Strategies to Increase Community Participation for Unaccompanied Children

Kerri Evans, MSW, LCSW, PhD
School of Social Work University of Maryland, Baltimore County
May 5, 2021

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- INCLUSIVE AND ACCEPTING OF DIVERSE CULTURES, GENDERS, PERSPECTIVES, AND EXPERIENCES
- HEALING-CENTERED AND TRAUMA-RESPONSIVE
- PERSON-FIRST AND FREE OF LABELS
- NON-JUDGMENTAL AND AVOIDING ASSUMPTIONS
- RESPECTFUL, CLEAR AND UNDERSTANDBALE
- CONSISTENT WITH OUR ACTIONS, POLICIES, AND PRODUCTS

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Introductions: Dr. Kerri Evans

• MSW: University of Maryland School of Social Work
• In-home case management for UC released from shelter
• Cross-border social work to ensure permanency of immigrant children in domestic foster care in NJ
• Placement coordination and agency capacity development for Post Release and Foster Care services for UC serving programs
• Program Management (Quality Assurance, Training, Grant Writing, Technical Assistance, etc.) for Long Term and Unaccompanied Refugee Minor Foster Care Programs
• PhD: Boston College School of Social Work

Introductions: Dr. Kerri Evans

Assistant Professor
School of Social Work
University of Maryland, Baltimore County

Current Research:
• Unaccompanied immigrant and refugee children
• Immigrant families
• In partnership with social service providers, answering questions that allow us to
  • Improve service delivery,
  • Advocate for policy change, and/or
  • Provide preliminary analyses to increase grant funding

Current Teaching:
• Social Welfare Policy
• Field Education Seminar

Introductions: Audience

Please introduce yourself in the chat!
• Name
• Agency/role
• State where you live/practice
Objectives

- Understand barriers to community participation, school enrollment, and school well-being
- **Discuss strategies** for improving barriers to community participation, school enrollment, and school well-being for immigrant children
- **Learn best practices** in creating welcoming schools for immigrant children

Who are unaccompanied children?

Unaccompanied children in the United States: Defining Terms

**Unaccompanied Child:** is one who has no lawful immigration status in the United States, has not attained 18 years of age, and with respect to whom: 1) there is no parent or legal guardian in the United States; or 2) no parent or legal guardian in the United States is available to provide care and physical custody. *(Office of Refugee Resettlement [ORR] 2019)*

Instead, let’s use: **Unaccompanied Children (UC)**
Migration Routes

UC Arrivals in US

Migration Routes

UC Demographics

AGE
- under 12
- 13-14
- 15-16

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN
- Mexico
- El Salvador
- Guatemala
- Other

GENDER
- Male
- Female
Today, we are talking about adaptation to life and communities in the US.
Barriers to community participation & Strategies for improving community involvement

Common means of engagement

- School
- Sports - soccer, gym membership, swimming
- Boys and girls clubs; after school programs
- Tutoring programs; ESL classes
- Mentoring programs
- Employment
- Art
- Church
- Volunteer efforts
- Babysitting
- Social interactions with neighbors

Despite the widespread fear and discrimination these kids face…
UC engage in their communities just like US-born kids do!

(Common et al., 2018; Evans et al., under review; Socha et al., 2016)

Common Challenges Adjusting to the US

- Immigration process
- Family separation and reunification
- New caregiver; home
- Educational Expectations
- Anti-immigrant sentiment
- Trauma (journey; home; & in US)
- Survivors guilt
- Debt
- Limited Resources
- Fear in community
- Possibility of deportation
Unaccompanied Immigrant Children in the United States: Macro Level Barriers To Adjustment

Kerri Evans, PhD, LCSW, University of Maryland Baltimore County
Samantha Teixeira, PhD, Boston College School of Social Work
Thomas M. Crea, PhD, Boston College School of Social Work
Virginia Fitchett, PhD. Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service

Systems and community level barriers to adjustment for unaccompanied children

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Barrier</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>UN Welcoming Communities</td>
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(Evans et al., in prep)

Barriers to Community Participation

“Raid are happening, that affects potential reunifications, and increases fear”

“Even something like playing soccer, they can’t play soccer without legal status because of league regulations.”

