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Article

Negotiating Education in an Immigration Context: Qualitative Insights into Age–Grade Mismatch and Family Cultural Capital

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Abstract: This qualitative study explores how immigrant families experience and negotiate age–grade mismatch during school enrolment and transition, and how family cultural capital shapes their ability to engage with school placement decisions. Age grade mismatch (i.e., being below age grade level) can be considered as either a technical or guardian move, but has significant social, emotional, and educational implications. The research is based on semi-structured interviews with 12 immigrant parents and young people regarding the announcement, justification, and reaction to the placement decision-making in the daily interactions of the family and school, the results of which indicate that age–grade incompatibility is widely perceived as an institutional evaluation instead of an objective adaptation, which shapes the sense of belonging, confidence, and peer relationships in children. The ability of families to challenge or make new deals on the placement decisions differed significantly and was largely connected to access to information, language assistance, social networking, and knowledge of school systems. Some families could mobilise these resources to bring about change, but in other cases, the process appeared to be fixed and intimidating. The research points to the ability of language-based tests to blur the previous education and the support systems to propagate inequalities in situations where there are no established ways of review.

Keywords: Age–Grade Mismatch; Immigrant Families; School Placement; Cultural Capital; Educational Inequality; School Belonging

1. Introduction

Migration also interferes with educative courses, yet numerous school regimes continue to use chronological age as a neutral organising principle to grade progression. That is not the neutral assumption in the context of immigrant education: age-based placement may turn into a gatekeeping mechanism that can make prior learning recognised, students be positioned as being behind and peer belonging can be maintained or broken. Quantitative evidence indicates that timing is important, but later migration age is related to lower educational attainment, but not how schools mediate migration histories into concrete placement choices, or how families accomplish and react to such choices in practice [1].

One of the mechanisms is the assessment and placement infrastructure of newcomers. According to King and Bigelow, placement tests are effective as language policy: they mediate language performance into labels of institutional categories (grade level, track, support placement), and in the process, mediate coverage of curriculum and future chances [2]. It is not that assessment is the problem, but that the treatment of language as a proxy of so-called general ability is being conducted to enable schools to justify placing students down the grade ladder and avoid the issues of validity that arise when attempting to test multilingual students with interrupted schooling or a different

schooling culture. The latest literature on migrant/refugee education sheds light on second-language testing dilemmas, of which the main problem is the danger of confusing linguistic proficiency with content knowledge, and the inability to provide assessments under fair conditions when it comes to mobile and multilingual learners [3]. Studies in European reception settings also demonstrate that tutors experience practical and theoretical dilemmas when assessment is employed both to support and to select, in particular at those moments when institutional practices put institutional efficiency, as opposed to sensitive educational backgrounds, in the forefront [4].

Nonetheless, the institutional explanations may make determinism too powerful when they see families as passive consumers of school classification. Research on migrant parenting and inequality indicates that the ability to negotiate schools is stratified along the lines of cultural capital which does not necessarily translate across borders—knowledge about school rules, confidence with professionals and the possibility of translating credentials or social status into a recognised source of power in the new system [5]. A meta-synthesis of immigrant parental involvement also suggests that structural (language barrier, lack of awareness of institutional expectations, lack of time/financial means, etc.) factors, and not lack of interest, create the so-called low involvement perceived by schools [6]. Simultaneously, qualitative research indicates that immigrant parents frequently give great educational promises, which are adopted in culturally distinct ways that might be misunderstood by the school [7].

The issue that is not yet analysed is how age–grade mismatch occurs at the intersection of (a) institutional placement regimes and (b) negotiation resources of their families that are culturally patterned. In order to fill this gap, the study makes two theoretical contributions. age–grade mismatch is theorised, first, as a negotiated institutional process and not a certain administrative result: it is constructed within tests, meetings, explanations and review practices that might either open or close channels. Second, the study prefigures the dignity loss as a psychosocial mediating variable between the placement decisions and the participation and belonging as well as (in older students) disengagement or exit thoughts. Empirical research of immigrant young people in upper-secondary systems has revealed that institutional barriers are not only perceived as a lack of support, but also as a hindrance and lack of legitimacy in schooling [8]. There is complementary evidence based on the accounts of school leaders that the language support structures have the potential to institutionalise discrimination by segregating learners and by endorsing the deficit framings [9]. Based on these arguments, the qualitative interview study analyses the perceptions of immigrant students and their families towards age–grade mismatch, their acquiescent or resistant attitudes to the placement decision-making process, and the influence of family cultural capital on the strategies available and helpful. This way, the study does not rely on the mismatch as a labelling of administrative design, but rather theorises it as a negotiated result that has long-term effects on identity, belonging, and future educational prospects.

2. Materials and Methods

The paper was based on a qualitative design, which aimed to explore the experiences, meaning, and negotiations of age–grade mismatch as experienced by immigrant families in school entry and transition. Since age–grade mismatch is both an administrative outcome of placement as well as a lived social classification (determining who belongs to which peer group, what teachers expect, and how families and schools relate), semi-structured interviews were selected to preserve both the meaning, emotions, and explanations developed by the study participants in their own words and simultaneously provide a systematic coverage of key themes [10]. It was an interpretivist-oriented study where accounts given by the participants are viewed as contextualized stories that are created in a particular institutional setting, and not as a report of facts. The reporting decisions were also consistent with the modern principles of qualitative reporting that focus on disclosure of information regarding sampling, analytic methods, and positions of the researcher [11].

2.1. Sampling and Recruitment

This research was carried out in England (United Kingdom) in a public school system that was structured in primary, secondary, and post-compulsory levels. This system of grade progression is usually age-based, that is, students are usually grouped with peers of their own age. Therefore, when assigned to a grade lower than age typical, they become socially visible and may feel over-age in comparison to other students. The research is based on the experiences in a metropolitan community in South East England where new and immigrant students come to

schools with different degrees of English, the dominant language in schools. Families with different types of migrations were included and country of origin was not considered as an analytical category to ensure confidentiality and concentrate on institutions placement processes. The first placement of newly arrived students is usually done at the time of entry or re-entry into the school through enrolment meetings and a review of documentation available, language-based assessment and/or a brief screening test. The communication of placement decisions has been made to sound as supportive and pragmatic with criteria, timing, and reassessment opportunities not necessarily discussed on a regular basis. The participants were anonymised to protect them and information about particular institutions (e.g., school names and neighbourhoods) and common system-level characteristics (school stages, age–grade norms, and common placement processes) was reported to facilitate transferability.

