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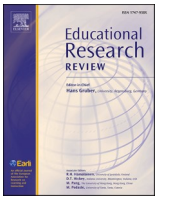

Education of unaccompanied refugee minors in high-income countries: Risk and resilience factors

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ABSTRACT

Record numbers of unaccompanied refugee minors continue to arrive in high-income countries seeking asylum and protection. Despite receiving educational support, unaccompanied refugee minors continue to be vulnerable to negative educational experiences and outcomes. The review investigates what resilience factors enable unaccompanied refugee minors in high-income countries to have positive educational experiences and outcomes. It aims to inform the literature on risk and resilience factors and the development of future interventions. Eighteen articles met the eligibility criteria for the review. Twenty-six factors were identified as risk and resilience factors related to five socio-ecological levels: child, microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. The findings revealed significant heterogeneity. Microsystemic and mesosystemic factors were found to play the most important role in educational resilience. Meanwhile, young mothers, minors who experienced immigration detention, and minors whose immigration statuses are unknown or pending are sub-groups of unaccompanied refugee minors who are particularly vulnerable to risk. Findings are discussed with implications for future research, policy, and practice. Future studies need to elaborate whether their findings are particular to the condition of being unaccompanied or being refugee.

Between 2010 and 2020, countries in Europe received 314,315 asylum applications from minors who arrived unaccompanied (European Statistical Office, 2021). Adverse events in their home communities forced such youth to have their education disrupted and undergo challenging and dangerous journeys in pursuit of safety, stability, and protection (Chase, 2010; Kohli, 2006). However, reaching their intended destination and finally requesting refuge and humanitarian protection does not offer a resolution for unaccompanied refugee minors. Unaccompanied refugee minors often experience a variety of challenges ranging from racist and discriminatory abuse to complex immigration and legal bureaucracies which have systematically disrupted or prevented their access to education. Nevertheless, several qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies have uncovered various resilience factors that empower unaccompanied refugee minors in various high-income countries to achieve positive educational experiences and outcomes despite the adverse events they often experience in host countries. Through a systematic mixed-methods review, this study was able to uncover 26 such risk and resilience factors impacting the education of unaccompanied refugee minors across five socio-ecological levels: child, microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. Identifying risk and resilience factors for education across contexts is necessary for informing future directions in research, policy, and practice concerning the education and social care of unaccompanied refugee minors.

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1. Literature review

1.1. Conceptualizing unaccompanied refugee minors

Conceptualization of 'unaccompanied refugee minor' used in this review is rooted in international legal frameworks around what defines an unaccompanied child and a refugee child. Incorporating both definitions are important for fully comprehending the double layer of risk and vulnerability attributed to being an unaccompanied child and being a refugee child. On being unaccompanied, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2005) defined unaccompanied status as having been "separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so" (CRC/GC/2005/6, para. 7). The committee clarifies being separated as being "separated from both parents, or from their previous legal or customary primary caregiver, but not necessarily from other relatives. These may, therefore, include children accompanied by other adult family members" (CRC/GC/2005/6, para. 8).

On being refugee, the Refugees Convention (United Nations General Assembly, 1951), ratified by 146 countries, and the Refugee Protocol (United Nations General Assembly, 1967), ratified by 147 countries, defined refugee status as:

Owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. (1951 Refugee Convention, art. 1, para. A.2; 1967 Refugee Protocol, art. 1, para. 2).

The review also includes asylum-seekers as refugees to be in line with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2006). These definitions form the basis for determining unaccompanied refugee minors in international law. However, frameworks for refugee status determination differ by country, leading unaccompanied minors to undergo difficult and uncertain bureaucratic processes (Zetter, 1991, 2007).

1.2. Education of unaccompanied refugee minors

According to a systematic review on the mental health of displaced and refugee children resettled in high-income countries, being unaccompanied on entry to a new country puts the child at the risk of negative mental health outcomes (Fazel et al., 2012). However, there has not yet been a systematic review that exclusively examines the educational outcomes of unaccompanied minors. Given rising interest in the pathways of unaccompanied refugee minors after settlement, investigation of both educational outcomes and various risk and resilience factors appeared in several reviews. One systematic review examining the impact of accommodation placement type on the educational outcomes of unaccompanied refugee minors in high-income countries found through qualitative synthesis that living in foster care, particularly same-ethnic foster care, contributed to better educational outcomes than living alone or in large-scale detention centers (O'Higgins et al., 2018). Another systematic review examining the risk and protective factors of mental health in unaccompanied minor refugees in high-income countries reported through qualitative synthesis that having a low level of education or a school diploma as the highest educational qualification was the most frequently investigated educational risk factor for poor mental health (Höhne et al., 2020). They also reported that being in a safe and supportive school environment was the most reliable educational protective factor for unaccompanied refugee minors in deterring poor mental health outcomes.

There has only been one systematic review on the resilience of unaccompanied refugee minors conducted by Mitra and Hodes (2019). However, the study only examined psychological resilience and reviewed only quantitative studies, and there is yet to be a review that specifically examined the educational resilience of unaccompanied refugee minors. Given the increasing need and heterogeneity of both current and former unaccompanied refugee minors, there is a growing need for evidence to understand the impact of different resilience factors on their educational success. Moreover, refugee and migrant support services invest heavily in the provision of quality educational programming for unaccompanied refugee children in their care. The present review seeks to complement and further the existing evidence by identifying and reviewing predictors of educational outcomes for unaccompanied refugee children. In so doing, it extends the findings from reviews on the educational success gap between unaccompanied refugee minors and their peers, such as those mentioned above, as well as providing information on their resilience and risk factors.

1.3. Conceptualizing educational resilience

It is not uncommon for practitioners and policymaker to confuse resilience as being an internal trait or characteristic of the child, and develop programs and activities based on this misuse of terminology (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). This necessitates an operational conceptualization of educational resilience that is applicable to educational and social policy and interventions to inform this review. As a starting point, this review endorses Rutter (2006) and Masten (2014) who define resilience as not the result of an internal trait or characteristic of the individual, but rather, in relation to adverse childhood experiences, stem from positive outcomes. Ungar (2008) further shifts the concept away from the child and to the child's socio-ecological system, stating that resilience is both a process of navigation towards positive outcomes and a process of negotiation with the wider system (e.g. parents, teachers, community, society) to achieve those outcomes. Taking from these conceptualizations, this review defines educational resilience as the exhibition of positive educational experiences and outcomes despite exposure to risk (Masten, 2014; Rutter, 2006). Educational resilience is also the result of a dynamic interactive engagement between the child and their immediate environment and is specific to the socio-ecological context of the child (Ungar, 2008).

