

Conexiones: Brokering Connections with Unaccompanied Immigrant Adolescents in Secondary Schools

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Throughout the migratory process, unaccompanied minors from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras—countries known as the Northern Triangle of Central America—are at great risk for exposure to adverse experiences, loss, and stressors that can have negative consequences on their mental health and well-being. Although the limited research with unaccompanied minors has focused on trauma, acculturative stress, and trauma-informed interventions, little is known about the effects of migratory grief and ambiguous loss on the psychological sequelae of unaccompanied minors and other immigrant youth. Without an opportunity to grieve the loss of family members and other concurrent losses, this marginalized group is left with perpetual ambiguity and confusion that can compound the effects of trauma and stress. In response to ambiguous loss, which is a relational phenomenon that severs important human relationships, school social workers have a unique opportunity to deliver a culturally and trauma-informed intervention that emphasizes the importance of making connections. This article will introduce cultural brokering as an added component of a school-based trauma-informed intervention that can be effective in facilitating relational engagement that fosters resilience among bereaved and trauma-exposed unaccompanied minors.

Keywords: *ambiguous loss, cultural brokering, migratory grief, school-based interventions, TF-CBT, unaccompanied minors*

Each year, unaccompanied children and adolescents make a treacherous journey across the Mexican-United States border to escape poverty and

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violence hoping to reunite with family members from whom they have been long separated. Unaccompanied minors are individuals under the age of eighteen who migrate to the United States without a parent or legal guardian (Androff, 2016). Migrant youth who arrive in the United States alone and are apprehended at the border or other ports of entry by a federal agency are placed in the custody of the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR, 2020a). Although federal agencies refer to these youth as *unaccompanied alien children*, this term may be considered dehumanizing; therefore, the term *unaccompanied minors* will be used in this article.

In recent years, the majority of unaccompanied minors who have been detained have been between thirteen and seventeen years of age (Krogstad et al., 2014). From 2018 through 2019, U.S. Customs and Border Protection apprehended 56,278 unaccompanied minors crossing into the United States (Chisti et al., 2019). In 2018, the U.S. ORR (2020b) reported that the highest percentage came from Guatemala, followed by Honduras and El Salvador—three countries known as the Northern Triangle of Central America. Unlike unaccompanied minors from Mexico, who are deported within 24 hours of apprehension, unaccompanied minors from countries in Central America are placed in detention centers until ORR can identify an appropriate sponsor or foster care placement (ORR, 2020a).

Unaccompanied minors from the Northern Triangle are at high risk for traumatic and adverse experiences throughout the tripartite migratory process (pre-, peri-, and post-migration) (Franco, 2018). Through the process of migration, unaccompanied minors also experience various forms of psychological and social losses that may evoke reactions of migratory grief (Jerves et al., 2019). Migratory grief is the psychological, interpersonal, and somatic reaction to losses caused by migration (Casado et al., 2010). Falicov (2002) described migratory grief as multi-layered because migration results in many simultaneous and recurrent losses that can include the loss of family members, friends, culture, community, homeland, and language. These losses are *partial* because the objects of loss psychologically exist yet are not physically present nor immediately available. Due to the uncertainty of physical absence and psychological presence that characterizes the partial losses of migratory grief, scholars have framed this experience as an ambiguous loss (Falicov, 2002; Jerves et al., 2019; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2002).

By applying Boss's (1999) type 1 ambiguous loss theory as a framework, school social workers can widen their understanding of grief and loss to acknowledge the psychosocial impact of migratory grief on unac-

accompanied minors. Type 1 ambiguous loss, a unique form of non-death loss, refers to the physical absence of a person who remains psychologically present. This type of loss has been studied with children in foster care placements and children with an incarcerated parent (Bocknek et al., 2009; Mitchell, 2018; Schwartz, 2010). However, there is still much to be learned about ambiguous loss as it pertains to migratory grief and how it impacts immigrant youth. This article will attempt to bridge that gap.