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling since they would be able to speak directly to the phenomenon of interest. The inclusion criteria were that the participants must be the parents or guardians of school-aged children or school-aged young people themselves, who were in immigrant families and had encountered age–grade mismatch when enrolling or re-enrolling in schools. age–grade mismatch was the term used to indicate that a child was placed at least one year below the age-typical grade or was thought of as an over-ager compared to the peers in the school-related standards. It was also necessary that the participants have the ability to participate in an interview in English whether individually or with the help of a relevant language. Community organisations that serve immigrant families (including community centres and language-support services) were used to recruit participants by using informal referral (snowball sampling) in addition to the more formal methods of recruitment, like distributing flyers to the communities where the participants were used or providing referral services to the schooling authorities, as some participants might be unwilling to engage with the researcher because of stigma or low institutional trust or because they were uncertain about the conduct of the researcher. The last sample was 12 participants who had various family migration histories, schooling disruption histories, and levels of perceived success in negotiating placement decisions. It was not aimed at statistical representativeness, but analytic range, so that one could compare it to other negotiation experience.

The sample (n = 12) was also justified with the idea of information power: under certain conditions of the specificity of the sample to the purpose of the study, the richness of the dialogue and a profound analysis of the data, it may be sufficient to conduct fewer interviews [12]. Saturation was also considered a controversial and practice-specific phenomenon by the researcher and recorded the level at which thematic patterns reached stability across interviews without being insensitive to exceptions and minority experiences [13]. Empirical research indicates that most interview studies stabilize around code and meaning patterns within similar ranges, which rely on homogeneity and ambition of analysis [14]. The recruitment process was terminated in this study because further interviews could not substantially alter the prevailing interpretive patterns as well as, nor was there enough variation to respond to the research objectives. The summary of the characteristics of the participants is provided in **Table 1**. Data collection was conducted by trained interviewers commissioned through a professional research service provider (Jubai Technology), following the study protocol.

Table 1. Characteristics of the study participants and contexts of age–grade mismatch.

Participant ID	Respondent Role	Respondent Gender	Child Age Band (Years)	School Stage	Time Since Arrival	Context of Mismatch	Mismatch Type (School Placement)	Interview Language	Recruitment Route
P1	Parent	F	12–14	Lower secondary	6–12 months	Initial enrolment	−1 grade	English	Community centre
P2	Parent	M	10–12	Primary	<6 months	Initial enrolment	−1 grade	English + support	Language service
P3	Parent	F	13–15	Lower secondary	<6 months	Initial enrolment	−1 grade	English + support	Snowball
P4	Parent	F	14–16	Lower/Upper transition	6–12 months	Re-entry	Proposed −1 → age-appropriate**	English	Community centre
P5	Parent	F	11–13	Lower secondary	1–3 years	Initial enrolment	−1 grade + regrouping	English + support	Snowball
P6	Parent	M	12–14	Lower secondary	6–12 months	Initial enrolment	−1 grade	English	Community centre
P7	Parent	F	9–11	Primary	1–3 years	Initial enrolment	−1 grade	English	Language service
P8	Parent	F	15–17	Upper secondary	6–12 months	Re-entry	−1 to −2 grades	English	Community centre
P9	Parent	M	15–17	Upper secondary	1–3 years	Re-entry	Below age-typical	English	Snowball

Table 1. *Cont.*

Participant ID	Respondent Role	Respondent Gender	Child Age Band (Years)	School Stage	Time Since Arrival	Context of Mismatch	Mismatch Type (School Placement)	Interview Language	Recruitment Route
P10	Parent	F	13–15	Lower secondary	<6 months	Initial enrolment	−1 grade	English + support	Community centre
P11	Parent	F	12–14	Lower secondary	6–12 months	Initial enrolment	−1 grade (persisting)	English + support	Snowball
P12	Parent	M	10–12	Primary	1–3 years	Initial enrolment	−1 grade + gradual adjustment	English	Language service

Note: ** indicates that the initially proposed lower-grade placement was subsequently adjusted to an age-appropriate grade.

2.2. Data Collection Procedures

The semi-structured interviews were completed by an interview guide that aimed at gathering information on the migration and school entry patterns of the participants, how the decisions of school placement were presented and justified, and the perceived consequences of over-age-at-grade among the participants, such as the sense of belonging, confidence, learning, and relations with peers. The guide also examined the family approaches to maneuvering the school system including the use of documentation, attendance of meetings, language mediating and advocacy and also what the participants thought the schools would have done differently to improve the situation of immigrant students and their families. Semi-structured interviewing was adopted to balance the relational responsiveness with methodological rigour. The interviewers were able to pursue the priorities of the participants (e.g., a particular incident with a teacher) and at the same time maintain the same level of key domains in haste with the participants [10]. The interviews were done either face to face or through secure video depending on the choice of the participants and the constraints of convenience. The interviews took approximately 30 to 45 min. Interviews were audio recorded with permission. The interviewers also made short field notes at the end of each interview, centering on contextual characteristics (e.g., emotional moments, interruptions, tone change) and developing analytic concepts.

Interviews were done in English, which is also predominant language of schooling in the field of study. In the case that the participants wanted more linguistic help, the interviews consisted of clarification and language assistance so that the participants could share their experiences smoothly. All the interviews were recorded in audio form and transcribed in English to be analyzed. In cases where participants were not using correct grammar or pauses of conversational English speech, passages in the Results have been slightly accommodated to be readable (e.g., fillers might be omitted or slight repetition might be removed) without changing the meaning or tone. There was no material content that changed. Where identifiability had to be removed by anonymisation, this is denoted by ellipses. The quotations are thus supposed to be interpreted to reflect closely the narrations of the participants, not necessarily in their pure form of speech.

Whereas there were core domains within the interview guide, the interviews were carried out in a flexible, probe-based fashion to enable the eliciting of the detailed process accounts. Contributors were prompted to recreate placement experiences in a stepwise manner (what was said in meetings, participants, actions that followed, interpreted decisions later) and so on. The subsequent questions were emotional, social as well as institutional and involved in depth the themes so that the themes were able to be brought out as the questions progressed and were not predefined. The interview guide with sample probes in their entirety is in **Appendix A**.

