Immigrant Youth: Some Implications for Schools

Different motives propel migration (e.g., better opportunities for work and education, political asylum; quality of life). At this time, estimates indicate that the immigrant population in the U.S. is about 41 million (13% of the 313.9 million U.S. population). It is estimated that 11.5 million came unauthorized.

Some immigrants are *first* generation and recently arrived; those born in the U.S. of at least one immigrant parent are described as *second* generation. In 2012, 17.4 million children under age 18 lived at home in the U.S. with at least one immigrant parent (25% of the 70.2 million children under age 18 in the U.S.). Second-generation children accounted for 88% (15.2 million) of all children with immigrant parents. Almost 9.6 million have immigrant parents whose family income is below 200 percent of the federal poverty threshold. About 1 to 1.5 million are undocumented.

Examples of the Challenges

Immigrant students bring a wide range of backgrounds and experiences to school; their stories often are both amazing and poignant. They differ in terms of such circumstances as family and peer support structure, documented status, language proficiency, literacy, and cultural identity. Most face a myriad of challenges related to transitioning into school. Some overcome the challenges and do well; some do not. What follows is a snapshot of factors that can make life difficult for immigrant youth.

Family Separation

The reasons for family separation are complex, as are the effects. It is not uncommon for families in some countries to send an unaccompanied minor to the U.S. (e.g., to escape conditions in the home country; to enroll in a good American school). And when undocumented parents are deported, minors born in this country often remain in the U.S. The Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation (LISA) study found that 80% of participating youth had experienced separation from one or both parents for 6 months to over ten years.

Students separated from their family need a variety of supports (e.g., social, emotional, medical, legal, academic). Unfortunately, many tend to be reluctant in seeking assistance.

Undocumented Status

Undocumented status is a highly sensitive topic. Families usually are not comfortable disclosing that status because of fear of deportation, discrimination, and stigmatization. (According to the U.S. Office of Immigration Statistics, most deportees from the U.S. are from Latin American countries, with significant numbers also from Asia, Europe and Africa.)

Support for schooling undocumented students varies by state. On one end of the spectrum, California offers in-state tuition and financial aid for undocumented students; on the other end, Georgia bans undocumented students from the university system.

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*The material in this document was culled from the literature by Josefina Flores as part of her work with the national Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA.

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Learning English

The number of English learners in the United States has increased in the past two decades. Currently, there are over 4 million in U.S. schools, including first and second generation immigrants of varying backgrounds and ages. As reported for the school year 2012-13, California and Texas had more than 313,000 English Learners; 12 other states had between 64,000 and 313,000. For some immigrants, their first exposure to reading and writing in another language is when they enroll in a U.S. school. Given successful acquisition of English (e.g., in and English as a Second Language program), achieving academic proficiency is estimated to take 4 to 7 years.

Students who arrive to the U.S. during their late teenage years usually are placed on a intensive language learning schedule. One disadvantage for them is that by spending major blocks of time learning English, they have less access to college preparation courses.

Adjusting to New Circumstances and a New Culture

Minimally, transitions to a new country can be expected to produce emotional reactions (e.g., fear, anxiety, sadness). Adjusting to a new culture takes time and seldom comes easy. Difficulties arise in relation to migration and transition, separation from family, lack of sufficient family guidance and social and emotional supports, school adjustment, threat of deportation, etc.

It can be anticipated that most immigrant students experience some degree of culture shock as they enter the U.S. and as they enroll at school. Culture shock is defined as the emotional reactions precipitated by anxiety resulting from loss of familiar social intercourse signs and symbols. It varies in duration and severity, of course, due to individual differences and current circumstances (e.g., stress and supports for coping).

> **Schools that don't address the above challenges often exacerbate stress and contribute to unsuccessful coping.**

What Can Schools Do?

While the high profile case of Plyler vs. Doe (1982) ruled that undocumented immigrants should have access to K-12 education without being charged fees, this effort to establish equity of opportunity has not resulted in enhancing success at school for many. Extrapolating from available data (e.g., comparing youth whose primary language is English with language minority students) suggests a high rate of school drop out.

One aim of school improvement policy and practice is to address factors that interfere with equity of opportunity for school success of all students; *all* is meant to include immigrant and English language learners. Addressing interfering factors involves enhancing staff development, improving academic instruction and student and learning supports, and more. With respect to higher education, the need is to address financial barriers and, for undocumented students, changing admission policies at some institutions.