In addition to educational resilience itself, this review aims to determine which internal and external factors function as risk or resilience factors for the education of unaccompanied refugee minors. To adequately determine this, It is important to first note that risk factors and resilience factors function differently according to the child's socio-ecological context. Risk factors, commonly associated with negative experiences and outcomes, must be seen as contextually specific, constructed, and indefinite across populations, while resilience factors, commonly associated with positive experiences and outcomes, must be seen as multidimensional, unique to each context, and predict experiences and outcomes as defined by the child and their immediate ecosystem (Sameroff, 2006; Ungar, 2004). This review relates the child's exposure to risk and resilience closely to characteristics of their immediate microsystem shaped by the wider macrosystem, and concerns an interaction of the child with the wider ecosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000).

2. Methods

This systematic mixed-methods review followed a concurrent parallel design where quantitative and qualitative data from eligible studies are extracted, transformed, and analyzed separately, then synthesized together for interpretation (Nye et al., 2016). The eligibility criteria and the selection process were predetermined into a protocol, which has been registered and published on International Database of Education Systematic Reviews under the reference IDESR000002 (Aleghfeli & Hunt, 2021). Documentation of the review process was completed in accordance with PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines (Shamseer et al., 2015). Details of the eligible studies including study participants, country of origin, country of settlement, sample sizes, age range of participants, study methodologies, factors identified, and outcomes examined are available in Appendix A.

2.1. Information sources

Twelve bibliographic resources were searched to identify peer-reviewed journal articles and grey literature in English (or any other language, provided that an adequate translation could be obtained), set in high-income countries (World Bank, 2021), and published between 2000 and 2020. This timeframe was intended to contextualize the review around recent migrant trends (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2021). The resources were EBSCOhost, Elsevier SCOPUS, Google Scholar, Informit, Microsoft Academic, ProQuest, SAGE Journals, Taylor & Francis Online, Ovid, PubMed Central, Web of Science, and Wiley Online Library. For studies in languages other than English, the authors of those studies were contacted for an English translation. Fig. 1 displays the flow diagram for the study selection process according to the PRISMA guidelines (Shamseer et al., 2015).

2.2. Outcomes

The review captures educational outcomes. After an initial piloting of the search strategy, the review defined educational outcomes to include, educational attainment (e.g., graduation rates, retention rates), academic competency (e.g., test scores, exam results, grade point averages), language and literacy (e.g., first language acquisition, second language acquisition, reading levels, writing levels), school enrollment (e.g., enrollment, disenrollment, dropping out), and school attendance (e.g., attendance rates, absenteeism, skipping school). The review additionally captures minors' educational experience of navigating towards positive educational outcomes and negotiating with the wider ecosystem for positive educational outcomes (Ungar, 2008). The results section reports findings on both outcomes and experiences towards those outcomes.

2.3. Search strategy

The following search terms were used in each database: (Unaccompanied) AND (Refugee* OR Asylum-seek* OR "Asylum seek*" OR "Displaced person" OR "Forced ADJ4 migrant*" OR "Independent child migrant*" OR "Independent migrant child*") AND (Child* OR Kid* OR "Young person" OR "Young people" OR Youth OR Adolescent* OR Minor* OR Teenage*) AND (Resilien*). To maximize search sensitivity, the authors opted against specifying terms relating to educational outcomes. Moreover, all searches were conducted to cover full texts rather than abstracts only. To ensure literature saturation, reference lists of eligible studies were also manually searched for relevant studies not found in the systematic search. The search record, including a full list of search terms and the combinations of terms used for each database, is available in Appendix B.

2.4. Screening

The systematic search returned 4451 publications, that were deduplicated on Mendeley and Rayyan, leading to 3596 studies. After title and abstract screening, where the two authors independently screened each title and abstract, then resolved discrepancies through regular discussion, 205 studies remained. After full text screening, where the two authors independently screened each text, then resolved discrepancies through regular discussion, 18 studies remained. Each study underwent a critical appraisal process using the CASP (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme) checklists (2018) to assess for risk of bias, trustworthiness, and methodological quality. The authors appraised each study independently, using the relevant checklist, then resolved any discrepancies through discussion. Results of the critical appraisal process is available in Appendix C.

