

# Unaccompanied children's education in the United States: Service provider's perspective on challenges and support strategies


## Educación para niños no acompañados en los Estados Unidos: La perspectiva de los proveedores de servicios sobre los desafíos y las estrategias de apoyo

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### Abstract

**Introduction:** Newcomer students seek routine and safety in schools, but often experience a "hard landing" when they begin school in the United States. Objective: While there is substantial literature on the academic and language achievement of emergent bilingual students, there is less specifically on unaccompanied immigrant students, and even less on their social and emotional well-being. **Methodology:** This study uses a human rights framework to analyze qualitative data from service providers ( $n = 79$ ) for unaccompanied children. **Results:** Challenges to meeting the needs of this population include the limited capacity of schools and school districts, students' language ability and preparedness for school, cultural differences, and individual health and mental health considerations. Supports to help immigrant students include academic and language assistance, cooperation among service providers, and emotional and behavioral programs. **Conclusions:** Recommendations include building community partnerships, creating more welcoming policies, school-assessments of programming compared to needs of newcomer students, and more research.

**Keywords:** Unaccompanied children; immigrant; education; challenges; support strategies; student

### Resumen

**Introducción:** Los estudiantes recién llegados buscan rutinas y seguridad en las escuelas, pero a menudo experimentan un "aterrizaje forzoso" cuando comienzan la escuela en los Estados Unidos. Objetivo: Si bien existe una gran cantidad de literatura sobre el rendimiento académico y lingüístico de los estudiantes bilingües emergentes, hay menos específicamente sobre los estudiantes inmigrantes no acompañados y menos aún sobre su bienestar social y emocional. **Metodología:** Este estudio utiliza un marco de derechos humanos para analizar datos cualitativos de proveedores de servicios ( $n = 79$ ) para niños no acompañados. **Resultados:** Los desafíos para satisfacer las necesidades de esta población incluyen la capacidad limitada de las escuelas y los distritos escolares, la capacidad lingüística de los estudiantes y la preparación para la escuela, las diferencias culturales y las consideraciones de salud individual y salud mental. Los apoyos para ayudar a los estudiantes inmigrantes incluyen asistencia académica y lingüística, cooperación entre proveedores de servicios y programas emocionales y conductuales. **Conclusiones:** Las recomendaciones incluyen la construcción de asociaciones comunitarias, la creación de políticas más acogedoras, evaluaciones escolares de la programación en comparación con las necesidades de los estudiantes recién llegados y más investigación.

**Palabras clave:** Inmigrante; educación; retos; estrategias de apoyo; estudiante; niños no acompañados

## INTRODUCTION

The population of Unaccompanied Children-UC in the United States has grown significantly in the past two decades, and while these children are attending schools all across the country, many are struggling socially and academically (Booi et al., 2016; Diebold, Evans & Hornung, 2019; Szlyk et al., 2020; Vidal, Avrushin & Coleman, 2018). This study uses a human rights framework to view educational disparities for immigrant students and discusses the findings of a qualitative study of focus groups and interviews with a wide variety of service providers that highlights both the needs of UC students and support strategies in place to help UC students succeed in the U.S. school system.

### *Unaccompanied Children from Central America*

In Federal Fiscal Year 2019, 76 020 UC were apprehended because they lacked legal status in the United States (Office of Refugee Resettlement-ORR, 2021). While this number drastically fell in 2020 due to COVID-19, it is rising again in 2021 (ORR, 2021). These children were placed in the care and custody of the Department of Health and Human Services through the Office of Refugee Resettlement-DHS/ORR because they were under the age of 18 and not accompanied by their parents or legal guardians (U.S. Code § 279; U.S. Customs and Border Protection-CBP, 2019). The majority of UC were from Guatemala (54%), Honduras (26%), and El Salvador (12%) (ORR, 2021). Many UC come to the United States in search of safety from interpersonal or community violence, to reunite with family, or for economic and educational opportunities (Szlyk et al., 2020; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees-UNHCR, 2014).

After fleeing their homes, surviving treacherous journeys to the United States (Schmidt, 2017), enduring the shelter care system (Gonzales, 2019; Krueger, Hargrove & Jones, 2019), and finally feeling a sense of safety (Roth et al., 2019), UC still have needs to be addressed. These needs include stable housing, meaningful connections in the community, cultural support and acculturation assistance, independent living skills training, educational supports, assistance with obtaining legal status, healthcare, English language training, and safety from gangs and human traffickers (Crea et al., 2018). Many UC who are living with family members in the community struggle to enroll in local schools, though schools can provide opportunities for education, social skill development, and peer support (Booi et al., 2016; Evans, Perez-Aponte & McRoy, 2019). UC encounter an abundance of challenges resulting from their legal status and mental health needs and only 5%-10% of UC are provided comprehensive follow-up services in the community after they are released or reunified (Jani, Underwood & Ranweiler, 2015).

### *The Current Study*

Disparities and inequalities among people of different races and socioeconomic statuses are prevalent in the United States' educational system as well as the child welfare system (McRoy, 2011). While there is research on the benefits of and barriers to education for immigrants (Hao & Pong, 2008; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco & Todorova, 2008; The Annie E. Casey Foundation-AECF, 2017) and for youth in foster care (Zetlin, Weinberg &

Shea, 2006; Zorc et al., 2013). This study adds to the knowledge base by looking specifically at unaccompanied immigrant children who are being served through the Office of Refugee Resettlement's Long Term Foster Care program. The research questions are as follows: 1) What challenges do unaccompanied children in foster care face as they navigate the U.S. educational system?, and 2) What are current strategies being implemented in schools to assist unaccompanied immigrant students?