Bal and Perzigian (2013) suggested that, because schools are usually the first social and institutional spaces in which immigrant youth engage in cultural adaptation, school social workers must become attuned to the needs of unaccompanied minors and tailor interventions to address their unique issues. Cultural brokering, a concept that refers to bridging and linking diverse groups to produce change (Jezewski, 1990), may offer a possible solution to providing a more culturally responsive approach that centers around making connections. This article proposes a school-based approach that incorporates cultural brokering in conjunction with evidence-based trauma and grief interventions. Although these interventions address the trauma and grief experienced by unaccompanied minors, cultural brokering facilitates the relational engagement necessary to restore the ruptured connections caused by ambiguous loss. The school social worker's dual role of clinician and cultural broker will be discussed and illustrated through the composite case example of Jaime, an unaccompanied minor from Honduras who was grieving the loss of family and homeland. As the article will illustrate, cultural brokering can create important connections that can be extremely powerful and healing for a minor who has been exposed to trauma and who struggles with unresolved grief and loss.

Literature Review

The Northern Triangle countries have long accounted for high levels of violence and poverty that have triggered the migration of unaccompanied minors to the United States (Androff, 2016; Ball & Rosenblum, 2016). Throughout all phases of migration, unaccompanied minors are at risk of experiencing trauma and other stressors that significantly impact their psychological well-being and development (Franco, 2018). The migratory process is tripartite; it includes pre-migration, or before migration; peri-migration, the journey from the country of origin to the country of destination; and post-migration, or after arrival in the destination country. Each stage carries traumatic potential that can

influence the experiences of another stage of migration, thus compounding the impact on the psychological sequelae of unaccompanied minors (Perreira & Ornelas, 2011). The migratory stories of unaccompanied minors reflect individual journeys, yet common themes emerge when these narratives are collectively examined (Franco, 2018; Murray et al., 2008).

During the pre-migration phase, unaccompanied minors from the Northern Triangle have reported many adverse experiences and stressors that motivated their migration to the United States (Lorenzen, 2017). For example, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR; 2014) conducted individual in-depth interviews with 404 unaccompanied minors from Mexico and the Northern Triangle countries while in the custody of ORR and found that more than half (53%) of those who mentioned family reunification, school, or better opportunities as voluntary motives for migrating also reported experiencing community violence and abuse in the home. Unaccompanied minors have reported other traumatic experiences during the pre-migration phase, such as lack of consistent caregivers, homelessness and lack of other basic needs, and sexual assault (National Child Traumatic Stress Network [NCTSN], 2014). Furthermore, the risk of exposure to trauma continues as unaccompanied minors embark on their journey during the peri-migration phase.

Through peri-migration, unaccompanied minors set out on a perilous and potentially fatal journey from the Northern Triangle through Mexico and across the United States border. Many unaccompanied minors rely on *coyotes*, smugglers who are paid to facilitate migration to the United States, at the risk of being extorted or kidnapped for ransom or human trafficking (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops/Migration and Refugee Services, 2012). Children who were unable to pay a ransom and escaped captivity reported that they were sexually exploited or forced to commit crimes such as selling or smuggling drugs.

Even at the end of the pre-migratory stage, the risk for trauma exposure and/or unique stressors endures. The post-migration resettlement phase exacerbates previous trauma exposure as unaccompanied minors find themselves in detention facilities that may lack adequate heating, food, and water and may offer limited access to bathrooms and showers (Collier, 2015). Additional trauma includes potential physical or sexual abuse at the hands of facility staff and others. After placement with a sponsor or in a foster home, unaccompanied minors face acculturative stressors that are unique and compounded by their preexisting trauma history (NCTSN, 2014).

Additionally, unaccompanied minors experience migratory grief that Falicov (2002) described as multilayered, recurrent, and partial. Migratory grief encompasses losses that are unclear and incomplete, leading scholars to frame this experience as an ambiguous loss (Falicov, 2002; Jerves et al., 2019; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2002). The next section will explore this concept further.

