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## Educational Justice for Undocumented Students: How School Counselors Encourage Student Persistence in Schools

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**Abstract:** School counselors are critical intermediaries in K-12 schools who can help students from undocumented immigrant families persist in school. Yet, a dearth of research exists about their advocacy work, or the range of efforts they make to support unauthorized youth. This paper asks, 1) what challenges do counselors face and strive to overcome to promote undocumented students' persistence in school?; and 2) what strategies do counselors use to encourage students to persist? Data come from an embedded case study with seven school counselors and a family intervention specialist in two Texas school districts on the U.S.-Mexico border. The findings revealed that two of participants' biggest challenges in terms of student persistence—and their strategies to help—related to complexities arising from students commuting across the border to school and students' transient living situations. Despite participants networking on behalf of students and families, forming partnerships and seeking services for students and families, counselors recognized limits to their efforts. Policies impeded their assistance, and events that were out of their control inhibited them

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from potentially acting as empowering agents for students in critical ways. While counselors can develop strong, trusting school-student partnerships to encourage student persistence, more research must explore how school leaders can act as empowerment agents and build capacity to serve newly arrived or undocumented families.

**Keywords:** undocumented students; school leadership; school counseling; advocacy

### **Justicia en la educación para estudiantes indocumentados: Como los consejeros escolares fomentan la persistencia de estos estudiantes en las escuelas**

**Resumen:** Consejeros escolares en las escuelas K-12 son intermediarios cruciales que facilitan que los estudiantes de familias indocumentadas persistan en la escuela. Aun, existe una carencia de investigaciones sobre su papel como defensores y el rango de sus esfuerzos en apoyo de jóvenes no autorizados. Esta investigación pregunta: 1) Cuales son los desafíos que enfrentan y superan los consejeros para promover la persistencia de estudiantes en la escuela?; 2) Cuales son las estrategias implementados por los consejeros para fomentar la persistencia en los estudiantes? Las datas derivan de un estudio empotrado de caso de siete consejeros escolares y una especialista en la intervención para la familia en dos distritos escolares de Tejas en la frontera de E.E.U.U. y México. Los resultados revelaron que dos de los desafíos más grandes en términos de la persistencia estudiantil- y su trabajo de ayudar- eran relacionados a las complejidades derivadas de la vida migratoria de los estudiantes y sus familias, cruzando la frontera para ir a la escuela. A pesar del “networking” hecho para los estudiantes y sus familias por parte de los participantes, y en el proceso formando asociación y buscando servicios para ellos, los consejeros se dieron cuenta de los límites de algunos de sus esfuerzos. Las políticas impedían su asistencia y eventos fuera de su control les inhibían de actuarse como agentes de potencia en maneras cruciales para los estudiantes. Mientras que los consejeros pueden desarrollar una relación con los estudiantes que sean fuertes y confiables para fomentar la persistencia estudiantil, se debe investigar más este proceso con atención particular en las maneras en los líderes escolares pueden fomentar una capaz de servir familias recién-llegadas o no documentadas.

**Palabras-clave:** estudiantes indocumentados; liderazgo escolar; consejo escolar; abogacía

### **Justiça de educação para estudantes indocumentados: Como conselheiros escolares encorajam persistência desses estudantes em escolas**

**Resumo:** Conselheiros escolares em escolas K-12 são intermediários importantes que facilitam a estudantes indocumentados a persistir em famílias da escola. Além disso, há uma falta de investigação sobre o seu papel como defensores e a variedade de seus esforços para apoiar os jovens não autorizados. Esta pesquisa pergunta: 1) quais são os desafios enfrentados e superados pelos conselheiros para promover a persistência dos alunos na escola?; 2) quais são as estratégias implementadas pelos conselheiros para encorajar a persistência nos alunos? As datas derivaram de um estudo de caso construído de sete conselheiros escolares e uma especialista de intervenção familiar em dois distritos escolares no Texas, na fronteira do U.S.A. e México. Os resultados revelaram que dois dos maiores desafios em termos de persistência estudiantil e seu trabalho- eram relacionados com as complexidades da vida dos alunos e suas famílias, migrando através da fronteira para ir para a escola. Apesar do “networking” pelos participantes para os alunos e suas famílias, e neste processo formando relações e procurando serviços para eles, os conselheiros perceberem os limites de alguns de seus esforços. As políticas e eventos além

de seu controle impediram e eles inibiram eles de atuar como agentes para ajudar seus alunos em aspectos cruciais. Enquanto os conselheiros podem desenvolver um relacionamento com os alunos que são fortes e confiáveis para encorajar a persistência estudantil, deve investigar ainda mais este processo com atenção especial para as maneiras em que os dirigentes escolares s podem ser capaz de servir as famílias recém-chegadas ou não documentadas.

**Palavras-chave:** estudantes indocumentados; liderança escolar; conselho escolar; advocacia

## **Educational Justice for Undocumented Students: How School Counselors Encourage Student Persistence in Schools**

The United States public is polarized on whether to provide a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants or to strengthen immigration enforcement efforts. This polarization and the political stalemate over how to fix the U.S. immigration system has an impact on undocumented students. The main way undocumented students pursue upward mobility is through improved access to education beyond secondary school. In 2012, President Obama signed an executive order, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) initiative. DACA did not provide a path to citizenship, but it gave young undocumented immigrants two years' relief from fears of deportation and also temporary authorization to work (Batalova, Hooker, Capps, & Bachmeier, 2014). However, even with deportation relief and opportunities to work and build their livelihoods, unauthorized students face great uncertainty legally, economically, and politically (Abrego, 2006; Gonzales, 2009; López, & López, 2010).

Conceivably, DACA may have enhanced unauthorized students' access to K-12 education by reducing their fears of coming and going to school without concern for immigration authorities. However, the July 2016 Supreme Court decision in *United States v. Texas* means that unauthorized parents do not get deportation relief, and DACA programs will not be expanded (National Immigration Law Center, 2015). The consequences are that families are likely to continue living with legal and economic insecurity and severely reduced access to social services, pushing them even further to the margins of society (Gonzales, 2016). Students may not be sure whether they should plan for and work toward social mobility by staying in school if the scope of their opportunities are severely limited beyond the secondary level.

