

## Nested Contexts of Reception and K–12 Schools: Addressing Immigration Status

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*Scholarship on the intersection between immigration, legal status, and education has grown over the past decade. Given that schools are intended to be purveyors of democratic values, schools represent an ideal context to examine how immigration and legal status are considered in a community that aims to support the academic and social success of all students. This study investigates how members of an urban, K–12 school community in California addressed immigration issues over nearly a decade-long period. The study details three ways in which the school addressed immigration status issues across time. They include college-going supports, addressing newcomer/unaccompanied students' needs, and delivery of legal services. The study's implications highlight how K–12 schools can address immigration issues in intentional, ethical, and supportive ways.*

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IMMIGRATION has been a driving force in the racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic changes occurring across the United States (U.S.), especially in education. Demographic changes alongside political shifts have called on educators to address immigration policy and legal status issues in schools (Ee & Gándara, 2020). Across the United States, 5.1 million children younger than 18 years live with at least one parent who is undocumented; 800,000 are undocumented themselves (Capps et al., 2016). In addition, an estimated 97,000 undocumented students graduate from high school each year (Zong & Batalova, 2019).

Although the “undocumented” label is utilized to refer to any individual with an unauthorized legal status to reside in the United States, it is important to note within-group differences. Undocumented youth include individuals considered to be part of the 1.25 and 1.5 generation consisting of people who typically arrived in the United States between ages 13 to 17 and 6 to 12 years, respectively. The 1.75

generation typically arrived at age 5 or younger (Rumbaut, 2004). In this study, the 1.25 generation is referred to as newcomers—students with less than 3 years in U.S. schools. Some of them are also unaccompanied young migrants. They are individuals with no lawful presence in the United States and who arrived without a parent or legal guardian (Galli, 2020). These generational differences are important to note because immigration policies affect immigrants differently, depending on when and how they entered the country.

Undocumented youth experience markers of belonging and exclusion in different contexts and at different points in their lives (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2018; Yoshikawa et al., 2016). As purveyors of democratic values, schools represent an ideal context to examine how immigration status is considered in a community that aims to support the academic and social success of all students (Adelman & Taylor, 2015). More broadly, studying schools as part of a nested context of



reception (NCOR), which considers immigration policies and societal exclusions, can shed light on the ways schools shape the incorporation of immigrant students across different contexts (e.g., communities, regions, and states; Golash-Boza & Valdez, 2018). In doing so, research can yield a better understanding of the structures and practices that can disrupt anti-immigrant narratives that criminalize undocumented immigrants.

This study investigates how members of an urban, K–12 school community in California addressed immigration issues over a decade-long period. The following research question guided the study: How does an urban public school, as part of a NCOR, address immigration policies as well as societal exclusions to support immigrant/undocumented students and families? In what follows, we present relevant literature and describe the study’s NCOR framework. We then describe the research site and the research–practice partnership (RPP) created to conduct the work and conclude with a discussion and implications for public schools to address immigration issues.

## Literature Review

We draw on literature on immigration and education to focus on the way immigration status shapes access to supports and opportunities. Specifically, we note how legal and political contexts of incorporation intersect with the education system to support and/or hinder immigrant students amid complex immigration policies that limit incorporation.

### *Legal and Political Contexts Affecting Education*

The U.S. court’s decision in *Plyler v. Doe* (1982) gives all children the right to a public education, including undocumented youth. In this way, schools serve as a protective barrier against the legal structures enforced upon undocumented youth that label them “illegal” (Gonzales, 2016). Despite this layer of protection, federal immigration policies and actions impact students and families in both negative (e.g., immigration enforcement) and positive ways (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals [DACA]; Gándara & Ee, 2021). For example, Crawford’s (2018) case study of 14 educators in northern California notes the decisions that were made in 2008 by school leaders to mitigate the presence of Immigration Custom Enforcement (ICE) in the neighborhood. The findings highlight the importance of creating a community-sensitive school culture as well as educating the community about their legal rights. In contrast, DACA, a federal executive program granting reprieve from deportation and the ability to legally work has shown to improve educational and career outcomes (Gonzales et al., 2014; Gonzales et al., 2017).

More recently, research on the Trump era’s anti-immigrant policies notes that schools with predominantly White students have become hostile environments for vulnerable

groups (Rogers et al., 2017). Miranda (2017) highlights the decisions a school made to adapt to Trump’s election by shifting language and making students feel safe. Ee and Gándara (2020) surveyed educators at 46 districts across the United States and found that immigration enforcement affects both immigrant and nonimmigrant students. While immigrant students and their families may be the target of enforcement policies, nonimmigrant students bear witness to disappearing classmates. In addition, many students have difficulty concentrating on instruction and are likely to attend the least resourced schools (e.g., limited access to counselors; Ee & Gándara, 2020). Still, schools are potential sites for undocumented students to flourish while promoting agency, initiative, and ambition (Bhabha, 2019). Yet without proper consideration of immigration issues they risk perpetuating a “school to deportation pipeline” through racialized practices that label students as deviant and placing them on a pathway that leads youth to a criminal record and possible deportation (Verma et al., 2017).