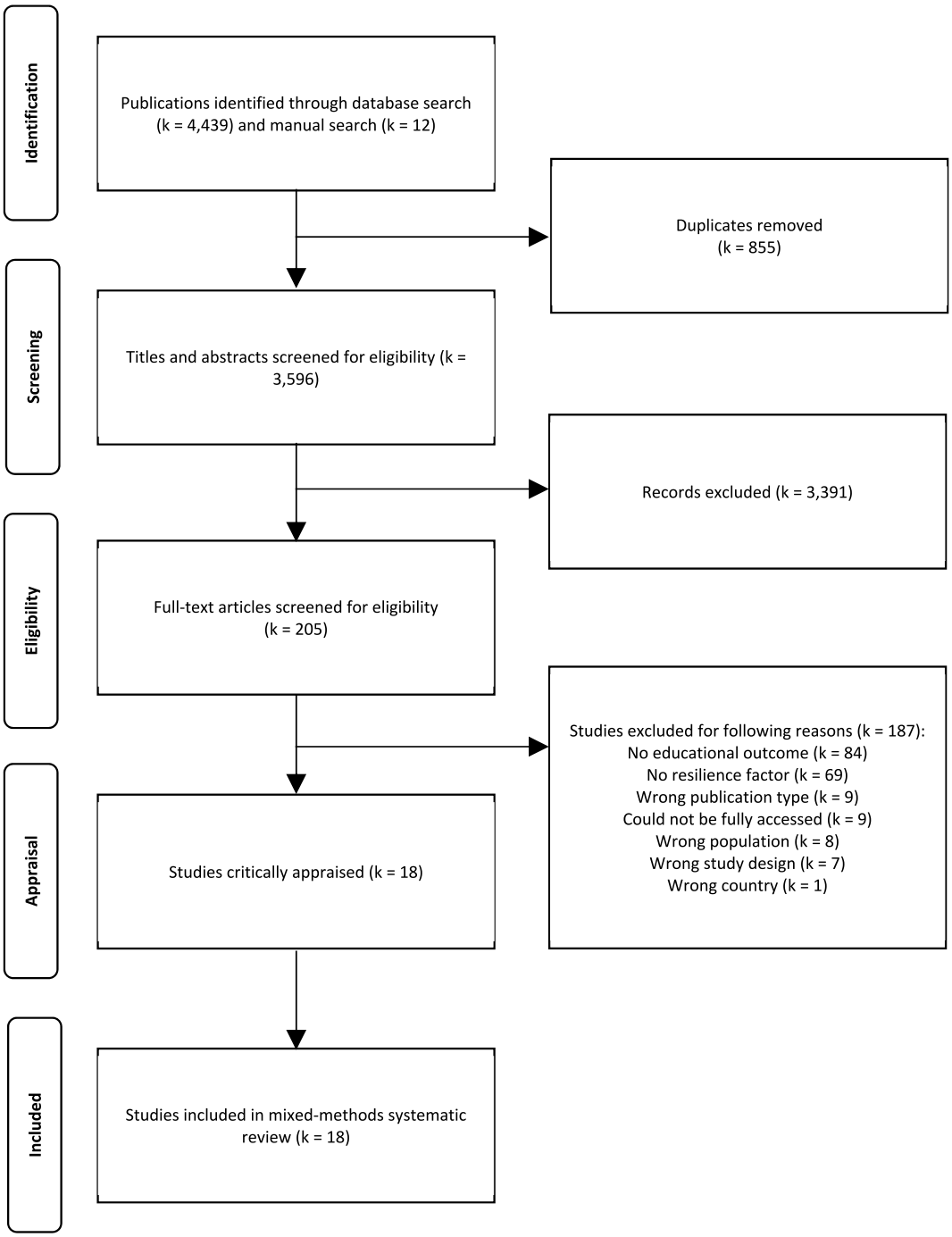

Fig. 1. PRISMA flow diagram for the study selection process.

2.5. Analysis

The eligible studies underwent qualitative meta-integration to allow for comparability (Frantzen & Fetters, 2016; Onwuegbuzie & Combs, 2010), transforming the quantitative data to a qualitative format (QUAN→QUAL), while the qualitative data remained the same (QUAL=QUAL). Both types of data (QUAN→QUAL and QUAL=QUAL) were, then, grouped together for analysis using the meta-ethnographic approach, characterized by line-of-argument synthesis and third-order interpretation (Noblit & Hare, 1988; Nye et al., 2016). Both processes took place on NVivo 12, where each author coded each study independently, then resolved any discrepancies through discussion. The final codes were organized into elements functioning as risk or resilience factors to the education of unaccompanied refugee minors. If the finding resulted in a negative educational outcome, it was deemed a risk factor. If the finding resulted in a positive educational outcome, it was deemed a resilience factor. Each factor was assessed for quality using the GRADE-CERQual 'confidence in the cumulative evidence' assessment (Lewin et al., 2015) and, finally, given a confidence rating of very high, high, medium, or low.

The socio-ecological framework provides an ideal theoretical framework for understanding the educational resilience of unaccompanied refugee minors in a cross-cultural, cross-contextual, and systematic way. Accordingly, the review utilized the Ecological Systems Theory by Bronfenbrenner (1977) to examine the emerging risk and resilience factors. Bronfenbrenner's model envisions human development to occur in an ecosystem with the child at the center composed of: 1) the Microsystem, the complex relationships and physical settings experienced by the child; 2) the Mesosystem, the interrelations between the microsystems; 3) the Exosystem, the formal and informal social structures that do not contain but may directly influence the child; and, 4) the Macrosystem, the socio-cultural and socio-economic norms that shape and influence the various systems around the child. Fig. 2 illustrates the risk and resilience factors identified by the review.

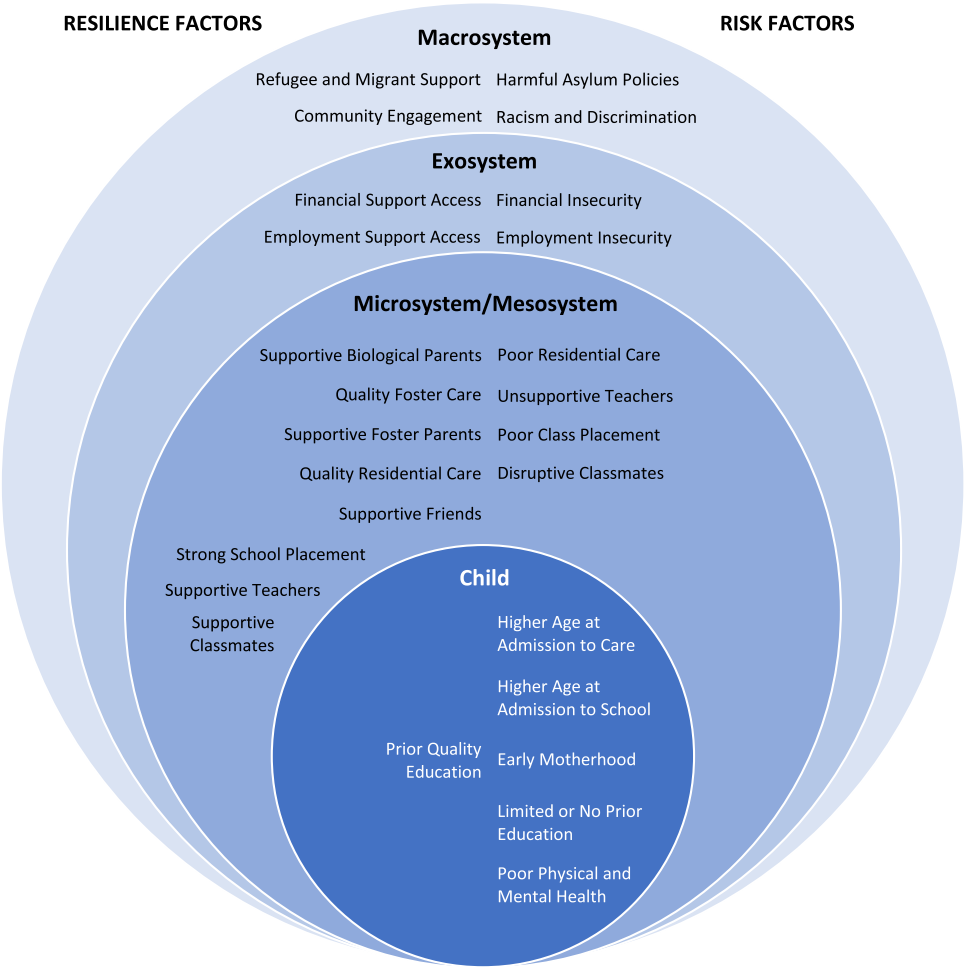

Fig. 2. Resilience and Risk Factors of education among unaccompanied refugee minors.