(Evans et al., in prep)
Language Barriers

A caseworker noted:

“A lot of kids are being seen by specialists that don’t speak Spanish” because “we don’t know of any bilingual psychiatrists, or psych assessments. There are huge waiting list and we need interpreters. It’s the highest need.”

(Evans et al., in prep)

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Welcoming Communities and Macro Level Facilitators of Adjustment For Unaccompanied Immigrant Children in the United States

Systems and community level barriers to adjustment for unaccompanied children

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(Evans et al., under review)
Community Relationships

"[Unaccompanied children have] no established roots, our kids don't have any type of connection with anyone – that's a big difference [from US born youth] for sure. I talk to my staff, and say every kid needs six adults that are absolutely crazy about them" (Evans et al., under review)

Inter-agency Collaboration

A foster parent commented:

"[I] definitely feel part of a multidisciplinary team – healthcare, housing, counseling, [there is] always someone I can call" (Evans et al., under review)

Access to Healthcare

"Sexual education groups have to be tailored differently – they've never been given education, we try to do it with outside agencies but we have to be present and ease into it much more easily. [We address questions like] what is a STD and birth control? Even a girl with a baby doesn't know what a STD is – sometimes it's mind-blowing, but we really have to fill in the blanks where they didn't get certain psychoeducational topics before"
Implications & Recommendations

- Advocate for welcoming communities
  - https://welcomingamerica.org/initiatives/certified-welcoming
- Decrease the fear of participation
  - Spread trust and empathy- By stander trainings
- Establish partnerships that will lead to success with long term goals
  - Paid internships for UC
  - Access to trade schools and certificate programs for UC
  - Informational nights on college application process; tours of local colleges; explain majors and career options

Implications & Recommendations: Inter-agency Collaboration

Collaborate and communicate across service providers
- Proactively – network on a regular basis
  - Schools, mental health providers, legal providers, health clinics, PRS providers, religious institutions, immigrant rights advocacy organization and …?
- Promote a continuity of care
- Co-host events
- Share resources
- Identify gaps in the community– and meet them!

Implications & Recommendations: Making GOOD Referrals

- Identify agencies with language and cultural knowledge
  - When not available in your community, advocate for training and resources to build the capacity of organizations
- Screen agencies for availability
- Consider transportation, ability to bring children, and hours of operation
- Go with client to make introductions
- Follow-up with clients, how was their experience? Use this in determining future referrals
School well-being

- Why Focus on school well-being?
- Barriers to school enrollment and school well-being
- Strategies for easing school enrollment and school well-being

Significance

- Education is a basic human right (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989)
- Globally, there are 617 million children who lack basic literacy and mathematics skills (United Nations, n.d.)
- Only 1% of refugee children eventually attend college (UNHCR, 2019)
- 1 in 4 kids in US schools are part of an immigrant family (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2017)

Educational System in Home Country

- Varies widely
  - May be only half day school; certain months
  - Many only attend primary school
    - Fees, uniforms, books are not provided
  - Work/family obligations that prevent attendance
    - Possible lack of truancy officer/educational neglect mechanism
  - Teachers may not have formal education
  - Many schools allow corporal punishment
Guatemalan Highlands

- K’iche’ speaking
- Limited books in K’iche’ and Spanish in most homes
- Long & dangerous walks to school
- High teacher absences

Photos courtesy of Dr. Thomas Crea

Importance of School Connections for immigrants in US

- Often the only connection outside the home
- Acculturation process often begins at school
- School is a ‘safe space’ for many
- Peer support
- Return to normalcy
- Desire to learn and advance in life (both child and parent)

(Birman et al., 2007; Correa-Velez et al., 2010; Kim & Suárez-Orozco, 2015)