Educators can play a pivotal role to ensure that students who are promised access to a public K-12 education are not denied a crucial human right. Educators' everyday acts of advocacy (Witherspoon & Mitchell, 2009; Witherspoon & Taylor, 2010) can change youths' life opportunities, ameliorating challenges that diminish student desire or ability to participate in school. However, the various strategies that educators in different roles in school use to advocate for undocumented youth is understudied. This article posits that school counselors can act as critical intermediaries in K-12 schools for undocumented and newly arrived immigrant students and families.

Strong, supportive relationships are essential to student success. Relationships with personnel matter to students' sense of belonging in school; they can promote student academic achievement and engagement, and also foster pro-social behavior (Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2007). In adolescence, student relationships with counselors, teachers, and other educators increase in importance to student ability to adapt to the social and academic aspects of the school environment (Pianta, 1999; Rhodes, 2002). Relationships with nonparental, caring adults may be especially important for immigrant youth and their engagement and attendance in school, levels of motivation, and achievement (Davis, Davis,

Smith, & Capa, 2003; Suárez-Orozco, & Rhodes, 2003; Suárez-Orozco, Pimental, & Martin, 2009). The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (NSCDC) asserted in a 2015 report that forming even a single, steady and supportive relationship with an adult can help a young person develop resiliency. Resiliency enables youth to overcome trauma and adversity, avoid toxic stress levels, and strengthens youths' ability to adapt to shifting circumstances (NSCDC, 2015).

Research shows that, among K-12 school personnel, counselors and teachers are primed to build the strongest relationships with unauthorized students as they navigate the school environment (De Leon, 2005; Gonzales, 2009; 2010). School counselors are especially well placed to form supportive relationships with undocumented students as they may be privy to knowledge of the myriad issues that students and their family members face due to a lack of legal status. Counselors have capabilities to assist students in finding ways to build resiliency and negotiate difficult and uncertain life circumstances. With the awareness they gain from interacting with unauthorized students and families, counselors may be able to use their professional position and networks to advocate for students in ways that enhances student academic, human, and social capital. Counselors may exert a powerful influence on student experiences of and connections to schooling. Yet, the extant information about the range of efforts they make to support unauthorized youth is limited, as is research on what counselors view as instrumental or detrimental to their work with this population. Accordingly, we ask 1) what challenges do counselors face and strive to overcome to promote undocumented students' persistence in school, and 2) what strategies do counselors use to encourage persistence? We argue that counselors act as critical empowerment agents (Hallett, 2013; Stanton-Salazar, 2011) who can help students develop stronger connections to schooling and build resiliency, both of which contribute to persistence. It is beyond the scope of this article to claim that counselors' efforts result in student persistence; however, as counselors are among the most likely school personnel to form relationships with unauthorized students (De Leon, 2005; Gonzales, 2009; 2010), they are essential to students' wellbeing and integration in school.

Evidence for this article comes from a case study of two school districts in Texas along the U.S.-Mexico border. Both districts have a long history of receiving students with and without legal authorization to come to the United States. We sought to learn how counselors perceive working in border schools, react to the intersections among power, politics, immigration policy, and ultimately whether they use their position to increase undocumented children's educational access. The original study from which we draw evidence for this case examined how school leaders use their "spheres of leadership," or distributed their leadership in K-12 schools and within their local communities to influence undocumented and newly arrived immigrant students' access to information, relationships, and resources. For this article, we reanalyzed data from interviews with seven school counselors and a family intervention specialist. Collectively, these eight participants serve undocumented students across the K-12 system to support a range of needs for elementary and secondary students.

## **Literature Review**

Since the Great Recession of 2008, the undocumented immigrant population in the U.S. has stabilized at approximately 11.2 million, or approximately 3.5% of the total U.S. population (Pew Research Center Hispanic Trends, 2015), though politicians may paint a picture of unprotected borders. While undocumented immigrants increasingly come from various regions and countries all over the world like India and China, the majority of unauthorized immigrants are of Mexican origin (i.e. 52%). Unauthorized immigrants reside predominantly in six states (i.e. California, Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, New York and Texas). However, more are beginning to settle in states not

historically considered as immigrant destination states, like Georgia and North Carolina (Passel & Cohn, 2009; Pew Research Center Hispanic Trends, 2015; Zong & Batalova, 2015).

### **Unauthorized Immigration in Texas**

The border that Texas shares with Mexico can serve as a gateway for refugees and unauthorized persons from Mexico and Central and South America who travel north to the United States (Krogstad, Gonzalez-Barrera, & Lopez, 2014). Texas has the second highest portion of unauthorized immigrants in the nation (Zong & Batalova, 2015). The undocumented population in Texas is nearly 1.46 million (Migration Policy Institute, 2016), or approximately 13% of the total unauthorized population in the nation (Pew Research Center, 2013; Zong & Batalova, 2013). Relatedly, Texas has a Latina/o population, both native and foreign-born, of nearly 10 million (Pew Research Center Hispanic Trends, n.d.). Seventy percent of the Latina/o population is foreign-born (Migration Policy Institute, 2015), and 78% of the unauthorized population in Texas is of Mexican origin (The Migration Policy Institute, 2016).

The 1982 Supreme Court case *Plyler v. Doe* makes it a legal right for any student, including those lacking legal status, to receive a free, public K-12 education. In K-12 schooling nearly 7% of all K-12 students have one unauthorized parent (Krogstad & Passel, 2015), which translates into 5.5 million children. A million of these children are undocumented, and the other 4.5 million are U.S. citizens (Passel & Taylor, 2010). Approximately ten percent of Texas K-12 students have at least one undocumented parent (Passel & Cohn, 2009), which exceeds the 6.9% national average (Passel & Cohn, 2014). The Migration Policy Institute states that, of the approximately 1.46 million unauthorized immigrants in Texas, 527,000 have a child under the age of 18; 152,000 of these children are between 3-17 years of age and are enrolled in K-12 schools (Migration Policy Institute, 2016).

### **Complicated Hopes: Access to Education Does Not Guarantee a Quality Education**

Though every child in the country is permitted to access K-12 education, unauthorized children and the children of unauthorized adults struggle to receive a high quality and consistent education. As earlier noted, sociopolitical, legal, and economic obstacles can compromise undocumented and newly arrived immigrant students' ability to persist in school (Abrego, 2006; Gonzales, 2010). Undocumented families are likely to live in poverty (Passel & Cohn, 2009), and they often lack access to basic social services like health care (Passel & Cohn, 2009). Further, most unauthorized immigrants belong to minority groups, and research has evidenced that minority students are most often enrolled in segregated, low-performing schools (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2014; Orfield & Lee, 2006). Gonzales (2010) found that undocumented students are frequently placed in lower, less rigorous academic tracks. They rarely experience the smaller learning environments that are critical institutional supports that make a difference to their quality of education.