### *Immigrant Students in U.S. Schools*

#### *A Human Rights Perspective to Education*

A human rights framework guided the development of this study's interview protocols and the analysis of its results. Full and equal participation in education is considered a basic human right (Convention on the Rights of the Child-UNCRC, 1989; Universal Declaration of Human Rights-UDHR, 1948), and yet UC and many other immigrant students do not have complete access to education. According to U.S. law, all children are entitled to free public education (Civil Rights Act of 1964; Plyer V. Doe, 1982), yet some factors hinder immigrant students' ability to participate in education, including enrollment practices (Booi et al., 2016), language acquisition and ability to understand classroom instruction (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008), and trauma histories that impede ability to concentrate or limit participation in the classroom (Davila, Hill, Sohn McCormick & Villarreal, 2020; Defranco, 2018).

The human rights issues related to education go beyond educational access. The ability to engage and participate in school can lead to human capital, social mobility, and opportunity (Miller & Roby, 1971). School is one of the primary ways in which immigrant students integrate into their new country as it is one of the places where they most frequently interact with U.S.-born children and adults (Birman, Weinstein, Chan & Beehler, 2007; Crea et al., 2018; Oxman-Martinez & Choi, 2014; Reynolds & Bacon, 2018). Education and the opportunity to gain important knowledge and skills are seen as one aspect of human capital that is important for future economic success (better paying and meaningful employment) and social well-being (DiNitto & Johnson, 2016; Hao & Pong, 2008; Stone, 2009). Likewise, unaccompanied children are often eager to adapt to their new community because they realize it is key to moving forward with their education (Thommessen, Corcoran & Todd, 2015) and to open doors for the future. Therefore, educational participation and access to social and emotional supports in schools should be paramount in ensuring UCs enjoy their human right to education.

#### *Challenges Immigrant Students Face in School*

The challenges immigrant students encounter in school vary widely in their nature and significance. Although not all immigrants are UC, all UC are immigrants, sharing many of the same experiences and characteristics. Szlyk et al. (2020) found that newcomer students experienced a "hard landing" when they entered schools in the United States (p. 135). Some of the most common challenges include the enrollment processes, standardized testing, the challenges of immigrants with special needs, language, social and emotional

well-being, lack of education in their home countries and existing teaching practices (Booi et al., 2016; Kaplan, 2009; Maynard, Vaughn, Salas-Wright & Vaughn, 2016; Reynolds & Bacon, 2018; Szlyk et al., 2020; Reynolds & Crea, 2017; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco & Todorova, 2008).

*Assessment practices.* Standardized tests and assessments of special needs do not always accurately assess a student's knowledge of concepts taught in the classroom as they lack culturally relevant material and require that students have a certain level of English skills, and therefore should be used cautiously (Kaplan, 2009; Roy-Campbell, 2012). When schools mandate the use of these assessments, teachers may be pressured to over-utilize memorization instead of spending time to help students fully develop both language and content knowledge (Tamer, 2014). Students feel inadequate when they have difficulty learning English and understanding what is being communicated in class (Szlyk et al., 2020), and we know language challenges are especially salient for indigenous students from Guatemala whose first languages are Mayan rather than Spanish (Crea et al., 2018).

*Social and emotional well-being in schools.* School environments pose a challenge for students, especially for those in their adolescence, when peer influences have an inordinate influence on their adjustment (Reynolds & Crea, 2015). Most UC arrive in the United States between the ages of 14 and 18 (ORR, 2021) and are subjected to peer influences and their subsequent effects on their adjustment both to school and the larger society. First generation immigrant students face social marginalization within U.S. schools and struggle to make friends due to differences in communication style, behaviors within the classroom, and lack of understanding of school norms (Reynolds & Crea, 2017; Szlyk et al., 2020). Immigrant and refugee students often feel that they do not have social support in schools and this isolation makes them less likely to be successful than their native-born peers (Barrett, Kuperminc, & Lewis, 2013; Bates et al., 2009). However Szlyk et al. (2020) note that UC students from Latin America often find strong social relationships and comradery among other immigrants that speak Spanish.

Some newcomer students arrive at U.S. schools with trauma histories that may impede their ability to learn and function effectively in the classroom (Szlyk et al., 2020; Chishti & Hipsman, 2014). Third, the educational environment in shelter facilities where UC are held vary drastically in their programming but may include overcrowded classrooms, a curriculum largely focused on English acquisition instead of content and classrooms with mixed ages and skill levels, which can lead to behavioral issues (Diebold et al., 2019). All of these together may make UC less prepared for formal education in U.S. public schools.

*Education prior to migration.* Unaccompanied children come to the United States for different reasons and bring with them a wide variety of backgrounds and challenges. First, many UC students arrive with limited schooling in their home countries or having had significant time out of formal school settings due to the journey to the United States, as well as limited literacy skills (Chishti & Hipsman, 2014; Szlyk et al., 2020). In some low- and middle-income countries, teachers are often late, absent, or unmotivated to provide quality education to their students (Bellino & Dryden-Peterson, 2018). Some families struggle to pay the costs associated with attending school, such as the cost of uniforms,



transportation, and basic classroom supplies, which may cause students to drop out of school (Colom et al., 2005; U.S. Department of Labor-DOL, 2016). Additionally, students and their families may choose not to attend school because they live far from school, and the commute to school can be dangerous, especially for girls traveling alone (Amin, 2011; Colom et al., 2005; U.S. DOL, 2016).

### *Academic, Emotional, and Behavioral Support Strategies*

School systems have varying levels of support for students who are struggling academically, emotionally, and behaviorally (Vidal et al., 2018). More research exists on the effectiveness of these programs for U.S.-born students than for immigrant students. For example, research indicates that educational liaisons help families navigate special education services for native born students (Zetlin et al., 2006). For foster youth living in residential education programs, services such as counseling, spiritual services, fine arts, peer to peer tutoring, and access to computers, sports, and leadership opportunities were found to improve educational outcomes (Lee & Barth, 2009).