Currently, the various efforts by schools to enhance equity of opportunity are limited in nature and scope and often are controversial. Here are a few major examples specifically related to addressing the needs of immigrant students:

Title III Programs. Title III of the federal education act is designed to increase educational resources that help English language learners develop language proficiency and meet grade-level academic standards. The funds typically are used for language instruction, but they also are used for alternative bilingual education programs, teacher professional development, and teaching English

to parents. Controversies have swirled around the program, including concern about disparities across the country in how the federal dollars are spent. When the U.S. Department of Education assessed the implementation of Title III, it found funding varied by state and by school. The findings indicated that the average funding for an English learner in Alaska was $86, $100 in California, and $457 in Pennsylvania.

Immigrants, Cultural Humility, and Staff Development

Given the variety of cultures found in many urban and poor rural school districts, developing a high level of cultural competence among school staff has not been feasible.* This has led to advocacy for a shift in focus to cultural *humility*. Cultural humility stresses remaining open to others cultural identity and working to appreciate the cultural differences that are most important to them.

Besides addressing cultural differences, other staff development concerns arise in addressing the many needs of immigrant students and their families. Examples include developing language and literacy, social, emotional, legal, economic, and planning for the future.

*Staff development involves not only teachers, but all others who work at a school.

Engaging Parents and Other Caretakers. Home involvement and engagement can play a crucial role in optimizing the educational trajectories of immigrant youth. Research reports confirm that immigrant parents value education for their children. Too often, however, those at home are unfamiliar with what a U.S. school expects of students and families and about what the school offers with respect to student and learning supports.

At the same time, school staff often have too little awareness of the pressures on immigrant families. For instance, besides the general challenges confronting many immigrants (e.g., learning English, adjusting to a new culture, family reunification), poor families must struggle each day just to meet basic survival needs (e.g., housing, food, clothing, child care). In such situations, many students have to take on extra duties at home and frequently have to find ways to earn money. (Note: researchers report that "Hispanic" adolescents who work more than twenty hours a week are more likely to drop out of high school).

To help address challenges confronting immigrants, schools need to engage those at home. In addition, to provide additional help for the students in learning to handle the realities of being a first generation student, some schools have developed mentor and internship programs – matching a student with an English speaker who can provide support, skills, advocacy, and a role model.

Student and Learning Supports. Student and learning supports are essential in addressing the many challenges that can interfere with immigrant students having an equal opportunity to succeed at school and beyond. Personal and familial problems arising from family separation, undocumented status, learning English, adjusting to a new culture, low family income, planning for the future, etc., all add complexity to already over-whelming intervention strategies.

Given the magnitude of students in need of help and the limited number of support staff available, schools cannot continue to react to each student as if the problems were unique to specific individuals. Addressing the concerns effectively requires that schools transform student and learning supports into a unified and comprehensive system of supports. Such a system is crucial for substantially improving current approaches to staff development, support for transitions, support to enable learning, student and family assistance, and school-community-home collaboration.

Special Concerns Related to Minors Seeking Asylum or Refugee Status

With the spurt in Central American youth traveling to the U.S., issues related to immigrant youth are widely being discussed. From 2009-2015, the number of unaccompanied minors from countries such as El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua apprehended at the U.S. border has grown exponentially. Of special concern is what happens to these youngsters after they are detained.

Upon being detained, youth are transferred to the Office of Refugee Resettlement. While immigrant youth await their court hearing, they remain in custody or are released to a sponsor. According to the Office of Refugee Resettlement, family members can sponsor unaccompanied youth and can care for them while their case is pending. Youth are to appear before an immigration judge, who will decide their fate and whether or not they will be able to remain. Estimates indicate that 94% of unaccompanied youth that have gone before an immigration judge do so without legal representation.

Due to the backlog and due to the fact that immigration courts are understaffed, many youth wait for months until their hearing date. During this time, they may attend schools.

Beside the pressing legal battle confronting them, many of these youngsters bring to school the effects of the negative conditions they are trying to escape and the hardships endured in coming to the U.S. The mental health concerns, while often not emphasized in news stories, clearly require attention.