2.3. Transcription, Anonymisation, and Data Management

Tapes were typed word-to-word. All transcripts were anonymised during the transcription phase to protect confidentiality: names, schools, neighbourhoods, employers and other identifying information were deleted or substituted with generic descriptors (e.g., secondary school, community centre, etc.). The participants had a unique identification code (P1–P12). The information was saved in safe devices with passwords and encrypted drives that can only be used by the research bureau. Since school-placement conflicts are sensitive and may cause harm to relationships between families and schools, we chose a conservative strategy of anonymisation, focusing on the protection of participants rather than their description at a finer contextual level.

2.4. Reflexivity and Researcher Positioning

Reflexivity was discussed as an analytic practice and not a short utterance. During fieldwork and analysis, the lead researcher kept a reflexive journal of assumptions (e.g., about the meaning of fair placement), emotions in re-

sponse to narratives of stigma or bureaucracy, moments when the interviewer could have influenced the course of the narrative because of his/her prompts. This assisted in being conscious of the co-production of interpretations and also made it difficult to engage in common-sense approaches to readings that would reproduce the frames of deficit of immigrant families. Like reflexive thematic analysis, we conceptualized subjectivity as a resource (managed by transparency, memo, and active consumption of other explanations) rather than bias, which can be completely removed [15,16].

2.5. Analytic Strategy

The analysis of the data was performed with the help of reflexive thematic analysis, which was selected due to the ability to identify a patterned significance within a set of data and consider the fact that the construction of the themes is an activity built on an interpretive interaction [15,17]. Interviews followed the semi-structured guide described in Section 2.2. Inductive coding was dominant but analysis was also assisted by sensitising concepts of cultural capital and institutional recognition to aid in explaining the differences between similar family attempts achieving different results in different school experiences.

As an enhancement to the analytic integrity, the research team had an audit trail of the coding decisions, theme adjustments, and memos being developed. The interpretations were tried out through regular peer-debrief meetings where over-generalisation was interrogated and deviant or disconfirming cases were incorporated instead of being viewed as noise [18]. Instead of seeking an inter-rater so-called reliability as an indication of objectivity (not a principle of reflexive thematic analysis), team conversations were employed to further interpretive investigation and explain the construction of themes [16].

2.6. Ethical Considerations and Data Availability

All the participants gave informed consent before taking part, parental/guardian consent and young person assent were given to the participants under 18. The participants were reminded that they could skip or pull out of any question at any time they wished. Since the interview data may include identifying information of educational background and institutional criticism, complete transcripts are not accessible to the public. The manuscript displays de-identified excerpts, and additional access can be granted upon reasonable request with approval of the ethics and under the provisions of confidentiality.

3. Results

Analysis of the 12 interviews revealed five major themes about how immigrant families experienced and negotiated age–grade mismatch: (1) grade placement as a language-led classification with unclear criteria and review timelines, (2) over-age placement as stigma, dignity loss, and disrupted belonging, (3) family cultural capital and networks shaping who could negotiate decisions, (4) spillover into home life through stress, conflict, and protective silence, and (5) partial repair when schools recognise strengths and offer credible routes forward. The summary of the 5 themes of the 12 participants is also mentioned in the **Table 2** and their connections between the themes can be seen in **Figure 1**.

Table 2. Overview of themes, subthemes, and illustrative evidence from participant interviews.

Theme	Subtheme	What the Subtheme Captures	Illustrative Quote (Verbatim)	Participants Contributing (IDs)
Theme 1: Placement as language-led classification with unclear rules	1.1 “They only saw English”	English proficiency treated as a shortcut for overall ability; limited recognition of strengths in other subjects	“They put my child in a lower grade… But I felt they only saw English and decided everything from that.”	P2, P8
Theme 1: Placement as language-led classification with unclear rules	1.2 Newcomer uncertainty and early compliance	Families initially accept decisions because the system is unfamiliar and intimidating	“They did some kind of test. They asked questions. They checked English also. Then they said, ‘We will put your child in this grade.’ And I was like… okay. Because I didn’t know how it works here.”	P1, P2
Theme 1: Placement as language-led classification with unclear rules	1.3 Lack of timelines and review criteria	Families experience waiting without clear milestones; desire for predictable reassessment	“They don’t tell you clearly: ‘After three months we review,’ or ‘After one term.’ It feels like you are waiting, but you don’t know for what.”	P2, P10

Table 2. *Cont.*

Theme	Subtheme	What the Subtheme Captures	Illustrative Quote (Verbatim)	Participants Contributing (IDs)
Theme 2: Over-age placement as stigma, dignity loss, and disrupted belonging	2.1 Visibility and "not fitting in"	Children notice age difference; discomfort is social even when work is manageable	"But later my child started saying, 'I'm older than them.' Like my child noticed it. And it made my child uncomfortable."	P1, P5
Theme 2: Over-age placement as stigma, dignity loss, and disrupted belonging	2.2 Cumulative micro-interactions	Small jokes/looks accumulate into sustained harm even without "major" bullying	"Not like serious beating, no. But jokes, comments, looks… Small things, but everyday small things become big."	P11
Theme 2: Over-age placement as stigma, dignity loss, and disrupted belonging	2.3 Dignity as the condition for engagement	Dignity frames motivation; mismatch can trigger withdrawal and exit thinking	"For us, school is not only education. It is also dignity. When the child feels dignity, they study. When dignity is broken, they reject school."	P9 (also echoed by P11)
Theme 3: Cultural capital and networks shape negotiation power	3.1 Silence under low power	Parents comply because they feel unable to speak, defend, or challenge decisions	"I just kept saying 'yes, okay.'"	P3
Theme 3: Cultural capital and networks shape negotiation power	3.2 Asking for reasons and policy	Parents with confidence/skills request criteria; support can be provided without demotion	"I asked, 'What is the exact reason?' I asked, 'Is this based on age or test?' I asked, 'Can you show me the policy?'"	P4
Theme 3: Cultural capital and networks shape negotiation power	3.3 Networks as translators and "scripts"	Relatives/community help translate language and norms, reducing fear and enabling meetings	"I have an aunt here… She talked clearly… We asked school, 'Why lower grade?'"	P7 (also relates to P12's "other parents")
Theme 4: Spillover into home life through stress, conflict, and protective silence	4.1 "Catch up" pressure and family conflict	Parents impose routines; children resist because the problem is social/dignity-based, not only academic	"I made strict routine. After school, homework. No phone. Weekend, extra study."	P6
Theme 4: Spillover into home life through stress, conflict, and protective silence	4.2 Migration guilt and blame	School placement becomes a symbol of migration costs; blame intensifies family stress	"My child started saying, 'You brought me here.' That was very painful for me."	P5
Theme 4: Spillover into home life through stress, conflict, and protective silence	4.3 Delayed disclosure and "protecting" parents	Children hide distress to reduce parental burden; disclosure comes late and emotionally	"My child said, 'I don't want you to worry.' That line… it broke my heart."	P11
Theme 5: Partial repair through recognition, age-respectful supports, and clearer pathways	5.1 Recognition of strengths	Targeted recognition (e.g., subject grouping) restores confidence and counters the "lower grade" label	"They moved my child to higher group in maths. That helped my child's confidence… 'Okay, they are seeing my ability now.'"	P8 (also P5)
Theme 5: Partial repair through recognition, age-respectful supports, and clearer pathways	5.2 Recovery sequence (language → confidence → friendships)	Improvement described as gradual, relational, and time-dependent	"Slowly my child improved. First, English improved. Then confidence improved. Then my child started making one friend, then two friends. After one year, my child was much better."	P12
Theme 5: Partial repair through recognition, age-respectful supports, and clearer pathways	5.3 What families wanted from schools	Structural recommendations: proactive check-ins, clearer information, age-specific bridging routes	"Maybe give bridging classes for older students only, to catch up without shame."	P9 (also P11, P10, P12)