Unauthorized immigrants are also susceptible to and fear deportation (Lopez, Taylor, Funk, & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2013; Storlie & Jach, 2012). In 2015, Immigration and Customs Enforcement deported over 235,000 people (Department of Homeland Security, 2016). Securing a legal path to residency is lengthy, complex, and expensive. Further, the process to receive a visa and resident status varies widely across the visa category (e.g., unmarried child of a U.S. citizen v. a worker with under two years of skilled training). Depending on an immigrant's country of origin (Carrero, 2013), years are added or subtracted years from the overall timeframe to receive a visa.

In addition to concerns about deportation, a lack of legal status is related to student feelings of stigma and shame. Stigma can take a physical and psychological toll on youth (Gonzales, 2011; Gonzales, Suárez- Orozco, & Dedios-Sanguinetti, 2013). Storlie and Jach (2012), demonstrating the political and educational vulnerability of undocumented students, write, “Destructive stereotypes, hopelessness over one’s future and unrelenting discrimination can also contribute to mental health and psychological problems among undocumented students” (p. 101).

Given the seriousness of the obstacles they experience, unauthorized students may not finish high school. Scholars and demographers estimate that approximately 65,000 undocumented students graduate yearly (Hallett, 2013; Oliverrez, Chavez, Soriano, & Tierney, 2006), though an estimated 80,000 undocumented youth turn eighteen [high school graduation age] each year (Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, & Cortes, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Of these high school graduates, only 5-10% go on to enroll in college (Gonzales, 2007; Hallett, 2013; National Immigration Law Center, 2009). Conceivably, the DACA initiative may encourage students to see postsecondary education as a possibility and dispel fears of deportation, though a sizable portion of students still do not or cannot enroll after high school. Having greater access to education and assistance in pursuing postsecondary options is critical as education is currently the primary path and hope students from undocumented immigrant families have for upward social mobility.

Though the barriers unauthorized students face are substantial, there is much hope that their access to education and connection to schools will improve. A qualitative case study in California (Crawford, 2015) found that educators across a variety of school roles commit to the pursuit of educational justice for unauthorized students. Educators viewed their commitment to students’ educational access as a human rights issue. School personnel in the study believed it was their professional responsibility and a personal ethical imperative to provide unfettered educational access for every child to the best of their ability; personnel prioritized student, school, and community relationships with unauthorized immigrant families (Crawford, 2015; Crawford & Fishman-Weaver, 2016).

### **The Importance of Student Relationships with Educators**

Research shows that relationships with educators have the power to encourage undocumented students to persevere in school. Gonzales (2009, 2010) found that the relationships students from unauthorized families form with school personnel and peers can facilitate their persistence and academic success and help offset family legal and economic obstacles. Strong school relationships and connections are critical for undocumented students, because they are the means by which students access the resources, counseling, and information they need but might not get elsewhere. While their emotional support is essential, undocumented immigrant parents may be unable to provide the kind of academic information and support their children need (Abrego, 2006; Gonzales, 2010; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Thus, it is important teachers and counselors complement and supplement parental knowledge to back students with academic and other supports.

Though relationships with educators contribute to student success, a few studies show that undocumented students may perceive negative relationships with school officials (Gonzales, 2011). Consequently, many students avoid or do not seek advice or counsel from school personnel (Enriquez, 2011; Munoz, 2008). However, when they do seek out personnel, they turn to teachers and counselors (De Leon, 2005). This highlights the need for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to gain a better understanding of the practices counselors use in constructing their relationships with students. Counselors’s practices can be shared with colleagues, agencies, and

students' peers to create systems of support to help undocumented students increase their resilience, access to resources, and ultimately persist in school.

Because students seek out counselors (and teachers) when seeking information and access to resources (De Leon, 2005), counselors are uniquely positioned to gain trust, learn about student and family experiences, and find a variety of pathways to advocate students' cause. Yet, knowledge about how counselors connect with school communities that include undocumented immigrants and how counselors relate their knowledge of undocumented students' schooling experiences and needs back to school leaders is still minimal. We argue that counselors serve as a linchpin to encourage student retention through their academic, affective, and psychological support. However, counselors' efforts and the challenges they face in their work are understudied. Families, schools, and communities interact to create overlapping spheres of influence on student schooling experiences (Epstein, 2011). This article uses the premise that school counselors play a pivotal role to encourage student persistence in school. However, their role and the strategies they use to empower unauthorized students to work around impediments to their schooling has not been fully investigated.

### **Theoretical Framework: Counselors as Empowerment Agents**

Stanton-Salazar (2011) highlights the importance of young people's connections to empowerment agents who mentor and advocate for students in institutions. We borrow from his definition of institutional agents as those who are "high-status, non-kin, ... who occupy relatively high positions in the multiple dimensional stratification systems, and who are well positioned to provide key forms of social and institutional support" (p. 1066). These agents, intentionally or unintentionally, act as institutional gatekeepers. Institutional agents possess social capital (See Bourdieu, 1986) that can be transmitted to the student. Counselors have opportunities to form relationships with a broad range of educational stakeholders, from teachers and school administrators to students, family members, and social service agencies. We assert that counselors are vital relationship intermediaries, or institutional agents, who possess political and human capital and social networks that can be used to help with unauthorized students' access to education and support their families. They are in a position to bridge students' home and schooling worlds.

To be designated an *empowerment* agent entails that the institutional agent finds ways to connect the student to information and resources. An empowerment agent needs both capacity and commitment in order for this to happen (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Empowerment agents are not just concerned with getting students better networked or more information to them; they empower students by building critical consciousness that transforms the student, and this transformation can also occur in communities and society (Hallett, 2013; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Following Stanton-Salazar's (2001) frameworks of empowerment agents, Hallett (2013) explored undocumented students' entrée to and persistence in college. He further argued that "empowerment social capital" acknowledges social systems of exclusion while leaving space for individuals to act individually and collectively within hierarchical structures in ways that encourage social justice" (p. 101). He conducted an ethnographic study of a postsecondary school organization of students formed to support undocumented youth. In this work, Hallett found that institutional agents were often incognizant of the trials unauthorized students experience. Students themselves also faced challenges in acting as empowerment agents in the organization. He found that, "[U]ndocumented students who [developed] a supportive network need to navigate internal and external tensions that threaten their ability to become empowerment agents for each other" (p. 109). We posit that counselors act as relationship brokers for unauthorized students, mediating exchanges of and access to

information, advocating for their relationships with personnel, and potentially changing students' life trajectories. They can move beyond a role as institutional agents to act as empowerment agents.

