occur in isolation, but rather through dynamic interactions among personal, ethnic, and national identities. Longitudinal research on immigrant adolescents demonstrates that these three identity dimensions interact with one another and serve as the foundation for healthy identity development (Mastrotheodoros et al., 2021).

An integrated cultural identity is also positively associated with various indicators of psychological and social well-being (De Lise et al., 2024). The relationship between cultural identity and self-esteem is dynamic and reciprocal. A strong and positive cultural identity tends to correlate with higher self-esteem, whereas identity conflict, discrimination, and experiences of marginalization can undermine adolescents' self-worth. Minority adolescents who experience identity uncertainty and social rejection exhibit higher levels of depression and lower self-esteem (Cheon et al., 2020). Conversely, attachment to cultural heritage can function as a protective factor that strengthens a sense of self-worth, even in contexts of forced migration and traumatic experiences (Ahmadipour & Sordé-Martí, 2024).

Conceptually, self-esteem is understood as an individual's global evaluation of self-worth, encompassing dimensions of perceived competence (self-competence) and self-liking (Refnadi, 2018). During adolescence, self-esteem serves as an essential psychosocial foundation in the processes of identity exploration and integration (Safitri & Ningsih, 2025; Maesya & Nugraha, 2025). In the diaspora context, these processes become increasingly complex, as adolescents are required to integrate personal, cultural, and social identities simultaneously (De Lise, 2024).

Longitudinal research further indicates that the psychosocial dynamics of diaspora children are influenced not only by cultural context but also by cultural stress and the quality of family relationships. A study of 160 immigrant adolescents aged 12–15 from the Soviet Union in Israel showed that parent–adolescent communication served as an important mediator between cultural stress and adolescents' psychological well-being (Alpysbekova et al., 2025). Interestingly, experiences of discrimination during the first year of migration were associated with increased hope, suggesting the development of resilience in response to cultural pressure.

Beyond relational factors, self-esteem has also been shown to play a central role in the social and cultural adaptation of migrant children. A longitudinal study of Chinese migrant children found that psychological capital and self-esteem significantly predicted socio-cultural adaptation, with self-esteem mediating 17.3% of the total effect of this relationship (Yu & Wang, 2022). These findings underscore that self-esteem is not only an outcome of the adaptation process but also a psychological resource that facilitates successful cross-cultural adaptation. Within the context of adolescent social development, self-esteem is also linked to the formation of healthy social goals, such as agentic–communal goals that reflect a balance between self-assertiveness and concern for others (Ojanen & Findley-Van Nostrand, 2020). Furthermore, the Positive Youth Development framework emphasizes emotional self-regulation, self-esteem, and self-reflection as core dimensions of self-awareness that contribute to positive adolescent development (Mertens et al., 2022). This framework is relevant for understanding how diaspora children manage emotions, reflect on cross-cultural experiences, and build adaptive self-identities.

Low self-esteem in adolescents has been widely associated with various psychological risks, including depression and suicidal ideation (Wahyuni et al., 2025), particularly among diaspora adolescents who face cultural conflict and experiences of marginalization (Alpysbekova et al., 2025). Therefore, social support from family, schools, peers, and the broader community becomes a crucial factor in the process of cultural identity integration. Families play a key role in transmitting values and maintaining heritage culture, while schools provide a critical context for fostering a sense of belonging and supportive social relationships (Aral et al., 2025). Safe spaces that allow adolescents to express

their cultural identities authentically have been shown to support healthy identity development and self-esteem (Pinetta et al., 2025).

Within this context, multicultural counseling emerges as a relevant approach to supporting diaspora children. Multicultural counseling emphasizes understanding clients' cultural backgrounds and sensitivity to cross-cultural experiences, enabling counselors to facilitate identity exploration, process experiences of discrimination, and strengthen psychological resilience (Yuliana et al., 2025). Research indicates that culturally sensitive counseling approaches can help adolescents integrate their cultural identities more healthily and enhance self-esteem (Hölscher et al., 2024).

Although the literature on cultural identity and self-esteem continues to grow, in-depth qualitative studies that explore the subjective experiences of diaspora children remain relatively limited, particularly in relation to cultural integration and multicultural counseling needs. Therefore, this study focuses on understanding the experiences of diaspora children in constructing their cultural identities and how these processes relate to their self-esteem, with the aim of contributing both theoretically and practically to the development of multicultural counseling services that are responsive to the needs of diaspora children.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with an interpretative phenomenological design. This approach focuses on understanding the meaning of individuals' subjective experiences of the phenomena they encounter in their everyday lives (Hadi, A., Asrori, & Rusman, 2021). The phenomenological design was selected because this study aims to explore in depth the lived experiences of diaspora children in constructing their cultural identity and how these experiences influence their self-esteem. Through this approach, the researcher seeks to understand how participants make sense of cultural integration, identity conflicts, and social experiences that shape their self-perceptions.

