Research Article

A phenomenological exploration of social pedagogy in immigrant education in the United States

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Abstract

This qualitative transcendental phenomenological study explores the perceptions of students and principals regarding social pedagogy in immigrant education in the United States. Findings from 13 in-depth interviews revealed that students value teachers who persist in clarifying concepts, and tend to conform to group consensus due to language barriers. Principals stress the importance of positive teacher–student relationships but face challenges like limited time and mental-health support. The study emphasises the need for teacher preparation that integrates social pedagogical principles, particularly inclusive practices for English learners. It also calls for greater investment in school-based mental-health services. These findings underscore the role of social pedagogy in fostering a sense of belonging, emotional safety and holistic support for immigrant students navigating US schools.

Keywords social pedagogy; immigrant education; English learners; teacher–student relationships; school-based mental health

The education of immigrant students in the United States falls short if it does not empower students towards agency (Addams, 1902; Busey and Russell, 2016), as focus on academic content exclusively is insufficient (Addams, 1902; Valenzuela, 2005). A holistic approach, preparing students to interact with society and promoting active citizenship, is essential, particularly for immigrant students (Eriksson, 2010; Hernandez, 2013; Rosendal Jensen, 2013). Many immigrant students face psychological challenges (Arbona et al., 2010; Potochnick and Perreira, 2010), and holistic education helps students overcome those challenges, which result in lower living standards, academic struggles, behavioural issues and higher drop-out rates (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017; Leonardo, 2004; Nieto, 2004).

Educators should consider students' life experiences, societal systems and the impact of historical events when designing education (Hernandez, 2013; Valenzuela, 2005). Social pedagogy, which aims to empower students to become engaged citizens, offers a framework for addressing the challenges of immigrant students (Stein et al., 2017). Understanding immigrant students' perspectives is key to meeting their needs, and exploring administrators' perceptions of social pedagogy can provide deeper insight.

This qualitative transcendental phenomenological study explored immigrant students' perceptions of social pedagogical praxis within the US education system, alongside school principals' viewpoints on its implementation. This approach was chosen to allow student and principal perspectives to shape an understanding of how social pedagogy is perceived and enacted within educational contexts. Identifying the needs of a population without consulting that population is ineffectual. In taking this participant-centric approach, it was anticipated that helpful themes concerning social pedagogy within the United States would emerge.

By centring the lived experiences of immigrant students alongside the insights of school leaders, this study aims to fill a critical gap in the literature on how social pedagogy is both perceived and practised in US schools. This study opens with an examination of social pedagogy and immigration in the United States. It then outlines the methodology and presents four central research findings. The study concludes with recommendations for future action. Together, these elements offer a nuanced, practice-based perspective that can inform policy, guide educator preparation and support ongoing research on equity-focused schooling.

Social pedagogy

Holistic teaching considers both cognitive and non-cognitive aspects, addressing a child's 'head, heart, and hand' (Petrie and Moss, 2019; Rothuizen and Harbo, 2017). This holistic vision of education is powerfully illustrated in Rothuizen and Harbo's (2017) parable of a boy and his beloved cap, which contrasts how different teacher responses reflect varying views on the individual's role in society. One teacher notices the joy a cap brings to a young boy in school, recognising this small expression's emotional and personal significance. Another teacher, focused on rule enforcement, removes the cap to uphold policy, dampening both the boy's and the observing teacher's moods. This moment exemplifies a core tension in education: the conflict between prioritising compliance and honouring student well-being and individuality. Social pedagogy emphasises this tension, encouraging educators to consider the emotional and social dimensions of learning, rather than simply enforcing behavioural conformity.