3. Critical appraisal of eligible studies

The final 18 eligible studies included in the review were 14 journal articles and 4 doctoral theses and dissertations (Abunimah & Blower, 2010; Auger-Voyer et al., 2014; Aytar & Brunnberg, 2016; Bitzi & Landolt, 2017; Çelikaksoy & Wadensjö, 2019; Crea et al., 2018; Doggett, 2012; Evans et al., 2018; Farmbrough, 2014; Ghaeminia et al., 2017; Lee, 2012; Luster et al., 2010; Macciomei, 2017; O'Higgins, 2018; Pastoor, 2017; Peña et al., 2018; Rana et al., 2011; Rania et al., 2014). The studies were from 9 high-income countries: Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the UK, and the US (World Bank, 2021), and the cumulative sample of participants is 23,498 unaccompanied refugee minors. All studies have been critically appraised for risk of bias, trustworthiness and methodological quality using Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (2021), with each study assessed based on their methodological characteristics by the appropriate checklist. Results of the critical appraisal process is available in Appendix C.

Eight studies used quantitative methods, three studies were longitudinal, and five studies were cross-sectional. Three studies used primary survey data self-reported by the child participant while five studies used secondary administrative data. Self-reported survey data can be more susceptible to measurement error than administrative data, due to potential issues of social desirability bias, meaning when the child responds to survey questions in a manner that is socially acceptable by others (Krumpal, 2013), and recall bias, meaning when the child is unable to remember past events or experiences accurately (Bell et al., 2019). However, administrative data may be more susceptible to other potential issues such as missingness, where the rate of missing data results in biased estimates of parameters (Peugh & Enders, 2004). In terms of quantitative analytical approaches, four studies used regression analyses (linear regression, logistical regression, probit modelling, and fixed-effects multilevel modelling), with only one of these using interaction analysis. Other approaches pursued were ANOVA analyses, correlation analysis, chi-square analysis, independent sample t-tests, and cluster analysis. Only two studies compared the outcomes of unaccompanied refugee minors with the outcomes of accompanied refugee minors, enabling them to identify findings particular to the condition of being unaccompanied refugee minors, and not a condition of being refugees.

Fourteen studies used qualitative methods, with a range of designs including ethnographic approaches, case studies, grounded theory, phenomenology, narrative inquiry, qualitative program evaluation, and life story interviews. Only three studies either did not specify the design or simply referred to it as 'qualitative research'. Data collection involved the use of interviews, participant observation, focus groups, photo elicitation, and social work case files. Majority of studies used purposive sampling, while a minority used snowball and representative sampling. Also, it was unclear whether each study's findings were particular to the condition of being unaccompanied refugee minors, or a condition of being refugees. Due to its socially constructed nature, research findings are often subconsciously susceptible to the researcher's preconceived beliefs, ideas, and experiences. Such biases prompt questions of whose authority, style and voice are being represented in the findings. Accordingly, critical self-reflection in the form of reflexivity, especially when studying refugee child populations, becomes a necessity (Attia & Edge, 2017). Only four qualitative studies were determined to be transparent and critically reflexive about how the researcher's identity and positionality may have influenced the relationship between the researcher and participants. For example, Ghaeminia et al. (2017) relayed that one of the authors was a former unaccompanied asylum-seeking minor themselves, even falling in the same age category as the study participants, and explained how this allowed for an empathetic ability to relate to the social and psychological realities of the participants.

4. Results

Using the socio-ecological framework, the review synthesized evidence into Bronfenbrenner's ecological system-levels (1977): the child, microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. Quality of the evidence was carefully assessed using the GRADE-CERQual assessment (Lewin et al., 2015). Results of the assessment for all factors, along with their overall confidence rating, and an explanation justifying the rating, are available in Appendix D.

4.1. Child-level factors

4.1.1. Age

Higher Age at Admission to Care as Risk Factor. Higher age at admission to care puts unaccompanied refugee minors at risk of lower educational attainment and academic competency outcomes, as well as more absences and more school changes. Among minors exiting a federally sponsored foster care program in the US, for example, each additional year of age of admission to care was significantly associated with a lower likelihood of exiting care without a high school diploma (Crea et al., 2018). Likewise, in the UK, minors who entered care at a higher age were significantly more likely to have more school changes, more absences, lower examination scores, and lower educational attainment (O'Higgins, 2018).

Higher Age at Admission to School as Risk Factor. Higher age at admission to school puts unaccompanied refugee minors at risk of lower educational attainment outcomes. In Sweden, unaccompanied refugee minors are often more likely to be in education at later ages than accompanied refugee minors and Swedish students, attributing it to unaccompanied refugee minors entering schools later, leading them to undergo different educational pathways (Çelikaksoy & Wadensjö, 2019). Higher age at admission to school often contributed to negative educational experiences as well. In Switzerland, several Afghan and Eritrean minors expressed their discomfort at being placed in classes incompatible with their age, and thus being the oldest (Bitzi & Landolt, 2017). This resulted in inconsistent attendance and wishes to disenroll from school. In Spain, Arab and African minors below 16 years old were enrolled in public schools with local Spanish peers, while those over 16 were often enrolled in vocational programs for special needs youth (Auger-Voyer et al., 2014). When comparing the two, social workers explained that minors registered in vocational programs often displayed poorer

attendance records.

4.1.2. Gender

Early Motherhood as Risk Factor. Unaccompanied refugee girls are often at greater risk of lower educational attainment outcomes. In the US, unaccompanied refugee boys exiting foster care were significantly less likely to exit care while still enrolled in K-12 education, implying boys are more likely to exit care with a high school diploma or be enrolled in college than girls (Crea et al., 2018). In Sweden, unaccompanied refugee girls in Sweden also exit education later than boys (Çelikaksoy & Wadensjö, 2019). However, one study reports different results. In Ireland, separated girls seeking asylum are often as much as likely as boys to be resilient, highly motivated to be educated, do very well in school, and become active in the community. Despite these varied results on gender, unaccompanied young refugee mothers are often vulnerable to negative educational experiences. Due to the financial burden and stress of parenting, young Sudanese mothers in the US, for example, had to reduce their secondary and tertiary education attendance (Rana et al., 2011). A few were even expelled when it was discovered that they were pregnant. In Ireland, social workers noted that girls who arrived pregnant, and were likely to be victims of sexual assault, were found to not report any good progress in school and were missing school regularly (Abunimah & Blower, 2010).

