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Emily Adkins

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Educating the Outsiders

The Importance of Social Support in the Success of Latino Undocumented Students

by **Emily Adkins**
Eastern Kentucky University

It takes a village to raise a child. This traditional proverb points to the importance of community and cooperation in ensuring children's needs are met and exposing them to a wide variety of resources that could provide assistance if necessary. This concept of community support is widely heralded, and for many students in the United States, this saying is vital. Their villages are complete with parents, teachers, and administrators that support them and believe in their potential for success. But who forms the support system for children who are on America's social fringes? For students who seem to be outsiders, such as those who lack a nine digit Social Security number due to lack of authorization to live in the United States, support systems play an especially vital role in academic success. These students face situations filled with fear and stress every day, including fear stemming from potential deportation of themselves or family members, stress due to poverty or being overworked, and heightened sense of being on the fringes of mainstream society. In the context of such circumstances, undocumented students are more equipped to overcome these obstacles when they are placed in the context of effective social support systems such as having high parental involvement in education and gaining mentorships and professional relationships with adults in their communities.

There are many students who are undocumented or unauthorized to live in the United States. In fact, there are approximately 1.6 million minors in the United States without proper documentation (King & Punt, 2011, p. 1). These students are constrained by their lack of citizenship. They have to make decisions every day that place them at odds with the law and jeopardize their ability to continue living "undercover" in America (Gonzales, 2009). It is education that can connect students to vital support systems. According to the Supreme Court Case Plyler v Doe (1982) any resident of a state is ensured protection to receive an education under the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment (Carrera, 1989, p. 16). In application, this case prohibits schools from requiring social security numbers for school enrollment and from providing any information about students' or their families' legal statuses to Immigration and Naturalization Services without a court order (Carrera, 1989, p. 42). Schools are, by federal design, safe spaces for undocumented children to gain an education.

Oftentimes, however, these students are not able to succeed in

traditional American high schools. Frequently these students are “pushed out” of high school due to unwelcoming settings that refuse to make accommodations for their unique situations (Covarrubias & Lara, 2013, p. 104). One longitudinal study found that from their sample of noncitizen undocumented students of Mexican origin, 50.7% of female students and 59.3% of male students were pushed out of high school. This is a stark contrast to their American-born counterparts. They experience push out rates of 22% for females and 21.9% for males (Covarrubias & Lara, 2013, p. 88). Why do unauthorized Latino students experience the educational system so much differently than those who were born in the United States? One study suggests that undocumented students face unique risk factors. These include working more than twenty hours a week during high school perhaps due to economic necessity, having a sense of rejection due to undocumented status (which can often stem from not being able to find a job or get a driver’s license since these students are not eligible for social security numbers), having parents with low educational attainment, and being a part of a large family (which the study defines as having three or more siblings) (Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronada, & Cortes, 2009). These students also had more instances of distress, low parental value of schooling, had friends who did not value schooling, were involved in fewer activities and volunteer efforts, and did not, on average, grow up with both parents. Such students who experience these factors are identified as gifted fewer times, have lower rates of bilingualism, and value school less. While some of these situations can be true of any student, an article by Maria Lopez suggests that Latino youths “are overrepresented with respect to higher education risk factors.” It concludes that “at almost every level...Latino youth face an upward struggle (2008, p. 1384). Latino undocumented students face challenges that other students also face, but the unique stigmatizing factors they experience like living in a country where English is likely not their first language separate them from general high risk students.

These students who are in danger of being pushed out of high school require intervention that can be provided through social support systems. This support allows students to see the value of their experiences and place themselves into the framework of the United States. One of these such interventions involves getting parents of undocumented children to be active participants and advocates for their children’s educations. Increasing parental integration into a child’s education would promote success in any subgroup, but doing so for the undocumented Latino community is especially difficult because of culture-specific challenges. One study points out that having Latino parents involved in educational decisions presents specific challenges because it goes against cultural norms. Teachers and professors are largely esteemed in Latino culture and a parent questioning their decisions or recommendations is unusual and goes against the grain (Lad

& Braganza, 2013, p. 10). The study also points out that often, parents are not literate in their primary language, much less English. This presents an additional barrier to parent-teacher communication and can discourage parents from becoming involved with their children's schooling. Additionally, parents and children are often distrustful of school officials because they are unaware of their rights as defined by Plyler v Doe (Lad & Braganza, 2013, p. 10). Unless teachers and administrators provide education to parents about their families' rights for safety and confidentiality within the school system, undocumented Latino parents can be especially fearful for the safety of their families. Teachers and administrators can combat these fears by providing a path for parents to become involved in their children's education, furthering their likelihood for educational success, by creating a culture of accessibility and cooperation between immigrant families and the technicalities of the school system.