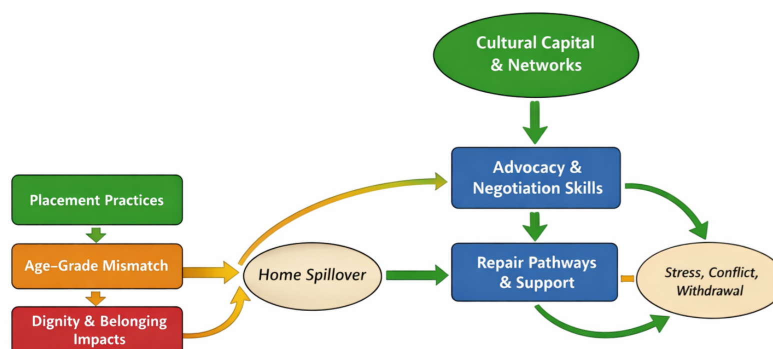

Figure 1. Conceptual links between institutional placement processes, family cultural capital, and lived consequences of age–grade mismatch.

Table 2 provides the full thematic map (themes, subthemes, and supporting excerpts); below, we highlight each theme's core analytic claim with a single illustrative quotation.

This results is structured in terms of five themes such as the way the processes of understanding placement decisions were presented in the process of enrolment (1), the way age–grade mismatch was socially and emotionally experienced (2), the way families were different in capacity to challenge decisions (4), the way that mismatch spilled to the home life (5), and the way that repairing confidence and belonging were aided (6). Themes are introduced by brief analytic propositions, and then several illustrative passages have been chosen. The thematic map has been visualised in **Figure 1**, and the rest of the themes are summarised in **Table 2** and their connection.

3.1. Theme 1: Placement Was Experienced as a Judgement about Language and "Readiness" with Unclear Rules

According to Theme 1, parents did not find the placement to be a neutral support decision; they found it the high-stakes judgement that diminished the readiness to the English performance and to short testing and provided unclear ways to review or correct it. This was relevant in that it established the subsequent experience of mismatch as something established as fixed, not easily refutable and socially relevant. Parents defined placement as a premature exposure to a new system that transformed English competence and short testing into grade decisions. Although schools tended to position placement as a pragmatic aid, parents themselves felt that it was a sweeping evaluation that was hard to challenge and hard to undo. Families kept on comparing their perception of the abilities of the children (particularly in maths, science or previous schooling) with their perception of what schools focused on at admission (English and short tests). This gave the impression that a multifaceted kid was actually narrowed down to one measure. Parents also reported of not knowing whether or not placement was temporary or basically permanent, since the review points were not clear and neither was the progress criteria.

3.1.1. Subtheme 1.1. "They Only Saw English": Language Used as a Shortcut for Overall Ability

Several parents believed the placement decision centred on English, even when the child's ability in other subjects was stronger. P8 explained:

"They put my child in a lower grade... But I felt they only saw English and decided everything from that."

P2 accepted that English mattered but worried the logic treated language as fixed and ignored the social cost of grade demotion:

"They said, 'Because of English, it will be easier.' But I was thinking... language can improve, but age is age. You can't change that."

Combined, these records indicate that parents knew English was a practical necessity, but they did not like the idea of English as the determining factor of general competence and preparedness. To parents, the major question was not whether they needed support, but why support had to be provided in the form of social demotion. The term age is represented by the way the families considered grade placement to be the status marker that continues with the child into peer relations and self-image despite the rapid improvement in language.

3.1.2. Subtheme 1.2. "I Didn't Know How It Works Here": Initial Compliance Shaped by Newcomer Uncertainty

Parents often agreed during enrolment because they lacked system knowledge. P1 recalled:

"They did some kind of test. They asked questions. They checked English also. Then they said, 'We will put your child in this grade.' And I was like... okay. Because I didn't know how it works here."

Some parents described moving from acceptance to action after speaking with others. P2 said:

"At first, yes. Because I didn't know the process. But after few days, I started thinking more. I asked other parents... Then I realised we can talk to the school, we can ask questions."

"I booked a meeting. I went to school. I tried to explain."

But respondents suggested that this education was not even: some families found the avenues to look into earlier, and some ones remained in the state of uncertainty longer and took the location as a final choice. In that regard, the first compliance was not only personal choice; the informational difference that the newcomers had at enrolment.

3.1.3. Subtheme 1.3. Waiting without Timelines: The Demand for a Review "Roadmap"

Parents repeatedly described uncertainty about whether placement would be reviewed. P2 said:

"They don't tell you clearly: 'After three months we review,' or 'After one term.' It feels like you are waiting, but you don't know for what."

P10 wanted explicit steps:

"Clear guidance. Like tell me clearly: 'If your child improves English, then this will happen.' Give a roadmap."