4.1.3. Education

Limited or No Prior Education as Risk Factor. Limited to no prior education often contributed to negative educational experiences. In a reception center in Spain, for example, Arab and African minors with little exposure to education in their countries of origin were often not motivated to attend school or participate in the center's educational programming, resulting in poor attendance (Auger-Voyer et al., 2014). In the UK, several Afghan minors found the school routine and expectations initially challenging due to never having been to school (Doggett, 2012). In the US, despite receiving English language instruction in refugee camps, several Sudanese minors and their foster parents reported that the initial years of schooling were challenging; especially when it came to English reading, writing, and comprehension (Luster et al., 2010; Rana et al., 2011).

Prior Quality Education as Resilience Factor. Exposure to prior quality education often contributed to positive educational experiences. In the Netherlands, several minors attributed their educational attainment to exposure to quality schooling in their countries of origin, prior to it being abruptly disrupted by war (Ghaeminia et al., 2017). In the US, foster parents of Sudanese minors noted that those who had received an education in the refugee camp often were more likely to succeed in secondary and higher education (Luster et al., 2010; Rana et al., 2011). However, several minors noted that it was common for their prior education to be ignored or dismissed by schools. In Switzerland, Afghan and Iranian minors participating in an educational program at a reception center often complained that the center did not take into consideration their prior educational knowledge when it came to their class placement (Bitzi & Landolt, 2017).

4.1.4. Health

Poor Physical and Mental Health as Risk Factor. Poor physical and mental health outcomes were found to be predictors of lower educational attainment, academic competency, and attendance outcomes. In the UK, minors with poor scores in the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, an emotional and behavioral screening questionnaire for children and young people, were significantly more likely to have more higher school absences, lower educational attainment, and lower GCSE scores (O'Higgins, 2018). In Ireland, minors who were traumatized with physical and mental health problems and in need of higher levels of support were also highly likely to miss school regularly (Abunimah & Blower, 2010). Poor mental and physical health outcomes often contributed to negative educational experiences as well. In the US, foster parents of several Sudanese minors expressed that those with mental health problems such as posttraumatic stress disorder and depression, or previous physical trauma (such as head injuries and malnutrition) were at an increased risk of failing at school, English language acquisition difficulties, or finishing high school on time (Luster et al., 2010; Rana et al., 2011). In the UK, several Afghan minors expressed that school gave them anxiety, making learning the English language initially challenging for them (Doggett, 2012).

4.2. Microsystemic and mesosystemic factors

4.2.1. Biological parents

Supportive Biological Parents as Resilience Factor. Few evidence exists on the effect of biological parents on the educational outcomes of unaccompanied refugee minors. In a homework tutoring program in Sweden, half of the participating minors attributed their school enrollment to their biological parents encouraging them to do well in school (Aytar & Brunnberg, 2016). Nevertheless, the presence of biological parents often contributed to positive educational experiences. In one high school teaching Sudanese minors in the US, several minors and their foster parents credited minors' commitment to educational attainment to the psychological presence of their biological parents (Rana et al., 2011). In the Netherlands, several minors similarly expressed gratitude to their biological parents for instilling in them strong educational values thereby enabling their educational attainment (Ghaeminia et al., 2017). In another high school teaching Central American minors in the US, several ESL (English as Second Language) teaching staff and biological parents reunited with their children found the physical presence of biological parents and their participation in school activities had a positive influence on the minors' English language acquisition (Peña et al., 2018).

4.2.2. Foster parents

Quality Foster Care as Resilience Factor. Quality foster care was found to be a strong predictor of better educational attainment,

academic competency, and school enrollment outcomes. In the US, longer periods in foster care were significantly associated with higher levels of educational attainment for minors (Crea et al., 2018). Every month in foster care was significantly associated with a lower likelihood of exiting care without a high school diploma, a greater likelihood of exiting care with a high school diploma, and a greater likelihood of exiting care while enrolled in higher education. Another study revealed that minors exiting a federally sponsored foster care program in the US were enrolled in post-secondary education at a significantly higher rate than minors who exited domestic foster care – thereby emphasizing the role of quality foster care (Evans et al., 2018). In the UK, minors in foster care were significantly more likely to have higher educational attainment and higher GCSE scores than those in other forms of care (O'Higgins, 2018). In a homework tutoring program in Sweden, half of the participating minors attributed their school enrollment to their foster parents emphasizing the importance of schoolwork (Aytar & Brunnberg, 2016).

Supportive Foster Parents as Resilience Factor. Supportive and caregiving foster parents often contributed to positive educational experiences. In the US, several Sudanese minors attributed their educational attainment and academic competency to their foster parents being supportive and caring (Rana et al., 2011). Examples included homework support and tutoring, help with school choice, transportation to school, financial assistance, educational planning and priority-setting, addressing discrimination and peer harassment, and being their advocates at school though participating in school activities. In the Netherlands, some minors indicated that their foster parents supported their educational attainment, while others noted that their foster parents were unsupportive because they did not have enough faith in them (Ghaeminia et al., 2017). Lastly, in the US, ESL (English as Second Language) teaching staff teaching Central American minors found that the support of foster families was crucial for enhancing English language acquisition (Peña et al., 2018).

4.2.3. Residential accommodation

Poor Residential Care as Risk Factor. Few evidence existed that connects residential care with negative educational attainment outcomes for unaccompanied refugee minors. In the UK, minors in residential care centers or group homes were significantly more likely to have lower educational attainment and lower GCSE scores than those in other forms of care (O'Higgins, 2018). Residential care unsupportive of educational development often contributed to negative educational experiences. Social workers in Norway noted that several minors did poorly in school or with their Norwegian language acquisition because they did not feel adequately supported in residential care centers, or that group homes were not yet recognized as formal child welfare placements (Pastoor, 2017). Lack of recognition meant that these group homes were restricted in the types of support they could offer. In the Netherlands, some minors felt demotivated and distracted from their education by co-residents who did not want to go to school (Ghaeminia et al., 2017).

Quality Residential Care as Resilience Factor. Residential care supportive of educational development often contributed to positive educational experiences. In Norway, social workers noted how residential care centers continued to support minors through activities and assets such as homework planning and support, staff members having teacher training, sports and outdoor activities, lessons on cooking and life skills, and holiday celebrations (Pastoor, 2017). At a reception center in Spain, intercultural mediators employed by the center supported Arab and African minors by acting as their cultural brokers, running individual and group tutoring sessions on Spanish literacy skills, and advising on immigration paperwork (Auger-Voyer et al., 2014). In the Netherlands, several minors felt motivated by their counsellors, whom they often saw as parental figures, and by their co-residents to go to school (Ghaeminia et al., 2017).