Research participants were selected using purposive sampling, taking into account characteristics relevant to the research objectives. The participants in this study consisted of three diaspora adolescents aged 12–15 years who live and grow up in two or more cultural contexts, such as Indonesian children residing abroad. The inclusion criteria were: (1) having lived experience in a cultural environment different from the family's culture of origin, (2) being able to verbally reflect on personal experiences, and (3) willingness to participate voluntarily in the study.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. This technique was chosen because it allows the researcher to obtain in-depth data while also providing space for participants to freely express their experiences and perspectives (Sugiyono, 2023). The interviews were conducted individually using a semi-structured interview guide developed based on the focus of the study, covering lived experiences as diaspora children, cultural identity conflicts, the impact of these experiences on self-esteem, strategies of cultural integration, as well as social and environmental support.

The research instrument consisted of a semi-structured interview guide specifically developed to explore experiences related to cultural identity and self-esteem among diaspora children. The interview guide included flexible open-ended questions, allowing the researcher to adjust the flow of questions according to participants' responses. This instrument enabled an in-depth exploration of the subjective meanings of cultural integration experiences and the factors influencing the formation of self-esteem.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis process involved six stages: (1) familiarization with the data through repeated reading of interview transcripts, (2) generating initial codes for relevant meaning units, (3) searching for potential themes, (4) reviewing and refining themes, (5) naming and defining themes, and (6) producing a narrative report of the analysis results (Braun, & Clarke, 2006). The analysis was carried out inductively, emphasizing meanings emerging from the participants' experiences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the interview results was conducted using a thematic approach to identify patterns of experience related to the formation of cultural identity and self-esteem. The findings indicate that living experiences as diaspora children involve complex dynamics, encompassing interactions between internal and external factors such as family, social environment, and the cultural context in which the respondents grow and develop.

Based on the coding and data clustering process, five main themes were identified: (1) living experiences as diaspora children, (2) cultural identity conflict, (3) the impact of experiences on self-esteem, (4) cultural integration strategies, and (5) social and environmental support. These themes are

interrelated and form a framework for understanding how respondents make meaning of their cultural identity and negotiate it in everyday life.

Living Experiences as Diaspora Children

The findings show that living experiences as diaspora children are perceived differently by each respondent, influenced by age at migration and length of residence in Australia. Respondents A1 and A3, who have lived in Australia since early childhood, perceive cross-cultural life as a relatively “normal” condition that has been internalized in their daily lives. For A1, although most life memories were formed in Australia, Indonesia still holds emotional meaning as home, as expressed in the statement “when I do go to Indonesia, it feels like home a lot” (A1). A similar perspective is reflected in A3, who does not view diaspora life as a problematic experience, but rather as a daily reality that has become integrated into their identity.

In contrast, respondent A2, who has lived in Australia for only one year, described the diaspora experience as a more challenging adaptation process. A2 perceived a striking difference between Indonesian social culture, which is considered warmer and more collective, and Australian culture, which is more individualistic, resulting in feelings of awkwardness in social interactions, “sometimes I’m not sure how to act” (A2). These differences emphasize that diaspora life is a dynamic and contextual developmental process, as stated by Oberg (2019) and Yudina (2025), and is not experienced uniformly by every individual.

Cultural Identity Conflict

These living dynamics have implications for the emergence of cultural identity conflict with varying levels of intensity. Respondent A1 explicitly stated that they had never experienced an identity crisis, as they perceived the Australian environment as a multicultural and inclusive space, “I’ve never really felt like discluded from it” (A1). A3 also did not describe identity conflict as a psychological crisis, but rather as reflective confusion related to identity labeling, particularly when explaining their cultural background to others, “sometimes I wonder if I’m more Indonesian or more Australian” (A3).

In contrast, respondent A2 demonstrated a more pronounced and emotional cultural identity conflict. They felt caught between two worlds, not fully belonging to Australian culture while also beginning to feel different from friends in Indonesia, “I feel like I’m not fully Australian, but I’m also starting to feel a bit different from my friends in Indonesia” (A2). This finding reinforces the perspective of Mastrotheodoros et al. (2021) that the formation of cultural identity among diaspora children occurs through dynamic negotiation between personal, ethnic, and national identities. In this context, identity conflict is not necessarily pathological, but rather part of adolescents’ developmental tasks in constructing self-meaning amid cultural plurality.