### *Immigration, Unauthorized Status, and the Educational System*

Immigrant students are likely to attend schools that are segregated, underperforming, and resource deficient (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008). They are often segregated from English-speaking peers (Garver & Hopkins, 2020), are making sense of racial dynamics and its impact on opportunity (Abu-Haj, 2015; Lee et al., 2017), have limited access to college preparatory courses (Kanno, 2018), and lack meaningful relationships with teachers and other educators that promote a sense of belonging (Shirazi, 2018; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008). In the past decade, scholars have more prominently examined the intersection between having an unauthorized status and educational experiences across multiple contexts (Gonzales, 2016; Murillo, 2017a; Rodriguez & Monreal, 2017). Extant research notes that having an unauthorized status can negatively affect youth and young adults in education, mental health and financial stability (Yoshikawa et al., 2016). In particular, high school is a time when many undocumented students grapple with the limitations their immigration status imposes on their academic and social opportunities (Gonzales & Chavez, 2012), including school personnel’s limited knowledge about their access to college and a dearth of social networks (Enriquez, 2011; Nienhuser et al., 2016).

According to Gleeson and Gonzales (2012), entrance into public schools affords undocumented students the same constitutional rights as their U.S.-born and legally residing peers. Yet similar to their peers, the quality of undocumented students’ education is plagued with “exclusionary practices” (p. 8) that include tracking and deficit-based bilingual education (Oakes, 2005). Other research highlights inclusionary practices, such as engaging newcomer students’ transnational identities (including undocumented status) to promote belonging

through culturally sustaining pedagogy (Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2018). Similarly, Bajaj and Suresh (2018) discuss the structures, supports, and practices newcomer students experience as a “warm embrace” at an Oakland public school. As such, school leadership plays an important role in creating a community of care and “site of possibility” for immigrant students (Liou, 2016; Villavicencio, 2021). This study contributes to a growing literature on inclusive practices for immigrant students. Specifically, it notes how schools as part of a NCOR are capable of resisting anti-immigrant policies through intentional inclusive structures and community-responsive practices. In addition, with few exceptions (see Villavicencio, 2021), most studies only capture one moment in time. This study follows the way legal, political changes affected City School as an institutional context for nearly a 10-year period, capturing the benefits and tensions of prioritizing structural supports that address immigration issues amid complementary and competing educational issues.

### **Conceptual Framework: Nested Contexts of Reception**

According to Portes and Rumbaut (2006), incorporation, in part, is determined by the host society’s context of reception (COR), consisting of government policies, public perception, strength of the ethnic community, and institutions (e.g., labor market and education). COR can result in positive, negative, or neutral modes of incorporation for immigrant groups (Luthra et al., 2018)—providing a lens to examine incorporation beyond individual characteristics (Marrow, 2011). Recent scholarship has applied COR to investigate school violence (Peguero et al., 2021), teacher preferences in teaching English Learner classes (Dabach, 2011), and unaccompanied minors’ development of a legal consciousness (Galli, 2019). In addition, COR has helped better define incorporation. For example, Zhou and Gonzales (2019) define incorporation as “the extent to which institutional barriers are removed for immigrant groups to fully participate in the host society and access equal opportunities, resources, and rights, regardless of race/ethnicity and national origin” (p. 385). Their definition offers an analytic lens for understanding the role of different contexts in leading to positive or negative modes of incorporation.

Golash-Boza and Valdez (2018) expand COR by arguing that immigrant groups experience different political/legal, societal, and institutional contexts based on distinct contexts at local, state, and federal levels. They developed the NCOR framework based on focus group interviews with 35 undocumented students at a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) in California. The findings consider the political/legal context at the time. For example, most participants were DACA recipients and the study was conducted during a moment of record-high deportations, leading participants to consider the vulnerability of non-DACA recipients (e.g., parents). The state context allowed students to qualify for in-state tuition and financial aid. However, they still experienced

significant financial stress. In addition, the national societal context felt both ambivalent and hostile, but was mediated because many of the participants resided in communities that were mostly welcoming. Finally, the local/institutional context was critical in supporting participants to persist through campus counseling services, emotional support, and a general welcoming climate. These findings demonstrate how NCOR exists in tension across varied contexts, creating differences in experiences, opportunities, and resources for immigrant groups that promote or hinder students’ sense of belonging (Gonzales & Burciaga, 2018).

NCOR has been applied across different state and local/institutional contexts. For example, utilizing ethnographic methods, Park (2020) found that bilingual youth experience different classroom contexts (e.g., affirming and rigid) across the same school. Similarly, Perez (2020) utilized NCOR to examine Latinx identity development in a new immigrant destination, showing how NCOR facilitated variations in exclusion, inclusion, and belonging. For example, despite encountering a hostile societal context, many participants developed empowered Latinx identities. For those in postsecondary education, the institutional context helped dismantle negative associations to Latinx identity. Overall, these examples provide a nuanced understanding related to the complexities of incorporation.