4.2.4. Friends and community peers

Supportive Friends as Resilience Factor. Supportive friends and community peers often contributed to positive educational experiences. In Norway, several minors spoke fondly of their Norwegian friends with whom they engaged in activities such as sports. They remarked that these friendships helped enhance their Norwegian language skills (Pastoor, 2017). In the Netherlands, several minors felt supported in their pathway to educational attainment by friendships, romantic relationships, and relationships with parents of friends, whom they viewed as parental figures (Ghaeminia et al., 2017). In the US, Sudanese minors acted as an emotional support group for each other (Rana et al., 2011). They engaged in activities such as playing sports together and motivated each other in their pathways towards educational attainment.

4.2.5. School placement

Strong School Placement as Resilience Factor. Strong school placement was found to be a strong predictor of higher educational attainment and attendance outcomes. In the UK, refugee and asylum-seeking children in care enrolled in mainstream schools have significantly higher exam scores than children in other education settings, while refugee and asylum-seeking children in care not enrolled in mainstream schools were significantly more likely to have lower educational attainment, lower GCSE scores, and are more likely to be absent from school (O'Higgins, 2018). Strong school placement often contributed to positive educational experiences as well. In the UK, several Afghan minors found being in mainstream schools a positive experience because it enabled them to learn English and gain vocational qualifications for future employment (Doggett, 2012). In Norway, however, several minors noted that non-mainstream schools were not helpful for their Norwegian language skills (Pastoor, 2017). In Switzerland, several Afghan and Eritrean minors found education at the mainstream school better than the education they received in their reception center (Bitzi & Landolt, 2017). Given the evidence, further research is required on additional school-related factors that enable minors in mainstream schools to have positive educational experiences.

4.2.6. Teachers and school staff

Supportive Teachers as Resilience Factor. Supportive teachers and school staff often contributed to positive educational

experiences. In the UK, several minors attributed their improved English to the individualized approach pursued by their ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) teachers (Farmbrough, 2014). Examples included teachers being willing to home tutor, schools placing children in small learning groups of 2–3 students, communication between teachers and social workers, and ESOL teaching staff themselves being ethnically and nationally diverse, thus enabling students to relate to their teachers. Foster parents and social workers reiterated the minors' sentiments and commended the various strategies used by ESOL teachers to facilitate their education. Examples of teaching strategies include having a sensitivity to the cultural, religious, and personal needs of the children, engaging with foster parents or social workers on children's welfare, and pursuing an individualized approach where the needs of the children are addressed individually – rather than treating them as a homogenous population. In the US, ESL teaching staff teaching Central American minors relied on an instructional strategy based on collaborative learning and an individualized approach to teaching, enabling them to group students based on language proficiency and pursue more targeted teaching (Peña et al., 2018). In the US, Sudanese minors and their foster parents praised teachers for being supportive; even going to the extent of providing extra instruction (Luster et al., 2010; Rana et al., 2011). In the Netherlands, several minors attributed their educational attainment to positive relationships they had developed with teachers, whom they considered as parental figures (Ghaeminia et al., 2017).

Unsupportive Teachers as Risk Factor. Unsupportive teachers and school staff often contributed to negative educational experiences. In the US, several Sudanese minors felt challenged by teaching styles and school materials, leading them to disenroll from school (Luster et al., 2010; Rana et al., 2011). Their foster parents expressed frustration at teachers who had low expectations of minors or conditioned their aptitude on having culture-specific knowledge in subjects such as American history or American government. In the Netherlands, several minors often felt unmotivated by their teachers in secondary vocational education and higher education, negatively impacting their Dutch language (Ghaeminia et al., 2017). In the UK, several Afghan and Iranian minors noted that their school experience was initially negative due to not being making a connection with their teachers (Doggett, 2012).

4.2.7. Class placement

Poor Class Placement as Risk Factor. Poor class placement often contributed to negative educational experiences. In the US, several Sudanese minors felt challenged in grades that were too advanced for them (Rana et al., 2011). This was because they came from academic contexts where grade placement was based on knowledge of the content area; unlike in their American schools, in which grade placement was based on age. This made their adjustment to the new educational context challenging, resulting in several minors having to repeat grades. At a reception center in Switzerland, several Afghan and Iranian minors complained that by ignoring their prior educational background, they felt misplaced in classes with other minors who were comparatively illiterate (Bitzi & Landolt, 2017). This resulted in inconsistent attendance and the minors wishing to disenroll from school. In Spain, several Arab and African minors were demotivated to attending vocational programs adapted to the needs of Spanish youth with learning impediments, thereby resulting in poor attendance records (Auger-Voyer et al., 2014).

4.2.8. Classmates and school peers

Disruptive Classmates as Risk Factor. Disruptive classmates and school peers often contributed to negative educational experiences. In Switzerland, several Afghan and Eritrean minors found it challenging to establish relationships with Swiss classmates due to age differences; to the extent that one Eritrean girl expressed plans to leave school and pursue employment (Bitzi & Landolt, 2017). In the Netherlands, several minors felt demotivated by classmates who did not want to work or speak with them, making Dutch language acquisition challenging (Ghaeminia et al., 2017). Regardless, a few minors did not feel discouraged by this, as they stopped feeling estranged when they reached university. In the US, several Sudanese minors found it challenging to establish connections with school peers whom they felt were less mature or lacked the kinds of early life experiences they had faced, while others complained that disruptive classmates made it difficult for them to focus (Rana et al., 2011). The minors' foster parents similarly noted how disruptive classmates often contributed to minors' lower grades. In Spain, social workers attributed the poor attendance of Arab and African youth in vocational programs to their inability to establish relations with their Spanish peers (Auger-Voyer et al., 2014). Lastly, in the UK, several Afghan and Iranian minors noted that the inability to make friends made their school experience negative (Doggett, 2012).

Supportive Classmates as Resilience Factor. Supportive classmates and school peers often contributed to positive educational experiences. In the UK, several minors benefitted from interacting with same-age British classmates, and particularly the acquisition of appropriate English language colloquialisms and cultural communication used by their same-aged British classmates (Farmbrough, 2014). In the US, several Sudanese minors felt welcomed by their American classmates, whom they met through activities such as sports, positively influencing their school adjustment (Rana et al., 2011). In Norway, several minors attending schools with diverse ethnic populations developed positive relationships with classmates, thereby leading to positive experiences (Pastoor, 2017). In the UK, several Afghan and Iranian minors also noted that school was a positive experience because it had become a means for them to make friends, and consequently had helped to reduce the English language barrier (Doggett, 2012).