Many schools provide academic support for immigrant students through specialized English learning classrooms and tutoring. While these are both effective and critical services for immigrant students, these services may look different for students who are illiterate in all languages, have special needs, or have large gaps in their educational backgrounds. The U.S. Department of Education's Office of English Language Acquisition-OELA (2019) supports bilingualism and works with school districts to ensure policies and practices are not discriminatory against English Language Learner-ELL students.

Some schools offer credit recovery programs (for both immigrant and non-immigrant students) that allow students to retake tests or complete additional assignments as a way to pass courses, rather than re-enrolling for another semester and delaying graduation (U.S. Department of Education-ED, 2018). These programs can be helpful to immigrant students who arrive in the United States after large gaps in their schooling, as noted above.

In recent years, more attention has been given to the need to develop social and emotional learning skills in school (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning-CASEL, 2021). Social and emotional learning is a process that students go through to apply knowledge, attitudes, and skills learned in order to set goals, manage emotions, demonstrate empathy, and participate in positive relationships (CASEL, 2021). Mentors and advocates such as coaches, teachers, and church members can help immigrant students both to be more engaged in the school environment and to improve academic outcomes (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008). Szente, Hoot and Taylor (2006) found that teachers who incorporated peer-to-peer activities and group work in their classes where immigrants and native-born students could work collaboratively together helped the students both socially and academically. Schapiro, Gutierrez, Blackshaw and Chen (2018) found that UC had difficulty finding the resources they needed for behavioral health, and used a school based mental health partnership to refer students in need of mental health services (44% of UC) to therapy (Schapiro et al., 2018). Research emphasizes that many UC arrive with both a lack of formal schooling and mental health needs that need to be addressed within the

school (Szlyk et al., 2020; Vidal et al., 2018). Similarly, immigrant students face internal conflict when it comes to skin color, race, and ethnicity (Anguiano, Ayala & Muñiz, 2019). Many schools feel they do not have the resources and skills needed to meet the needs of immigrant students (Reynolds & Bacon, 2018).

While the literature related to unaccompanied immigrant youth in schools is growing, additional work must be done to ensure that these students are having their needs met in U.S. schools. The current study will take a deeper dive into challenges UC face and understanding the support strategies that are currently operating for UC in two midsize cities.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed qualitative methods, holding interviews and focus groups with a variety of service providers who serve UC. The sample included teachers and school personnel, medical staff, attorneys, clinicians, case management and youth care worker staff, foster care supervisors and program directors, and foster parents. There were a total of 22 focus groups and interviews ( $n = 79$  service providers), separated by job function, conducted in spring 2016. The fourth author, who has extensive experience in global child welfare, conducted the focus groups and interviews in collaboration with Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service-LIRS and their foster care agencies serving unaccompanied children in two midsize cities, one in the northeast, and one in the Midwest. The focus groups followed a semi-structured protocol where the researcher was able to ask follow-up and impromptu questions as relevant to the discussion (Rubin & Babbie, 2017) and lasted 60-90 minutes each. The protocol was approved by the University's IRB office.

### *Analytic Strategy*

A phenomenological approach to qualitative inquiry is useful in understanding the common practices and behaviors among a group of people (Creswell, 2013). It is thus an appropriate orientation for this work which seeks to better understand how service providers describe the educational experiences UC face in schools, and how the educational system is supporting newcomers to the United States. It is important to understand the commonalities as a way to develop best practices and potentially create policies of inclusion for UC in school settings (Creswell, 2013).

The fourth author conducted interviews and focus groups and took extensive notes. A graduate research assistant compared the notes and audio files for accuracy. These notes were then used for qualitative analysis in this study and will hereafter be referred to as transcripts. The data analysis strategy entailed many steps, first of which was for the first author of this paper to immerse herself in the data by listening to the available audio files and reading the transcripts of all 22 interviews. Three of the authors open coded six transcripts (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Rubin & Babbie, 2017), and a preliminary list of codes was developed in alignment with the research questions of interest (Miles & Huberman, 2004). The research team gathered for a second cycle coding and consensus-building activity in order to identify the key codes and condense the list into a codebook organized by

research question (Maxwell, 2013; Rubin & Babbie, 2017; Saldaña, 2015). Two people coded each of the first three transcripts. The first author then assessed preliminary inter-rater reliability in order to improve the descriptions available in the codebook, and to condense codes that were underutilized or confusing to distinguish between. Five coders then used the established codebook (two persons per transcript) to deductively code all 22 transcripts (Creswell, 2013).

Inter-rater reliability was calculated by counting the number of times that both coders of a given transcript identified the same theme for each quotation, then dividing by the total number of items coded, resulting in a percentage of agreement. If the inter-rater reliability was below 80%, the established level of acceptable similarity (Creswell, 2013), for any given transcript, the two coders met together to discuss discrepancies and reach consensus.

After the data analysis process was completed, the first author held an external audit meeting with five staff members from LIRS (Morse, 2015). This process enabled staff members to see the preliminary results and discuss how they relate to what is seen in practice on a regular basis. Staff agreed that the results were representative of what they would expect as responses to the given research questions and offered insights and explanations into some of the findings, which are represented in the discussion section of this paper.

## RESULTS

### *Research Question 1: What challenges do unaccompanied children in foster care face as they navigate the educational system in the United States?*

While UC experiences some challenges shared with other immigrant groups, some challenges are unique, and some have added complexities. The main findings include struggles with language abilities, the school system having a low capacity to serve UC, the students' lack of preparedness for US schools, cultural clashes, and mental and physical health challenges, as described below.

