

8 Difficult Transitions

Undocumented Immigrant Students Navigating Vulnerability and School Structures

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FLOR

For many Americans education is viewed as the key to the American dream. But this ideal is lost on Flor Garcia, one of the young people we have been following through the course of our research. Horace Mann's proclamation that education is a great equalizer simply does not match Flor's experiences. Flor is an undocumented immigrant. Together with six siblings and her two parents, she came to the U.S. when she was just nine years old. Flor's formative years were difficult and shaped in her a sense of ambivalence about the future. She realized from an early age that her lack of *papers—papeles*—would keep her from the good jobs she dreamed of as a child. She also felt like an outsider at school, internalizing a belief that no one was looking out for her—that she was on her own.

With so many mouths to feed, Flor's family struggled to make ends meet. She entered the labor force at the age of 14. A family cleaning business allowed her to bypass the typical hurdles involved in seeking work. However, a grueling work schedule forced her to miss too many days of school. She felt frustrated and scared, wondering if her future held anything more than backbreaking work. She left high school during her junior year after being suspended for excessive—work-related—truancies. She felt sad that not a single person at her school “tried to pull me back in”.

Flor eventually returned to school. Along the way she married and had children. Due to financial and family issues, Flor took seven years to earn her GED. She later tried to take community college courses, but without the proper guidance and with an unrelenting work schedule she never got very far. Beyond the logistical issues of financing and making time for school, she was deeply ambivalent about the value education held for turning her life around. During a conversation in 2009 she articulated her frustration with school:

[I thought] if I go to college I'm not gonna have much time to spend with my kids you know, but since my son was already attending kindergarten and he [was] there for four hours, I would just have to leave my

daughter alone for those four hours . . . I ended up not going because I didn't want to leave my kids and I didn't really see the point of making those sacrifices. For what? I don't think it would have changed anything.

Now in her early 30s, Flor has been working for almost 20 years. She is isolated and under constant stress. Her undocumented status is a constant reminder of her limitations. Flor recalls,

I'm obviously an older person now. I mean, I see things different today. Back then I wasn't so much interested in being there, you know, in school. But when I think about it, there was no one there saying, "hey, I care about you and I want to help you stay in school". I was needed by my family and I get that. I'd do anything for them, you know. Being in my situation I really didn't see much of a future for myself. I wonder what would have happened to me if I had someone like that looking after me.

Each year, tens of thousands of undocumented immigrant students like Flor leave American high schools for uncertain futures. Whereas most students face some difficulty transitioning to college, undocumented young people face multiple barriers. Over the last few years, as growing numbers of undocumented students have matriculated to colleges and universities across the U.S., their plight has gained increasing attention. Stories of valedictorians and class presidents whose talents are wasted because current laws do not allow them to pursue their dream careers strike a chord with the American public.

Undoubtedly, there are a great number of high achievers who have faced challenges due to their undocumented status (Gonzales 2010; Contreras 2009; Abrego 2006, 2008). Very little, however, is known about lesser academically achieving young adults like Flor, who, because of legal, financial, and educational barriers, make up a larger share of this population. Young men and women who exit the public school system at or before high school graduation encounter increasing legal risks (Gonzales 2011). These years represent a crucial transition in their lives when the limitations of their immigration status begin to make themselves known (Gonzales 2011; Suarez-Orozco et al. 2008; Abrego 2006). Further, their untenable circumstances force them to deal with additional sources of stress, such as fear of deportation and societal rejection (Perez et al. 2009). As they reach working age, they face the dilemmas of finding full- or part-time work. Such decisions are complicated by the need to make further choices about driving and working illegally. Especially when working and driving are necessities, the need to make such decisions forces these young people to confront their legal limitations and the constricted range of available choices (Gonzales and Chavez 2012). Exclusion from financial aid eligibility and low family socioeconomic status severely limit their ability to matriculate to institutions

of higher learning (Salsbury 2003). But little is known about the ways in which school experiences influence postsecondary transitions. Moreover, these achievement narratives tell us very little about the ways in which undocumented immigration status frames the everyday lives of young people, particularly at the onset of exclusions (Gonzales 2011).

This chapter focuses on the high school experiences of a sample of undocumented young adults from the first author's West Coast Undocumented Research Project, a multi-sited longitudinal research project aimed at better understanding what happens to undocumented immigrant youth as they make critical transitions to adulthood. In doing so, we examine the ways in which school structures shape access to resources needed for healthy development and successful postsecondary transitions. Current research suggests that school-based networks are critical for success. However, we argue that these networks are fundamentally shaped by the school structure. For undocumented immigrant youth, school represents the opportunity of inclusion. Whereas their parents are absorbed into the world of low-skilled work, they begin their American lives legally absorbed into a defining institution, the public school system. It is there where they not only meet American-born peers, but are also taught to internalize ideals of meritocracy. But schools do not treat all of their pupils equally. Resources are concentrated on a small number of students who, because of a perceived set of abilities, strong work ethic, and obedience to authority, reap the benefits of small learning environments and access to supportive adults. Meanwhile, a larger majority of the student body must contend with larger classes, outdated materials, and barriers to receiving help.