Migratory Grief as Ambiguous Loss: Loss of Family and Patria

Immigrant youth and their families are transformed through the process of migration. Often families migrate in a stepwise pattern, with one or more family members migrating to the host country to establish themselves. Through *remittances*, financial support sent to family members in their country of origin, relatives pave the way for others to follow, thus creating migrant social networks (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008). Due to this migratory process, families often endure long separations that may cause two sets of disruptions in emotional attachments of children, first from their migrating parent(s) and then from their surrogate caregivers.

Suárez-Orozco and colleagues (2002) conducted a mixed-methods study that explored the adaptations of newly arrived immigrant youth coming from Central America, China, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Mexico. Of 385 youth interviewed, 85 percent reported being separated from one or both parents during the process of migration. In the interviews of Central American children, 49 percent reported that their maternal separation lasted more than five years. Additionally, the authors found that children who were separated from their parents were more likely to report depressive symptoms than their peers who migrated alongside their parents.

Separation from important attachment figures such as parents or other caregivers creates a sense of loss and grief that is unresolved and rarely acknowledged. The unique experience of unaccompanied minors is fraught with disenfranchised grief, defined by Doka (1989) as grief experiences that are not openly acknowledged or socially supported. Along with the physical losses of family, unaccompanied minors also experience feeling homesick, a loss of patria, as they leave behind their homeland, culture, familiar places, and the home of their ancestors (Perez & Arnold-Berkovits, 2018). These losses are not clear-cut and leave unaccompanied minors struggling with the ambiguous nature of their migratory grief.

Boss's (1999) concept of ambiguous loss offers a theoretical framework to understand these losses that lead to migratory grief in

immigrant families. She defines two distinct types of ambiguous loss. Ambiguous loss type 1 involves a person who is physically absent yet psychologically present. Examples can be a parent or caretaker who is absent due to incarceration, deployment, or migration. Type 2 involves a person who is psychologically absent yet physically present, such as people with Alzheimer's disease, addiction, and chronic mental illnesses. Although immigrant families can experience what Boss (1999) refers to as a *crossover*, containing elements of both types of ambiguous loss, this article focuses on type 1 loss due to its prevalence in migratory grief. Because of the absence of closure or resolution of grief, Boss (1999) described type 1 as a relational rupture and one of the most painful loss experiences within personal relationships.

There is a dearth of literature on ambiguous loss experienced by unaccompanied or other immigrant minors. Luster and colleagues (2008) conducted an in-depth qualitative study with ten Sudanese refugees known as the lost boys of Sudan that may provide some insight as to how ambiguous loss manifests. The lost boys were adolescents who were separated as children from their parents during a civil war in Sudan in the 1980s. The study examined how these children coped with separation and ambiguous loss while living in refugee camps. Most reported feeling frustrated about the loss of emotional support from their parents, the not knowing when they would be able to see them again, and the feeling that they were always missing something. Although the experiences of Sudanese refugees are not generalizable to unaccompanied minors from the Northern Triangle, the impact of ambiguous loss is quite similar.

More recently, Jerves and colleagues (2019) piloted a study on the effects of ambiguous loss on Latinx adolescents from transnational families whose members are separated and living in different countries for an indeterminate amount of time. The study interviewed fourteen adolescents living in Ecuador with at least one parent who migrated and asked them about their lived experiences in transnational parent-child relationships as well as ongoing parent-child separation. In the context of parental migration, adolescents' lived experiences with parent-child relationships were characterized by ambiguity, which Boss (1999) asserted could lead to *frozen grief*, in other words, a confusion that freezes the grieving process. Although this study captured the relational rupture that can occur when a child still living in his or her country of origin is separated from a parent due to migration, it is limited in that it does not capture the experiences of adolescents who have migrated to the United States.