In this study, we contribute to research on NCOR by considering how a K–12 school addressed immigration legal/policy contexts and societal perceptions of immigrants to structure supports. We also apply Zhou and Gonzales’s (2019) definition of incorporation to focus on a K–12 school as an institutional context capable of designing learning and social environments that result in a positive and inclusive incorporation for its immigrant students.

### **Methodology**

In partnership with a local university, City School (pseudonym) has designed institutional structures and norms to craft responses to immigration issues affecting school members. We draw on data from three research studies conducted between 2013 and 2021 as part of a longstanding RPP between City School and a local university (see online Supplemental Appendix A, available in the online version of this article, for more details). Although unconventional, scholars have merged data sets from individual research studies when the projects have similar approaches in terms of design and focus (see Griffin & Reddick, 2011; Welton & Martinez, 2014). Welton and Martinez (2014) refer to this process as epistemological collaboration, which includes the epistemological assumptions shared by the researchers. For example, the three research studies are grounded within ideals of equity and social justice that focus on the strengths of immigrants. In addition, all three studies were conducted at the same site and provide unique insights of the work that has evolved over time. Finally, the RPP allows the research

team to participate in critical reflection across the three studies, noting the design, culture, and response of City School related to immigration issues across time.

### *City School as Part of a Nested Context of Reception*

City School is a K–12 neighborhood public school located in an urban, high immigrant population area. In the 1980s, the federal government designated the surrounding neighborhood a receiving community for thousands of Central American refugees. Between 2009 and 2019 the community has seen some demographic changes. In 2019, the neighborhood Latinx/a/o population was 45% (59% in 2009), while the Asian or Pacific Islander population was 37% (29% in 2009), with the majority of residents being of immigrant-origin (58%; 63% in 2009; U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). City School student population reflects the immigrant roots of the community. During the 2020–2021 academic year, the student population was predominantly Latinx/a/o (83.9%; see Table 1 for full details). Just over half (51%) of students identified as female and 28% were classified as English Learners. In addition, most students (94%) were socioeconomically disadvantaged. As a NCOR for immigrant students, City School is guided by the following core set of beliefs and values, which are revisited and reaffirmed regularly:

Language and culture are central to learning and human development. Individuals learn as members of a community that values their participation and is respectful, productive, antiracist, and inclusive. The purpose of schooling is to guide all learners, both students and adults, to think critically about the world around them, to engage as agents of social change, and to promote democratic practices.

These values and beliefs are evident in the physical environment and also within classrooms and offices where teachers and staff members have established norms and routines that bring these core values to life. As described in more depth below, the school embraces students' cultural, racial/ethnic, and linguistic diversity and works to offer an enriching, culturally relevant curriculum.

### *A Research–Practice Partnership*

City School was designed in 2007 as a site for RPP, with support from the partner university as well as the school district, which have enhanced the school's ability to support immigrant-origin students and families (Harkavy et al., 2013). The data in this article come from three studies conducted between 2013 and 2021 in the context of a university-assisted RPP. RPPs are long-term, symbiotic relationships aimed at improving intermediate and long-term outcomes for students, families, and communities (Coburn & Penuel, 2016; Penuel & Hill, 2019). As a new school designed with structures and practices to support RPPs, City School is a

fertile context to study questions of practice and research where both practitioners and researchers share knowledge and work together to address existing and pressing local issues (Quartz et al., 2017). For example, City School has created longitudinal databases and regularly convenes partnership retreats to study and improve bilingual education as well as college access. Immigration issues have also emerged as salient aspects in the lives of the school community, inspiring sustained inquiry and data collection on a range of related topics, including the college choice process for undocumented students; work-based learning experiences; and student agency. Over time, school systems and practices have been developed to recognize and support immigration status issues, leading to additional inquiry. This has been an ongoing learning process, requiring the school to adapt to changes in immigration policy and evolving attitudes toward immigrants. The almost decade-long time span allows us to capture the ebbs and flows of immigration policy and attitudes.

### *Research Studies*

The data from three studies demonstrate the school's evolution and responsiveness to immigration status issues (see online Supplemental Appendix B).

*College Preparation and Support (2013–2014).* This study employed ethnographic methods to understand how the school addressed legal status issues in students' college choice process (Murillo, 2015). Observations were conducted between August 2013 and May 2014 in classrooms and in the college and career center. Attention was given to the ways adults and students talked about legal status as well as how the issue was addressed in school. To complement observations, 42 semistructured interviews were conducted with 15 U.S.-born/legally residing students, 14 undocumented students, and 13 administrators and teachers. Interviews allowed the researcher to elicit a range of information to understand participants' lives, experiences, and cognitive processes in relation to immigration, undocumented students, and conceptions of belonging.