Social pedagogy blends theory and practice to shape relationships between individuals and society (Ryynänen and Nivala, 2017), combining social and educational theories (Eriksson, 2013; Hämäläinen and Úcar, 2016). Within the United States, it is rooted in critical theory and progressive education, examines the causes of social issues and advocates for reform using education to promote democracy. This tension between emotional responsiveness and institutional norms resonates deeply with the work of American reformer Jane Addams, whose contributions laid the groundwork for social pedagogy. Addams believed that education should not only cultivate cognitive skills but also address the social conditions that foster individual development and active citizenship (Hämäläinen, 2013, p. 7). While social pedagogy remains 'underdeveloped' in the United States (Fox and Thiessen, 2019, p. 1), it draws heavily from Addams's work at Hull House, where she advocated for a culturally compassionate approach to educating immigrants. Shure (2024) identifies 11 dimensions of social pedagogy that can be seen in contemporary US schools, including critical reflection, student empowerment, cooperative learning and the exploration of cultural narratives.

Immigration

Issues surrounding immigration are political yet personal. Powerful political figures often decide the policies that govern the immigration process (Batalova and Mittelstadt, 2012; Kirksey, 2020). Also influential are federal immigration laws, state policy and institutional contexts (Gonzales, 2024). Their effects profoundly impact the physical, emotional, spiritual and mental well-being of those that they touch (Arbona et al., 2010; Artiga and Ubri, 2017; Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2024). Policies change as societal responses change (Massey, 1995; Stephenson, 1926), and these responses are shaped by many factors (Carranza and Harris, 2025). Historically, as the number of immigrants rises from a given area, so does fear among US-born citizens towards that group (Schuck, 2018).

A study examining US newspaper articles addressing immigration over the past decade found that issues concerning immigration are often portrayed in a negative light and may create a negative connotation in the public's eyes (Evans et al., 2025). While fear and rhetoric often influence public opinion, legal protections for immigrant children in the United States remain, ensuring their access to education regardless of immigration status.

The current laws affecting school practices are best understood in a historical context, but concisely put, all children residing within the United States are entitled to equal protection. This foundational right is currently under attack, but as of August 2025, it stands. Children cannot be denied an education regardless of birthplace, immigration status or language proficiency (Hernandez, 2013; *Lau v. Nichols*, 1974; *Plyler v. Doe*, 1982).

With the criminalisation of immigration in the 1990s (Macías-Rojas, 2018), many children and young adults found themselves at an impasse. There was no path to citizenship in the only country they knew. In response and through executive order, President Obama authorised the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) (Gonzales et al., 2014). DACA offers a means for lawful presence, though it is not a path to citizenship (Gonzales et al., 2014). This was contested during Donald Trump's first term but was ultimately upheld. During Trump's current term, within his first day of office, he 'signed 10 executive orders on immigration, all of them limiting immigration or expanding enforcement' (Chishti and Bush-Joseph, 2025). This emphasis on immigration enforcement is consistent with trends, as policy has been scaled up throughout the past three decades (Gonzales, 2024). The unknown future increases stress.

Fear of deportation is palpable among both documented and undocumented residents, exacerbating the emotional stress that they face (Arbona et al., 2010; Evans et al., 2025). One parent stated: 'Uncomfortable and unstable; we feel that in any moment a new rule could be issued leading to expelling us and sending us back' (Artiga and Ubri, 2017, p. 1). As of 2022, 89 per cent of children living in immigrant families were US citizens (Evans et al., 2025) and deeply affected by policies they do not control (Chaudry et al., 2010). These children typically receive 1.18 fewer years of education (Brabeck et al., 2014) and face more behavioural (Landale et al., 2015) and mental health (Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2024) issues. Their access to supportive resources is more limited than that of the general population (Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2024).

Children who once exhibited typical developmental behaviours now face challenges such as difficulty sleeping, eating and experiencing physical pain due to stress (Artiga and Ubri, 2017; Cavazos-Rehg et al., 2007; Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2024). Around 7 per cent of first-generation Latino adolescents show signs of depression, and 29 per cent show signs of anxiety, with depression increasing in second- and third-generation immigrants (Potochnick and Perreira, 2010). These concerns are especially problematic for a population over 70 per cent uninsured (Brabeck et al., 2014). One such outcome is cultural dissociation, or children distancing themselves from their heritage to avoid being linked to undocumented status (Dreby, 2012), a protective response observed historically (Addams, 1902).