Throughout the interviews, there were no milestones and review criteria, which were a permanent condition of placement, particularly among the families that did not have the resources to insist on a second look. According to parents, roadmaps would be seen as an emotional stabiliser since the parents would explain that the school was anticipating improvement and had a method of acknowledging it. In the absence of that, parents said they would work harder at home or even feel powerless since they could not make the effort translate into an institutional product.

This theme helps explain why later age–grade mismatch was not interpreted by parents as "just one grade," but as a socially visible label that affected dignity and belonging (Theme 2).

3.2. Theme 2: Age–Grade Mismatch Was Lived as Stigma, Loss of Dignity, and Disrupted Belonging

Theme 2 demonstrates that being out of place was not only the main cause of the harm of mismatch, but social meaning as well. The described mechanism used by stigma and loss of dignity was mentioned by parents as a way of participation (not talking as much, not wanting to be part of groups) reduced and among older students, thoughts of withdrawal, or exit were more prevalent. Parents explained mismatch by causing embarrassment, fear of ridicule and withdrawal. Some claimed that the biggest hurt was not necessarily the job itself, and that it was the embarrassment of not being noticeably out of place in front of their colleagues. The narrations of the participants placed age as a social resource: association with peers of similar age encouraged confidence and being older generated exposure and critique. Consequently, children tended to resort to evasive ways to be not noticed, such as talking less, not working in groups, and having an emotional shutdown. Parents explained these reactions as reasonable but not lazy, and that the lack of compatibility redefined the perception of the school as a safe place.

3.2.1. Subtheme 2.1. "I'm Older than Them": Noticing Difference and Feeling Uncomfortable

P1 recalled the child recognising the mismatch:

"But later my child started saying, 'I'm older than them.' Like my child noticed it. And it made my child uncomfortable."

Peer comments intensified this. P5 said:

"Some kids made comments. Like, 'Why you are so big?' They laughed sometimes. Not every day, but enough that my child felt bad."

These stories demonstrate how disjuncture can destroy belonging despite the fact that some learning could be done. The parents reported that the child complained of being uncomfortable: the child was able to accomplish tasks but when others subjected the child to ridicule based on physical size or maturity, he would not fit well in

the social world. Notably, parents also characterized boredom as a negative event, and not a serious grievance, and work that was perceived to be too easy was not seen as a signal of being lost but as a social sign of being lost, which might escalate withdrawal and diminish motivation.

3.2.2. Subtheme 2.2. Small Daily Interactions Accumulating into a Large Burden

P11 described how minor behaviours built up:

"Not like serious beating, no. But jokes, comments, looks... Small things, but everyday small things become big."

Parents said it was hard to report, because each incident looked "small," yet the daily build-up taught children to avoid attention and stay silent.

3.2.3. Subtheme 2.3. Dignity as the Condition for Motivation, Especially for Older Students

For older adolescents, parents linked mismatch to shame and school exit thinking. P9 stated:

"For us, school is not only education. It is also dignity. When the child feels dignity, they study. When dignity is broken, they reject school."

P11 agreed:

"Yes. Age–grade mismatch is not just number. It affects dignity."

These quotes demonstrate that the misfit can cause the paths to turn not due to the impossibility of students to learn, but due to the fact that learning is socially and emotionally expensive. Parents explained that the process of dropping out of school occurred as a result of cumulative humiliation as opposed to an abrupt lack of engagement implying that saving face is at the core of retention among older newcomers.

Because mismatch was experienced as socially costly, families' outcomes depended heavily on whether they had the resources and confidence to negotiate placement and request alternatives—this is the focus of Theme 3.

3.3. Theme 3: Family Cultural Capital and Networks Shaped Who Could Negotiate Placement

Theme 3 demonstrates that not all families were equally negotiating the placement. It was not motivation that existed but access to decision: who was free to ask the correct questions, interpret reactions of schools, and attend meetings without any fear. This is one of the reasons why closely related instances of placement situation might result in quite different family trajectories. Unequal ability to challenge decisions was described in families. The factors that determined whether parents remained silent or requested policy explanations or invited mediators to the meetings were English resources, confidence, and networks. Parents insisted that negotiating placement needed to be more than a willingness, it needed knowing what language to talk in, what questions were good and how to get to meetings without fear. Within the same school system, one family might find themselves with placement that was fixed and final and another one having a placement that can be reviewed, explained and adjusted.

3.3.1. Subtheme 3.1. "I Just Kept Saying Yes": Silence under Low Power

P3 described compliance:

"I just kept saying 'yes, okay.' "

P3 linked silence to vulnerability:

"I felt... shame... because I couldn't speak. I couldn't defend my child."

Parents like P3 framed silence as a survival strategy in a high-stakes setting where they felt vulnerable. At the same time, they recognised that silence reproduced the initial decision, because the school received no signal that placement was contested.

3.3.2. Subtheme 3.2. Asking Questions and Requesting Policy

P4 described refusing immediate acceptance:

"At first, they tried to place my child one grade lower... But I didn't accept it directly. I asked questions."

The outcome was different:

"Then they agreed to place my child in the age-appropriate grade, but with extra English support."

And the child's relief was social:

"My child felt better. Like, 'Okay, I'm with people my age.' Still nervous about English, yes. But not embarrassed about being older."

Parents described this as a practical example of "support without demotion." They emphasised that asking for policy and criteria shifted the conversation from personal opinion to institutional accountability. In this framing, advocacy was not about denying language needs; it was about refusing an unnecessary dignity loss when alternative supports were possible.

3.3.3. Subtheme 3.3. Networks as Translators and "Scripts"

P7 described relying on family:

"I have an aunt here... She talked clearly... We asked school, 'Why lower grade?' "

P5 similarly used a mediator:

"Then I went to school with a family friend who speaks English better. We asked for a meeting."

Participants explained networks as carrying out three tasks concurrently as translating language, translating norms (what is appropriate to ask) and fear reduction. In some families, this assistance was what informed them to wait and not to negotiate placement.

When families could not change the school decision (or could not reduce its social costs) parents described the consequences moving into everyday home life through stress, conflict, and protective silence (Theme 4).

3.4. Theme 4: Mismatch Spilled into Home Life through Stress, Conflict, and Protective Silence

Theme 4 demonstrates that not only school-related problems but also family ones turned into a stressor. Academic pressure on parents in terms of keeping up and social/dignity related terms of the problem in children brought conflict and guilt, and delaying the expression of distress. Parents noted mismatch as reinventing routines and relationships at home especially when parents cast their side as more academic pressure where the kids cast the situation as social and dignity-related. Home in many instances emerged as a place where frustration and concern emerged as a result of school appearing to be hard to directly affect. Parents had a desire to help, however, in the absence of perceptible school routes, assistance was improvised: more rigorous routines, more reiterating counsel, or emotional confirmation. Children on the other hand transferred school stigma back into family where in some cases it became anger, silence or blame.