*Immigrant Family Legal Clinic (2020).* A qualitative case study was conducted to understand the perspective of teachers and staff regarding the development and implementation of an immigrant family legal clinic on the school campus (Murillo et al., 2021). An anonymous school staff 10-question Qualtrics survey was administered in December 2019. A total of 41 staff members out of 54 responded to the survey, including teachers, administrators, counselors, and support staff. The survey included questions on: (1) the role and length of time at the school, (2) the history and foundation around the shaping of the legal clinic on a large community school campus, (3) the school's connection to the legal clinic, and (4) previous knowledge around immigrant advocacy efforts related to



TABLE 1  
2020–2021 Enrollment Demographics

| Student group    | <i>n</i> | %     |
|------------------|----------|-------|
| African American | 24       | 2.50  |
| Asian            | 70       | 7.20  |
| Filipino         | 45       | 4.60  |
| Latinx/a/o       | 820      | 83.90 |
| White            | 15       | 1.50  |

services and communities. Eight semistructured in-depth interviews were then conducted between January to June 2020 to capture school staff and legal clinic staff perceptions of the clinic’s role on campus.

*Unaccompanied Youth in Public Schools (2020–2021).* This study was conducted using a youth participatory action research methodology to foreground the voice of unaccompanied youth in describing and interpreting their schooling experiences (Garcia, 2021). The team included four youth coresearchers and a principal investigator who met over 9 months to set up the study and conduct interviews. Together, the researchers read and reflected on research methodologies, theoretical frameworks, immigration policies, literature on immigrant youth, and their own immigrant experience vis-à-vis the local and national contexts. The youth coresearchers designed an interview protocol that would reveal how immigrant youth described, experienced, and interpreted their school experiences at City School. Six semistructured in-depth interviews were conducted in the spring and summer of 2020 by the research team. The protocol created by the youth coresearchers included questions on: (1) arrival and adaptation to the country, (2) family and family connections, (3) schooling experiences that ranged from selecting the school to learning English, (4) the role of teachers, staff, and peers in the adaptation process, and (5) the impact of current anti-immigrant context on students. The final part of the interview included a reflection about the interview process. The youth then analyzed the data through various cycles of both inductive and deductive coding using a framework that highlights the shared commitments between critical race theory and youth participatory action research methodologies (Torre, 2009).

#### *Positionality*

Scholars note the role of subjectivity and reflexivity in qualitative research, allowing researchers to acknowledge their identities and power in the research process (Peshkin, 1988; Pillow, 2003). The RPP between the university and City School has created opportunities to research, reflect, and learn about immigration. In the online Supplemental Appendix C, we describe our roles across the research,

noting our personal and professional ties to the work. We consider the tensions of addressing immigration issues, specifically, as scholars with an authorized status, as well as the dynamics of power embedded in the work (Reyna Rivarola & López, 2021). As such, we approach the research with a commitment to critically examine our roles in advancing the work, recognizing the collective knowledge and humanity of participants.

#### *Data Analysis*

Similar to Menjívar and Abrego’s (2012) research on legal violence that draws on multiple studies ranging for over a decade, we conducted a secondary analysis of data collected from these three studies. As part of the RPP, we have been part of a learning process in understanding the role of immigration and legal status in the educational opportunities and engagement of immigrant-origin students and families. The integrative analysis of data across these three studies was made possible by the diversity in our positionality, including our roles and experiences, as researchers, practitioners, school leaders, and immigrant-origin individuals. As such, we ground the study’s findings on the data collected and we also draw on our unique experience as part of the RPP. For over a decade, we have worked for and with community members to address a variety of issues at City School. We draw on these experiences and the voices of our research participants to contextualize the immigration policy changes and the school’s adaptation.

To conduct the secondary data analysis, we examined codes from the original research studies. Based on the study’s framework, we looked across codes from the three studies and recoded them to align with the core components of the NCOR framework. We applied four codes: immigration policies, societal views, institutional supports/actions, and the local/school community (online Supplemental Appendix D). For example, the code “Bipolar Context of Reception” in the college preparation and support study was recoded as “Immigration Policies”, while the code “College-going support” was recoded as “Institutional supports/actions.” Recoding the data in this way allowed the research team to understand how City School, as an institutional context, designed systems, supports and services for immigrant students (Saldaña, 2016). The research team met multiple times to discuss the data and relate these concepts to ideas of incorporation, focusing on three themes: (1) college-going systems and supports, (2) resources and supports for unaccompanied youth, and (3) the development and implementation of legal services. To supplement the data for the research studies, the team conducted a 90-minute post hoc reflective discussion to better understand how the school’s work on immigration was nested within immigration policy and societal views of immigrants. This process was possible because of the team’s deep engagement in the RPP.

The 90-minute post hoc semistructured reflective discussion focused on the national, state, and local contexts in which the three studies occurred and the ways in which school structures, norms and practices emerged to address immigration issues. Prior to engaging in this discussion, the research team created a list of 32 artifacts from newspapers, flyers, powerpoint presentations, memoranda of understanding, and protocols to reflect back on the events which initiated the studies (online Supplemental Appendix E). Three questions directed the conversation and provided a through line across the three studies: In what ways did the school's norms, and practices address immigration issues for college-going supports, resources for unaccompanied youth, and the creation of legal partnerships? What was the national, state, and local/institutional immigration/education context? In what ways did the RPP allow for this work to emerge and be studied? The reflective process allowed the research team to consider City School as the institutional context by discussing pertinent immigration policies, societal views, and school actions across time (Pillow, 2003). For example, the research team discussed the way the growing number of unaccompanied youth enrolling at City School necessitated direct action from school staff. The conversation focused on the institutional tensions (e.g., teachers' concerns about how to support students) while noting educators' determination to foreground students' assets as opposed to the deficit views often seen in mainstream media (i.e., societal views). This iterative and cyclical analytical process allowed us to make connections across the three studies and yielded findings that capture change over time alongside the school's responsiveness.