As a result of anxiety, families in diverse settings sometimes avoid institutions that can offer mitigating support (Gonzales, 2024). Adverse outcomes are likely to escalate, as people become aware of the realities of Trump's policy (Human Rights Watch, 2025). News outlets are reporting that at least three US-citizen children have been deported along with their undocumented mothers, one with cancer and without her medical equipment or medicines (Kuchar, 2025). In addition, the current administration is challenging birthright citizenship. The ongoing political and social challenges that immigrant children face underscore the need for schools not only to provide academic support but also to foster environments that address these broader emotional, psychological and legal concerns.

Contemporary education of immigrant students

Despite persistent stereotypes, immigrant families are shown to deeply value education (Evans et al., 2025). However, the optimism that often marks the beginning of their journey can shift to discouragement over time (Nieto, 2004). Although educational supports exist (Evans et al., 2025), the system as a whole still falls short of preparing immigrant students to thrive in a democratic society. Many educators recognise these shortcomings, but the way forward remains uncertain, leaving many immigrant students vulnerable (Hernandez, 2013; Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2024).

Schools across the nation adhere to what are known as 'The Lau Remedies', which are minimum requirements established by the Supreme Court, the highest court in the United States. These necessary practices include identifying language learners, assessing language ability, collecting data and implementing a results-driven programme (*Lau v. Nichols*, 1974). Van Ngo (2007) emphasises that such programmes foster academic achievement, English-language development and social integration. Considering that 25 per cent of students in the United States are part of an immigrant family (Evans et al., 2025), it is reasonable to prioritise this population.

Currently, schools in the United States seek to 'educate all the children of all the people' (Roberts and Willis, 1988, p. 1), yet students sometimes 'find themselves in an invisible curriculum denied access to the sources of understanding they need' (Fabbian and Zanotti Carney, 2018, p. 423). 'If our public schools are to uphold the right to "free and appropriate education (FAPE)" … public schools must ensure that all students can access the educational curriculum, including providing an educational environment that positively supports immigrant students' (Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2024, p. 40). Providing immigrant students with holistic schooling that validates their experiences and cultures while engaging them with their community can be considered through a social pedagogical lens.

Effective schools demonstrate authentic caring (Valenzuela, 2005), incorporate cultural diversity (Busey and Russell, 2016) and promote justice (Cammarota and Romero, 2006). They may support immigrant students by creating safe, supportive environments, such as designated spaces in case of raids (Chaudry et al., 2010) and often offer school-based mental-health services (Chaudry et al., 2010; Kataoka et al., 2003). Holistic approaches involve what Naiditch (2022) refers to as push/pull systems, in which students go out into the community and community resources come into the school. When these services are unavailable, involving church leaders or community advocates has proven beneficial (Chaudry et al., 2010; Ee and Gándara, 2019).

Methodology

This qualitative transcendental phenomenological study explored immigrant students' perceptions of social pedagogical praxis within the US education system, alongside school principals' viewpoints on its implementation. An interpretive approach was used to explore the lived experiences of immigrant students and principals concerning the research questions.

RQ1. What perceptions do students have concerning the dimensions of social pedagogy?

RQ2. What are principals' perceptions towards implementing a mobilising social pedagogical praxis? Specifically, what benefits or roadblocks do they experience?

The study followed ethical guidelines, including Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval through Arkansas State University, informed consent and assent, and confidentiality measures. An interpreter was available as needed, and discussions on documentation status were avoided. Schools, districts and participants were anonymised, with all data securely stored. Clean, verbatim transcripts were provided to participants within one week for review; no changes were suggested. Bracketing, a method of setting aside personal biases, was used throughout the study to ensure accurate representation of participant perspectives (Bednall, 2006).

A stratified, purposeful sampling strategy was employed to ensure a diverse range of experiences. This method strengthens the reliability of the findings through data triangulation by integrating perspectives from both students and principals, which provided multiple viewpoints on the same phenomenon (Noble and Heale, 2019). The sample included male and female participants from different ethnic backgrounds, school types and socio-economic statuses. Participants also represented a variety of immigration experiences and English proficiency levels. The inclusion of principals from both

high-income and low-income schools, and students from six countries with different immigration reasons, ensured diversity and broadened the scope of the study's findings. Although all participants resided in one region, this sampling approach mitigates bias.