Our overarching purpose in this article is to examine the ways counselors may work individually and collectively as empowerment agents to encourage undocumented K-12 students. This investigation included looking at the obstacles the counselors encountered in their work, and how they chose to work around them. We extrapolate from Hallett's results to suggest that counselors, too, may have tensions arise within their organization, perhaps at the school and/or district levels. We also look at what successes counselors perceive in their efforts to empower students and families.

## Research Context, Design, and Methods

### Context for the Research Site

The research site was located in a major city in Texas along the U.S.-Mexico border.<sup>1</sup> The city where the research took place has long served as a crossing point for millions of people moving between Mexico and the United States. The city has a population of under a million people who still share families, culture and community directly across the U.S.-Mexico border. Families regularly traversed back and forth across the U.S.-Mexico border with relative ease until a decade ago when violence related to drug wars erupted in Mexico. The border has also become increasingly militarized in the wake of 9/11, strengthening divisions between the two countries. In recent years, the school districts and personnel have received children in schools from families fleeing the drug wars across the border. Participants reported that Mexican families with school children and those outside the school communities lost loved ones to murder. Running from border violence led to an influx of Mexican nationals, including young undocumented children who needed to be incorporated into schools in their new Texas location.

While the city for the research site has a history of serving children from different linguistic and racial/ethnic backgrounds, the newer wave of immigrants has presented new and unique challenges. The mobility of the student population and a large number of transient families added to the layers of complexity to participants' work. Helping children grapple with and recover from trauma has been a part of participants' responsibilities; the influx of immigrants has reshaped community demographics, and consequently the context for counselors' work (Deborah, personal communication, March 15, 2015).<sup>2</sup>

In 2016, approximately 83-93% of the students in the two districts were of Latina/o heritage (District 1 Enrollment Statistics, 2016; District 2 Enrollment Statistics, 2016). As noted earlier, Texas has the second largest population of undocumented immigrants in the country (Passel & Cohn, 2009). When asked, some research participants claimed their schools had upwards of 90% unauthorized or newly arrived immigrant students, though no-district level data was available to corroborate participant estimations<sup>3</sup>. English Language Learner (ELL) status was one way that

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<sup>1</sup> All names in this paper, including participant, school, district, and city names, are pseudonyms. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identities of the research participants and also to ensure compliance with the district-mandated research protocols concerning external research projects.

<sup>2</sup> The U.S. Departments of Justice Civil Rights Division and Education (2011) have explicitly warned districts against collecting information related to students' or families' legal status as it could "chill" student attendance in K-12 schools.

participants indicated a proxy for documentation status. One counselor stated, “Personally, I do not think the schools officially identify the immigrants. As long as a student has an address in the district, they can enroll with a birth certificate from anywhere (personal communication, March 15, 2015). Though not an exclusive consideration, the need for English language acquisition (and the ability for school programs to deliver it) can influence student preparedness for academic content in English and integration in school. The official district profile states that 24% of district students are ELLs, and 16% of students participate in bilingual education. These figures conflict with participant accounts. District estimates of the size of the immigrant population in general (1% for the 2013-2014 school year) also conflicted with participant estimations.

## **Methods and Methodology**

Data for this paper come from an embedded case study, which is an appropriate methodology for researchers who choose to examine “contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context” in depth. We wanted to consider the real-life contexts counselors work in, and study the circumstances they negotiate in border schools while having minimal influence on the events or behaviors as researchers (Yin, 2009, p. 2). The original study from which this “smaller” case derived involved a range of educators from principals to front office personnel working across different schooling levels in grades K-12. For the purposes of examining counselor perceptions of the challenges they face and strive to overcome to promote undocumented students’ persistence in school, and to gather information on the strategies they use, we reanalyzed data from the study, focusing on seven counselors and one intervention specialist.

## **Data Collection and Research Participants**

We collected data in spring 2015 over the course of three weeks and used convenience sampling (Bodgen & Biklen, 2007). Research methodologies followed the grounded theory tradition (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), and we conducted interviews using a semi-structured topical protocol. In addition, we performed observations of the local communities surrounding the two school districts. We also collected documents as sources to triangulate data and enhance study validity (Maxwell, 2005). Of the seven counselors and family intervention specialist that we interviewed, all participants, except one, were Latina/o. Most of the participants had also grown up in the community, and they had shared traits with their community in terms of racial/ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds. For this article, we rely predominantly on the interviews with participants, learning from their accounts of what they considered barriers to their work with unauthorized students and/or families, and how they devised paths to get around perceived barriers to students’ education. Table 1 provides study participant details.

Table 1:  
*Participant Characteristics*

Participant	Ethnicity	School Level	Previous Role(s)	Years as Counselor	Time at Current School
Lorena	Latina	Elem.	teacher	4	4
Paulina	Latina	Elem.	teacher	2	2
Selena	Latina	Middle	teacher	7	1
Deborah	White		teacher	44	N/A; supervises counselors across district
Ximena	Latina	Middle	teacher	7	7
Jorge	Latino	Elem.	teacher	11	1 yr. 4 mos.
Clara	Latina	Elem.	community organizer	21 (Family intervention specialist)	20
Paz	Latina	High School	teacher	10	10

Interviews with the research participants occurred in three different ways. We first interviewed five of the counselors (Lorena, Paulina, Selena, Deborah, and Ximena) as part of a focus group; we then interviewed Paz individually, and lastly interviewed Jorge and Clara together. All of the other study participants, save for Jorge and Clara, work at different schools. Deborah was the primary gatekeeper who enabled us to get access to other participants in the focus group and to Paz. Deborah has worked in the district for four-plus decades and has a vast network of district contacts. She arranged for the participants to meet with the researchers for a two-hour long focus group interview at a coffee shop away from participants' schools. We interviewed Paz, a high school counselor, for an hour at a restaurant near her school using the same topical protocol used with the other participants. The remaining two participants, Jorge and Clara, were interviewed on-site over the course of an hour in a quiet conference room at their school. They work together at the elementary school, and their principal helped schedule the interview.