### Findings

We situate City School as part of a NCOR and present our findings in three themes, focusing on the structural supports the school has developed: (1) college-going supports and the disclosure of legal status; (2) newcomer-centered courses; and (3) legal services. The findings demonstrate City School as an institutional context, grappling with the commitment and tensions taken to support immigrant youth across the school.

#### *College Center: Access and Disclosure of Legal Status*

City School's college access work converged with immigration policy changes to create a pathway toward higher education for undocumented students. The "dreamer" movement took off in the early 2010s amid undocumented youth advocating for educational access and immigration reform. Although immigration reform did not pass, two changes shaped the local context for postsecondary education incorporation. The California Dream Act was passed in 2011 to allow undocumented students to qualify for state financial

aid. And in 2012, DACA permitted qualifying individuals reprieve from deportation and a work permit. Alongside these immigration policy changes and executive order, the "college-for-all" movement gained momentum. For example, a district policy called for all students to graduate from high school having completed and passed the required course sequence to be eligible for the state's public higher education system.

Designed as a college-going school, City School established a college center in 2013, initially staffed by AmeriCorps volunteers who offered students and families college workshops and guided students through the college application and choice process. In its inception, the school's institutional college-going efforts pushed back against societal views that resources should not be given to undocumented youth. Emily, the college counselor in 2013 shared, "I don't think the school views it as a negative. I think the school treats all the kids the same. . . . So I think the students just don't really care who's undocumented and who's documented." Although City School as an institutional context believed that all students, regardless of immigration status, should be prepared to attend college, an infrastructure to facilitate discussions about immigration status and manage information was missing.

Observations in the college center captured the complexities in supporting undocumented students. The school learned that during the college application season it was common for students to disclose their immigration status when they were asked for a Social Security Number, completed financial aid forms, or sought direct support from the counselor about how to navigate the college choice process. In some instances, the college counselor directly asked about students' immigration status by asking them to complete an index card that included the question, "Are you a U.S. citizen?" To alleviate concerns, Emily told students it was information she needed for targeted support. Yet questions emerged about the ethics around asking about immigration status regardless of the intent to support students. Some students were comfortable discussing their unauthorized status within the school context after establishing long-standing and supportive relationships with adults as well as feeling recognized by the school. Gan, an undocumented high school senior, captured the sentiment in 2014, "I didn't feel neglected. I didn't feel like I didn't belong here. . . . I mean I feel that I am not the only one so that makes me feel a lot more comfortable." According to Gan, "everyone" knew about her immigration status and felt the majority of her peers were supportive. For many others, disclosing their immigration status was uncomfortable, but necessary to receive guidance and support. Edgar, an undocumented 12th grade student in 2014 shared,

I know it's something personal and sometimes it's uncomfortable to talk about with everyone. But I deal with it like anything else. I

don't give it too much importance. I didn't feel bad because it's something they need to know to help me. It's something I have to share.

The institutional context at City school around college-going was supported by teachers across the school. Maricel, City School's Spanish teacher was particularly passionate because she was undocumented when applied to and attended college in the 1990s. During a class discussion on college Maricel discussed writing her personal statement about her experience as an undocumented immigrant. She sometimes directly addressed undocumented students without singling out anyone:

She says, "they're not going to reject you for being undocumented." Returning to her college admissions essay, Maricel attributes her acceptance to the personal statement she wrote. "I wrote it from the heart," she tells them. (Fieldnote, September 12, 2013)

Maricel's words spoke to undocumented students, helping build collective agency around their status, in contrast to the messages they often heard in opposition to their capabilities to attend college. As such, many of her students internalized these messages in positive ways. For example, Isabel, a 12th grade undocumented student with a close relationship to Maricel, commented in 2014, "I know a person that has citizenship has more benefits than me, but I don't think that it makes them more than me." Although Isabel understood that having an authorized legal status led to greater access to resources, she challenged the idea that being undocumented equated to being a person of lesser value. These ideas also helped push back against the shame and risk associated with disclosing immigration status by creating an institutional context amid confusing federal contexts and negative societal views of immigrants where having an unauthorized legal status was humanized and embraced.

Over time City School designed the college-going infrastructure to better support students. For example, the post hoc reflection highlighted how during the 2014–2015 academic year, they hired a permanent college counselor after parents and university partners voiced a need for there to be a permanent staff position. As part of the RPP, City School also implemented practices learned from the research on college-going supports. Students were no longer directly asked about their immigration status. Instead, information targeted for undocumented students was included in all workshops as well as during one-on-one meetings, regardless of legal status. In addition, the school informed all students and families about DACA. Altogether, these actions and practices signaled to students and parents a responsive institutional context. However, some of these local practices were altered with Donald J. Trump's election in 2016.