Interview questions were designed to explore the 11 dimensions of social pedagogy, with at least one question corresponding to each dimension. These questions were tested in a pilot study to ensure that they effectively elicited responses related to social pedagogical praxis without explicitly using the term. Initial and follow-up questions were adjusted based on pilot feedback to improve clarity and ensure relevance to participants' experiences. Interviews were semi-structured, conducted face to face and recorded using a password-protected smartphone.

Meaningful statements from the interviews were extracted and coded based on the 11 dimensions of social pedagogy as outlined in Shure's (2024) study. Each transcript segment was examined for explicit references to these dimensions, with overlapping themes coded multiple times if they pertained to more than one dimension. The allocation of meaningful statements is outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Coded segments by participant type

	Students	Principals
Empower students towards agency	20	32
Problem posing	17	13
Student-centred	28	31
Explore culture narratives	33	12
Generate dialogue	19	12
Healthy relationships	27	42
Generative themes	10	11
Integration	19	27
Critical reflection	10	8
Cross-generational opportunities	2	8
Cooperative learning	21	2

Once coded, meaningful statements were broken into smaller chunks and assigned embedded codes using MAXQDA Manual (2020). Interactive quote matrices were used to identify, compare and contrast embedded codes across participants, revealing intersections of themes. In total, 925 coded segments were identified, 408 from student interviews and 517 from principal interviews. Consideration was given to the frequency with which potential themes were presented as well as the consistency across multiple participants. This volume of coded data allowed for meaningful comparison across participant groups and helped reveal recurring patterns and intersections.

Sentiment analysis was employed as a secondary method to validate emerging themes by digitally evaluating the emotional tone of participant statements. This tool helped ensure that the researcher's interpretations aligned with the affective content of the data, enhancing the credibility of the findings by cross-checking meaning with tone. Triangulation was strengthened not just through the inclusion of immigrant students and principals, but through the intentional diversity within those groups. Participants represented a range of educational settings (elementary, middle, high school and alternative programmes), home countries, immigration pathways, family structures and levels of English proficiency. This breadth allowed the study to capture a wide spectrum of experiences, adding depth to the analysis of social pedagogical praxis. By incorporating varied perspectives across cultural, linguistic and institutional contexts, the study minimised bias and revealed how social pedagogy manifests across different school environments.

Six administrators, including principals from diverse school types, were interviewed, and seven immigrant students, all of whom were born outside the United States and immigrated before the age

of 17 with plans to stay long term, were included. Table 2 provides further details on the student participants.

Table 2. Student participant information

Participant	Gender	Time since immigrating	Home country	Language proficiency	Living situation
S1	Female	4 months	Guatemala	Emerging	Extended and immediate family
S2	Male	10 years	Mexico	Proficient	Immediate family
S3	Male	4 months	Vietnam	Progressing	Extended family
S4	Female	2 years	South Korea	Progressing	Extended family
S5	Male	2 years	Honduras	Progressing	Adoptive family
S6	Female	2 years	Honduras	Progressing	Adoptive family
S7	Male	10 years	El Salvador	Proficient	Immediate family

Through this rigorous and systematic methodology, the study ensured that the voices of immigrant students and principals were captured authentically and that the interpretation of these voices was as free from researcher bias as possible. By leveraging multiple coding strategies, sentiment analysis and triangulation, this study aimed to provide valuable insights into how social pedagogy is understood and implemented in the US education system.

Findings

Four distinct themes appeared. Students establish stronger connections with teachers who demonstrate a willingness to provide clarity until an effective exchange is achieved. Additionally, students tend to conform to group consensus, a behaviour attributed to language barriers. As for principals' perceptions, there is a clear consensus regarding the importance of teachers fostering healthy relationships with their students. Nevertheless, principals grapple with constraints such as a shortage of essential resources, including mental-health professionals and time.

Research question 1

In response to this research question, 408 data points were analysed. Two themes emerged concerning student perceptions: (a) students more readily build relationships with teachers who clarify until students understand; and (b) students desire to conform to the group consensus due to language barriers.