3.4.1. Subtheme 4.1. Pressure to "Catch Up" and Conflict over What the Real Problem Is

P6 described increasing structure:

"I made a strict routine. After school, homework. No phone. Weekend, extra study."

The child resisted the framing:

"My child said, 'You don't understand, it's not only study.'... Then we started having arguments."

According to parents such conflicts were painful because, although both sides desired improvement, there was a conflict of the problem. Punishment could do nothing to salvage the situation of being put in the younger position and strain occasionally made the child feel more humiliated. Simultaneously, parents too described themselves as just being afraid: in case the kid lagged behind, there would be a sense of insecurity in the future. This was the fear that turned the routines into being stricter, and being strict did not cure social reality of mismatch.

3.4.2. Subtheme 4.2. Migration Guilt and Blame

P5 described the child connecting school pain to the migration decision:

“My child started saying, ‘You brought me here.’ That was very painful for me.”

Parents responded with guilt and sadness, which implies that complementary incongruence can be the center of expression of more extensive migration stress. This blame was not always present, but parents termed it as emotionally high-flying since it transformed a structural issue into an answer in the family. Through this, school placement was to be used as a representation of the expenses of a fresh start: new regulations, new language, new ranks.

3.4.3. Subtheme 4.3. Delayed Disclosure and Protective Silence

P11 initially believed things were fine:

“At the start, my child said it’s okay. My child didn’t complain. My child was acting normal. So I thought everything was fine.”

Then the teacher raised concerns:

“After some months, teacher called me.”
“Teacher said my child is quiet in class, not mixing, not speaking.”

P11 recognised similar patterns at home:

“At home my child was also quiet but I thought it was just teenage.”

According to parents, this silence was protective yet expensive, as it postponed assistance and prevented adults to see distress. The motive of the child (do not worry), also re-packaged withdrawal as nurturing and not disobedience making it difficult to respond: parents felt guilty but they also realised that the child was attempting to keep them safe in her turn.

Alongside harm, parents also described conditions under which confidence and belonging could be repaired, particularly when schools recognised strengths, protected age-respect, and made pathways clearer (Theme 5).

3.5. Theme 5: Partial Repair Occurred through Recognition, Age-Respectful Supports, and Clearer Pathways

Theme 5 reveals that when support was not coupled with demotion then repair was also feasible. In parents' accounts, repair was a means of recovering face: being recognised as competent, being treated in ways that respected the age, and having clear review processes that made effort count in the institution. Though parents also reported harm, they also reported improvement where schools had identified strengths, where flexible grouping was used or when language support was not linked with grade demotion. Parents said it was possible to achieve progress when schools were responsive and when children had gained confidence in small steps once again. Notably, families did not refer to repair as a type of intervention. According to them, repair is a means of regaining dignity: having someone think of you as competent at something, being treated as old enough where the opportunity arises, and having time to make the necessary changes without being ashamed of it.

3.5.1. Subtheme 5.1. Recognition of Strengths Supported Confidence

P8 described an example of recognition:

"They moved my child to higher group in maths. That helped my child's confidence... 'Okay, they are seeing my ability now.' "

P5 described incremental adjustment:

"They did it step by step... They put my child in some higher-level groups for certain subjects. Then later they moved my child to the grade closer to age."

Parents took these changes as an indication that the school could see the kid outside English and it did not mean that the placement was forever. The recognition was not only important to learning outcomes but also to identity. In a situation that the child was being observed to excel in something, parents explained this as a way of shielding the child against internalizing the label of lower grade as a complete definition of who the child was.

3.5.2. Subtheme 5.2. Recovery as a Sequence: Language → Confidence → Friendships

P12 described improvement over time:

"Slowly, my child improved. First, English improved. Then confidence improved. Then my child started making one friend, then two friends. After one year, my child was much better."

According to the parents, this was vital since it allowed the children to feel free as learners without feeling less which contributed to perseverance in the tough early years. Confidence was not described as a personality characteristic in a number of stories but one that was created by situations: safer schools, supportive peers, and adults who helped to make errors seem natural and not shameful.

3.5.3. Subtheme 5.3. What Families Wanted from Schools: Proactive Checks and Age-Specific Pathways

P11 emphasised proactive well-being attention:

"They should check on immigrant children more."

"Not only grades—feelings."

"Because many kids will not speak."

P9 proposed an age-respectful route:

"They should have a special pathway for older immigrant students. Because putting them with much younger kids is not good."

"Maybe give bridging classes for older students only, to catch up without shame."

These recommendations are similar in their logic: families were not against language support, but it had to be the support that upheld dignity, whose criteria were clear and credible, and provided old newcomers with plausible ways ahead. To them a good system is not one that does not put children who are below age level, but one capable of explaining the placement process, reviewing it predictably and safeguarding students against the social evils that lead to silence, withdrawal and dropping out of school, which are avoidable.

Throughout the five themes, the narrative of parents follows a related line: the decision of placing children was felt as a high-stakes, uncertain experience (Theme 1) and increased the social costs of being out of age compared to peers (Theme 2). Results were then based on unequal access to decisions; who is able to negotiate and demand alternatives (Theme 3). In areas where the mismatch was not present, it spread its influence into family ties and home-based emotional state (Theme 4). Lastly, parents wrote of repair to be possible when schools integrated language support and age-respect, strength identification and predictable review pathways (Theme 5).

4. Discussion

4.1. Summary of Contributions and Main Claims

This paper has explored the experience and negotiation process of age–grade mismatch in school enrolment and transition by immigrant families and explained how cultural capital in the family impacts the ability to participate in the process of making placement decisions. The results support previous research that demonstrates that newcomer evaluation and placement could be a variant of language policy organization that organizes the access to grade-level curriculum [19]. There are two contributions that are made in the study, which are interrelated and need to be spelled out. To start with, age–grade mismatch is theorised as a negotiated institutional process, as opposed to a ratified administrative performance: it is produced through meetings, little tests, papers, informal advice and translation practices which have the capacity to open or close decision paths. Second, the study anticipates the role of place of dignity as an intervening psychosocial process within the context of relating the placement decisions to classroom participation, placement belonging, and, especially among the older students, considerations of disengagement or departure [20]. The third contribution comes as a consequence of the first two: family cultural capital acts as a decodonance, i.e., the imbalanced capacity of receiving access to decision-relevant information, posing institutionally legible questions, and creating review or alternative support [21,22]. The themes demonstrate the influence of language-as-ready, cloudy reviews, being over-age, networked advocacy, and partial repair through recognition on routes of belonging and participation.