Clara was the sole family intervention specialist of our participants. Her role is similar to that of a social worker; she works with a district-level intervention program devised to intervene if children have behavior or emotional struggles or experience repercussions related to economic disadvantage. This program is integrated into approximately 20 schools, and an important component is therapeutic counseling. Students who fled the violence in the Mexican border city are referred to this program. Thus, the intervention program became salient to our consideration of educators' involvement with unauthorized and newly arrived immigrant students.

Finally, participation in the study was fully voluntary, and we offered participants anonymity through the use of pseudonyms. We followed IRB procedures to further ensure participant confidentiality. In the focus group interview, we did not perceive that group dynamics prevented participants from candidly sharing their perspectives.

### **Analytic Procedures**

Data analysis began with the researchers taking field notes while in the field of study, followed by memo writing and transcribing interviews. As a first critical step in the analytic process, we used open coding to develop initial data codes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Merriam et al., 2002).

The next step, axial coding, enabled us to see how the codes for the initial concepts and themes did or did not relate to one another (Merriam et al., 2002). Continuing with our analysis, we then chunked data into categories to make systematic comparisons across data to refine emerging concepts and themes. Memo writing was also used throughout the entire process to refine thematic categories (Charmaz, 2011) and better examine the patterns that became visible within and across data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). We also engaged in member checking by going back to our research participants to ask clarifying questions about data interpretation to increase study validity.

## Findings

The findings from the study revealed several key themes that address our two primary research questions, 1) what challenges do counselors face and strive to overcome in order to promote undocumented students' persistence in school?, and 2) what strategies do counselors use to encourage students to persist? We highlight counselors' perceptions of their work as intermediaries in a border context.

### Commuting Over the Border: Getting to School

One of the biggest challenges participants raised in terms of student persistence—and their work to help—was related to complexities arising from students' daily commute to school. The past five years resulted in more difficulties in the movement of people across the border, but the complexities of commuting had less to do with drug-related violence, which had eased. Instead, students' commutes could be arduous due to concerns over their legal status or due to having U.S. citizenship and attending school in Texas but living in Mexico with their families.

Though arguably unsurprising to educators who work in border communities, educators not working on the border may be surprised to learn that many unauthorized students commute daily across the U.S.-Mexico border to get to school. In this study, both unauthorized students and the U.S.-born children of Mexican parents living in Mexico would commute in the morning and at day's end. Some students commuted during the weekend only, staying with an extended family member or grandparent during the week. During visits to Jorge and Clara's school, the researchers saw the U.S.-Mexico bridge connecting the two cities from the second floor of the elementary school building. A participant shared that students as young as elementary age might walk from their home in Mexico over the bridge to the U.S.-based school. Parents did not always accompany children to school. As a result, some children navigated the border crossing alone. This was a source of concern and frustration for participants as they could not guarantee student safety once a child began their walk over the international bridge.

Students who crossed the bridge sometimes struggled to make it to school on time. Transportation could prove unreliable, and some students waited in line to get approval to cross into Texas. Participants further noted that bad weather could compromise students' health. Paz, a Latina woman who had worked as a high school counselor for ten years, stated that students arriving late to school led to issues and policy conflicts like students taking tests. She said,

The tests are supposed to start at a certain time, alright. Let's be honest. It's the summer. We're waiting for the kids to get here [to school from across the border]. They will tell us flat out, 'I didn't get to the bus. I missed it. I have to cross. It's taking me this long.' Okay. So what do I do? Do I tell the student, 'Well now you can't test?' Can't do that. That's not fair either. So you have to try and find your way

where you're fulfilling the requirements but being flexible enough to look at all those different things. We run into that all the time.

In addition to students having to wait to cross into the U.S. and scrambling to find transport to school, participants were concerned for students leaving school at the end of the day in a timeframe where they could get home safely (i.e., before dark). The additional considerations for student safety had an impact on student integration and participation in school activities and support programs. According to Paz, having to commute could limit students' ability to get academic support:

If a student is here, they're able to do the tutoring; they're able to do the sports; they're able to get involved, and that makes a bigger commitment to the school from the student. The student who has to go back and forth, they can't do the same thing because—and they'll tell us sometimes, 'I have to do this.' And you're, like, 'Well, that's true.' English is not—going to tutoring is not going to be their priority when their priority is to cross back by a certain time, and that's the bottom line.

Counselors like Paz noted that having to traverse the border safely superseded student ability to engage in the critical schooling supports and services intended to benefit them. As institutional agents, counselors recognized the realities of their students' lives. Students crossing safely to get home before dark trumped pressuring students to stay later in order to receive tutoring or participate in extracurricular activities. Due to prioritizing student safety, and based on their assessment of the risks students might face if commuting alone (e.g., elementary school students) or in the dark (e.g., high school students), counselors perceived they could not *empower* students through the supports and programs that were readily available and in place. Instead, counselors focused on encouraging students to persist in coming to school daily, and they made the most of the time student were at school. This was the first step to help students build resilience and establish a routine.

For other counselors, another challenge related to lack of legal status that impeded student opportunities was compromised family-school communication. Clara stated, "Because we have a lot of people that are living over there [in Mexico] that are commuting, yet we don't—they're not caught unless there's really an issue at school, and they can't contact the mom, and she never shows up. We have a number of people that commute and are actually living over there [in Mexico], which they're not supposed to." Counselors had issues placing school-related calls to Mexico, or were uncertain where a family lived. The intent to help students via keeping families informed and discussing student-related issues could be problematic if parents were unable to come to the Texas because of concerns about documentation, or if the family did not have the means to consistently pay for phone service. This issue held true for counselors across all schooling levels. The consequence was that counselors were often unable to discuss support for students to help them.

Participants like Clara explicitly suggested some families were taking advantage of educational opportunities without being U.S. residents or citizens. However, Clara and other participants simultaneously suggested that student documentation status did not interfere with student participation in schooling unless an incident was serious enough to warrant requesting an in-person meeting with a parent. Again, counselors had awareness of how they *wanted* to act, and how they could serve as institutional agents. However, they experienced obstacles in their efforts to enhance family involvement in student-related matters when legal considerations (e.g., a parent crossing the border) or the family's financial circumstances came into play.