Our aim in this chapter is to explore the ways in which undocumented immigration status constrains interactions with school structures, cultures, and practices.¹ Whereas most studies focus on academic achievers, we turn our attention to a broader portion of this population that is not tracked for school success and examine the ways in which immigration policies and educational practices conspire to narrowly circumscribe their options. Undocumented immigrant students are particularly vulnerable and have arguably greater needs than their citizen peers. Legal and financial constraints not only erect numerous barriers but also create added layers of need in navigating the successful completion of high school and the transition to college. However, many of these students face challenges forging relationships with teachers and counselors who can provide access to important resources.

Our findings, furthermore, suggest that students' ability to access these relationships is shaped by their position within the school curriculum hierarchy. There are many reasons why undocumented immigrant students do not make successful transitions to college: exclusion from financial aid, resource-challenged families, frustration, and disillusionment, to name a few. But we find that many students are also disadvantaged by school structures that fail to illuminate pathways to resources critical to successful

postsecondary transitions. Instead, many schools compound barriers, limiting access to information and support. We situate these students in their relevant school contexts and ask: How do school relationships mediate the various constraints of undocumented status? And how are these relationships structured institutionally?

CONTEMPORARY EDUCATIONAL POLICY AND EDUCATIONAL ACCESS

Until only a few decades ago, undocumented immigrants were mostly seasonal labor migrants who left their children and families back home in their countries of origin (Massey, Durand, and Molone 2002; Chavez 1998; Heyman 1999). However, compositional shifts in settlement involving increasing numbers of women and children started taking effect on communities across the country. By the mid-1970s, these changes were already becoming apparent in states like California, where the political implications of these trends were most felt in debates about the place of immigrants in society and in the schools.

In 1982, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Plyler v. Doe* that states could not discriminate against undocumented immigrant students on the basis of their immigration status in the provision of public elementary and secondary education (see Olivas 1986, 2005, 2012). This decision provided undocumented children the legal means through which to receive both a formal education and an important socialization towards becoming American. By affirming the pursuit of a public education as legally permissible, the Court provided opportunities for undocumented children to be woven into the fabric of American society, just as generations of immigrant students had before them. However, *Plyler's* reach did not extend beyond school. So, although undocumented immigrant youth could receive a public K–12 education, they could not legally work, vote, travel out of the country, or drive in most states. They also faced restrictions from federal and state financial aid.² As a result, tens of thousands of undocumented young people leave school each year with uncertain and untenable futures.

Individual states have attempted to rectify the financial hurdles by passing tuition equity bills. As of June 2014, 18 states allow undocumented immigrant students to pay tuition at in-state rates. Sixteen of these states—California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Kansas, Maryland, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Mexico, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Texas, Utah, and Washington—provide provisions through legislation. The remaining two—Oklahoma and Rhode Island—provide similar in-state rates through a Board of Regents decision. Hawaii and Michigan's Board of Regents have also passed similar policy to allow certain undocumented students to be eligible for in-state tuition. In addition, four states—Texas, New Mexico, California, and Washington—have passed legislation that makes undocumented immigrant students eligible for certain state aid.

However, a handful of states have taken a more exclusionary stance. Arizona, Georgia, and Indiana prohibit undocumented students from receiving in-state tuition rates. Furthermore, South Carolina and Alabama bar undocumented students from enrolling in public postsecondary institutions, and Georgia bans undocumented students from its most competitive universities. And although North Carolina attempted to ban undocumented students from enrolling in community colleges, they are permitted to enroll if they have graduated from a North Carolina high school and are able to pay out-of-state tuition.

In addition to the limited access to financial aid opportunities, undocumented students are barred from participating in federally funded programs, such as TRIO and work-study.³ Both of these programs are designed to assist low-income, first-generation, and ethnic minority students. Because these programs receive federal funds, undocumented students are not entitled to participate. Despite the fact that an overwhelming majority of undocumented students fit this description, they are ineligible for these critical services (Gonzales 2010). Additionally, exclusion from work-study limits students' support systems on campus. Taken together, the inability to receive financial aid and the exclusion from federally funded sources of support place undocumented students on a difficult path towards higher education.