In summary, unaccompanied minors experience many psychological and social losses in addition to trauma exposure. School social workers should keep an open mind related to grief and loss (Pataky & Parent, 2018) that is inclusive of the unique loss experiences of unaccompanied minors. Through their access to unaccompanied minors in schools, school social workers have an important opportunity to provide culturally responsive and trauma-informed direct practice that is tailored to the unique needs of this underserved student group.

Because ambiguous loss is a relational phenomenon that severs important attachments and hinders interpersonal development, *cultural brokering*, combined with evidence-based trauma-informed interventions could prove to be an effective school-based approach in alleviating the psychosocial impact of migratory grief and ambiguous loss.

An Integrative School-Based Intervention Using Cultural Brokering

Through migration, unaccompanied minors find themselves stripped of important relationships as they navigate unfamiliar social contexts (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010). The creation of support networks using a culturally informed framework promotes protective factors such as resilience and cultural identity (Simich & Mallozzi, 2015). Cultural brokering offers an adaptable scaffolding for working with unaccompanied minors. Given that schools are the first social spaces that unaccompanied minors navigate (Bal & Perzigian, 2013), school social workers serve as ideal cultural brokers. Nonetheless, a review of the literature revealed a gap in the literature related to cultural brokering and social work, rendering only one qualitative study that explores the additional role of social workers as cultural brokers.

Lindsay and colleagues (2014) examined the role of social workers as cultural brokers in pediatric rehabilitation facilities and the impact on providing care for immigrant families with a child who has a physical disability. The study highlighted the importance of social workers utilizing a cultural brokerage framework that incorporates three key requirements: self-awareness, development of an understanding of the people served and their worldview, and connection of people to community resources. Although the study focused on the role of social workers as cultural brokers in providing culturally sensitive care to immigrant families within a pediatric rehabilitation setting, it is limited in applicability to school social work practice. To date, there is no available research on school social workers as cultural brokers. Nonetheless, there is research on how

cultural brokering appears in a school setting, thus providing a framework that can be adapted by school social workers.

Currently, two studies have incorporated and examined the exclusive role of cultural brokers in educational settings. The first, a collaborative study of cultural adjustment and trauma services (CATS) by Beehler and colleagues (2012), was designed to explore multiple levels of a child's ecology through comprehensive services to immigrant youth with trauma exposure and cultural adjustment needs. This study pioneered the concept of cultural brokering within a school-based mental health context. In the CATS study, cultural brokers were paraprofessionals who served as connectors in their communities and were responsible for outreach and case management services.

Similarly, the second study conducted by Yohani (2013) described the role and activities of cultural brokers, thus supporting the analogous working definition of cultural brokering presented in the CATS study (Beehler et al., 2012). Yohani explored the roles of educational cultural brokers in Canadian schools who work with refugee children and families. Through interviews with eight cultural brokers, the study produced a working definition of cultural brokers as community representatives who provide a welcoming environment for newcomer children and their families. These cultural brokers perform microlevel tasks of assisting children's adaptation through direct contact with families, school personnel, and community and macrolevel tasks such as advocacy and raising awareness. An important limitation to both of these studies is that public schools do not typically consider cultural brokering as a full-time job, thus bolstering the suggestion that school social workers would best fit this dual role.

In summary, the review of the literature found that unaccompanied minors face an exponential risk of trauma and stressors throughout their migratory journey. Also, unaccompanied minors experience family separations and other psychosocial losses that can lead to migratory grief characterized by ambiguous loss. Cultural brokering offers a possible solution to this relational phenomenon as illustrated in the case example that follows.

Methodology

As author, I am a bilingual and bicultural school social worker and assistant director of a school-based mental health program located in a secondary high school (grades 9–12) with over 3,000 students. The high school is in the center of a small yet densely populated city that is home

to a predominantly Latinx immigrant population. Throughout my tenure in the school district, many of our immigrant newcomers have been identified as unaccompanied minors from the Northern Triangle.