### **Living in Two Worlds and Belonging to Neither**

Counselors expressed that students who commuted daily to school across the Mexico border into Texas experienced psychological hardship in addition to the physical hardship. Students physically and psychologically negotiated having school, family, and life in two different countries and cultures. Within this complexity, what stood out most to participants was the emotional impact students felt in being separated from family. They perceived a high toll on students. All eight participants related that many unauthorized students lived with a guardian—sometimes a family member, sometimes not—or a grandma to prove legal residency so the student could attend school in the United States. For Jorge, a counselor, and Clara, a family intervention specialist, students could figuratively have one foot in the U.S. and the other in Mexico. Jorge stated,

They leave to [City across the border in Mexico]. And then they spend the weekend there, and then they come back on Monday, and sometimes their weekend has been rough. It's been a rough weekend. Or just the change in the commuting back and forth is difficult, because sometimes they miss mom. Mom stays back or dad, or whoever, and they have to come and be ready for school on Monday morning, and that's difficult for them.

Having to commute between residences mattered to students' re-integration in school after being away, even if only for a short time like a weekend. Counselors hinted that the shifting of family dynamics and locations, or incidents that occurred over the weekend, affected student ability to successfully transition back into a school day. Students were resilient and exhibited fortitude going back and forth over the border, but they had trouble gaining a sense of stability with families split across the border and having to move between two worlds. Clara echoed her partner Jorge's comment, saying,

The ones that are undocumented, those are the ones that usually...come with a relative or something. I had a couple that wind up going back, and it's very hard for them to make that decision, because once they go back...They paid somebody to get them across, and it was pretty dangerous and whatnot. And so the child starts struggling so much, and like he [Jorge] says, they start missing the family that's over there. So it gets to be an emotional impact on them.... Now, the ones [students] that commute that are here legally, and they can come and go, usually a lot of their families have a home over there [in Mexico] and they have a home over here [in the US]. An apartment here and maybe a small house over there or something. They can't leave their roots. The majority of their families are over there. So they—like [Jorge] says, every weekend they come and go.

The shifts among homes, cultures, and separation from loved ones wore students down and could affect their emotional and physical readiness to adjust back to the norms of U.S. schooling. Counselors worked to help students through the psychological wear associated with living between two worlds and students feeling torn to choose one world, language, or culture over another. Jorge and Clara worked with elementary school students, so the separation from family may have been especially acute for such young children.

Research from Appleyard, Egeland, Dulmen, and Sroufe (2005) points to the longer-term consequences of unstable circumstances. Their work documents that children who experience multiple risks (e.g., family disruption, low socioeconomic status, high parental stress) are more prone

to behavioral and emotional problems later in life. Clara also pointed out the physical risks children took, and the struggle for families to choose whether a child should return to Mexico after sacrificing a lot of money for the child to make the journey to Texas, even if the child displayed distress. Some families wrestled over the decision to have a child stay permanently in one place or not.

### **Meeting Basic Needs, Hiding Legal Status, and Issues of Homelessness**

In this study, poverty and undocumented status corresponded to student and family homelessness or experiences of transient living situations. Families or students had difficulty securing basic needs while also living in fear their undocumented status would be discovered. Impermanent housing compounded issues with students getting to school and their readiness to learn.

**Meeting Basic Needs.** Every counselor in the study talked about students not having adequate access to basic needs. Student need ranged from not getting enough to eat at home to missing items like shoes and backpacks. Access to sufficient amounts of food was particularly pertinent, and it was an area where counselors sought help from other school personnel and students. Participants commonly mentioned that many unauthorized students relied heavily on getting breakfast and lunch at their schools. School-provided meals were sometimes the only meals students would have that day. Even so, the amount of food students received at school was not always sufficient. Lorena, with four years' counseling experience, expressed frustration at her failed attempts to ensure children did not go hungry. She recalled making an effort to get more food for a student but a co-worker tried to block her. She recalled,

[The student] said, 'I need more food. Can I have another slice of pizza or another hamburger?' And I would tell the kids, 'if you're not going to eat it, give it to him. 'Well, I got caught, and then I asked [the cafeteria manager], 'Can we do an arrangement with the cafeteria so he can have more?' And then she told me 'No, no, no, they're just being—they want to eat a lot.' I told her, 'They're undocumented, they live in the shelter. We don't know if this is the only meal they have.

Lorena had to educate some colleagues on the ways poverty and lack of documentation status intersected to deprive a child of access to basic human needs. She had to fight the unjust perception of that an elementary school student was greedy rather than expressing a vital need. Lorena's strategy stood out, too, because she involved students in creating a network of peer assistance to have them help empower each other. Her efforts were inclusive of students of varying legal status, potentially signaling to students the importance of taking care of each other. Her attempt to strengthen undocumented students' networks can be conscientious acts to empower.

Across schooling contexts, participants spoke also of the intersection of student socioeconomic well-being and documentation status. The intersection could manifest by affecting student ability to maintain good hygiene. Paulina, an elementary school counselor for two years, stated, "We have a lot of kids that—they don't have access to basic [necessities], even when they're living in their own apartment, I think. I've had to have a lot of those conversations regarding bathing and I don't know, do you have that? I've had a lot of lice [issues with students]." Counselors made efforts to help children stay well physically by sharing good health practices and by taking care of their other physical needs that could ultimately help the child stay resilient and strong at school.

**Concerns about Legal Status.** In addition to securing essential services for students, counselors had to be sensitive to students' fear that their legal status would be exposed or betrayed. A middle school counselor, Selena, recounted,

I think of a little girl right now I am working with that I haven't asked her status. If she's undocumented, we're not allowed to ask, but basically she lives with her aunt who is her guardian, and her mom lives in [Mexican City]. I kind of assume, but I'm ...making the assumption just based on how she reacts [reacted] when one of her teachers brought in her letter, because she had written something like—it's also an outcry. She wrote that she was going to commit suicide.

Selena and other participants reported that students were careful to not jeopardize their education; they tried to minimize awareness of their legal status. While elementary school students may not have known about the concept of legal status or its complexities, at the middle school level, some students knew the implications well, and they deeply feared the consequences of others learning their status. Selena had perceived the student experienced deep distress that others might discover her status and upend her life. Selena remembered,

...when I told [the student] I was going to call her aunt, I didn't have a way to reach her mom, and she's the enrolling contact, she was just, 'Please miss, don't call, I'm going to be in so much trouble.' She was reacting, like, really scared about her aunt's reaction. Basically, the kids sometimes live with their guardians if they are living—if they have their parents living in [Mexican City] and I have a lot of that here and [school name]. I remember that was one of the situations. Their home environment is—usually they're living with a guardian, a relative, or sometimes just a friend of their parents.