RESOURCE DISTRIBUTION IN THE *PLYLER* ERA

Immigration laws mark individuals either inside or outside of the legal system; similarly, schools also draw boundaries. By tracking students into different curricular pathways and labeling them based on perceived abilities, schools make determinations of worthiness. Scholarly research on the consequences of educational stratification—tracking, labeling, and other forms of ability grouping—has received considerable attention in sociological studies of education. Whereas the long-held assumption of such practices is that students need specialized educational programs to prepare them for different careers and that those homogeneous groupings promote efficient teaching and learning, research has consistently demonstrated that school stratification disadvantages students in the lower tracks (Hallinan 1994; Kilgore 1991; Oaks 1985; Schafer and Olexa 1971).

Most undocumented children from working-class backgrounds outpace their parents in educational attainment. As they reach high school, they are confronted with a range of decisions they must make without parental guidance. College attendance certainly helps them to extend a period of legal participation while it gives them the opportunity to gain knowledge, obtain advance degrees, and prepare themselves to be competitive in the labor market. However, most of these students are at a distinct disadvantage with respect to basic knowledge about what it takes to move from high school to college.

The concept of social capital—how individuals and groups invest in social relationships and share resources—resonates with current concerns about

immigration and education. Accordingly, social capital exists in the structure of relationships between and among people (Bourdieu 1986). Its key characteristic is convertibility. That is, it can be translated into other social and economic benefits. People can access social capital through membership in interpersonal networks and social institutions. By converting these relationships into other forms of capital they can pursue their goals and improve their position in society.

Recent scholarship has suggested that a diversity of student outcomes exists within schools, and that relationships with peers and school officials can enable some poor and ethnic minority students to access important social capital in order to mobilize resources necessary for school success (Conchas 2001). In particular, access to resources and improved information are two important benefits that arise from school-based social capital (Faist 2000). In large, urban schools with large classes and high student to counselor and teacher ratios, access to teachers, counselors, and high-achieving peers can provide important advantages. And, improved information about their options and rights can help them make informed choices.

It is important to note that school success or failure often hinges upon whether school officials create a culture that facilitates positive interactions among students, teachers, and staff (Conchas 2006; Pizarro 2005). When teachers take time and effort to assist students, they can be an important source of social capital (Croninger and Lee 2001). Such teacher-based forms of social capital reduce the probability of students dropping out and help students who come from socially disadvantaged backgrounds or who have had academic difficulties in the past. Schools can also structure peer environments to promote academic achievement (Gibson, Gándara, and Peterson-Koyama 2004). This is particularly important for students who have less information about how schools and the broader society allocate resources and opportunity. However, when schools treat their students as outsiders they diminish their chances for success and close off avenues for counseling and assistance.

School officials' decisions are often influenced by a scarcity of resources, differential access to information, and their own personal prejudices and beliefs. Particularly in large, urban schools is a lack of adequate time and resources to be distributed among the entire student body. Consequently, teachers and counselors often expend these resources on those who have been designated as worthy, while the vast majority faces the difficulty of navigating the system on their own. As the following discussion suggests, problems that plague large, urban school systems are doubly felt by undocumented immigrant students who require additional support in order to make successful postsecondary transitions.

STUDYING THE SCHOOL EXPERIENCES OF UNDOCUMENTED YOUNG ADULTS

In this chapter we provide data from several studies on the West Coast. Since 2003 the first author has been engaged in what is arguably the most

comprehensive study of undocumented, immigrant young adults in the United States to date. This research has taken place in two strategic sites on the West Coast.⁴ Between 2003 and 2012 he carried out longitudinal research in Los Angeles, involving extensive field work and 150 individual life history interviews with Mexicans and Central Americans (El Salvador- and Guatemala-origin young adults, 20–34 years of age) who migrated before the age of 12. The second study began in 2009 in the state of Washington, involving young adults of the same age, immigrant generation, and immigrant status. Whereas respondents in the Los Angeles study are overwhelmingly urban, its Washington counterpart also draws from rural settings. To date, 40 life history interviews have been conducted. In both studies, samples were drawn to include equal numbers of college-going young adults and lesser-achieving young adults who stopped their schooling at or before high school graduation. In addition to these studies, we draw from the work of the second author, who, in 2013, carried out a yearlong study in Los Angeles, involving field work, semi-structured individual interviews, and group interviews with 15 undocumented youth between the ages of 14 and 18.

Our research sites are ideal for studying contemporary immigration and educational processes. With close to 2.5 million undocumented immigrants, California is home to almost one-fourth of the nation's undocumented population. California also educates about 40% of the undocumented student population at all grade levels. In addition, Washington state consists of a large agricultural industry and is one of the top 10 destinations for undocumented immigrants (Hoefler, Rytina, and Baker 2012).