Theme 1: effective exchange

While communication between peers varied by context, a consistent theme emerged regarding teachers and effective exchange. Students form stronger relationships with teachers who patiently clarify until students understand. Participant S1, the only student requiring an interpreter, shared that she misses school in her home country, where communication was easier because 'we all speak Spanish'. Similarly, Participant S6 appreciated her US maths teacher for speaking Spanish and offering help. While this highlights the benefits of instruction in a first language, evaluating bilingual education is beyond this study's scope. This study revealed that students value teachers who take the time to explain, whether in English or Spanish. They reported *feeling* valued in those classes.

Participants S3 and S4 particularly praised advisory teachers, who are responsible for both the academic and social aspects of the school. In some schools, advisory teachers are assigned to provide students with academic, social and emotional support beyond traditional classroom instruction, often

spending additional class time with students. 'Whenever I have any problems, she [advisory teacher] never complains and is always happy to explain' (Participant S3). Social pedagogy, as analysed by Kyriacou (2009) and Manninen et al. (2019), and contextualised within the United States by Addams (1912) and Valenzuela (2005), emphasises authentic care, acceptance, relationship-centred teaching and valuation of students.

When teachers are unwilling to explain, this hinders the development of healthy relationships. About one such teacher, Participant S5 said: 'He never helps us … when we go to him because we don't understand something.' His frustration was evident during the interview in his tone and the change in countenance when shifting from a discussion about peers to one about teachers. When speaking of peers, he lit up, mentioning playing soccer after lunch. When talking about his teachers, he spoke matter-of-factly, being sure to include that he had repeated a year of school.

Theme 2: conformity

While questions were posed to address all dimensions of social pedagogy, participants discussed specific dimensions with a higher frequency. Students were 2.5 times more likely to address cooperative learning or problem posing than principals. They often mentioned 'group work', describing projects from across content areas that required peer interaction. Students appreciated opportunities to engage with their peers but were hindered from true collaboration by a desire to conform and blend in. This tendency was primarily due to language barriers. 'I wish the school would help me learn English more … it's very difficult to communicate what I want to say' (Participant S1).

Students generally had positive views of group work, seeing it as an opportunity for deeper engagement and better understanding of the content. These group opportunities provide extra time for students to work from home, review and improve their work before submitting it, helping them demonstrate their full capabilities. One student shared that peer interactions helped her feel 'more confident' (Participant S3).

Students appreciated that, among other aspects, the opportunities to engage with peers were fun, allowed for creativity, helped create and maintain friendships and gave each student a chance to participate in a way that allows them to excel. About 'group work', Participant S4 said, 'the fun part is we're making another connection to having a conversation … and then we feel closer since we have been talking sometimes'. While principals value cooperative learning, it was the students who repeatedly brought it up, suggesting that this practice holds particular significance in their lived experiences. Their frequent references imply that cooperative learning may serve academic purposes and function as a social bridge, especially for those navigating language barriers. The fact that students drove the conversation in this direction indicates a strong internalisation of its value. On this topic, a principal offered input: 'A lot of high school teachers tend to stand and deliver and … we've got to try to get out of that. Having those cooperative groups and group dynamics in the learning is very instrumental' (Participant A6).

Simultaneously, while enjoying group work, students overwhelmingly desired to conform and blend in, with all but one of those interviewed citing this as a preference. Participant S4 explained: 'I don't speak a lot, so I always follow one of the leaders who has power, but if they [teachers] help the students who doesn't [*sic*] have a voice, then they can have confidence to speak their opinion'. Many students attributed this conformity to frustration with being misunderstood. 'If I say something, people make a face, and I have to repeat it', said one participant.

Research question 2

Findings showed that principals highly value healthy relationships between students and teachers, yet face roadblocks in taking holistic, student-centric approaches. There is a lack of mental-health professionals and time, hindering the implementation of social pedagogy.

Theme 3: healthy relationships

Though several interview questions elicited responses focusing on all 11 dimensions, principals frequently drove the conversation back to this dimension. For one principal, 53 per cent of statements

addressed building healthy relationships. On average, 30 per cent of the coded segments of principals referenced healthy relationships in some way (M = 30.0; SD = 10.8).