Mandatory School Attendance

- Plyler v. Doe (1982) affirmed that local school districts could not deny children enrollment in public schools due to their immigration status
- School districts may not discourage enrollment or attendance
- School districts may not ask about parent or child’s citizenship or immigration status to establish residency within the district

Call to Schedule an Appointment; COVID= web based enrollment in English

Register at the Office

Parent or Guardian must Accompany child
Health Records

Funding Implications of Student Success Rates

Strategies for Facilitating Enrollment

• Utilize Alternative Documents
  • Hospital or physician’s note, adoption record, baptismal records, previously verified school documents, or an affidavit from a parent
  • ORR shelter documents
  • Consulate may be able to obtain birth certificate or prior school records
• Language
  • Provide information in native language – or secondarily, a language they speak fluently
  • Title VI of Civil Rights Act; Executive Order 13166; 1970 Memo
  • Advocate for bilingual staff in main office & guidance office

Strategies for Facilitating Enrollment: McKinney Vento Act

• The McKinney–Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987
  • Law that provides federal money for homeless shelter programs

Educational Implications:
• McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvements Act of 2001 Part C:
  • Homeless youth have equal access to free education
  • If state has residency requirements for school, they must revise or create alternative regulations to ensure Homeless youth have equal access to free education


Macro level strategies

• Advocate for fair enrollment practices
• Advocate for Centralized Enrollment Centers
• Train staff members
  • Incl. Enrollment Center or front office


Kerri Evans, PhD, University of Maryland Baltimore County
Robert G. Hasson III, PhD, Providence College
Thomas Crea, PhD, Boston College School of Social Work
Sarah Neville, Boston College School of Social Work
Gabrielle Oliveira, Boston College Lynch School of Education
Challenges unaccompanied children navigate in the US educational system

Table 1. Challenges Faced in the School System

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge</th>
<th># Comments</th>
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<td>Language challenges in school</td>
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<tr>
<td>Low capacity of school district to serve UCs</td>
<td>38</td>
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<tr>
<td>UCs' lack of school preparedness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cultural clash</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCs' health/Mental Health challenges</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Evans et al., under review)

Low capacity of the US system to adequately serve UC

Teachers said:

“[We are] missing a partnership with a trade school”

“A kid is mislabeled with ADHD – in reality he’s been working on a farm since we 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.”

(Evans et al., under review)

Cultural clash

“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”

“Parents often hesitate coming to the school in general because of lack of language, they think it’s a negative connotation to walk into the building because something must be wrong.”

(Evans et al., under review)
Other Edu Challenges

• Anti-immigrant sentiment
• Cost of supplies
• Potential lack of trust in adults, teachers, those with authority
• Balancing work v. school pressures from family

Challenges for the Caregiver

• Work and family obligations
• Navigating a new community
• Understanding educational norms: incl. testing, applications, requirements
• Physical and emotional needs for oneself, and child

(Chiu, Pong, Mori & Chow, 2012; Markham, 2012; Maynard et al., 2016; Szcze, Muldoon & Jackson, 2016)

Current strategies being implemented in schools to assist unaccompanied children

Table 2. Support Strategies in Place for Unaccompanied Children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
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<tr>
<td>Academic support strategies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tutoring</td>
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<tr>
<td>Access Individual Learning Plans and Special Education Services</td>
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<td>ESL Services</td>
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<tr>
<td>Educational Advocates</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interdisciplinary team of supports in the educational system</td>
<td>28</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emotional and behavioral support strategies</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Blanco et al., under review)

Academic Support Strategies

A community agency staff member said:

“We do tutoring four nights a week. They want to learn – but schools are hindered with how much they can do.”

“Taking them to the college campus to meet with mentor there and exposing them to higher education. In several cases it changed the goals for certain kids who were in high school and weren’t considering college.”

(Blanco et al., under review)
Interdisciplinary team of supports in public schools

Teacher commented:

“It’s important for students to see there’s collaboration among all of us… it would be great to have agencies come for after school – it makes it a more cohesive learning experience if it’s on site.”