Although many of our respondents are now adults, we draw on the aspects of the interview that capture their high school experiences. We asked respondents to describe their high school years (the school setting, their classes, and programs of study) and tell us about their relationships with teachers, counselors, and peers. We were particularly interested in the connections they made with adults during these years and how these adults may have shaped their sense of belonging and access to resources. The advantages of this approach are worth noting: interviewing young adults provides the opportunity to examine important events and turning points in childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. Additionally, comparing the diverse experiences of modestly achieving respondents with their higher-tracked counterparts allows us to identify mechanisms that promoted upward and downward trajectories. The following discussion draws from these studies.

STRUCTURED VULNERABILITY

What happens in the formative years can have a major impact over the course of one's lifetime. For many of our respondents, childhood was wrought with hardship and struggle. Parental work life often entailed long

hours away from home and children. Restricted access to decent wages also impacted parents' ability to find affordable housing. These problems not only concentrated families in crowded neighborhoods and in cramped living arrangements, but also funneled children into low-performing, overcrowded, *de facto* segregated school districts. Most of our California respondents attended large public schools with counselor to student ratios as high as 1,000:1.⁵

By the beginning of high school nearly all of our respondents had outpaced their parents in educational attainment. Due to parental work schedules, limited knowledge of the school system, and language barriers, they were at a distinct disadvantage to provide academic assistance to their children. Nevertheless, the vast majority of respondents felt as though their parents supported their educational goals and encouraged them to do well in school. Many even cited their parents' support and sacrifice as their inspiration to continue school even when they did not think they could do much more. Angeles, from western Washington, exemplifies this sentiment:

I remember talking to my mom and saying that maybe I cannot do it. I have been spending my whole school career trying to do something that I am really not going to end up doing. My parents are very positive and they always say "there is always a way, there is always a solution. You have to look for it and you have to work hard. Don't let it get you down, keep working". It is always this that keeps me going, going strong.

But as we listened to the narratives of our respondents, the common experience shared by those at both ends of school sorting practices was quickly noticeable. Whereas parents were generally supportive of their children's educational pursuits, they were at a distinct disadvantage to provide the kind of guidance needed to navigate school.

Small Learning Communities and the Construction of Engagement

The narratives of our college-going respondents bolstered claims about the benefits of smaller classes and specialized programs in high school. Respondents described positive experiences in programs such as International Baccalaureate, Gifted and Talented Educational (GATE) program, and other small learning academies, as well as Advanced Placement (AP) and honors classes. These learning environments were generally smaller and helped them to foster relationships with key school personnel who could leverage important and scarce resources. High-achieving respondents benefited from positive schooling while being shielded from the broader problems that plagued their large and overcrowded schools. Many of these respondents were placed in specialized programs as early as seventh grade. By the time

they reached high school they were capable of competing for seats in gifted and talented programs, specialized academies, and honors and AP classes. As Jacob from Los Angeles told us,

I definitely felt like I belonged. School was what they call a home away from home for me. I really felt their support. I always did well in my classes and I always felt like my teachers were there for me. It was comfortable, you know. Like, supportive. I know this is not the experience of a lot of other students, but I really credit my teachers for all of their help and assistance.

However, as Jacob's comments importantly point out, whereas some respondents benefitted from supportive school environments others were not as fortunate. Even those who were placed into better classes found themselves lost in the academic process due in part to teachers and counselors who could not provide them with the resources they needed. Rosa from Los Angeles explained the disconnect she experienced:

I was in a [small learning community] and there were good advisors that knew about my status, and to all the teachers, I felt comfortable telling them. I knew they will support me and they have ways to support me. It's a great support because nobody judged you. I knew I could go to them and they will have my back 100%, but they didn't know a lot about my situation, or like, they knew about me being undocumented but they didn't know how to help me. The rest of my classmates ended up applying [to college] and it just didn't happen for me.

Although Rosa developed a positive sense of self through the help of her counselors and teachers, they were unable to support her through her college application process. In the end Rosa graduated high school and began working to help support her family.

Many of our respondents were placed in general track classes or spent much of their schooling in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. Respondents in the general track sat in much larger classes, had very little contact with other school personnel, and were hard-pressed to come up with positive examples of their school experiences. For Gino from East Los Angeles, a bad relationship with a teacher spelled overall difficulty in school.

High school was a very difficult time for me. It seemed as though everyone there had a problem with me. I had this one teacher, my math teacher, who, I think he was having some kind of family problems. He was always yelling at me, picking on me for no reason. He made life very difficult. One day he decided that I had stole [sic] his calculator. He made a big deal out of it. A lot of drama. I was suspended for three

days. He later found the calculator in his desk. It was too late. After that, I kind of had a reputation at school and all the teachers treated me like a criminal. I never had a chance to do anything about it. It was already decided. Really sucked.