#### *Low Capacity of the Educational System to Serve Unaccompanied Children*

Many participants discussed how at a systems-level, mainstream U.S. schools are unprepared to meet the needs of UC.

A foster parent expressed that “schools are hindered with how much they can do” given limited resources, and a supervisor elaborated, “we’re seeing our graduation rates increase, but we’re questioning whether they’re getting the education they deserve.” Schools face difficulty in working with UC students and trying to meet the unique needs of each student. A foster parent mentioned the “school system [is] not serving them well. [The] only remedy would be a special education advocate.”

Existing policies and procedures sometimes do not adequately meet the needs of UC. Participants mentioned the debate schools have when thinking about grade placement. Should grade placement be based on age, academic level, or something else? One person lamented, “the school system is putting a child in ninth grade who never set foot in school

[before].” A foster parent said, “we need to stop experimenting and come up with a plan.” Another participant explained that the schools often did not have enough information up front to understand the student’s needs upon their arrival to school, making grade placement even more of a challenge. This lack of information coupled with the cultural adjustment that UC are experiencing makes it hard for schools to adequately assess these students.

Participants felt that the school systems did not have enough funding for extracurriculars, adequate staffing, and community partnerships. For example, one teacher explained “[there is] no sports program here.” They discussed overcrowded classrooms as a challenge “average classroom is 34 kids, [but] ESL ideal is 12-15 kids” and another school said, “we have classrooms of 25 [students] of all different levels and languages” and that this was compounded by the fact that “salaries for ESL teachers are very low.” Another participant noted “[we are] missing a partnership with a trade school” which is holding students back because “if kids were able to go to vocational school and be able to make money sooner... so many of them just want to work, they have a lot of debt from coming here.” One therapist believed teachers were overwhelmed with the numbers of UC they serve, going on to explain:

A kid is mislabeled with ADHD [Attention-deficit/Hyperactive Disorder] – in reality he’s been working on a farm since he was six. They try to teach him at age level, but they need to teach him at a 5-year-old level. Kids like him end up with an outstanding number of suspensions, it’s hard for schools, they’re just tired of him.

An attorney described how UC students are often “enrolled in the worst schools in the district where they’re not going to be learning much” and that kids face “the pressure of standardized tests and pull down scores of these schools.” Participants also acknowledged that there is an innate stigma and some participants noted that schools adopt a deficit-based lens, viewing immigrant students as problems instead of putting supports in place to help UC succeed.

### *Language Challenges*

Participants commonly discussed learning the English language as a barrier. Language skills are the foundation for educational success in U.S. schools. More specifically, challenges include students’ lack of English skills, the challenges that come with learning English and Spanish at the same time (i.e., illiterate students and students who speak only indigenous languages upon arrival to the US), and a lack of translation and interpretation services within the school system.

One teacher noted that both the quantity of available personnel, and the policy on interpretation, can hold them back from serving students effectively: “Having sufficient amount of translation services for families and students without a long wait time, that’s a huge challenge for us as a whole,” she noted, going on to say, “through the school system we need to submit a request two weeks prior [for an in person interpreter and this], makes it difficult when something comes up and we need translation on emergency basis.” One teacher expressed that:



Beyond stigma, the biggest need is language barriers in classroom. If you can't learn you can't do a whole lot of other things. [You have to] learn English so you can have a mastery of the material. And if you feel confident in classroom you feel confident in other things. Otherwise, students feel overwhelmed in classroom because the teacher talks too fast and they don't understand.

Not all U.S. public schools have the same resources available for UC students. One caseworker said, "[There is] not a lot of Spanish support, and classes are so far above them [so] they don't understand. The message they get at school is that they're stupid." However, from the foster care agency they hear the other side as "there's encouragement to continue education ... they're bright and resilient" and one foster parent pointed out:

We didn't have an ESL program, she's the only student they're working with. The district is rising to the challenge to meet what she needs, but they have done a lot of research...she's learned English fairly well and quickly and that's because that's all she does and all she hears. It's hard to type an English paper when you're just getting the speaking part down and you're still learning English.

These struggles are exacerbated for students for whom Spanish is a second language. For those who are "coming from Guatemala and El Salvador, a lot speak dialects" and begin to learn Spanish while in immigration detention, then begin to learn English, often their third language, shortly after they enter mainstream schools. A caseworker noted that "[we need to] work more on providing more and better ESL services, especially to kids from Guatemala who don't even know Spanish."

Some communities have charter or magnet schools that are designed to meet the needs of immigrant students in a separate building; to help students learn English and to gain the skills they need to enter mainstream schools at grade level, they use experiential learning, increasing autonomy and responsibility of students, and providing mutual academic support (*Internationals Network, 2018*). A teacher explained, "a lot go to [the newcomer school] first to learn English, and then go to public high school [...] kids are in a rush to get [to] high school." Some view these newcomer schools as beneficial, but on the other hand, one attorney remarked, "kids are sitting with other kids of their nationality speaking their native language. I don't know if concentrating them in the school is the best approach." One teacher mentioned, "It would be great to have [newcomer programs] in each school rather than separated."

### *Unaccompanied Children's Lack of Preparedness for School*

While at the systems level, schools struggle to meet the needs of UC, at the individual level, many students struggle with being unprepared for school. Participants explained that UC were not "typical" students, and their backgrounds posed a challenge to their individual adjustment and academic success. Many mentioned UC's education gaps, caused by dropping out of school in their home countries or being out of school during their journey to the United States. A foster parent said, "some of them come with little to no background in education and they're expected to catch up and pass [state standardized testing]"; another said, "educational gaps often exist. The journey is so long [they may be] out of school for a few years."