Interviews with school staff conducted in 2020 captured how DACA's termination by the Trump administration in September 2017 generated concerns among school educators,

students, and families. Reflecting on these issues, Elaine, a middle school teacher, shared in 2020, "If DACA doesn't exist how do kids who can't afford college and are undocumented even have access to higher education?" City school grappled with ways to approach the issue. While students were no longer able to submit DACA applications, the school informed families that students could still be eligible to receive financial aid from the state. This required tact, care, and understanding as Elisabeth, a high school history teacher, noted, "We don't record [legal status] anywhere, obviously, because that's a total violation of student and family privacy. But we keep that knowledge and that means that students need specialized help with applying for financial aid, applying to college." As a result, undocumented students and families continued to submit college and financial applications, committing to attend to both 2- and 4-year colleges. The ongoing changes with DACA have created challenges for City School. Still they continue to support students' postsecondary aspirations, regardless of immigration status.

#### *Newcomer-Centered Classrooms and Practices: Supporting Unaccompanied Youth*

Newcomer students were always present at City School. However, the increased number of unaccompanied youth in 2014 from Central America alongside media coverage generated additional conversations about supporting newcomer students, in particular, unaccompanied youth at the institutional level. School staff recognized the importance of structuring supports with unaccompanied youth in mind, but felt uncertain about how to do so. Drawing on their experience designing a full inclusion special education program, City School staff embarked on a learning journey to ascertain the needs of unaccompanied youth within the larger immigrant population. As part of the RPP, some school members read research on immigrant students to understand the complexities in educational experience and needs. These actions helped the school design supports as the Principal shared in 2020, "We have intentionally decided to strengthen our structures around integrating newcomer students. It lives in a lot of spaces." One of the institutional structures designed where these supports reside is in the school's Newcomer course. The course offers students an opportunity to receive academic and socioemotional support. The content for the Newcomer course is centered on the students' immigration stories—students journal about their experiences and share their accounts with one another. For example, posters created by students detail the small cells where they had been detained in Texas or New York. Units are student centered and are intentional in meeting students' needs. The Principal shared,

[We have] developed a unit on immigration stories. They read children's books about immigration and migration stories. Then they wrote their own and read them to our fourth and fifth grade



classes. It was the most beautiful, tear jerker moment because their stories were so powerful. You can see the response from the fourth and fifth graders. They're just enthralled by these stories. Some of them understood because those are their stories or their parents' stories.

Intentional structures such as the newcomer course helped empower students by creating affirming spaces that build on strengths to support learning and engagement. These curated spaces contrast with the hostile and dehumanizing federal context many students experience on entering the country.

The school also works to uplift student agency through a process aimed at better understanding students' challenges and assets. For example, the school learned that almost all of the newcomer students had spent considerable time in detention centers across the nation before being released to family members and other guardians. Alumnus Kevin shared,

The first [thing] is the treatment they give you when you cross the border . . . they caught me and put me in an immigration detention center. Being there, seeing, feeling the sensation, having the sensation of how things are there, is not a place where a person should be. And I think that for me that was an experience that I cannot forget, because it affected me a lot mentally. . . . For me, that destroyed me as a human, as a person. And see, politics now I am not so much in agreement with how they are doing things.

Kevin's comments give voice to the dehumanizing experience of many migrants from Central America. Hearing from students made it apparent that counseling services were necessary for students to heal and adapt to their new schooling context. Counseling resources, such as a school psychologist and a social worker are available to students through the enrollment process and ongoing monitoring is provided by specialized personnel. By centering students' voices, the school adapted and provided personalized student supports. For example, through the newcomer course students shared how they must juggle school and work. In response, the school created a more flexible schedule for the completion of assignments and projects.

Another way the school has created a welcoming institutional context is by extending its dual language program to the secondary level. In these spaces, students appreciated teacher support in helping develop their English skills while at the same time engaging in academic content that fostered the use of their home language. For example, Jose, a 12th grade student, was able to contribute in his first language as he developed both academic content and English skills. Jose also appreciated the role his bilingual peers played in his learning:

It is like a learning exchange, because sometimes they [peers] do not understand certain things that we say and then one simply explains to them how that is. And also, because they know English so they have helped me too.

For Jose, the classroom became an opportunity for a "learning exchange" to occur between students by sharing cultural knowledge based on language and experience.