Schools can create this climate of inclusion for families of undocumented students in several different ways. First, they should consider the larger social culture of which they are members. Educational institutions should realize that undocumented immigrants of all ages face discrimination that is frequently institutionalized. For example, Covarrubias and Lara note that "states like Arizona, Texas, Utah, Indiana, South Carolina, Alabama, and Georgia have passed bills...continuing the historically familiar pattern of anti-immigrant and anti-Latino policy making" (Covarrubias & Lara, 2013, p. 76). Schools are a part of a larger society that encourages anti-immigrant sentiments in many cases. Acknowledging the stigma that these families face on a daily basis allows schools to meet them where they are—in a very tense social climate. Next, schools can further parental involvement by creating positive communities of teachers and administrators that recognize the legal rights of undocumented students and educate their families about their protections. Offering professional development about students' rights and needs to teachers, as suggested in Lad and Braganza's recommendations, allows them to be equipped to reach out to students and their families (Lad & Braganza, 2013, p. 13). This type of teacher education and encouraged advocacy can lead to parental involvement in the school system, which is often necessary to motivate students to overcome their unique challenges and pursue education as a lifelong goal.

Another way students can be motivated to achieve academic success is through the presence of professional informal mentorships between undocumented students and members of the community. Lad and Braganza noted that in their study, all of their participants graduated high school and most participants said that "they 'lucked out' in that they had a teacher, another adult, or older sibling that mentored them through school" (2013, p. 6). Perez et al. found in their research that

adult mentoring is a resource that helps an individual overcome risk (2009, p. 6). In her research, Gemma Puntì suggests that a teacher positively influencing undocumented students involves the educator forming a close relationship to discover who the student is by “building trust and care” (2013, p. 213). One student in her study did not see value in disclosing his status to his teachers, and she suggests that had his teachers shown interest in discovering who he was and developing relationships with him, he would have felt comfortable enough to employ self-disclosure and have had access to more information and support to attend college (Puntì, 2013, p. 213). Developing close working relationships with professional members of the community can be a vital resource for undocumented students that allows them to reach their developing personal and professional goals.

Mentorships with adults in the community press students to pursue success and provide them with resources to pursue their dreams even though they might seem unreachable, especially in the face of social stigma. Ingrid Hernandez, in her piece, “Things I’ll Never Say,” describes how, as an undocumented high school student, she was invited to a school publicity and sponsorship event by her high school vice principal (Hernandez, Mendoza, Lio, Latthi, & Eusebio, 2011). Academically successful, she was pursuing her goals with support from her school’s teachers and administrators. At this event, she sat next to a familiar teacher in the midst of finery at a table with “an elderly man and his beautiful young wife” (Hernandez et al., 2011, p. 505). Conversation was light and jovial until that man asked her teacher about the school’s policy on undocumented students. Ingrid continues, “The old man turned to me and said, ‘I do not want to sponsor aliens who will take away opportunities that students like you deserve’” (Hernandez et al., 2011, p. 505). She went on to graduate from Stanford University (Hernandez et al., 2011, p. 506). Hernandez was able to experience academic success despite being largely ineligible for financial aid and being ineligible for most working positions because her academic environment helped her connect with resources that could help her on her quest for higher education. Her access to school personnel, information about college, and general academic support provided by her high school helped her advance toward her goals in the face of a largely uneducated and insensitive culture.