This article will introduce Jaime, a composite case example of four male unaccompanied minors who were referred to our school-based program for counseling and outreach services. The composite case method blends the clinical characteristics and experiences from multiple client sources to construct a single case (Duffy, 2010). This composite case example seeks to guide school mental health practitioners working with this population in implementing an integrative school-based approach that utilizes cultural brokering. Identifying information discussed in this composite case has been altered to preserve the anonymity and confidentiality of the unaccompanied minors who make up this hypothetical case example. Dialogue represents an approximation of actual content that was recreated from memory.

Case Example

Jaime is a sixteen-year-old male who recently migrated from Honduras about five months before being enrolled as a sophomore in a public high school. When Jaime was five years old, his biological mother migrated to the United States, leaving him in the care of his maternal grandmother. Born and raised in a small city in Honduras usurped by gangs and organized crime, he experienced extreme poverty, often having to go hungry for days until his grandmother received remittances from his mother. After being threatened by a local gang when he refused recruitment, Jaime fled to the United States, forced to leave his grandmother and thirteen-year-old brother behind. He was apprehended at the U.S. border and placed in a detention facility until the ORR was able to locate a paternal aunt who agreed to become his sponsor. After many years of working alongside his grandmother at a local market, Jaime was now having to attend school in an unfamiliar place.

Phase 1: A Cultural Adjustment and Psychoeducational Group

I met Jaime on his first day of school during his English language learning (ELL) class. He was sitting quietly, tapping his pencil on the desk while the other students were laughing and talking to one another as they waited for our group to begin. His ELL teacher and I together facilitate a weekly classroom-based psychoeducational and cultural adjustment group. The group is held in the students' native language, Spanish, and focuses on cultural adjustment, migratory grief and loss, coping skills,

and other themes students identify. Cultural brokering intentionally begins at this stage to connect newcomers with similar experiences to one another in a safe setting, their classroom. Boss (2006) suggested that collaborative settings where youth can interact and set the tone for what is being discussed can lead to an understanding of loss. Peer group models like this psychoeducational group can help decrease isolation and provide a normalizing effect for immigrant youth (Pataky & Parent, 2018).

About a month after his arrival, Jaime began to participate cautiously in group discussions. Reluctant to share too much, he began to give the group a sense of who he was. One day, we began to explore the grief and loss associated with migration. Students were asked to draw or write on a poster board in response to the prompt “lo que extraño (what I miss),” an activity to identify all of the people and things they were missing. Some students drew pictures representing elements of their culture and countries of origin, family members, and other similar subjects. Jaime was very meticulous with his poster board, taking his time. A few students shared how much they missed their parents and/or caregivers back home, the community, and the familiarity of things. This invoked intense emotions among the students, creating a space that encouraged students who had initially decided not to participate to share with their peers.

After Jaime raised his hand, his peers quickly lowered their voices, and he said, “I miss home.” He shared that “home” was with his grandmother and his thirteen-year-old brother, both of whom he had left behind in Honduras. Jaime sighed and continued, “Me siento solo (I feel alone).” His peers validated and identified with his experience. Yalom and Leszcz (2005) described this group phenomenon as *universality*, which is emphasized in specialized groups of individuals for whom secrecy has been an isolating factor. The universality encouraged through group work allows students to feel less alone and more connected. For the first time since his arrival, Jaime began to connect with his new classmates. A few weeks later, Jaime’s ELL teacher referred him for individual counseling because she noticed that he appeared sad and disengaged, complained of frequent headaches, and was falling asleep during class.

Phase 2: Integrating Cultural Brokering with a Trauma-Informed Intervention

During our first individual session, it was important for me to inform Jaime that counseling at our school-based program was completely voluntary and that he could decide to accept or deny services. Allowing Jaime to decide for himself was a critical step in engaging him in the ther-

apeutic process. Jaime said, “I know you from Mrs. L’s class so I feel like I can talk to you.” This was the first sign of trust. After the first couple of sessions, it became apparent that Jaime had experienced traumatic and adverse events throughout his migratory process. Themes of grief and loss also began to emerge as we began to explore pivotal relational disruptions in his life.