> When teachers have that natural desire to build those relationships, connect with kids, care about the kids, value the kids – when they care more about the kids than they do the content then students are going to learn more. (Participant A2)

When asked about staff members who value students, principals' eyes lit up. 'Oh, there are so many … most of the staff do a phenomenal job' (Participant A1). When asked to identify just one teacher, two thirds of principals instead pointed to several who consistently exceed expectations in building relationships, often describing them as 'genuine', 'caring' and capable of truly 'connecting with kids'. One principal noted, 'She's hard on them when they don't meet expectations, but she's the teacher everyone hugs in the morning' (Participant A3). When hiring, every principal more strongly considers teachers who demonstrate an ability to know and connect with students over those who excel in curriculum.

Principals value this partly due to the influence on discipline referrals, which have risen significantly post-Covid-19. 'There have been 12,500 office referrals in the district … almost one per student on average' (Participant A5). Principals noted that discipline consumes much of their day, with one principal addressing issues through a 'walk and talk' approach where he allows time to cool down before discussing the issue. This takes time. Healthy relationships between teachers and students reduce these issues, freeing up valuable resources. Students also valued healthy relationships and believed focusing on them would improve mental health. 'If we focus on having a good relationship with people, we can figure out the depression problem, and then how to get into the [*sic*] society when you grow up' (Participant S4).

Theme 4: limited resources

Intentionality is required for a student to engage fully with their peers and curriculum (Hernandez, 2013; Stein et al., 2017). Available resources facilitate this, but inadequate resources can be a roadblock. Chaudry et al. (2010) and Kataoka et al. (2003) highlight the need for mental-health professionals in schools. This limited resource, as well as time, was precisely referred to as a roadblock throughout the interviews.

An administrator who runs the district's Alternative Learning Environment, encompassing about 80 students who have not demonstrated success in the typical school setting, stated that his significant roadblock is a lack of qualified counsellors. His school does not have a school-based mental-health therapist dedicated to the students. 'I tried to show [redacted] there's a need here, but it didn't work out very well' (Participant A5). Several principals shared this frustration. Participant A4 noted that their school was assigned a provider, but she was never replaced after going on leave (Participant A4). Principals cited post-Covid-19 emotional struggles, parental follow-through issues and increased technology use as reasons for needing in-school mental-health support.

Time was the only resource mentioned more often than mental-health providers. 'Time is always the roadblock' (Participant A2). Principals felt that mandates from the Department of Education and district pacing guides for literacy and maths left little time for relationship-building practices:

> Well, it all goes back to testing scores. Everything is based on a test score. To get that score as high as possible, most people feel like the solution is to spend more time in [*sic*] that. More time in [*sic*] *that* is less time for other things. So, we're seeing a degradation in social studies which is our history and our past. Why we did what we did, so we're not learning from our mistakes. (Participant A6)

These findings highlight the central role that social pedagogical principles – particularly effective communication, relationship building and cooperative learning – play in shaping the educational experiences of immigrant students. While students emphasised the importance of clear communication and the opportunity to collaborate with peers, principals recognised the need for fostering healthy relationships despite the constraints of limited resources. These findings offer insight into how social pedagogy can be applied and enhanced within the complexities of US school systems.

Recommendations

Strong interpersonal relationships drive human behaviour (Baumeister and Leary, 1995) and help students grasp academic content and social nuances. Effective communication is essential for these relationships and requires a willingness to non-judgmentally clarify when needed. Without this, English learners may struggle to follow directions, causing a perception of defiance, leading to a cycle where the student is labelled disruptive, further hindering learning. Findings from this study reveal that students who felt teachers made an effort to clarify instructions were significantly more likely to report positive relationships with them, whereas those who felt ignored or misunderstood, like Participant S5, expressed frustration, further exacerbating the risk of being labelled disruptive. Such misunderstandings negatively impact student success (Manninen et al., 2019; Rothuizen and Harbo, 2017), and acculturative stress arises (Arbona et al., 2010). Tailored programmes exist to address this (see https://www.capturingkidshearts.org/), yet studies demonstrate little improvement (Rhea and Singh, 2020). The most vulnerable are often disproportionately affected, as was the case with the Alternative Learning Environment, which had no assigned mental-health provider.