These gaps create complications in terms of grade placement, emotional stability, and can hinder healthy social and academic adjustment to the school environment. For example, a teacher explained that because the majority of UC are entering schools as adolescents, the school district would need to adapt high school curricula to really meet their needs. A direct care worker noted UC have challenges with “basic things that kids learn in elementary school. [For example, I] asked a child to write five paragraphs, and what I got was just a bunch of sentences. I wish they were learning basic things from school.” A supervisor suggested that “it takes a lot of creativity and work and committed teachers and school and committed foster family to advocate” for a student to succeed. Because of these gaps and lack of resources, other participants expressed their opinion that the classroom content is too advanced.

There was also discussion about the implications of this lack of formal education in terms of social and emotional needs. For example, a caseworker noted that “the gap in education plays a big role in mental health and adjustment,” and a therapist explained that the “lack of education in home country is systematically an issue.”

Participants also described struggles with transition, both the transition from newcomer schools to local district schools, and the transition from high school to college. A teacher explained that “once they develop language skills they transition to [local district] schools for required courses.” Another teacher expressed that the curriculums and goals are different between the two types of schools:

The difficulty for us is that we're teaching on standard-based competencies, but in home [local district] schools it's credit based, so [there is a] need to turn into numerical grade. Here we are trying to build the positives, and then end up giving them a D, or F or C when in the spectrum of what they're learning they're doing better work.

This teacher expressed that it is also hard “translating curriculum here to [state] common core curriculum.”

When discussing college, one participant mentioned that “access to higher education [is limited because they] can't fill out FAFSA<sup>1</sup> [Free Application for Federal Student Aid] because they have no social security number.” A teacher added that the lack of available funding for college forced some students to choose alternative paths: “The valedictorian went to community college. It's so important that they get legal status” in order to have all doors open for the student.

### *Cultural Clash*

Services providers who participated in the focus groups and interviews discussed the many ways in which UC and their caregivers face cultural clashes and struggle to meet the norms and expectations of US school systems. A teacher explained that “kids don't know what it means to be in school. The expectations in different countries are not the same, [and this] affects behavior and study skills” and another agreed that they cannot “assume that kids know what the rules are” and therefore they:

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<sup>1</sup> In the US, students and their caregivers complete an application annually to apply for federal grants, work-study, and loans to assist with the high cost of college education.

Try to address it, and teach them the rule. The second time we contact the family or caseworker, and the third time there is consequence. It's not like mainstream school, but something suitable— [we do] a lot of mediation and conflict resolution.

A foster parent discussed that the cultural norms in school extend to social relationships by saying “another challenge is getting accustomed to the norms here” and went on to explain a situation at school where “one of my kids had difficulty with the girlfriend/boyfriend relationship and [using] acceptable communication compared to back home.” In addition, missing school or dropping out in order to work and send money home to family are more acceptable to UC than to U.S. educators; this was noted by an attorney who nonchalantly said, “A lot of kids drop out and get their GED.”

In addition, U.S. school systems sometimes struggle adapting to UC's needs and expectations. A caseworker elaborated on these systemic issues of cultural clash by saying:

[There is] a lot of hostility in the community with [kids who speak] different languages. That's been a real challenge to get people to open their minds to other cultures. [For example, the] school board is resistant to having kids in classes. How are we supposed to help them? They are really resistant to putting services in place and want the kid to change for them instead of making a plan for the kid. That kind of determines the kid's [level of] success.

### *Health and Mental Health Challenges*

Prior research has established that many UC arrive having had significant experiences of trauma. The focus groups in this study highlighted the desire for teachers and school personnel to be more trauma-informed, but they face many competing demands. A teacher at a newcomer school said, “trauma is a huge part—it's a new way of teaching, a whole trauma understanding,” and went on to explain that “it's not a regular public school where a couple kids have things going on. Everyone has [trauma], there are triggers that you're not aware of, and [...] that are important to know to understand the child.” A program director echoed this by saying there are “huge huge mental health needs” and another manager expressed the variety in trauma backgrounds:

They come from places that are post-conflict, trauma they have witnessed includes witnessing someone being murdered, forced out of country, being threatened, discriminated against because of gender identity, being displaced from their homes, the journey here and what they witnessed along the way. A lot of girls have been assaulted or molested in different ways. The journeys are brutal, they suffer from hunger, robbery, assault. Some kids have never had primary care doctors or dentists. There is separation from family, generational trauma, and some kids come with learning disabilities, it takes a while for the system to pinpoint it, once they start school the IEPs [Individualized Educational Plans] don't come into place because no language skills, [and there is a preference to] learn language before testing.

Many participants described how the health and mental health challenges of UC impact their well-being and educational success. A teacher explained that “each child presents with different needs and meeting all those needs is difficult” and another said that “100% of the kids are coming in with trauma backgrounds, such large numbers make it difficult to maintain [mental and emotional well-being for all students].” A case-

worker agreed that meeting the demand was a struggle by saying that “when someone needs extra mental health services, [there is] only so much we can do because there is not enough funding.” A participant went on to explain that “sometimes in the school system, some kids struggle safety-wise because other kids have found out about their situation and they’ve been targeted, getting picked on, bullying them” and it was noted that “we do have our fair share” of physical altercations. It was also acknowledged that “counseling services are needed in various languages” within the school setting.

Participants pointed out services that are not currently being provided that could potentially help UC. First, some feel that UC would benefit from mentors or life coaches in the school environment as explained by a teacher who said, “The support system —there isn’t enough people to help them the way they need to be helped.” Secondly, when it comes to physical health, another teacher said “we refer them [...] but it would be helpful to have an in-house health center [...] for immunizations, and health appointments. UC are missing school if they go to appointments, [it would be] more helpful if on site.” Thirdly, some felt that more training on trauma-informed practice and vicarious trauma should be provided to school staff, as demonstrated by a medical provider who said “[there is] not enough training in therapeutic processes for staff, so they can be traumatized.” Lastly, a teacher expressed, “As an ESL teacher, it would be great to have a basic newcomer class, where we offer support while teaching the standards.”