Due to the complex trauma and losses experienced throughout his migratory journey, Jaime and I engaged in an integrative approach that included a culturally modified trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy (TF-CBT) in conjunction with cultural brokering. This therapy is an intensive evidence-based approach that has demonstrated efficacy in treating refugee and immigrant adolescents (Murray et al., 2008). It aims to reduce posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms in children and adolescents by incorporating the role of the caregiver and developing a child’s ability to self-regulate and utilize coping skills (Cohen & Mannarino, 2008). Cultural considerations needed to be taken into account to modify the TF-CBT approach so that it was culturally and linguistically responsive. For example, sessions were held in Jaime’s native language, Spanish. As a Latinx bilingual/bicultural clinician, it remained imperative for me to practice self-awareness; avoid biases and assumptions; and learn from Jaime about his cultural values, customs, history, and traditions.

As we progressed, Jaime began to disclose more about his mother, a topic that he refused to discuss in our earlier sessions. When speaking about his mother, Jaime expressed conflicting feelings of yearning and longing to see her someday and anger at her for abandoning him and his brother when they were so young: “She left me as a little boy and would always make promises that one day we would see each other, and I would wait for her, and wait for her, and is she around?” he asked. After sitting in silence, allowing him to breathe, I responded “Jaime, you know it’s okay to feel all these things. To feel angry, yet still long to see her.” By normalizing his ambivalent feelings of longing and anger, we were able to find coping strategies to help him when those feelings surfaced again. Boss (2006) designated normalizing ambivalence as one of the therapeutic goals necessary in helping people who are experiencing ambiguous loss.

Jaime also shared his feelings about leaving his grandmother, saying, “I abandoned her as my parents did to me.” He also expressed feeling anxious about not knowing if he would see his grandmother and brother ever again. I guided Jaime in reframing these experiences as actual losses that he was grieving. I worked on developing a safe space where he

could move from disenfranchised grief to recognizing his family separations as a loss. After recognizing this significant loss, he was able to understand why he had struggled with sleep and profound sadness since his arrival in the United States. He allowed himself to grieve.

Jaime presented with cultural adjustment issues and acculturative stressors, including the uncertainty of his immigration case; adjustment to his new living arrangement; and being in an unfamiliar home, school, and country. Although he had a complex trauma history, he was presenting with issues of grief and loss due to familial separation. However effective TF-CBT has proven to be in research and clinical practice (Beehler et al., 2012; Cohen & Mannarino, 2008; Franco, 2018), it still would not have rendered such positive outcomes if it had not been paired with cultural brokering. Connections made through cultural brokering have the transformative ability to cultivate resilience and healing that go beyond the four walls of a counseling room. Jaime worked with me to create such connections within the social contexts of family, peers, school, and community.

Family

Jaime would often share that he was living in an unfamiliar place where he did not feel at home. During one of our earlier sessions, Jaime said, "Every day I am reminded that I am no longer at home with my grandmother and my brother." He acknowledged that, although he was surrounded by kind family members, they were indeed strangers. Due to his recurrent feelings of isolation and lack of support, it was imperative to engage his paternal aunt in the therapeutic process to build an understanding of Jaime's experience and provide her with resources as well. Engaging the families in discussions about issues that affect immigrant youth can make them feel like stakeholders in the student's healing (Franco, 2018). Jaime's aunt was eager to attend the conjoint caregiver-child sessions component of TF-CBT, which helped improve their communication. Through our joint sessions, she shared with Jaime how she had also migrated to the United States by herself when she was a teenager. Through their shared experiences, they were able to build a stronger connection. Eventually, Jaime was able to identify her as a supportive person in his life.