Opportunities for institutional incorporation of unaccompanied youth also occur around graduation and college-going. With the state's passage of Assembly Bill 2121 in 2018 newcomers' students were able to take an additional year of high school in order to complete graduation requirements or take courses that would make them eligible for college. The policy was an important step in facilitating a context that supported unaccompanied youth's college-going goals. Secondary schools are ranked and judged based on graduation rates and allowing students a fifth year of study comes at a cost to the school in terms of external accountability measures. However, it makes a difference for students who feel better prepared to attend college or advance in their careers by having more time in high school. Some educators encouraged unaccompanied youth to get involved in spaces that allowed students "to get together and belong". For example, Michelle, high school sophomore, joined the school's 2College Club, a student-run club whose mission is to fundraise money for scholarships for undocumented students:

It was very nice because we did and collaborated in activities, like when we sold things and we met in Ms. M's room. We spent time together and made plans for what we had to do, it was very nice.

As a member of the 2College Club Michelle took an active role in helping classmates fulfill a dream she had for herself—to attend college. This experience was particularly poignant when the club selected the winner of the 2College scholarship, an immigrant student like herself. Michelle expressed feeling a sense of accomplishment because she saw herself in the recipient.

Overall, unaccompanied youth in particular see, experience, and make meaning of schooling through complicated identities that thread their roles as scholars, laborers, caretakers, and young people with big dreams for their futures. In spite of working full-time in physically demanding jobs until late into the evening, these young immigrants found time to pursue their educational dreams by seeking challenging courses and taking advantage of the opportunities that the school created for them.

#### *Legal Services: Immigrant Family Legal Clinic*

Planning for an immigrant family legal clinic began in 2015 after recognizing that students' and families' immigration legal questions extended beyond college-going. Legal inquiries included questions about deportation proceedings, pathways to legal residency, and visa status. With support from the RPP, City school partnered with a local law school to design a legal clinic within the institutional context. An early memo noted the clinic's intent to, "advise and



represent City School students and their families on a variety of legal issues where immigration status is a barrier to their education and employment.” The memo also outlined the steps needed to design and implement the clinic such as access to the school, space location, and technology infrastructure. In addition, the clinic was designed as a service available to all members of the six schools in the shared campus. As such, conversations about space and resource allocation became topics of contention.

In the midst of planning for the clinic, Donald J. Trump was elected president. With the onslaught of anti-immigrant policies and actions (e.g., rescinding DACA), the need for additional legal support was clear. School staff were trained to deal with the presence of ICE in the community, but constant changes in policies created challenges in having current and accurate information. Concurrently, the administrative leaders at the other school sites contended with competing interests (e.g., offering English classes to parents) before approving the clinic. The principal reflected on the moment:

I’m not minimizing focusing on [reclassification and assessments]. We know we live in that world. It’s just that it doesn’t mean that’s the only thing that everyone else is connected to . . . I was like, “What do you mean this is not the most urgent thing you’re worried about? Don’t you know what they’re going through?” . . . But if you’re not necessarily tuned in to that and you haven’t created the [immigration support] spaces, then you might not seem as urgent.

The principal’s comment suggests that some school leaders across the other campuses considered first issues of accountability measures affecting the schools. Yet she argued that the urgency of immigrant issues facing students and families required immediate action.

The tide in favor turned when students and parent advocates requested that the clinic be a part of the schools sanctuary school protocol in 2018. The clinic opened in 2019 and provides another crucial structure for immigrant youth and their families through three supports: (1) direct representation, (2) consultations, and (3) community education. Altogether these services extend the school’s ability to serve immigrant-origin families, creating an institutional context with direct access to legal support within the campus. Yoshua, a middle school arts teacher, talked about the benefits of the clinic’s accessibility, “I think the benefits are to give the children a sense of security. They are in a new country in fear every day of their life that they or their family are going to be apprehended, separated, or deported.” Yet despite the proximity, clinic staff learned that it had to build its own trust with the community. Nancy, the clinic law fellow, shared,

I think a lot of what I did the first semester was trying to give the clinic a face, making sure people knew who I was and where the clinic was. It was just a lot of outreach and engagement to build trust and that involved getting good relationships with the teachers, staff, and paraprofessionals who already have the trust from the community and the families.

Despite providing legal services free of charge, clinic staff had to develop their own relationships with students and families. In part, they attributed students’ and families’ initial hesitation to distrust of the legal system, having had negative experiences with lawyers or notaries who offered little help. For this reason, a goal of the clinic was also to empower community members.

The clinic’s presence represents another protective layer to the school’s work. For many, this work embodies a commitment that reinforces the community’s sense of belonging. Abigail, a first grade teacher, commented, “we’re really demonstrating to the community our commitment to all of their different kinds of needs.” As an institutional context, the clinic contributes to a positive COR within the school and an empowering space for community members. According to the clinic director, the clinic serves as a “source for accurate information” as well as empowering space in a variety of ways. She shared,

I don’t think we’re quite there yet—but the goal is to also work with organizers and community-based groups where we can deliver the bad news but we can also say it doesn’t always have to be that way. And you know, you should definitely get involved in fighting for something better.

As the clinic director noted, while gaining an authorized legal status protected individuals from deportation, the clinic’s work had other benefits such as building community knowledge to help build agency in advocating for pro-immigrant policies.