*Research Question 2: What strategies are being implemented in schools to assist unaccompanied immigrant students?*

This research question examines the existing strategies and promising practices being implemented by schools, foster care agencies, and through partnerships among service providers in order to aid unaccompanied children in US school systems. Findings fall under academic and language support strategies, emotional and behavioral support strategies, and interdisciplinary support strategies.

*Academic and Language Support Strategies*

Academics are the cornerstone of the educational experience. Participants mentioned tutoring, after school help, ESL, individual learning plans, reduced class sizes, and educational advocates as beneficial academic and language support strategies. A foster care staff member explained they “have a group tutoring session where volunteers spend 1.5 hours tutoring and come back every week to work with the same kids.” Another foster parent noted that “we do tutoring four nights a week, they want to learn, [but the] schools are hindered with how much they can do.” However, because the emphasis for help is often on English language learning for these students, one direct care worker explained that “[sometimes] there’s no one who can help them with their math homework” even though “we’ve been matching tutors one on one.”

Other supports acknowledged by participants included individual learning plans and special education services. A teacher explained that “making education individual[ized based upon] their need baggage and gaps” in education is really important and should be used “to determine the need,” and a school staff member elaborated to say,



“individualizing as much as you can, and assessing the student ahead of time [are key], but it’s not always workable.” A teacher explained, “[in] trying to determine whether a child would be referred for special education, the teachers can try different strategies. And if a student is not making adequate progress, they then begin the team process to transition to special education.” However, a foster care program manager pointed out that “some kids come with learning disabilities, and it takes a while for the system to pinpoint it.” She explained, “Once they start school, the IEPs don’t come into place because there are no language skills. [Many districts require the child to] learn the language before testing.”

Other academic supports indicated include caseworkers serving as educational advocates, credit recovery programs, having a strong transition from the newcomer school to the local school, and multilevel classrooms. A direct care worker explained that the “majority start at one school, [and then] some transition to regular high school.” A teacher explained, “We’re a credit recovery school, you get credits in English, Math, and Science [...]. By the time we get them they’re 16 or 17 years old, so we try to make it more possible for them [to graduate].”

When it comes to thinking about life after high school it is really important to “find what kids are interested in- whether college, or skill/trade” so that service providers can assist with the appropriate resources in order to support these goals and because “most of us grow up thinking about college and profession, but these kids don’t have the same [expectations].” A foster care staff member explained that they offer “15-week life skills classes [which include] information about college education: how to look for housing, [going on] college visits, FAFSA, college application, and employment.” A caseworker noted that “taking them to the college campuses” exposes them to higher education and a wider range of options for their future. Another staff member expressed that “colleges always welcome our youth for college visits to understand college life. [It helps them to] see a broader sense of community.” Partnerships with local colleges provide college tours and information sessions that can benefit the student, as well as the college if the student chooses to apply there.

Participants often discussed academic support specifically related to language skill development. One teacher noted that “All teachers are ESL certified or dual certified,” yet a foster care supervisor felt that “[we need to] supplement what they receive” when it comes to ESL services in the schools. When a supervisor was asked how they evaluate success in UC, the response was, “ESL always a big one, especially in urban areas” and therefore this agency provides “ESL classes” under the purview of the foster care program in addition to what UC students get at school. One foster parent noted that regardless of which supports student needs, it is important to “get all supports in place as soon as possible.”

### *Emotional and Behavioral Support Strategies*

Focus group and interview participants also discussed a variety of emotional and behavioral supports available to UC students through the school system. Importantly, a supervisor described the positive qualities that UC bring to the table that help them succeed:

[There is] tremendous resilience among kids, [especially] given everything they've gone through. They do achieve a lot, not always a diploma, but the power of the human spirit is really powerful in our kiddos. That's what I get out of coming to work every day. A lot of their path is dictated by who they are. Overall, the outcomes [for UC] are good and positive, and overall they do very well.

Building a school that is emotionally responsive to the mental health needs of UC students starts with basic safety, a teacher explained that it starts with the basics by saying "I think they need a good program to support educationally. [But] they certainly need a secure and safe spot to be. We become counselors, and we need more of that in place because they need so much." Another staff person in the school expressed that "I'd love to create a school for [UC] kids to help them catch up and deal with emotional impairments in the classroom" and a teacher explained that "[there is] initial testing to place [UC] in certain groups based on needs, [but they] can move to different groups throughout year. It's very flexible." One teacher also expressed their opinion that being a "Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports (PBIS) school" was beneficial to UC students.

Other formal supports that may be less formal in nature to help UC students address social and emotional needs in school include extracurricular activities, "mediation and conflict resolution" programs, and the ability to refer UC students to alternative schools as needed. A foster parent noted that her foster daughter:

She's actually expressed a lot of gratitude for the boundaries we've put in place [...] A kid said something inappropriate to her, but she went right to the principal, and after she expressed that it was nice to have a voice and that somebody would care.

A direct care worker noted that the "alternative school is a last-ditch effort after kids have been expelled from every other school" and sometimes provide the structure needed to help them push through to graduation.

Participants agreed that "extracurricular activities are important" as a way to help UC develop healthy emotions and relationships. For example, a foster parent said her foster daughter is, "real athletic and wants to be in every sport; she's made so many friends and that's helped her fit in" and a teacher recognized that UC students enjoyed the benefits of the "traveling library bus." Another teacher discussed how students also benefit from doing community service projects: "we have to put in service hours at school... in the middle of the day we go to the senior citizen's center and do mailings."