4.3. Exosystemic factors

4.3.1. Financial status

Financial Insecurity as Risk Factor. Financial insecurity put unaccompanied refugee minors at greater risk of lower educational attainment outcomes. In Sweden, unaccompanied refugee minors are often more likely to be in education at later ages than accompanied refugee minors and Swedish students due to financial limitations (Çelikaksoy & Wadensjö, 2019). Financial restraints often contributed to negative educational experiences as well. In the US, Sudanese minors and their foster parents explained how financial uncertainty forced minors, particularly young mothers, to reduce their school attendance and eventually disenroll (Luster et al., 2010;

Rana et al., 2011). In Ireland, social workers named financial restrictions as a leading cause for minors having inconsistent school attendance, dropping out of school, or having never enrolled in school in the first place (Abunimah & Blower, 2010). In Norway, one Kenyan minor explained that she was compelled to pursue part-time employment due to not having the financial resources to pay rent and being unable to receive financial help from her parents (Pastoor, 2017).

Financial Support Access as Resilience Factor. Access to financial support often contributed to positive educational experiences. In the US, several Sudanese minors and their foster parents noted how access to financial grants from the local foster care agency enabling minors to enroll in higher education (Luster et al., 2010; Rana et al., 2011). In the Netherlands, one minor revealed that financial aid from a local non-governmental organization enabled him to enroll in higher education while his asylum application was pending (Ghaeminia et al., 2017). In Italy, several minors receiving educational support from a community center noted in their feedback to the center that more work grants were needed to support their professional development (Rania et al., 2014).

4.3.2. Employment

Employment Insecurity as Risk Factor. Having career and employment insecurity often contributes to negative educational experiences. At a reception center in Spain, several Arab and African minors saw education as distracting them from employment, thereby reducing their attendance in the center's educational programing activities (Auger-Voyer et al., 2014). In Switzerland, one Eritrean girl skipped school to get to work, and planned to disenroll to find employment instead (Bitzi & Landolt, 2017). In the US, several Sudanese minors explained that working long hours to financially support relatives in Sudan took time away from their education (Luster et al., 2010).

Employment Support Access as Resilience Factor. In pursuit of economic stability, it is quite common for unaccompanied refugee minors to work and study at the same time. In Sweden, unaccompanied refugee minors are more likely to be combine their studies and work when compared to accompanied refugee minors and their Swedish peers (Çelikaksoy & Wadensjö, 2019). Career development for youth often contribute to positive educational experiences as well. At a community center in Italy, several minors reported that more personalized professional training, internships, or ways to find jobs or plan their careers could play a positive role in their educational development (Rania et al., 2014). In the UK, several Afghan minors valued completing school because it would give them vocational qualifications in areas such as nursing and mechanics (Doggett, 2012). In Norway, one Kenyan minor pursued part-time employment to improve her Norwegian language skills and become a nurse (Pastoor, 2017). In the US, several Sudanese minors saw employment as an indicator of success, inspiring them to graduate from school (Luster et al., 2010). In the Netherlands, several minors attributed their educational attainment to their ambition for a stable professional future (Ghaeminia et al., 2017).

4.4. Macrosystemic factors

4.4.1. Immigration policy

Harmful Asylum Policies as Risk Factor. Negative asylum outcomes are a predictor of lower educational attainment outcomes. In the US, minors who had obtained legal permanency (Green Card, US Citizenship) were significantly more likely to exit foster care with a high school diploma than those who had not (Crea et al., 2018). Negative asylum outcomes are often the result of harmful asylum policies, such as immigration detention. Unaccompanied refugee minors who experienced immigration detention are often at greater risk of lower educational attainment and attendance outcomes. In one high school district in the US, Central American minors who had been detained once recorded a smaller year-on-year increase in GPA and higher year-on-year increase in mean days absent (Macciomei, 2017). Unaccompanied refugee minors with pending immigration status report negative educational experiences as well. In the US, several minors were compelled to postpone schooling due to their pending immigration status (Lee, 2012). In the Netherlands, several minors without a residence permit had their school trajectory abruptly halted at the age of 18. Minors who had had their schooling disrupted often referred to those years spent out of education as their 'lost years' (Ghaeminia et al., 2017). In Ireland, social workers noted how minors waiting for their asylum application outcome often attended school less (Abunimah & Blower, 2010).

4.4.2. Racism and discrimination

Racism and Discrimination as Risk Factor. Irrespective of context, experiences of racism and discrimination at school often contributed to negatives educational experiences. This was evident in the perspectives of unaccompanied refugee minors, foster parents, and social workers. In the US, several Sudanese minors often felt harassed by their American peers for their darker skin (Rana et al., 2011). It did not matter whether they were in a majority White American school or in majority African American schools – they still experienced color-based discrimination. Foster parents similarly noted that Sudanese minors experienced harassment regularly. As their guardians, they employed several strategies to help the minors sustain their educational progress and deal with discrimination and peer harassment at school. These strategies included serving on school boards to act as their advocates, maintaining regular communication with teachers, and providing them with continued emotional support. In the Netherlands, minors often felt othered at their schools due to their skin color or poor language skills (Ghaeminia et al., 2017). In Norway, several minors craved the opportunity to be active in their schools, make friends, and improve their Norwegian language skills (Pastoor, 2017). However, minors often found it difficult to socialize with their Norwegian peers, even reporting that they avoided sitting next to them and ignored their questions. In the UK, foster parents and social workers explained how schools themselves can act as barriers to the minors' educational pathways (Farmbrough, 2014). They stated how some teachers and schools neither facilitated minors' integration nor protected them from racist bullying that, in extreme circumstances, resulted in violence and harm being inflicted on them.