Throughout the study, participants shared that students who were aware of the meaning of immigration status and of being undocumented viewed their status as a secret they had to keep. The student might express or exhibit severe emotional distress if the student thought it would be revealed or they would be “found out.” This finding corroborates other research that examines the intersection of documentation status and mental health (See Gonzales, Suárez- Orozco, & Dedios-Sanguineti, 2013; Storlie & Jach, 2012). Student distress was manifested even when counselors interacted with students in situations where legal status *was not* intentionally disclosed. Instead, legal status came to the forefront as a result of another issue like personnel going through district enrollment procedures. In some instances, however, students intentionally and more freely approached counselors, trusting them to negotiate them through complex family dynamics, worries about legal status, and mental health needs. With trust in place, students depended on counselors to think and act through the system of schooling and non-conventional resources to empower them. Building trust with personnel would take time. Participants wanted to empower students, but they could not do so without first establishing trust with them.

The evidence signals the importance of counselors, administrators, and teachers coordinating their efforts to ensure students without legal status trust that personnel's priorities are to educate them and care for their well-being; that undocumented status is not shameful. It also pointed to educators knowing that status cannot be used to deny a student an education, and doing the same for students and families if necessary. Similarly, all personnel need to be cognizant of the

physical and psychological stressors associated with unauthorized status and its relation to mental health.

**Documentation Status, Homelessness, and Family Integrity.** Participants grappled to find ways to work within the existing system to serve students of transient residency. Several counselors like Jorge found that impermanent housing added another layer of complexity to students' ability to attend or participate in school. Participants noted that impermanent housing was an issue that participants noted crosses all schooling levels. Sometimes a child's housing situation changed quickly with little or no notice to the school. High mobility and transient living made it difficult for personnel like Jorge and Clara to keep track of how these changes affected students. Transient residency intersected with documentation status, posing great challenge for the counselors. Jorge said,

...we do have a high number [of children coded as homeless], but also because we have a lot of frequent mobility. We have children that maybe move from shelter to shelter. We also have children that live with relatives. Their parents maybe have been deported or for some reason cannot cross into [U.S. City] and they live with a relative; an aunt, an uncle....[We may] have a child who all of a sudden can be considered homeless, because mom was deported or [the] parents were—one of them, the parent has been incarcerated in Mexico or even here. And so they become homeless.

Clara shared a related story that focused on an allegedly unauthorized parent in a detention center, highlighting how easy it is for students from a mixed-legal status family to abruptly leave school. To help the child of this parent remain in school, she and a case worker strove to prevent the parent from being deported so the family could stay intact. However, the extended timeframe, separation, and uncertainty over the outcome eventually became too heavy for the parent to bear. Clara said,

[F]or example, a family, her daughter wound up there [in an immigration detention center]. And so I—they contacted them, and they had a case worker that was working [the parent's] case. And so they tried to keep them here. As long as they don't sign that they want to be deported, but sometimes it just takes so long that they get so much anxiety that they sign off that 'just send me back.' And then I had that parent—I swear to God. We worked with—we must've worked what three or four months, and it came that close for her, just about a week to wait and she could not wait any longer. Her anxiety was killing her. And so she just said, 'I can't take it. I can't wait another week.' And so she signed those papers to be deported, and boom. There she went. With her kids.

Despite counselors strategizing to get assistance for the family, and working with other professionals to find ways for the family to maintain its integrity, the pressure and anxiety stemming from detention was too much. As a family intervention specialist, Clara saw her role as advocating not only for students but also for students' parents, even when it entailed going to a detention center. Clara and other participants had willingness to get involved in complicated family situations, which had an impact on students' persistence in school.

### **Working (Various) Systems and Building Relationships and Partnerships**

All counselors in the study applied multiple, creative strategies to keep students connected to schooling processes. Participants were savvy: when facing an obstacle, for example, like having little funding in one area of need, they would find an alternative that helped them achieve their goal. They learned how to work within and sometimes around the system to achieve their purposes.

**Marshaling Resources.** Jorge, who had worked in various districts, applied for and won grant money that he used to supplement and extend counseling services to students. He used the grant money to pay for another counselor. He said,

I've been in different districts. One district in particular I coordinated a federal grant, which pretty much consisted of working with school counseling teams in four high at-risk schools. And these were schools that had maybe—it was maybe 600-to-one counselor ratios. Very high need. And this grant actually provided a second counselor. And we worked with children either first generation immigrants or newly arrived immigrants, but we also had students that were fleeing the violence in [Mexican City].

Like schools across the nation, the average student-to-counselor ratio in Texas is an average of 435:1 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). While participants reported a higher ratio, their estimation indicated their struggle to have adequate capacity to attend to the students who may need their expertise most. Participants had to counsel numerous students who had experienced severe trauma, like losing a parent in a shooting or bombing. Having more counselors available to encourage students and help them cope and work through their grief was salient to the districts' context. As an institutional agent, Jorge responded by seeking grant money to increase counseling services to build school capacity to better serve students.

Clara found another way to increase the capacity to serve newly arrived or undocumented students. She stated her district provided support that enabled her to meet student needs through involvement in a district-wide program. This program was designed in part to meet needs that could be unique to undocumented students. She said,

We work a lot with different types of families. And one of the things that our program provides is actually in-school therapy that, especially for students that are not legally here, our program provides monies for those students so they can get the help that they need if they need any therapeutic type of help.

Deborah, a counselor for over four decades, described how she and others frequently approached social institutions outside of the school for extra support for students. They built school-community alliances to strengthen the services provided to students. She strategized, saying,

And a lot of times counselors do end up soliciting. I know when I was at [place], when school started, the church across the street, I would say, could you all provide deodorant? They did. They were very nice and sent the stuff.

Jorge's comment on the subject echoed that of Deborah. He said,

Yeah. Basically, it's building relationships in the community. It's getting to know—it's really having the right connections. Even like [Clara] was saying, just the immediate community, but one of the things about this campus that makes it pretty special is that they also have an alumni association... And they do offer a lot of help. If we look at the hierarchy of needs, they provide—every year, they provide uniforms or they'll buy a good amount—a high amount of uniforms for children most at need. We do have a lot of children that come in and they're coded as homeless. And they live in the area shelters. We provide transportation for them. Sometimes the uniforms—the school uniforms, shoes, and school supplies, and a lot of that is—those are donations from the community. They're also purchased by the [school's] alumni association.

Counselors pursued a range of opportunities to provide basic necessities to students, and they were entrepreneurial in their efforts. They used their position to network with groups such as an alumni association and off-campus social service agencies in order to connect students to resources. They looked holistically and pragmatically at student needs and then found partners in the local community to remove obstacles that might inhibit students from attending or could have contributed to students feeling stigmatized or marginalized.