4.2. Placement as Gatekeeping and as a Negotiated Institutional Process

In interviews, parents never talked about placement as a neutral fit choice; they talked about it as an opinion that would place English performance and short screening in one-dimensional multidimensional ability of children. This is in line with the scholarship that views assessment regimes are capable of becoming both selection devices and support devices, at the same time that it confounds linguistic proficiency with content knowledge [23]. Our findings build on this body of work by demonstrating that achieving gatekeeping can also be done via communication practices that determine what is considered evidence, who should have a right to ask questions, and whether a decision is reversible. Parents told of one-directional explanations (this is the way it is), not the dialogic justification (here are the possibilities, and why), and doubt regarding timelines to consult. This is in line with the studies done on school home communication which emphasizes mismatched expectations regarding parental system knowledge and frustrations felt and discrepancies of recognition experienced despite the intent towards cooperation [24].

The explanation of these patterns in terms of a negotiated institutional process can be used to interpret one key tension between schools viewing lower placement as defensive (time to learn English and pressure relief) and families viewing lower placement as loss (delayed development and damage to reputation). Other literature highlights a similar conflict where newcomer language program supports are found to be beneficial when acting as a bridge to grade-level learning and detrimental when acting as a holding track using poorly defined transition criteria [25]. The current research also contributes the fact that the concept of the lack of transparency is a source of injury on its own: when the families cannot see how their work is converted into the institutional acknowledgment (milestones, review dates, criteria that go beyond English), placement is seen as permanent and hard to challenge.

Relational interpretation also implies that such practices are not only interpersonal misapprehensions but are an institutional habitus, which is directed to risk management and categorisation, and that influences what schools constitute to be safe and what they constitute to be credible evidence of readiness. It is in this sense that the parents' description of previous schooling, the strengths they portrayed into the subject or how they may have advanced faster can be discounted since they cannot be easily read in the placement script.

4.3. Dignity Loss as the Psychosocial Mechanism Linking Placement to Participation and Belonging

In one of the fundamental findings, it was found that parents always presented mismatch as socially costly. The experience of children being older was described to lead to a state of visibility such as being seen, laughed or thought of as out of place and this influence avoided (said less, not joining groups, shutting down emotionally). This backs up qualitative research on the over status and grade retention, over-age learners can be viewed through deficit frames by educators in a way that justifies retention or demotion [26]. Our research contributes to this debate

because it identifies the cause of such classification to behavioural consequences as dignity loss. Disengagement was not characterized by self-protection by the parents who were describing lack of engagement as a protection of self against humiliation and expected criticism.

Older newcomers are particularly significant because of the dignity mechanism. In events of both cumulative damage and exit thinking, the participants associated dignity with drive and determination (when dignity is broken, they reject school), a hint of motivation or discouragement. This is in tandem with findings, to the effect that belonging and participation are patterned and institutionally formed as opposed to an individual characteristic [27]. Our input is a micro-process research on how placement turns into place-making, in which judgments are supported by language-grounded suppositions and left uncorrected, students may come to feel illegitimate and deprived of belonging. Being a member thus seems to be a consequence of governance decisions, such as the understanding of prior learning, providing age-respectful supports, and considering interpreted communication as valid instead of stigmatized [28].

Such findings also explain the meanings of families by motivation. Engagement was defined by parents, depending on the dignity conditions of learning: the lower-judged the student felt shamed or socially exposed, the lower the participation; the larger the degree of recognition and safe peer interaction, the greater the self-confidence, and participation. Families also wrote of spillover effects whereby schools failed to offer believable means of propulsion, parents enhanced the routine of catch up at home and conflict sometimes intensified since the core issue was perceived by the child as social and not necessarily academic.

4.4. Cultural Capital as Decision Access: Why Outcomes Diverge across Families

The third theory of synthesis is inequality in the bargaining power. Previous studies indicate that the participation of immigrant parents is frequently limited due to structural barriers as opposed to low motivation [6,7], and that the knowledge of system is skewed to affect the success of the students. This is narrowed down in our results since we demonstrate that cultural capital actually was source of access to decision in a practical way which is to know what questions to ask, how to request policy, who to invite to meetings, and who will initiate review. Families explained the acquisition of these scripts in networks and community organisations and the act of translation was not only language but also norms (what can be asked) and fear reduction.

This is one of the reasons why some of the families realized the support without demotion and some of them were placed as fixed. Negotiation took time, trust and interpersonal relationships—resources that had been formed through settlement processing and broader inequalities. Even where there is partial institutional support, families have to complete additional navigation labor (translation of letters, identification of mediators, assembly of documents) to get decisions, which replicates inequality even in schools aimed at supporting these. In principle, this is a change in perspective, as it does not present the description of involved parents, but rather examines the distribution of voice in schools.

4.5. Implications for Policy and Practice: From Placement-as-Protection to Placement-as-Pathway

This outcome has an obvious practical implication, namely, to minimize preventable harm, placement ought to be approached as a channel with explicit conditions, and not as a safeguarding but rigid categorisation. This does not imply giving up on language support, but rather making the distinction between support and demotion and creating well-established paths of recognition and circulation. There were multiple requests of the participants to (a) have transparent timelines to review, (b) criteria of evidence other than the English language, and (c) active check-ins with the emphasis put on wellbeing besides grades. These conclusions are consistent with research that structured accelerated tracks have the capacity not only to mitigate the learning loss and age grade mismatch among students with disrupted schooling histories, but also the quality of implementation is important [28], and with studies that have suggested that placement decisions reflect governance and local coordination, potentially leading to schools serving more as opportunity or constraint experiences to families with interrupted schooling histories [29].