### *Interdisciplinary Team of Supports within the Educational System*

Participants frequently highlighted the benefits of service coordination among different people, both within the school and between the school and other service providers, to "build an external collaborative team." Beneficial collaborators included advocates, mental health providers, nurses, local colleges, mentors, and nonprofits serving immigrants and refugees.

Having individuals within schools show support and understanding of the experiences of UC students was pointed out as beneficial. One foster parent expressed that the "Principal has been great" and a teacher explained "interventionists have been a great plus, they come in and assist. [It] helps in manpower, and additional help is so important, there's

never enough with multilevel classrooms.” Another teacher discussed that they have a great team consisting of interdisciplinary personnel such as a “bilingual school adjustment counselor, bilingual behavioral specialist, and a school psychologist one day per week. [But also mentioned that they] should have a full time nurse for students’ needs.” Another school said that they have “education advocates, and there’s a clinician in-house” to help students.

Other service providers were also discussed as key players and partnerships in the success of UC students and there was a desire for them all to “come to Know Your School night.” It was said that “education is one of the hardest things and caseworkers are biggest advocates at school, because kids are left in the shadows.” A teacher described that it would be beneficial to “utilize the agencies and get more translators available and build a team, a base of stakeholders” which supports the comments above about lack of interpretation and wait times causing a barrier to student success. A community partner commented that “all higher education [institutions] do service learning in the area” and that many college students volunteer their time to work with immigrant students within the schools. Another teacher explained how they wished more community agencies would partner with the school and create seamless service delivery:

It’s important for students to see there’s collaboration among all of us. One thing that would make it better would be to have agencies come in and do their groups within the [school] building... it would be great to have agencies come for after school – it makes it a more cohesive learning experience if it’s on site.

This teacher went on to explain types of groups that had been or would be helpful such as “boys group and girls group discussing self-image, or overall well-being, [and these could] morph into what girls or boys needed. Or with therapeutic groups, we could see some of the changes with students bonding with each other” but explained that “staffing became an issue” and expressed that partnerships with community agencies could assist with this. A medical staff person explained that collaboration among immigrant and refugee serving agencies benefited the school and teachers’ level of knowledge:

The organizations that are directly involved in serving refugees get together quarterly and discuss resources for the population, what they’re doing. The Office of Refugee Resettlement also comes to tell people what to expect for the next quarter. [This is] representative of how collaborative [the city] is as a whole.

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study highlight key challenges faced by UC students, including: the capacity of the school and school district to serve UC students, students’ language abilities, students’ preparedness for school, cultural differences and expectations, and health or mental health challenges of students.

The capacity limitations of schools and school districts (e.g., lack of resources such as staff, money, training, and policies and procedures) sometimes stifle the potential of UC students. Participants noted that many schools are unsure how to assist UC, and therefore may inadvertently create a greater divide between mainstream students and UC.

Policies and procedures may prohibit teachers and school administrators from acting in the best interest of immigrant children (Reynolds & Bacon, 2018). Several studies have examined teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Ross-Hill, 2009) and note that policies of inclusive education are influenced by the beliefs and practices of the teachers implementing them. Though UC may be enrolled in school, we argue if they are not enjoying equal participation in school then their basic right to education is not being fulfilled.

Results from this qualitative study support the common notion that UC students face language barriers in school. While the results suggest that the language struggles among UC students have much in common with prior research on other immigrant groups, the participants in this study also pointed out that the struggles are sometimes greater for students who speak indigenous languages (Bauer & Arazi, 2011; Crea et al., 2018; Rance-Roney, 2010; Pacheco, 2010). While some school personnel that participated in this study indicated that all teachers are ESL certified, Russell (2015) notes that more training is needed for all school staff and teachers to ensure that ESL teachers are not overburdened because they are the only staff equipped to respond to the struggles of UC students.

Given the difficult living conditions, political instability, and lack of economic opportunities in many UCs' countries of origin, coupled with the often-traumatic journey to the United States, almost all unaccompanied children enter U.S. schools after a lag in formal schooling, and without the knowledge and skills that will enable them to keep up with their U.S.-born peers. The results of this study highlight how these educational gaps impede a student's ability to participate in the classroom, a finding which is consistent with those of other studies on forced migrant children (Chishti & Hipsman, 2014; Markham, 2012; Socha, Mullooly & Jackson, 2016; Szlyk et al., 2020; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops-USCCB, 2013). However, participants in the current study also identified nuances and challenges associated with the decision of whether to place them according to their age or according to their academic abilities. Booi et al. (2016) found that undocumented students faced similar struggles with determining grade placement due to age discrimination by school districts.

School was mentioned as a key component to helping UC students integrate into their communities and to form relationships with their native-born peers. This assertion is consistent with existing literature (Birman et al., 2007; Crea et al., 2018; Oxman-Martinez & Choi, 2014; Reynolds & Bacon, 2018). However, participants said that the struggles UC students face as they explore the cultural norms within the school system include understanding expectations, classroom rules, and navigating social and potential romantic relationships with US-born teenagers. Szlyk et al. (2020) found a similar theme as students described the hard landing, they felt upon entering U.S. classrooms because they were unfamiliar with classroom practices and the amount of time and work required in a U.S. school.

Health and mental health challenges were another theme frequently mentioned by participants in this study. Service providers empathized with UC students who overcame the hardship of the journey to the US, describing the ways that UC students overcome



their trauma through the assistance of teachers and social workers. However, there was also significant discussion around the unmet needs of these students and how schools need more bilingual/bicultural school mental health professionals, mentors, and supports within the school system. Szlyk et al. (2020) discussed the role social workers can have in advocating for the social and emotional needs of newcomer students through extra services, better communication, and IEPs. Similarly, Reynolds and Bacon (2018) suggest that schools have 1) psychoeducational programs incorporating the use of the arts, 2) the ability to refer students out to community-based mental and behavioral health providers, and 3) create school-based mental health initiatives in collaboration with licensed clinicians experienced in treating trauma; in order to effectively meet the needs of refugee students in mainstream schools. However, the results of this study add to the existing research by looking from the perspective of service providers who focus their work with unaccompanied children.