4.4.3. Community resources

Refugee and Migrant Support as Resilience Factor. The presence of refugee and migrant support services often contribute to positive educational experiences. At a community center in Sweden, several minors appreciated the homework tutoring services they received, which enabled them to meet school expectations (Aytar & Brunnberg, 2016). At a community center in Italy, minors spoke positively of the educational support resources they received, such as professional training activities, indoor sports activities, and work grants (Rania et al., 2014). The adolescents also spoke highly of the educators and the fact that the community environment was supportive and caring. In the US, Sudanese unaccompanied refugee minors and their foster parents named the refugee resettlement agency as the most important source of social thanks to resources such the caseworkers who served as cultural brokers helping the minors adjust to their new life, financial support until the age of 21, financial aid grants for college tuition until the age of 23, independent living skills classes such as cooking and financial literacy, and regular tutoring services, and training for foster parents (Luster et al., 2010; Rana et al., 2011). One minor in the Netherlands explained how support from a dedicated foundation for refugee students had allowed them to continue their studies and move on to higher education, despite the fact that their asylum application was still pending (Ghaeminia et al., 2017).

Community Engagement as Resilience Factor. Community engagement and volunteering often contribute to positive educational experiences. In the Netherlands, several minors attributed completing secondary or higher education to having their sense of belonging reaffirmed through participating in activities such as volunteering work, giving back to the community, or acting as a role model for other youth (Ghaeminia et al., 2017). In Norway, several minors attributed improvements in their Norwegian language skills to their participation in volunteering and youth organizations (Pastoor, 2017). At a reception center in Spain, several Arab and African minors felt they had improved their Spanish language skills through voluntarily tutoring other youth (Auger-Voyer et al., 2014). Several unaccompanied refugee youth framed education as a means to supporting their home communities. In the US, Sudanese unaccompanied refugee minors noted that the one of the primary objectives they set for themselves upon resettling in the US was giving back and rebuilding Sudan (Luster et al., 2010). In another study, Sudanese unaccompanied refugee minors in the US attributed their educational attainment to their ambition to contributing to rebuilding their communities in Sudan (Lee, 2012).

5. Conclusion

The review made important contributions to knowledge about the educational resilience of unaccompanied refugee minors. Gaining a socio-ecological understanding of what enables educational resilience provides practitioners with a helpful conceptual framework to effectively deliver educational and social care services to unaccompanied refugee minors. Knowledge about minors' individual, home, school, and community contexts is necessary for understanding the ideal environment for enabling youth to academically thrive. The design of a sensitive search strategy allowed for a synthesis and interpretation of evidence from heterogenous methodologies, contexts, and findings. As evident from the search strategy and eligible studies, evidence on the effectiveness of educational interventions for unaccompanied refugee minors is mixed. Moreover, factors such as race, ethnicity, or pre-migration language acquisition skills were not studied. Strengthening the evidence base on risk and resilience factors in education is necessary to build better educational interventions. The specifically educational findings from this review build on the results of previous reviews on risk and resilience factors for unaccompanied refugee minors (Fazel et al., 2012; Höhne et al., 2020; O'Higgins et al., 2018), and are intended to contribute to future studies.

However, potential limitations of this review should be highlighted and carefully considered. First, generalizability of the findings is limited by the small number of countries represented in the eligible studies, with the majority coming from the US. It is also relevant to note that the US is not party to the 1951 Refugee Convention. Future systematic reviews could explore risk and resilience factors for education for unaccompanied refugee minors resettled in middle- and low-income studies to supplement and broaden the findings of this review. Second, despite the search terms being designed and piloted to maximize search sensitivity and literature saturation, it remains likely that the review did not identify all relevant studies. For example, the search strategy may have filtered out studies that did not meet the eligibility criteria but could have still reported relevant quantitative or qualitative findings related to the education of unaccompanied refugee minors.

The review findings have various implications for research on educational and social care outcomes for unaccompanied refugee minors. First, little is known about the long-term educational development of unaccompanied refugee minors after resettlement in high-income countries. As such, there is a need for longitudinal studies on the link between unaccompanied refugee minors' educational outcomes and various non-educational outcomes (such as physical health, mental health, immigration, and employment) to assess in the aggregate their level of risk and resilience (Feinstein et al., 2021). Second, it is unclear from the eligible studies whether their findings are particular to the condition of being unaccompanied refugee minors, or just a condition of being refugees. Methodological approaches such as quantitative experimental and quasi-experimental designs or qualitative comparative analysis and case selective designs that examine the educational trajectories of unaccompanied and accompanied refugee minors could address this issue. Third, the review emphasizes the important role of the microsystem and mesosystem for unaccompanied refugee minors. Future research can explore microsystem and mesosystem contexts more deeply, and how they affect the educational experiences and outcomes of unaccompanied refugee minors. Lastly, there are opportunities for future meta-analyses to investigate the relationship between one resilience or risk factor and one or more educational outcome, and for future meta-syntheses exploring how particular socio-ecological domains can affect the educational experiences of unaccompanied refugee minors.

The review reveals with very high confidence that harmful asylum policies are linked to negative educational experiences and outcomes. As such, the review authors make various recommendations for immigration policy impacting unaccompanied refugee children and youth. First, the authors believe that it is important to ensure educational access for unaccompanied refugee children and

youth whose asylum applications are pending. The evidence revealed that having access to education in the host country forcibly disrupted while their immigration status was still pending could strongly impact self-esteem and motivation for education. Such institutional responses to unaccompanied refugee minors can impact their reengagement with their continued learning (Hunt, 2021). Second, the authors believe that avoidance of immigration detention is necessary for ensuring that educational experiences do not become negative, echoing findings from other reviews revealing how detention can negatively impact mental health outcomes (Mitra & Hodes, 2019). Third, the authors believe that it is important to prioritize family reunification policies for refugees and migrants. The review reported extensive evidence on the importance of both the physical and the psychological presence of biological parents in the lives of unaccompanied refugee children and youth, echoing findings and policy implications reported by other reviews (Fazel et al., 2012).

The review findings also have various implications for practitioners supporting the education of unaccompanied refugee minors. First, the findings report evidence on the unique vulnerability of sub-groups of unaccompanied refugee minors: namely, young mothers, minors who experienced immigration detention, and minors whose immigration statuses are unknown or pending. Such evidence calls for the development and elaboration of specialized interventions and programs for these sub-groups that address their unique needs and circumstances and support them in their educational trajectories. Second, the findings identified several quantitative studies that found positive associations between effective delivery of various children and youth services (such as foster care, social work, teaching and instruction, and refugee and migrant services) and unaccompanied refugee minors' educational outcomes. Finally, the review identified cross-contextual qualitative evidence on what is perceived to be quality foster care, quality residential care, and quality teaching from the perspective of unaccompanied refugee minors, their foster parents, their social workers, and their teachers. Such evidence reaffirms the importance of considering the voice of unaccompanied refugee minors in understanding what it means to be educationally resilient (Chase, 2010; Kohli, 2006).

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Declaration of competing interest

None.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

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