One-on-one mentorships provided by faculty can also provide support for academic success. Kirstin Milks, a science teacher in Indiana, describes her experience with attempting to reach an uninvolved student as a student teacher:

I wanted to challenge and support all students...those who had studied with well-meaning teachers who hadn’t quite reached them. Rolo was just the kind of student I wanted to reach...I finally cornered Rolo and asked why he was failing school...he looked left, then right, and told

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me he was undocumented...Rolo told me that all the students I worried about (here he ticked off names) didn't have papers, either. There was nothing for any of them here. (Milks, 2014, p. 67)

Milks went on to compile lists of resources to Rolo locally for accessing college and financial aid. She began to build a bridge between herself and her student, creating a relationship of trust and outreach that Rolo needed. Milks provided accessibility and purpose to an educational system that Rolo thought was unreachable. By pursuing a professional relationship with this student, she gained knowledge on how to connect to other students in similar situations. Rolo also benefitted from this partnership. He began making up missed schoolwork, stopped skipping school, and eventually graduated (Milks, 2014, pp. 67-68). Here, a teacher took initiative and forged a relationship with a student on the fringes. By attempting to understand his situation and asking good questions, Milks was able to gain finesse in teaching uninterested undocumented students and motivate them to develop goals. Because of Milks' outreach to Rolo, a student who other classmates avoided but who she saw potential in, he was able to succeed academically although he had given up on getting his diploma. Through mentorship, Milks made academic success a tangible idea for her student. When teachers show genuine interest and willingness to meet undocumented and underachieving students where they are, these students can overcome challenges associated with their legal situations and unabashedly pursue higher education and perhaps even citizenship.

This experience is echoed in a research experience detailed by Enrique Sepulveda. He was acting as an observing researcher at a particular high school when two female staff members, one an English language department teacher, asked him to lead a discussion group in a class of twenty four Latino male students a couple times a week so the two female teachers could focus on the female Latina students and create safe spaces for them to express and process their specific challenges. "Their students were not responding, and the teachers felt something different had to be done to reach them (Sepulveda, 2011, p. 557). Sepulveda's program for these students involved *acompañando* or "accompanying" these students on their journeys as Latino students in America (some undocumented), discussing where they were at socially, emotionally, and academically. Giving these high school students an outlet to frankly discuss topics they all struggled with allowed Sepulveda to develop rapport with them and to go with them as they experienced injustice and difficulty on a daily basis. He did this in a classroom by employing relevant poetry about Latino identity that inspired emotion and reaction then by charging the students to respond to those emotions in writing. He also developed relationships with these students outside a classroom by facilitating discussion, being a willing listener, and playing soccer with them (Sepulveda, 2011, p. 564). Sepulveda states,

“Acompañamiento meant losing some of my power and letting go of hierarchal aspects inherent in teacher/student relationships...I was no longer the teacher in charge of policing and classroom management and the rules of the school as much as I was engaging and interacting with them as a guide and mediator on their journey through high school” (Sepulveda, 2011, p. 564). This approach builds respect between the mentor and the students, and encourages not only success but mutual understanding and compassion, two extremely beneficial traits educators must gain through experience with their students.

In this case and in Milks’ case, when educators come alongside undocumented students and encourage them to explore how their lack of social security numbers do not define them, academic success follows. Such students engage in their education in new ways and are not afraid to pursue goals that would otherwise seem out of reach. By including culturally significant poetry that students could connect with, Sepulveda put students in touch with academic skills. It allows them to develop important skills in writing and communication while discussing and analyzing concepts that are culturally relevant. Developing personal and professional relationships with students allowed both Milks and Sepulveda to understand the students they were educating in new ways while serving as mentors and positive role models to them. Along with increasing familial involvement, teacher initiatives such as these provide a foundation for undocumented students to experience success in a country where the overwhelming atmosphere is unwelcoming.

Immigrants of all types come to the United States hoping for some sort of a better life, but when they reach this country, they are faced with barriers. Language barriers, citizenship barriers, and financial barriers must all be overcome by the immigrant family. Undocumented students face particular challenges that seem insurmountable, but schools can offer these students success if they choose to do so. By going out of their way to involve the families of these students while making them feel comfortable in the safe place that the United States school system is and by encouraging teachers to reach out of their own accord to students who seem uninterested in success, these students gain the means to succeed. When educators become the village for children who struggle and seem unbothered by their academic achievement, these students gain positive role models who then can inspire them to reach goals they never thought possible. Teachers and administrators determine what they will do when faced with underachieving students who are all too often uninvolved in their own educations and are far too frequently pushed out of high school due to factors beyond their control. These educators are responsible for reaching out to the students who need the most help. “Even though schools are open systems, they are able to create their own cultures and rules. In this sense, schools are empowered to meet the needs of all students, if they choose to do so” (Lad & Braganza, 2013).

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