Our respondents who were in ESL classes reported a different kind of problem. They expressed feeling overwhelmed by the additional barriers they faced because of their immigration status and their classes. Blanca from South Los Angeles conveyed the pressure she felt due to these barriers.

I know that college is important but right now I have to focus on helping my family. Without papers there's not much I can do. And it's not the focus of our teachers. They just want us to learn English and so they don't talk to us about how to apply to college. I think it's best if I work and help my family.⁶

Other students were generally happy with their teachers, but many felt disconnected from the larger school body and cut off from important resources. Orquidia, from Fullerton, California, provides an example.

All of my ESL teachers were really nice. I could really feel that they cared. It's just that, it was more of a kind of party environment, not really academics. A lot of us were undocumented and it was like they kind of felt sorry for us. But there was never anyone coming in [to the classroom] to tell us, "even though you don't have papers you can do this, you can go to college". No, I just felt like we weren't really dealing with reality. It was kind of like a handicap, in the end.

Whereas they were generally happy with their teachers, many felt disconnected from the larger school body and cut off from important resources.

However, being part of the general school body held other types of problems. Respondents from general track classes were exposed to fights and disruptive classrooms that had old and outdated materials. Lupita, from Tacoma, WA, told us that her parents actually pulled her out of school.

It got to the point where there were, there were fights every week. My parents tried to talk to my teacher about it, but it was kind of hard. They don't really speak much English and my teacher wasn't much of a help either. She cancelled a couple meetings with them and, you know, they were taking time off work to go, so they felt bad, like she wasn't respecting their time. When they finally met she really scared them with stories about teachers being attacked by students and that she didn't feel safe there. They ended up taking me out of school a couple weeks later.

Instead of comforting Lupita's parents or providing them some reassurance that she was safe at school, her teacher fed their fears about school not being a good place for their daughter.

Whereas not all of respondents' school experiences were overtly negative, many struggled to find illuminated pathways to resources. Respondents noted a disconnect between what they thought school should be and their actual experiences. Only a small number of them could actually name a teacher or other school official who they felt cared about them. Take Fatima, also from Tacoma:

my experience at school was not terrible. I mean, I graduated with my class and I got okay grades. A few Cs here and there, but otherwise ok. It's just that I didn't relate to any of my teachers and I didn't know anyone else [at school].

Like Fatima, many of these respondents drifted through their high school years without having any significant conversations with school personnel about their hopes for the future, their career aspirations, or their postsecondary options. Many felt as though the school system let them fall through the cracks. This rang true for Alfonso, from Long Beach.

I didn't know a lot about college. My older sister was 17 when we came, and she started working like right away. So, I didn't really have anyone at home who knew too much about college . . . I remember I saw a counselor, like a guidance counselor, during my senior year of high school. He told me that I wasn't eligible for college because of my status. He recommended that I should ask my parents to help me find a job. So, that was it. I didn't find out that I could actually go to college until about three years later.

The school experiences of our respondents provide ample evidence to support arguments that school cultures are critical in assisting students to make successful postsecondary transitions. Respondents in general track classes had less individualized attention from teachers and fewer opportunities to form positive relationships with other school personnel. As a result, many of these students fell through the cracks.

As our higher-achieving respondents' experiences demonstrate, the benefits of school-based resources are several. As a result of their relationships with teachers and counselors, many received assistance with their college applications. Their lesser-achieving counterparts did not experience the same kind of assistance. Take George, for example. After a series of misunderstandings and suspensions from school, George tried to turn his life around. After his older sister did some Internet research and found out that George could legally go to college, he committed to going to school every

day and promised to raise his grades. However, he was unsure of what he needed to do in order to go about making the kinds of changes that would put him on the right path to college. In his efforts to reach out to school staff he faced dead ends and resistance.

Even though I had a bad background, I really tried to turn myself around. Teachers didn't care about me. The Assistant Principal didn't like me. . . . The counselor wasn't there for me. I didn't know what to do. I tried to go back to regular high school, but they wouldn't let me. They said that due to "my kind", I had to be at the continuation school. I even tried to go to the district, but they gave me the run-around.

George could not find anyone at school who wanted to help him. Eventually, he grew frustrated and dropped out. He was viewed as a "trouble-maker" and, as a result, was not afforded the benefit of caring and school support staff eager to help him out.

Without special attention and strong support from their schools, undocumented immigrant students face barriers that considerably undercut their ability to make successful transitions from high school to a life after that preserves some of the protections and inclusions they enjoy in K–12 schools. Indeed, other marginal student populations share many of the same questions of access. However, undocumented students' exclusions from federal and state aid create added layers of need that require support and assistance so they can navigate the difficult terrain of college applications and private scholarships. In addition, as we will see in the next section, undocumented status places additional stresses on students that create additional needs.