Peers

Social relationships serve as a protective factor for Latinx immigrant high school students (Sibley & Brabeck, 2017). Jaime's first relational engagement began in his ELL class during our cultural adjustment and psy-

choeducational group. This is where he was able to align himself with other newcomers who had similar experiences and began to develop friendships. I quickly discovered through our sessions together just how much he loved *fútbol* (soccer). When we spoke about soccer, his body would prop up on the seat, his face would light up, and I could see his desire to play. In a session he said, “I used to play soccer in Honduras every day with my friends, and I miss that.” I was able to coordinate a meeting between him and the junior varsity soccer coach, an adult male who was also a bilingual teacher and a resident of the community. By becoming a part of the soccer team, Jaime was able to make new friends who shared his passion for the sport. Being able to play soccer also encouraged him to remain academically engaged. At one of our final sessions, Jaime excitedly stated, “I have met so many new friends playing what we love most, *fútbol!*”

School

Connections with caring teachers and adults in schools provide a protective factor that promotes the positive school integration of unaccompanied and other immigrant minors. Through cultural brokering, I served as a liaison and advocate for Jaime within the school, helping him navigate through his new school environment by introducing him to administrators, teachers, and his school counselor. Because of Jaime’s interrupted formal education, it was important to link him with academic support in school so that he could develop his skills. Our school-based program offered after-school tutoring and homework help. If a bilingual staff member was not available, a bilingual student was assigned to help him. On the macrolevel, school social workers can advocate for unaccompanied and other immigrant minors in the school setting to raise the visibility of these students. By hosting school events that highlight the talents and contributions of immigrant youth, we provide them with a platform to be seen and respected in their school community.

Community

School social workers need to familiarize themselves with the community and culture of the people they are serving. Through cultural brokering, school social workers should partner with local mental health agencies, colleges and universities, youth development programs, and/or faith-based organizations to collectively provide services to unaccompanied minors and their families (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010). For example, our local community college provides scholarships for undocumented immigrant students who achieve a qualifying grade point average during

high school. Opportunities such as this promote positive school and academic engagement. Furthermore, faith-based organizations, spiritual leaders, and traditional healers must be considered as sources of safety among Latinx communities (Franco, 2018). Jaime expressed the desire to find a local Catholic parish where he could go and pray for his family's safety and well-being. Although his aunt identified as Pentecostal Christian, she helped me locate a Catholic church where he could worship privately. Cultural brokering also includes connecting students to community resources that can assist with issues such as legal concerns, access to food, and medical care. Linking Jaime and his family to community supports and resources helped alleviate some of the acculturative and socioeconomic stressors they were experiencing.

From the initial session to termination, I was able to witness Jaime's resilience and growth, not only through the therapeutic alliance but through the connections made with cultural brokering. "Me siento menos solo," he said about feeling less alone. Although we were not able to address all the trauma he had been exposed to, he was able to acknowledge the ambiguous losses of his mother, grandmother, brother, and homeland.

Throughout his time in high school, he never stopped worrying about his grandmother and his brother, who eventually embarked on the same journey to the United States. Upon his brother's arrival, Jaime was able to serve as a connector and assist his brother's transition to a new environment. Although Jaime proudly graduated from high school, he maintained a low profile due to his immigration status. Like most unaccompanied minors, he risked deportation once he turned eighteen and no longer had certain legal protections (Roth & Grace, 2015). All things considered, Jaime developed meaningful relationships and *conexiones* that helped him not only to feel less alone but also to thrive amid all of the uncertainty.

Discussion

This composite case example illustrates how the ambiguous nature of migratory grief can negatively impact unaccompanied minors like Jaime. Although limited, the research indicates that family separations and concurrent losses contribute to migratory grief that is riddled with ambiguity and disruptions in relational processes (Falicov, 2002; Jerves et al., 2019; Luster et al., 2008). Jaime experienced two major disruptions in attachment, first from his parents due to their migration, and then from his grandmother, his surrogate caretaker. Jaime's longing and yearning

for his physically absent yet psychologically present family members indicate the ambiguous loss he was experiencing. By expanding their lens on grief and loss to account for the unique impact of migratory and ambiguous losses, school social workers can guide adolescents to find meaning and mastery over their grief while also helping them make social connections that foster resilience and reduce isolation. Although this article focuses on practice with unaccompanied minors, cultural brokering applies to other immigrant minors as well.