The school must decide what role it will play in addressing the various needs of such students and what capacity building (including staff development and reworking of student and learning supports) is essential. All this, of course, involves increased understanding of the new wave of immigrants and enhanced collaboration with community resources (especially legal representation and advocacy for basic quality of living).

Concluding Comments

Recognize yourself in he and she who are not like you and me.

Carlos Fuentes

Immigrant students often find it difficult to succeed in U.S. schools. Schools often find it challenging to meet the needs of immigrant students.

Fundamental to improving this state of affairs is transforming student and learning supports; accomplishing the transformation is facilitated when there is substantive school-community collaboration. Such collaboration allows for weaving resources together to address shared concerns and helps strengthen and fill intervention gaps (e.g., related to providing accessible health, social, and legal service needs and economic opportunities to immigrant families; enhancing guidance and support for student entrance to post secondary education). Moreover, successful collaboration can markedly enhance an atmosphere of trust and psychological sense of community.

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See our Center's Related Online Clearinghouse Quick Finds & Related Resources

>*Immigrant Students and Mental Health* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/immigrantkids.htm

>*Cultural Competence* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/culturecomp.htm

>*Transition Programs/Grade Articulation/Welcome* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p2101_01.htm

>*Transition to College* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/transitiontocollege.htm

>*Systems Change Toolkit* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm

Some Additional Helpful Online Resources

BRYCS - Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services – http://www.brycs.org/

Center for American Progress – https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/immigration/report/2014/12/05/101366/removing-barriers-to-higher-education-for-undocumented-students/

Center for Healthy Families and Cultural Diversity – http://rwjms.umdnj.edu/departments_institutes/family_medicine/chfcd/index.html

Colorín Colorado – http://www.colorincolorado.org/

Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) – http://www.cal.org/

Digital Chalkboard – https://www.mydigitalchalkboard.org/

Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees (GCIR) – https://www.gcir.org/

Immigrant and Refugee Children – http://www.healthinschools.org/Immigrant-and-Refugee-Children.aspx

MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership – http://www.mentoring.org/

National Center for Cultural Competence – http://nccc.georgetown.edu/

National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition & Language Instruction Educational Programs (NCELA) – http://www.ncela.us/resources

National Immigration Forum – http://immigrationforum.org/

National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights – http://www.nnirr.org/drupal/

Young Center for Immigrant Children's Rights – http://theyoungcenter.org/

About Transforming Student and Learning Supports

Concerns such as those highlighted in this Information Resource are part of a wide range of barriers to learning and teaching. To effectively address the breadth of concerns schools face each day requires transforming current approaches to providing student and learning supports. The *2015 National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports* is dedicated to this.

It's Time for Direct Action!

2015 is the time for everyone concerned about student learning, behavior, and emotional problems to pursue the following courses of action to enhance school improvement policy and practice:

- Work for collaboration among groups recommending changes in education policy so that there is a unified message about
  >ending the marginalization of student and learning supports
  >developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student and learning supports.
- Participate at decision making and planning tables focused on school improvement so you can clarify the need to expand from a two to a three-component policy framework.
- Send the message to those shaping school improvement policy (e.g., principals, superintendents, mayors, governors, organizational, business and philanthropic leaders).
- Communicate with Congress about the need to end the marginalization of student and learning supports and expand from a two to a three-component policy framework for school improvement as a major facet in reauthorizing the ESEA.
- Focus the attention of governors, mayors, superintendents, principals, and other leaders on the need to help schools unify and develop a comprehensive system of student and learning supports.
- Let us know who to send information to.

At a minimum, let us know your thoughts about direct action to elevate student and learning supports in policy as a nonmarginalized and unified system. That will help us in mobilizing others.

Send your ideas and any information about what you see happening to Ltaylor@ucla.edu or to adelman@psych.ucla.edu

Here's a few resources to share with colleagues:

>*Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Trailblazing Initiatives!*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/newsletter/summer14.pdf

>*Introducing the Idea of Developing a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports to a New Superintendent or to One Who May Be Ready to Move Forward*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/introtosups.pdf

>*Developing a Unified, Comprehensive, & Equitable System of Learning Supports: First Steps for Superintendents Who Want to Get Started*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/superstart.pdf

>*Establishing a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports at a School: Seven Steps for Principals and Their Staff*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/7steps.pdf

And for a more in-depth discussion, go to the section on our website for the 2015 initiative and download and share the new book: *Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Developing a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System.*