Contending with the Transition to Illegality

On November 25, 2011, Joaquin Luna Jr. of Mission, Texas took his life. Joaquin had hoped to become the first in his family to pursue college. But as an undocumented immigrant student he faced challenges many of his other peers never confronted. As he "transitioned to illegality" (Gonzales 2011), the exclusions, pressures, stigma, and difficulties of everyday life became too much for him. Although nothing Joaquin left behind indicted his school or his teachers, his suicide draws important attention to the confluence of unfavorable circumstances that make adolescence a difficult time for undocumented youngsters. In the previous section we examined the ways in which schools structure relationships that can foster academic success. In this section, we take a deeper look at the ways in which these relationships frame trust and help-seeking behavior.

Over the last several years, research on undocumented immigrant students has explored the tensions produced by integrated school lives and legal exclusions. For many undocumented children, participation in K–12

schools provides important opportunities to receive an education, prepare for their futures, and participate in the social and cultural worlds of their legal peers. Legally integrated into this defining institution, undocumented immigrant students are allowed to “suspend” many of the negative consequences attached to unauthorized status while accumulating Americanizing experiences. Their childhoods are experienced with few restrictions: they develop a self-image and related expectations for the future in parallel fashion with their legal peers. But as these youngsters come of age, they find that they are not able to join their friends in applying for driver’s licenses, taking a first job, and receiving financial aid for college (Abrego 2006; Gonzales 2010, 2011). This powerful “awakening” has tremendous consequences for their ability to stay positive and continue to progress in school. Their identity as undocumented immigrants becomes a powerful stigma, causing most to remove themselves from important peer networks and activities for fear of being found out (Abrego 2008; Gonzales 2011). Moreover, their precarious circumstances engender additional sources of stress, such as fear of deportation and peer rejection (Gonzales and Chavez 2012).

Seeing friends move forward punctuated our respondents’ own immobility. Confusion about the future constrained their decisions regarding the present. Ruben, from Seattle, explained to us that his entire future was turned upside down.

You know, you grew up thinking, dreaming of your future. Like, “I’m going to be a firefighter when I grow up”. You know, like that. I thought I could be something more. It’s hard to swallow realizing that you’re just an immigrant. How do you say? Undocumented? It really stopped me in my tracks.

Other respondents noted a particular fear towards facing an unprotected environment after they left school and transitioned into legal adulthood. Roberto, from Hollywood, expressed this anxiety.

Realizing I’m undocumented I knew I’d be limited to privileges other people had. It’s just a big deal, after high school you grow up, what can you do after that, like, with being illegal it’s kinda hard for you after high school because you are all by yourself. And you need that support from the government or financial aid and you don’t have it. And I need to think about that now in order to survive, or make it.

For many, this discovery had especially detrimental effects on school progress. Realizing the changes they were experiencing in the present would adversely affect their remaining adult lives, respondents began to view and define themselves differently. For example, Laura, from Boyle Heights, felt so deflated she gave up on school.

I just figured, “what’s the point”? Why should I try anymore? What does it matter? I started skipping school. I got involved in the wrong crowd. I was really down.

For many of those we spoke to, externally conceived stereotypes came into sharper focus as fears and insecurities framed their relationships and their choices about participation in school or peer activities. This “transition to illegality” happened during a corresponding period in which American-born peers are making similar, albeit legally unrestricted, transitions into adulthood. As their peers transitioned into adulthood, undocumented students were limited by their own transition. Alejandro, from Hollywood, described the anxiety he faced with his peers.

Sometimes when I talk about the situation I feel like I’m lower than everybody else. Or, that’s why sometimes I feel uncomfortable talking about it. People that don’t know I’m undocumented and they ask me, I’m scared to tell them because they might think of me as being lower than them, and my confidence is hurt.

During childhood there are not typically any noticeable differences among similarly tracked peers. However, as the world of adulthood was opening up to their peers, a succession of doors was being shut on them. Jaime, from Seattle, also feared that his friends would begin to see him differently. “I was scared”, Jaime stated, “I didn’t know what my friends would think. What they would do. I thought it was just better to keep it a secret”. For many respondents, the prospect of being found out was debilitating. They were afraid of being cast out from social circles and ostracized. They became distant from friends. Withdrawal from once regular activities and patterns took them away from environments where they could spend time with friends and peers.

Their falling off from regular activities was paired with the beginning of a chain of activities and roles for which they could not take part. Judith, from Anaheim, described a world narrowly circumscribed by her avoidance.