The adverse effects can be viewed through the lens of social interactions shaping identity (Burke, 1996). Students internalise the roles assigned to them, influencing their self-perception. Data from participants such as S1, who struggled with language barriers and often conformed to group norms rather than voice their opinion, supports the theory that students' identities are shaped by the roles they are assigned due to misunderstandings and societal pressures. Repeated misunderstandings can lead to students reshaping their own views about themselves and their roles in society. Social pedagogy, which positions students as active participants in their learning and communities (Petrie and Moss, 2019), fosters empowerment. As noted by Participant A4, teachers who create inclusive, relationship-centred classrooms see a positive impact on student engagement and learning, which further supports the role of social pedagogy in empowering students: 'She has all the difficult students, and she has such a way. After they leave her room, they love to read these novels.'

Districts should train teachers in three key dimensions of social pedagogy: healthy relationships, problem posing and cooperative learning, emphasising critical analysis and reflection. In response to the findings, which highlighted that students valued teachers who could clarify and encourage participation, training should also focus on communication strategies that help teachers support students in overcoming language barriers, thus reducing the tendency to withdraw or conform. Training should begin with empowering student agency to ensure equal participation and should cover communication skills that lead to effective exchange between a teacher and their student. Because language barriers often lead immigrant students to withhold input in order to conform, training should address inclusive practices for English learners and encourage full participation.

Schools should reduce extra requirements as state and district guidelines allow, prioritise hiring mental-health professionals and offer incentives to fill these positions. The efficacy of school-based mental-health programmes has been well established for decades (Chaudry et al., 2010; Kataoka et al., 2003) and takes precedence over funding unproven programmes. The need for these services was echoed by several principals in this study, who expressed frustration at the lack of mental-health support and the strain that it placed on school resources. Immigrant students face higher rates of depression and anxiety, with some experiencing multiple forms of marginalisation, making mental-health services essential. These findings were mirrored in the experiences shared by students, like Participant S1, who reported feeling isolated and stressed.

The students in this study frequently spoke about their struggles with language barriers, and their desire for better English language support was a recurrent theme. In contrast, principals discussed the importance of overall student well-being but did not focus as much on the specific needs of English learners. Research on best practices for teaching English as second language remains mixed, partly due to inconsistent measures of programme effectiveness. National guidelines could help standardise content testing, English acquisition metrics and social-emotional assessments. However, the issue is cyclical in that federal recommendations require solid data, yet uniformity is required to gather solid data. A meta-analysis across states on language acquisition, content learning and social-emotional well-being could provide valuable insights.

Conclusion

This study examined immigrant students' and principals' views on social pedagogy, which blends social and educational theories and emphasises relationships as a key motivator in learning. Through 13 semi-structured interviews, findings revealed that students value teachers who persist in clarifying concepts, but they also tend to conform to group consensus due to language barriers. Principals stress the importance of positive teacher–student relationships but face challenges like limited time and mental-health support.

These findings align with prior research on immigrant student challenges and suggest the need for specialised educator training and increased school-based mental-health support. Ultimately, the story of the boy and his cap from earlier serves as a reminder. With a little creative licence, let us consider the story with a twist. Miguel wore his cap proudly, a symbol of his connection to his culture and his uncle who gave it to him before his journey to the United States. Unaware of any rule prohibiting hats, his focus was on navigating the lunch queue and blending in. One teacher saw his cap as a violation of school rules, demanding he remove it without conversation, singling Miguel out for negative reasons. Another teacher took a different approach, waiting until Miguel was fed before gently discussing US school norms regarding caps, while prioritising Miguel's sense of belonging and safety. This interaction reflects the importance of relationship building and understanding, key themes in this study, where communication and empathy foster student engagement and success.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Arkansas State University (#FY22-23-247). All data were anonymised and securely stored to protect participant confidentiality.

Consent for publication statement

Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study, including school principals and the legal guardians of student participants. Assent was also obtained from the students themselves prior to data collection.

Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares that there is no conflicts of interest. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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