The results of this study also suggest several supports for UC exist within the themes of academics, language, emotional, and behavioral strategies, and that these strategies are most effective when they exist in cooperation among service providers.

The results suggest that emotional and behavioral support strategies in schools help UC students to feel welcome, and to be mentally prepared to handle the rigor of US schools, but participants also mentioned that there were often not enough services in place. Reynolds and Bacon (2018) agreed that mental health services in most schools should be expanded, and that schools should develop more psychoeducation programs. One participant described how a school benefited from adopting the Positive Behavioral Interventions & Support-PBIS) framework. PBIS (2019) incorporates culturally-relevant outcomes, empirically supported practices, and data to monitor the effectiveness of the practices. There is substantial research showing the effectiveness of PBIS models in improving equity among student groups, improving discipline outcomes, and increasing family collaboration with the school (PBIS, 2019). However, the research on PBIS models does not focus specifically on outcomes for UC or immigrant students at large. New research is beginning to emerge that specifically addresses how successful trauma-informed and culturally responsive programming can be for immigrant students (Beehler, Birman & Campbell, 2012; Defranco, 2018).

The results of this study suggest that engaging multiple service providers (including teachers, school mental health professionals, interpreters, and community partners) allows for more work to be accomplished and draws on various strengths and resources that could benefit UC students. Interdisciplinary teams working within the school setting may provide benefits such as more effective problem-solving ability, more successful advocacy, and a better understanding of roles and responsibilities among colleagues. These benefits may help improve student behavior and discipline (Holtzman, Dukes & Page, 2012). Reynolds and Bacon (2018) recommend that school leadership financially support the use of bilingual liaisons and cultural brokers and enable staff to work to develop community partnerships that can aid the integration of refugee students into the school system.

### *Strengths and Limitations of the Current Study*

This paper addresses a gap in the academic literature by explaining challenges and best practices in school systems specifically for UC students; a unique community at the intersection of immigrants, undocumented persons, and Latinx groups. The perspectives of many service providers were intentionally included to provide well-rounded perspectives, but the voice of UC students themselves is missing because they are in the custody of the federal government and unable to participate in research studies. While the focus groups and interviews were conducted in 2016, the status of UC in public schools has not drastically changed since that time. Despite these limitations, the study provides unique and new information about UC student's well-being in schools and lays the groundwork for future studies and improvements in day-to-day practices.

### *Implications*

The results of this study can provide guidance for school personnel, researchers, and policy makers in order to improve the experiences of UC students in US public schools, and their outcomes. Below are implications for research, practice, and policy.

More research is needed on the social and emotional well-being of UC students in schools (Berger, Stinchcomb, Hershberg & Stefler, 2018; Evans, Perez-Aponte & McRoy, 2019). Future studies should involve mixed methods to dive deeper into specific research questions such as understanding the effect of cultural clashes and lack of preparedness for school on the social and emotional well-being of UC students. It is possible that the experiences of UC who are new to a school will vary from experiences at time of graduation; longitudinal research is needed. Additionally, research on experiences in school would be enhanced if the sample is drawn from the school rather than from social service agencies as there may be unaccompanied children in the school who are not actively receiving services. Lastly, research is needed into the special education process and specific barriers faced for UC students, before better policies can be created to create change.

School systems with high numbers of UC students should critically reflect upon the available services for UC students including school orientation, bilingual and bicultural staff, ESL services, mental health professionals, and programs and community connections to determine if they are doing enough to meet the needs of local UC students. Offering orientation materials, tours of the school, and open house nights for UC students and caregivers is one concrete way to address the issues of cultural clash and to begin to address the preparedness for school by better understanding the gaps in formal education, conducting proper assessments, and conveying expectations (Evans & Reynolds, 2006). Schools with fewer numbers of immigrant or UC students can reflect upon their programming and how they may be able to rely on community agencies to supplement programming within the school, or to raise funds to ensure they are addressing the human rights of students in terms of educational potential.

Advocating for increased funding (Berger et al., 2019), and more services for UC students may be more successful when done collaboratively across schools within the district.

Changes to policies and procedures can help to advance human rights and increase equity for UC students. The results of the current study suggest that school districts should think through the implications of grade placement, and create guidelines for handling these situations, while recognizing that sometimes the best answer will need to be individualized. For districts with a newcomer school, there could be specific policies to address when and how to create transitions from newcomer school to local school. Newcomer schools should also work to offer more extracurricular and trade school opportunities. Individualized educational opportunities such as Options for Youth (Options for Youth, 2021) should be explored as well. Lastly, school policies related to ESL or ELL students can be rewritten to address overall school wellbeing (academic, health, future planning, social and emotional needs) rather than focusing solely on language acquisition (OELA, 2019) of immigrant students.

### CONCLUSIONS

While many unaccompanied immigrant students struggle to adjust to and succeed within their school setting, there are also many promising practices happening in schools that are able to ease the challenges. From a human rights perspective, we need to focus on these strategies to continue to evaluate their effectiveness, and to advocate and replicate where possible. Each school and school district has different resources, knowledge, and capacity to serve this unique population. Individual factors such as language barriers, the student's prior education and preparedness for school in the US, ability to navigate cultural clashes, as well as health and mental health challenges can complicate the educational potential for UC. Schools that offer supports in terms of academics, language, emotional, and behavioral needs are beneficial to UC, especially when done in collaboration with other service providers and community members. Recommendations include expanding support services to meet the needs of UC students, conducting more research to better understand the effectiveness of programming, and building evidence-based practices specific to this population.

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