I figured if I was just not around it would be okay. Like if I wasn’t showing up to places on the bus when everyone was driving there or why I never had any money. I thought it might let me off the hook. But what I ended up doing was, I was pushing everyone away. Like, I ended up creating this very small world.

For most American youth, the adolescent years can be difficult and full of uncertainty. Piling on top of these difficulties, exclusions from defining rites of passage, separation from peer group activities, and a debilitating stigma coming of age as an undocumented immigrant is a harrowing experience

(Gonzales, Suarez-Orozco, and Dedios-Sanguinetti 2013). Trying to do it alone can be frightening.

Many of our respondents were instructed by parents and family members not to disclose their undocumented status. The everyday survival strategies of migrant parents include avoiding apprehension by immigration officials. They also avoid institutions and try to minimize their contact with institutional agents (Yoshikawa 2011). For their children, acts of self-preservation make rational sense. However, by concealing their undocumented status and not seeking help from teachers or other school personnel, they risk even greater problems.

Many of those respondents, however, who were concentrated in the advanced curriculum tracks in high school—with smaller and more supportive learning environments that gave them access to key school personnel—drew upon relationships with teachers and counselors to disclose their status and to seek out help. These respondents told us that they felt comfortable talking about their problems with school personnel because the trust was already there. Take Claudia, from Spokane:

Miss H. has always been there for me. Of course I was scared. A little embarrassed. I just knew that if anyone could help she would be the one. So I told her everything. I remember that first time she brought out a box of tissues and we had a good cry together. That's what I mean, she got it, and after that she told me that I had to pick myself up and keep going. That year she really helped me a lot. She really got me through.

Many high achievers who found teachers or counselors they could trust received important emotional support and academic guidance. These trusted figures helped them find answers to difficult questions about their futures and sought out others who could assist them. At critical times when the students' motivations were low, these relationships buoyed their hopes and aspirations.

Although many high-achieving respondents benefited from school environments that facilitated relationships of trust they could leverage to receive support at critical times, their experiences stand in direct contrast to our more modestly tracked respondents. These young people responded to the transition with similar degrees of confusion, fear, and anxiety about their futures. They similarly curtailed activities and relationships. However, their withdrawal was particularly costly, precisely because they were less integrated in their school communities. When reflecting on her high school years, Judith's memories are filled with regret and a longing for a caring adult in her life.

In a way I guess it didn't do me any good to keep so quiet. I'm not so sure, though. It's kinda both ways, like, yeah I was afraid of what the school would do. It's kind of vulnerable, you know, the situation. But

then I had no one to help me. I wish someone was there to cradle me and give me advice. I think it would have helped.

As the previous section illustrated, respondents' positioning in the school hierarchy was important for accessing critical forms of support and capital. Placement in honors and AP classes strongly shaped college-going students' sense of belonging. It gave them solid claims to other identities—good student, high achiever, class president, valedictorian—that could provide a bulwark against pressures to leave school.

However, placement in middle and lower tracks typically eliminated special relationships with teachers and classroom visits from counselors. As a result, these young people were disadvantaged by structures that limited their abilities to form relationships with school personnel. Their large class sizes limited any one-on-one time with their teachers, and many of them had scarce access to counselors. Ruben expressed frustration with the limitations imposed by school and family.

This is what gets to me. I don't think any of my teachers knew my name. I was not causing trouble in class, so I wasn't known like that. And I'd always have to go straight home after school, so there wasn't really any ways to make a personal connection.

Whereas Ruben's quiet behavior did not garner him any negative attention from teachers, many other respondents were disadvantaged by teachers and administrators' perceptions of them as troublemakers. In some cases, their disruptive school behavior was rooted in frustrations tied directly to the barriers erected by their newly consequential, but still secret, undocumented status. This was true for George.

I probably missed more than 20 days during my junior year. It was like the world was caving in on me and I was having a hard, I was having a lot of troubles dealing with it. And on top of it, I was always in trouble at school. How could I talk to anyone about my problems, my situation? They assumed I was getting high or something. I just couldn't catch a break.

Whether they were assumed troublemakers or simply invisible to teachers, these respondents were unable to build important school-based social capital that would allow them to develop relationships of trust and support. Many of these problems stem from their large, overcrowded, and under-resourced schools. Large classes and high student to counselor ratios mitigated opportunities for meaningful interaction with adults. Perhaps more responsible were school stratification practices that directed some students to smaller environments while funneling a larger student body to under-resourced and understaffed classes. Many respondents were contending

with a host of problems regarding their uncertain futures, alienation, and blocked access. Unfortunately, for most of those in middle or lower tracks, their troubles went unaddressed because their status within their schools provided no basis for forming relationships of trust or for eliciting the attention of sympathetic school personnel.