Finally, the stories of struggle and hardship were punctuated with examples of counselors seeing students succeed. These successes mattered deeply to the counselors, even if the successes seemed too few. Participants shared many moments that spurred them to keep seeking educational justice. Lorena observed, “Some of [the students] have a very strong desire and they're determined. They're here and they take advantage of those opportunities. I think they know their struggles in Mexico and if they're given the chance, they get the support they need, they'll flourish here.” Ximena stated, “I have one that is a very great success story, but he came from Mexico in seventh and eighth grade, well, in middle school, and he was like our valedictorian and he's gone on to law school.” Finally, Deborah observed that taking a long-view of success provided hope. She said,

But we have to be able to pat ourselves on the back because sometimes we don't get any positive reinforcement except Ms. Award-winner here. But we have to be able to watch our own wellness and to be able to remind ourselves—Hey, I'm not going to find out if this worked or not possibly for six or 10 years, but it'll be awhile they'll come back and say, ‘hey, I made it.’

In other words, success may not occur immediately or in the short-term, and counselors might not see changes in student persistence as a result of their efforts, including networking. However, per Deborah, maintaining hope for a student's future would reap rewards and create transformation in students' lives. Whether the counselors' actions ultimately empowered students is uncertain. However, participants provided many examples of using their institutional position and privilege to center students' needs in their work. In this way, they sought to influence schooling conditions as well as students' lives outside of school. These strategies were aimed at letting students know they were wanted at school and helping them build resilience to keep coming back.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

This article provides evidence that counselors in two school districts in a large, urban city in Texas are seeking educational justice for unauthorized students. Though participants did not

explicitly label themselves as institutional agents who pursued social justice, they supported and strove to empower students individually and collectively. The counselors, as school leaders in this study, performed actions of advocacy for this population, because they were aware that undocumented status functioned as a barrier to access, persistence, and children needed services.

Toporek, Lewis, and Crethar (2009) speak to the ethical aspects of counselors working to serve students. They promoted advocacy as a path to systemic change. Through the American Counseling Association, they asserted that advocacy competencies are central to the profession. In this study, participants used a variety of strategies to make it possible for students to connect to schooling processes. However, ensuring that young people had their basic needs met was the biggest and most common challenge for each participant. Their advocacy efforts to remove this key hurdle looked different from person to person. Some participants used networks that their districts had helped scaffold for them (e.g., Clara working with the district program to help children who had experienced trauma) while others relied on the networks they had created and nurtured (e.g., Deborah capitalizing on school-community partnerships and soliciting churches). All sought to take advantage as best they could of school district programs that specifically included service to undocumented youth and families.

Concerning issues related to the intersection of student homelessness and unauthorized status, counselors adapted their efforts to meet students' needs. One counselor explained to a bus driver how critical it was for a student to make it back to the shelter by a certain time and not get locked out. Another, Selena, emphasized to cafeteria personnel how as students' unstable housing situation made it urgent that the student get extra food at school. Noguera (2001) emphasizes the critical nature of educators attending to the issue of student homelessness, stating schools are sometimes their lone refuge:

Children who are homeless, undocumented, sick or disabled, hungry or abused, all have a right to public education. Given the harsh realities confronting the poorest people in this country, schools are often the only place where children can be guaranteed at least one meal, a warm building, and relative safety under adult supervision. Public schools are, in effect, the most significant remnant of the social safety net available to poor people in the United States (p. 197).

Counselors were active intermediaries for students. They demonstrated an orientation and provided examples of what it means to be an empowerment agent utilizing and building their social networks and outreach. These findings are consistent with Stanton-Salazar's definition (2011) and Hallett's (2013) application to undocumented students. However, whether the counselors empowered students was unclear, despite exhibiting the traits of empowerment agents. The findings may suggest that empowering others is a gradual process.

Despite participants' networking on behalf of students and families, what was clear in the data was that school counselors recognized limitations to some of their efforts. They felt that some policies impeded their efforts to assist as were events that were out of their control (e.g., trauma related to drug wars). Such circumstances were a normal part of the border context that inhibited them from acting as empowering agents for students in critical ways. For example, Paz and other personnel could not control how long it would take for unauthorized children to cross the border, so they adapted their efforts to get the most student participation they could in important school events like test-taking.

None of the participants, when asked, were aware of any school district or school-level policies tied specifically to student documentation status. One counselor wished the district had

conducted training on ways to meet the unique needs of undocumented students. A few participants vaguely mentioned they knew they could not consider legal status in their work, but expressed they did not want to concern themselves with finding out or caring about students' legal status. It is unclear if greater policy awareness on counselors' part would have an impact on their actions. Even so, the lack of policy talk points which address greater district and school-level transparency, around the legal responsibilities, policies, and ethical considerations that personnel who work with undocumented youth need to know is deficient. Research has established that undocumented status poses future challenges for students when they pursue access to higher education and employment (Gildersleeve, Rumann, & Mondragón, 2010). Lack of policy knowledge could minimize educators' understandings of their legal obligations as well as their sense of the importance of advocating for the student population. Without stronger protection at the K-12 level, students could consequently be rendered further invisible, particularly in high-need districts. Policy knowledge can help transform personnel from institutional agents to empowerment agents.

Counselors alone cannot create sustained changes in policy and practice, or build district capacity and greater student resilience. Largely absent from the conversation was counselors mentioning how they mediated relationships between students and school personnel, or how school leaders mediated access and persistence of undocumented youth. This absence could be due to a limitation of the data that the researchers collected, or to the type of questions that were asked. School leaders, counselors and teachers must develop strong, trusting school-student partnerships to encourage student persistence and disperse their knowledge. Together, the school community can collaborate to find both agents in their local communities and resources to support unauthorized students.

More research is needed in particular about the ways that school leaders can build school capacity to serve newly arrived or undocumented families is needed. School administrators have a lot of power to create inclusive and socially just school environments that foster the positive relationships which translate into increases in student resiliency. Educators who lead school systems must continue to develop a repertoire of efficient ways to strengthen their relationships with diverse communities. They must utilize the multiple forms of cultural wealth and capital (Enriquez, 2011; Huber, 2009; & Yosso, 2005) that their students and school communities already possess, and learn the cultural competencies they need to advocate for equal educational opportunities for students of differing legal status. With national immigration reform overdue, advocacy and socially just school practices that empower undocumented youth are imperative.

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