Impact of Experiences on Self-Esteem

These dynamics of cultural identity are closely related to the respondents’ self-esteem. Respondents A1 and A3 demonstrated relatively stable and positive self-esteem, characterized by self-acceptance and comfort in explaining their cultural background. A3 even perceived dual identity as a source of uniqueness and pride, “it makes me feel special because I have two cultures instead of just one” (A3). This finding is consistent with De Lise et al. (2024), who state that integrated cultural identity is positively associated with adolescents’ psychological well-being.

In contrast, A2 exhibited more fluctuating self-esteem, particularly during the early stages of adaptation. Fear of making language mistakes, concerns about social judgment, and feelings of marginalization within the school environment affected their self-confidence, “I was afraid of making mistakes” (A2). This condition supports the findings of Cheon et al. (2020) that identity uncertainty and negative social experiences can lower the self-esteem of minority adolescents. Nevertheless, A2’s narrative also shows that as they began to build social relationships and represent their cultural heritage, feelings of pride emerged and functioned as a protective factor, as explained by Ahmadipour and Sordé-Martí (2024).

Cultural Integration Strategies

In dealing with the complexities of cross-cultural experiences, all three respondents demonstrated adaptive but distinct cultural integration strategies. Respondents A1 and A3 tended to employ situational integration strategies by separating cultural expression based on social context. Indonesian culture was more deeply experienced within the family context, while Australian culture was more prominently expressed in the school environment, as stated by A3, “At school, I feel more Australian, but at home, I feel more Indonesian” (A3). This pattern reflects adaptation to intergenerational acculturation gaps, where heritage culture is maintained in the private domain and

host culture is enacted in the public domain (Muhammad & Maya, 2024).

Meanwhile, A2 relied more heavily on personal reflection and active learning to negotiate differences in social norms across cultures. They attempted to adapt to the new environment without fully relinquishing family cultural values. This indicates that cultural integration is a non-linear process that requires time, particularly during the early phase of migration.

Social and Environmental Support

The success of adaptation and cultural integration among the respondents cannot be separated from the role of social and environmental support. The findings indicate that family serves as the most consistent source of support in shaping the cultural identity of diaspora children. All respondents identified parents as the primary agents in introducing and reinforcing cultural values. A1 emphasized the role of both parents in introducing Indonesian culture, “they kind of introduced me a lot” (A1). For A2, parents functioned as reinforcers of heritage identity through the transmission of Javanese and Sundanese values, while A3 received dual support from both father and mother in understanding two different cultures.

In addition to family, multicultural school environments served as relatively safe social spaces for A1 and A3 to build relationships and a sense of belonging. However, A2’s experience indicates that during the early adaptation phase, the school environment was not yet fully able to meet the psychosocial support needs of diaspora children. These findings highlight the importance of creating culturally sensitive and supportive educational spaces to facilitate the adaptation processes of diaspora adolescents (Pinetta et al., 2025).

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the lived experiences of diaspora children constitute a dynamic and contextual developmental process, influenced by the length of residence in the host country, age, and multicultural family background. Diaspora children live at a cultural crossroads that requires them to continuously negotiate their personal identity, heritage culture, and the culture of the host society. This process does not always unfold linearly and may generate diverse experiences, ranging from relatively stable identity integration to confusion and cultural identity conflict, particularly during the early stages of migration.

The findings indicate that the level of cultural identity integration is closely associated with the self-esteem of diaspora children. Participants who exhibited more stable cultural identity integration tended to demonstrate more positive self-esteem, characterized by self-acceptance and pride in their dual cultural background. Conversely, cultural identity conflict, feelings of being “in between” two cultures, and social adaptation barriers contributed to fluctuations in self-esteem, especially among adolescents who had recently entered a new cultural environment.

This study also confirms that self-esteem functions as an important psychological resource in the social and cultural adaptation process of diaspora children. Relatively positive self-esteem supports adolescents’ ability to establish social relationships, navigate differences in cultural norms, and develop adaptive cultural integration strategies. Furthermore, social support from family and the school environment proved to be a key factor in helping diaspora children build a sense of belonging and maintain their psychological well-being.

Moreover, the findings highlight the importance of providing reflective and safe spaces for diaspora children to explore their cultural identities and process their cross-cultural experiences. In this context, multicultural counseling holds significant potential as a supportive approach capable of facilitating identity exploration, strengthening self-esteem, and enhancing resilience among diaspora children. Thus, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationship between cultural identity and self-esteem in diaspora children and underscores the urgency of psychosocial approaches that are sensitive to cultural contexts.

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