### **Discussion and Implications**

The study’s findings demonstrate how federal and state sociopolitical shifts informed City School’s development and implementation of an inclusive school environment. The study expands our understanding of K–12 schools’ role in maintaining a welcoming institutional context amid ongoing federal and state changes. Schools, as an institutional context within the NCOR framework, can provide needed support to immigrant students. The findings also demonstrate how City School addressed immigration issues amid changes in education policy that at times created tensions regarding the prioritization of supports. Specifically, the present study details three ways in which City School addressed immigration status issues across time; they include designing contexts to: support college-going and disclosure of legal status; honor newcomer/unaccompanied students’ migration journeys and assets; and provide legal support. In particular, the study highlights how students’ and families’ immigration status moved from the periphery of the school’s work to become a set of intentional efforts designed to address immigrant-origin individuals’ documentation and educational needs.

City School embodies a school context affected by federal and state policies in addressing immigration issues in both positive and negative ways. Despite these challenges

the school centers immigrant students' and families' cultural wealth to design a learning environment that considers language, culture, and immigration status among other issues (Yosso, 2005). The findings provide insights on the way the school's work and role as a local context has evolved over time. The process of building on immigrant students' assets developed over the course of a decade in mindful, ethical, and supportive ways. For example, City School initially confronted disclosure of immigration status through conversations about college supports. Given that schools are prohibited from inquiring about students' immigration status, it may be uncommon for conversations about immigration status to emerge unless they are prompted by students, families, or staff (Gonzales, 2010; Murillo, 2017a). Yet for many secondary schools, discussions about college, in particular, may prompt some students to disclose their immigration status or realize the barriers their immigration status may impose (Murillo, 2017b; Nienhusser, 2013). City School, as part of an NCOR, illustrates an environment where many individuals felt secure disclosing their immigration status. Individual connections alongside concerted efforts to address immigration status issues allowed these moments to occur. Yet political and social changes prompted educators to adapt their systems, ensuring that student information was not shared or stored while continuing to encourage students to pursue higher education. These findings demonstrate the delicate balance between supporting students and recognizing the larger immigration policy context affecting students.

City School also responded to the growth of newcomer students, in particular, unaccompanied youth. These findings demonstrate the structures implemented and the recognition of individual and communal agency in support of these students. The establishment of a newcomer course allowed City School educators to learn about their newcomer students. Research shows that teachers play a pivotal role in nurturing academic and social advancement. When teachers hold deficit views toward their students they create uncaring and unsupportive learning environments (Valenzuela, 1999). In contrast, when teachers demonstrate concern over their students' well-being and display sensitivity regarding potential stressors in students' lives, positive relationships may develop between students and teachers (Garza Mitchell, 2009; Sosa & Gomez, 2012). However, it is important to note the danger in essentializing the immigrant-origin experience (Rodriguez, 2015). For example, despite encountering hostile environments in detention, many newcomer youth were engaged and active contributors to the learning community. While some newcomer students discussed the trauma they experienced in detention, they also thrived in educational settings that incorporated their needs (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2018). Students' voices were centered in different ways within the school context to make informed decisions about supports and learning opportunities. As

such, it is important for schools to recognize students' needs, yet provide opportunities to build agency.

Finally, the findings from this study demonstrate the benefit of local legal partnerships created to create access to legal counsel and to improve students' and families' school experience and legal supports (Turner & Figueroa, 2019). The establishment of an immigrant family legal clinic also helped empower community members, while delivering direct services to community members (e.g., direct representation and consultations). Although this is a unique school structure, other schools can benefit from partnerships with local organizations doing immigration work. Moreover, as more districts and schools declare sanctuary status for students and families, concrete resources and supports should be made available.

### *Limitations*

This study was conducted at a school aware of its immigrant students and families. In addition, the school's partnership with a local university provided additional resources for addressing immigration issues. Therefore, findings from this research study are not intended to reflect the schooling experiences toward immigrant students and immigration status across the country. Rather, the findings demonstrate that despite hostile federal and legal contexts schools can address immigration issues in ways that create an inclusive community and, more broadly, humanize students and families. Additional research is needed in state and local contexts with explicit anti-immigrant policies and sentiments. Finally, the use of three research studies with various frameworks and methodologies limits our ability to apply the NCOR framework in ways that could capture other aspects of the institutional context.

### *Conclusion*

A roadmap for addressing immigration status and working with undocumented students is not available for educators. City School serves as an example of a school's capability to create an institutional context where immigration status issues are considered in thoughtful and meaningful ways. At a moment where the social and political COR has vilified immigrants across the country, schools can serve as welcoming contexts of reception. Schools can do this by affirming the presence of undocumented students and their families, providing safe spaces for students, and counseling students about their rights and availability of resources. They also require educators to develop empathy and sociopolitical awareness on immigration issues and its impact on educational access and engagement (Rodriguez et al., 2020). The findings from this study shows that schools can be actors in promoting proimmigrant attitudes. Yet schools need to consider the different layers and dimensions that impact

incorporation. While addressing immigration status issues is time consuming and difficult work, schools, as part of a NCOR, can help students and their families develop their sense of self in the educational system and beyond.

### Open Practices

The data instruments for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.3886/E151721V1>.

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