Available research on unaccompanied minors has focused on motives for migration and a myriad of adverse experiences. Much is still unknown about the post-migratory phase of unaccompanied minors after apprehension at the border (Roth & Grace, 2015). The gap in the literature emphasizes the need for longitudinal research that can examine the effectiveness of cultural brokering on various trajectories (e.g., academic, occupational, social, and health) from adolescence to adulthood. This article highlights the need and implication for research on the psychosocial effects of migratory grief and ambiguous loss on unaccompanied and other immigrant youth. Empirical research in these areas can inform the provision of services that are culturally responsive and tailored to address the needs of unaccompanied minors.

As a result of their accessibility and availability to unaccompanied minors in schools, school social workers play an instrumental role in direct practice and advocacy with this vulnerable yet resilient population. Because this is an underserved group of students who are often subjected to anti-immigrant sentiment and discrimination (Carlson et al., 2012; Simich & Mallozzi, 2015), school social workers are called to advocate for anti-oppressive, anti-racist, and culturally responsive school policies and programs that support the integration and equity of unaccompanied and other immigrant youth.

Limitations

It is important to note a few limitations of this composite case example. First, this is a hypothetical case example that draws from common qualities and experiences of a few unaccompanied minors whom I have worked with as a school social worker. This composite case example is not meant to be generalizable to all unaccompanied minors and other immigrant youth. Instead, it offers a demonstration of a culturally responsive and collectivist approach to addressing the grief and loss that unaccompanied minors and other immigrant youth may be experiencing. School social workers and other school mental health professionals who work

with unaccompanied minors can apply and modify this approach according to the needs of their students.

In addition, I am a school social worker who works for a school-based program that is not common in most secondary schools. We are grant funded to provide comprehensive services that allow for the implementation of cultural brokering through many creative avenues. Some school districts cannot financially support programs outside of academic instruction. In my district, each school has a team of social workers who are assigned to the general student population and child study team social workers who are assigned to students with special needs. In some school districts, one or two social workers may be assigned to different schools while carrying a substantial caseload that does not allow time for anything outside of case management. In other districts, the school counselor may solely be providing academic and supportive services to students.

I was able to establish a partnership with an ELL teacher who gave me access to her classroom to facilitate the cultural adjustment and psychoeducational group. This collaboration may be the exception; not all teachers and/or administrators will be open to having their instruction time interrupted. By providing professional development to administrators, supervisors, and teachers on the experiences of unaccompanied and other immigrant youth, school social workers can promote a more culturally and trauma-informed school environment for immigrant students.

Conclusion

Ambiguous loss is a relational rupture that can leave unaccompanied immigrant minors feeling disconnected and alone (Boss, 1999; Falicov, 2002). The migratory process can strip these adolescents of key relationships that are important for healthy development, ultimately causing them to be frozen in their grief. Due to fear of retribution and/or discrimination, unaccompanied minors like Jaime feel marginalized, disenfranchised, and ostracized in their new social environments. Because adolescents thrive in positive and supportive relationships with family, peers, school, and community, school social workers should engage unaccompanied minors as both cultural brokers and clinicians, forging new relationships and connections that promote resilience and healing. Further research can determine the effectiveness of cultural brokering as a component of school-based trauma- and grief-informed interventions in addressing and mitigating the effects of trauma, acculturative stress,

and ambiguous grief and loss among unaccompanied or other immigrant minors. School social workers can accompany these students out of the shadows by advocating and raising their visibility within their home, school, and community environments.

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