Practically, a placement-as-pathway approach would involve: (1) a written description of placement presented to families in accessible form, describing the evidence-based, and how the decision may be reviewed, (2) periodic promotion or regrouping of older newcomers based on age (age-respectful placement), (3) provision of dedicated support to parent voice, including interpreters as recognized partners, and not as symptomatic of parental inadequacy. These actions are aimed at the central processes that have been identified in the data, which are those of

transparency, stigma, and unequal access to decisions.

More generally, the findings confirm the decision to consider mismatch a system design problem, as opposed to a classroom problem. The intervention decisions of placement overlap with design of assessment, provision of language support, and local coordination (how families receive information, interpreters, and referral pathways). When they are not aligned, support might transform to segregation: learners can be slowed down or assigned together in new categories without clear specifications, and families might be left to manoeuvre around informal space. Installing accountability—stated review materials, established standards, and active communication makes access to basic decision-making less dependent on family cultural capital and proactive communication the new rule and not the exemption.

4.6. Limitations and Future Research

Considering it is a qualitative research, the results can be conceptually transferred to the settings where schools have the discretion of placing newcomers. A direct observation of placement panels and decision panels is not made on the analysis, which is based on the accounts of the families. The triangulation of interviews with document analysis (placement letters, assessment rubrics) and observational work could be created in the future thus to map the decision justification in situ. Comparative analysis across local authority and type of school would also aid in identifying which governance orders defend age honourable pathways, and additional activities would likewise encompass the feedback of the students directly, specifically older adolescents, in the examination of how dignity and belonging transform with age.

Overall, age–grade mismatch is created in the daily institutional practices, which can be negotiated (although unequally) and its damages mediated by loss of dignity and belonging. Mismatch then needs to be addressed through procedural reform (transparent standards, reviewing points, accessible communication), as well as through relational reform (acknowledging prior knowledge, age-respectful supports, and respectful relationships with immigrant families).

5. Conclusions

The qualitative research has investigated the process of experiencing and negotiating age–grade incompatibility in immigrant families and the impact of family cultural capital on the potential to challenge the choice of placement. In 12 interviews, age grade mismatch was not only an administrative effect; it was also an experience that influenced the dignity of the children, their sense of belonging as well as desire to participate in school. The decisions concerning placement were usually interpreted as based mainly on the language proficiency and delivered in a manner that was not understood by the families on the basis of the criteria, timeframes and opportunities of review. Those families with a more networked, confident, or language-mediated were in a better position to pose questions, seek clarity and other supporting options and those whose processes were fixed and threatening. It is also found that the mismatch may be transferred to the family life by stress, conflict and protective silence, but can be partially repaired by the schools that acknowledge strengths of students, offer age respect support, and offer clear ways of reassessment and development. In general, the analysis highlights the importance of open and accountable placement procedures and communication conventions that consider immigrant families as capable collaborators that promote the dignity of students without interfering with their language growth and academic advancement. Practically, the results indicate that multiple steps may be taken in order to minimize preventable evils related to age–grade mismatch. Initial newcomer placement should be tentative in schools, and there should be set points of review (e.g., 6–8 weeks and after the end of the term), and clear specifications of how an individual can move upwards. The multi-source evidence must be used to make the placement decisions rather than only language proficiency, based on prior records where available, teacher observation and overall academic strengths of the student. The families also would have a clear written placement roadmap, which would include timelines, reassessment procedures and access to translation assistance. Lastly, age-respectful non-demotivating routes to language development such as in-grade scaffolding, sheltered instruction, or provision of older newcomers should be facilitated to enable students to acquire English proficiency without having to be mixed with students who are significantly younger.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

Ethical review and approval were waived for this study.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study, with additional consent procedures applied where required.

Data Availability Statement

Due to the qualitative nature of the study and the risk that participants could be identifiable through detailed narratives, the interview transcripts and related materials are not publicly available. De-identified excerpts supporting the findings are included within the manuscript.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Appendix A. Semi-Structured Interview Guide (with Example Probes)

Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured guide organised around key domains relevant to school placement and age–grade mismatch among immigrant families. Questions were asked flexibly, with follow-up probes used to explore institutional processes, emotional impacts, and negotiation experiences in greater depth. Example prompts are provided below.

Section 1: Migration and Educational Background

1. Can you tell me about your family's migration journey and when you arrived in the host country?
   Probes: What were the main challenges during settlement? How soon did your child enter school?
2. What was your child's educational situation before migration?
   Probes: What grade level were they in? Were there any interruptions in schooling?
3. How important was education in your family before migration?
   Probes: What expectations did you have for your child's schooling after migration?

Section 2: School Placement and Age–Grade Mismatch

4. Can you describe how your child was placed into school after migration?
   Probes: Who was involved in the placement decision? Was there an assessment or meeting? What explanations were given?
5. How did you feel about your child's grade placement at that time?
   Probes: Did it seem appropriate? Did you feel you could ask questions or request changes?
6. What challenges, if any, did your child face because of being older or younger than classmates?
   Probes: Were these challenges academic, social, or emotional? Did your child mention peer reactions?

Section 3: Family Cultural Capital and Educational Navigation

7. What knowledge or skills did you rely on to support your child's education in the new system?
   Probes: Did you seek advice from others? Did previous educational experiences help?

8. Were there things you felt you did not know or did not understand about the school system?
   Probes: For example, placement rules, review processes, or support pathways?
9. How did you communicate with teachers or school staff about your child's placement or progress?
   Probes: Were interpreters available? Did you feel listened to? Were meetings formal or informal?

Section 4: Emotional and Social Dimensions

10. How did the school placement affect your child emotionally or socially?
    Probes: Did your child's confidence, friendships, or participation change over time?
11. How did these experiences affect you as a parent?
    Probes: Did you feel stress, guilt, frustration, or uncertainty? How did this shape family life?

Section 5: Adaptation, Strategies, and Agency

12. What strategies did your family use to help your child cope or succeed despite these challenges?
    Probes: Extra learning support at home? Emotional reassurance? Community resources?
13. Did you ever try to challenge or change your child's grade placement? Why or why not?
    Probes: What barriers did you face (e.g., language, fear, lack of information)? What helped families feel empowered to negotiate?

Section 6: Reflection and Meaning-Making

14. Looking back, how do you think the education system could have better supported your child?
    Probes: What would an age-respectful placement or language pathway look like?
15. What advice would you give to other immigrant parents facing similar situations?
    Probes: What would you tell them about meetings, advocacy, or seeking support?
16. Is there anything else about your experience that you feel is important but we have not discussed?

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