(Evans et al., under review)

Implications and Recommendations

- Critically assess
  - Needs of their immigrant students
  - Current services available to them
  - Gaps

- Conduct program evaluations on various school-based interventions to assess outcomes before expanding services

- Create policies around grade placement best practices for UC students with large educational gaps

(Evans et al., under review)

Establishing Welcoming Schools
School-wide practices

- Ensure bullying prevention programs are culturally responsive
- Establish school adjustment programs and newcomer groups
- Increase tutoring availability
- Hire bilingual and bicultural staff
- Bystander trainings for staff (teachers, counselors, bus drivers, crossing guards, cleaning staff, students, and parents of all backgrounds)
- Multilingual signs & Diverse decorations
- Advocate for Trauma Informed Schools

Trauma Informed Practices

- Lower the volume of the bell
- Let the new student observe the chaos of class transition first
- Create a quiet space to relax and self-regulate
  - Applaud students for using this resource
  - Do not set limits or consequences
- Conduct home visits, meet the family where they are--build trust
- Use a trauma informed lens when conducting assessments, and asking questions of the student or parent
- Attend other webinars that address this topic more in-depth!
Welcome Parents/Caregivers

- Welcome caregivers who are not bio parent
- Explain expectations for caregiver engagement
- Invite caregivers to tour the school
- Provide orientation to instructional programs
- Host open house and parent nights
- Utilize (or advocate for) parent liaisons
- Help facilitate social support networks

Support Services for Students

- Orientation to the school
- Extended learning time
- Proper assessment
  - Refer for Individualized Education Plans (IEP) when needed
- Mental health supports
- Use classroom curriculums that celebrate diversity

Networking among providers/staff in the schools

- Before a new student starts, have a meeting to discuss the plan for welcome
- District wide committee for all the people who serve as “point person” for immigrant students
- Who to include??
  - Classroom teachers, ESL teachers, guidance counselors, social workers, psychologists, special education professionals, family liaisons, nurses, principal and assistant principal, physical therapists, or occupational therapists, etc.
Networking among providers/staff in the community

• Make referrals to the community for student, caregiver & family:
  • Financial capability, Health, mental health, housing, employment, and basic needs, ESL, GED classes
  • Develop partnerships with immigrant serving organization that can help students and teachers become more knowledgeable

Peer to Peer Strategies

• Build a social support network
• Lunch clubs
• Per mentoring programs
• Extracurricular activities – sports, language clubs, volunteer opportunities, leadership opportunities

Welcoming policies and practices

• Work alongside existing diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives
• Bilingual staff: main office & guidance office
• PROACTIVELY Translate forms and resources
• Centralized Enrollment Offices
• Policies for Grade Placement
• Culturally sensitive academic testing measures
• Explain laws and expectations to the family: substance use, mandatory attendance, supervision, child abuse, etc. to help mitigate future issues
Thanks for being here today!

References


Acknowledgements: Dr. Thomas Crea of Boston College’s School of Social Work for access to interviews from which much of this research was conducted.
Coming Up Next

Robert C. Hasson, II, Ph.D., LICSW
Resurre Ortega-Aguayo, Ph.D.

Mental Health
Assessments for Unaccompanied Minors to the US
May 12th, 2021
1:00 pm Eastern

Evidence-Based Trauma-Focused Interventions for Unaccompanied Minors
May 19, 2021
1:00 pm Eastern

Your opinion is important to us!
Fill out your evaluation forms, it only takes a couple of minutes. Just scan this code with your smartphone. Don’t worry if you can’t - an email will be sent to you with the link.

Type your questions in the Question Log

National Hispanic and Latino Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
Ibis Carrón, Psy.D.
Director
ibis.carron@uccaribe.edu
Angel Casillas, MHS
Project Manager
angel.casillas@uccaribe.edu

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Email: hispaniclatino@mhttcnetwork.org