CONCLUSION

Making the transition from adolescence to adulthood is perhaps one of the most anxiety-provoking periods in the life course. Often marked by dramatic changes and uncertainty, this change entails taking on greater levels of responsibility and adult roles. This is the first time for many where choices about their futures are not automatically determined by the school cycle. For young adults who have tarnished academic records, prior trouble with the law, or circumstances that stall their advancement, future prospects are limited. As the U.S. economy has shifted from one in which high school-educated young adults could secure manufacturing employment with job security and good wages to one in which good jobs require advanced levels of education, so have traditional routes to adulthood. Without advanced degrees, many young Americans experience the transition to adulthood as one replete with barriers.

Getting a driver's license, securing a first job, starting college, going to bars and clubs, and voting mark one's entry into the legal world of adulthood. However, for those who have grown up in the U.S. but do not have legal status, these very ideals they have grown up believing in become increasingly out of their reach, thus leaving them vulnerable to the consequences of their "illegality". As undocumented immigrant students reach these important American milestones, they must learn the hard lessons of what it means to be undocumented. Equally important, they must deal with the stress and stigma that accompanies their new status. Negotiating separation among their community of peers, friends, and classmates is all the more difficult, as undocumented immigrant youth must make decisions about whether to reveal or conceal their status.

The school context—an already protected environment for undocumented students—provides an array of potential mentors in the education and development of its students. Adolescents are at a learning stage where they are gaining independence, but still require additional guidance in opening doors. Schools provide the opportunities to form these relationships. However, student positioning within school curriculum hierarchies can determine their access to resources and can facilitate relationship building. Far too often, students in general track classes face unfair disadvantages in accessing teaching and counselor time. For undocumented students, not having positive relationships with helpful and trusting adults can lead to disastrous outcomes.

Our study is largely based on the experiences of undocumented young adults who have already made high school transitions. Because of increased levels of immigration enforcement today's immigrant youth face arguably greater difficulties. Addressing their needs should be paramount among educators' concerns. Whereas most of our respondents did not have access to deferred action for childhood arrivals (DACA) while they were in high school, it has undoubtedly changed the landscape for undocumented immigrant youngsters across the country. DACA beneficiaries have obtained new jobs, increased their earnings, and now have access to driver's licenses in most states (Gonzales, Terriquez, and Ruszczyk 2014). These new forms of access have also likely widened postsecondary options for these young people. But because of the recent implementation of the program, it is still too early to discern their impact on high school-aged youth. However, in light of recent analysis of DACA applications (Singer and Svajlenka 2013) that suggest a large segment of eligible youth have not applied to the program, we suspect that those with the biggest resource challenges in schools may continue to face significant barriers to receiving DACA and accessing its benefits. Those who lack meaningful connections to school personnel or community services will continue to be disadvantaged.

What would be most beneficial for the successful transitions of undocumented immigrant students are school structures and cultures that facilitate positive interactions between students, teachers, and staff, allowing those at all levels to develop school-based social capital and build relationships of trust so critical to their success. By investing in a baseline of support for all students, schools could develop support structures necessary to facilitate more targeted outreach to undocumented students. This is not only a social justice issue, but an economic imperative for the nation.

NOTES

1. We borrow from previously published material of the first author (see Gonzales 2010 and Gonzales 2011).
2. There are presently only four states that allow undocumented students to compete for state aid. See discussion below.
3. In 1965, under Title IV of the Higher Education Act, Congress established TRIO to assist in the matriculation, retention, and graduation of low-income students.
4. Respondents for these studies were recruited from various community-based settings, including continuation schools, community organizations, college campuses, and churches. Members of research teams accompanied respondents throughout their school and work days, volunteered at local schools and community organizations, and sat in on numerous community meetings. Interviews ranged from one hour and 40 minutes to three hours and 20 minutes, and focused on questions regarding respondents' pasts and their present lives, as well as their future expectations and aspirations. Transcripts of interviews were analyzed using open coding techniques. After analyzing all interviews, responses were examined for common metathemes across all interviews. And, the names of the respondents are pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

5. California schools struggle to meet the needs of their students. The state ranks last in the nation in its ratio of students per counselor, at 945 to one. The national average is 477 to one. See California Department of Education, Research on School Counseling Effectiveness, <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/cg/rh/counseffective.asp>.
6. Yo entiendo que la universidad es importante, pero en este momento me tengo que enfocar en ayudar a mi familia. Sin documentos no ay mucho que pueda yo hacer. Y tampoco es el enfoque de mis maestros. Ellos quieren que aprenda ingles y entonces no nos platican sobre como aplicar a la Universidad. Yo creo que mejor trabajo y ayudo a mi familia.

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