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Voices of Courage and Strength: Undocumented Immigrant Students in the United States

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Introduction

According to the Urban Institute's National Immigration Law Center, in the year 2002, 1.3 million undocumented students were enrolled in grades *K-12*. Each year, more than 65,000 undocumented immigrants who have lived in the United States for a period of five years or more graduate from United States high schools. Of these graduates, it is estimated that approximately 13,000 of them enroll in public colleges and universities across the country. Undocumented students, however, are more likely to drop out of high school than students who are United States citizens because of their immigration status and the associated barriers to higher education.

In the academic literature and the media, attention is focused on adult immigrants (Zhou, 1997, Portes, 1990), who are more visible and whose progress through the labor market and the immigration bureaucracy can be more easily traced (Portes, 1990). As more immigrant families relocate to different areas of the United States it is imperative for educators, health service providers, researchers, and policy makers to become familiar with their needs and contributions to society, especially those of immigrant youth.

Immigrant children have myriad barriers to overcome. Research suggests that the immigration experience has many stressors and affects immigrant youth in different ways (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001; Zhou, 1997; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Rumbaut (1991) explains the effect different stressors of the immigration experience have on the individual. He identifies some of the risk factors for immigrant youth, such as: motivation for migration, events prior to the immigration experience, demographics, socioeconomic status, physical health, social support, and acculturation. For many immigrant children, immigration is a life changing experience, and many overcome barriers such as poverty and discrimination, and become academically successful. He concludes that the immigration experience is shaped by a combination of an individual's characteristics and political, economic, and social factors.

It is important to consider that the immigration experience is not the same for everyone (Rumbaut, 1991). Many children immigrate to the United States legally and

with their entire families, while others experience hardships crossing the border and obtaining legal documentation. They come from different countries with different backgrounds: some from educated and privileged families, others escape poverty, war, and torture.

Research on Undocumented Immigrant Students

Although literature exists on first and second generation immigrants, there is a lack of research on the undocumented immigrant student population. Dozier (1992; 2001) emphasized the emotional concerns of unauthorized students who had initially come to the United States with student visas. She found three central emotional concerns: fear of deportation, loneliness, and depression (Dozier, 1992). She found that students' fear of deportation was so central to the lives of undocumented students that it influenced their decision-making in almost every aspect of their lives. She also found that undocumented students tended to enroll as part-time students, and that their academic grade point average and academic honors were lower than those of documented international students (Dozier, 2001).

Resiliency

Resiliency is the idea that one can bounce back and overcome stressful situations or negative experiences and often come back as stronger individuals in the process (Henderson & Milstein, 2003). Resilient children are known for having developed external characteristics such as problem-solving skills, motivation for self-improvement, involvement in social change, a sense of faith, and can make meaning of their trauma, struggles, and tragedy (Bernard, 1991).

Becoming resilient is a lifelong process (Henderson & Milstein, 2003). In their study of stress in children, Garcia-Coll and Manuson (1997) found that three consistent factors in resilient individuals were: a supportive family environment, supportive agencies outside of the family, and characteristics of the child. Garza, Reyes, and Trueba (2004) had similar results and stated that a strong familial relationship, external services, support systems, and personal attributes were factors that influenced resilient immigrant adolescents. For the purpose of this paper, the elements of discussion will be familial influences, external support, and personal characteristics.

To date, there are no research studies on the resiliency of undocumented immigrant students. This study seeks to understand the risks and protective factors that develop this resiliency. In this paper I examine the psychological and social characteristics of undocumented college students who exhibit high levels of academic

achievement and civic engagement in their pursuit of higher education. The undocumented college students in this study have managed to become academically successful in high school, go on to higher education, and help future generations.

Research Question

The primary goal of this study is to answer the question: How do undocumented immigrant students become academically successful and what are the factors that contribute to this success?

Method

Participants

This paper includes the qualitative analysis of a subset of seventeen interviews from the larger study of 172 participants. The participants were recruited to participate in the study using snowball sampling methodology. The participants included ten females and seven males, currently undocumented and enrolled at an institution of higher education. Thirteen participants identified as Latinos and four identified as Asian American/Pacific Islander. All of them have lived in the United States for several years and attended Middle school and High School in the United States.

Procedure

The students completed an online survey. Following the survey, they were contacted by email or phone to participate in an in-depth interview. The interviews were conducted in various places, which participants chose, including college and university campuses, coffee shops, and some were conducted by telephone. The qualitative in-depth semi-structured interview lasted approximately one hour and was composed of seventy-one open-ended questions and it was used to document students' experiences. The focus of the questions ranged from asking for detailed responses concerning their educational experience from elementary school up until college to questions that aimed to better understand the types of challenges students encountered as undocumented immigrants pursuing a postsecondary education and how those challenges, in combination with their life experiences, influence their occupational and educational aspirations.

Data Coding and Analysis

Audio tapes were transcribed and transcripts were read numerous times and coded for risk factors, and personal and environmental protective factors. The coding scale was informed by a review of relevant literature on the resiliency of minority

students (Padilla and Alba, 1996; Gandara, 1995). Then the data was analyzed for themes, commonalities, and differences.

Table 1

Educational Resiliency Coding Scale

Educational Resiliency

<i>Risk factors</i>		<i>Protective Factors</i>	
		<i>Personal</i>	<i>Environmental</i>
Poverty		High levels of motivation	External support
Limited English proficiency	English	Leadership roles	Family
Low levels of parent education	parent	Sense of serving "her/his" community	School
Low SES		Strong ethnic Consciousness	Community
Family stress/conflicts/difficulties		Strength from own ethnic culture	Mentor/role model
Single-parent home		Positive personal/social identity	Access to social/cultural capital
Institutional and social racism	social	Personal Characteristics	Advise in stressful situations
School Practices		Persistence	School
Tracking		Positive Outlook on life	Sense of school belonging
Lower Expectations	Academic	Negative experiences came to reinforce positive outlook on life	Quality of student-teacher interaction
Inferior instruction		High Self esteem, locus of control	Teachers' expectations
Low levels of school satisfaction	school	Negative experiences converted into goal oriented actions	College Prep. Environment
		Determined "stubborn"	General School Climate
		High sense of control	GATE Programs
		High Achievers=personal abilities=academic achievement	Early ID

Special Attention
Constant Positive
Reinforcement
Educational
Outreach Programs

Results

Risk Factors:

Crossing the border/family separation

All undocumented students in our sample presented a variety of what resiliency literature considers risk factors. The students in this analysis immigrated between the ages of two and eleven. Some immigrated with their families, while others experienced family separation. Some students like Ismael experienced about a year of separation from one of their parents, the hardship of crossing the Mexico-United States border, as well as hiding from the Immigration and Naturalization Service due to lack of documentation:

Ismael: My dad had a good job in our country of origin but politics caused him to lose his job, forcing him to come to the United States. He saved money for a couple of years and then sent for me and my mom. I remember trying to cross the border many times, hiding, and getting caught. I was afraid. I thought we would never be reunited, but we had to keep trying.

Uncertainty and Financial Struggle

Sixteen of the participants come from a low socio-economic background, with low parental education. Even the participant who was born in a middle class family and whose parents had college degrees in their country of origin became part of the working class in the United States. Due to the lack of economic resources, undocumented immigrant students are forced to work large amount of hours while attending school full time. This produces high levels of stress, and for some students like Ismael it means having less time to focus on academics.

Ismael: Working and going to school is difficult. I have to work three times as much as other students because I don't get financial aid or support from anyone. I pay all my expenses, help my family, and commute 100 miles on the bus every day. I work two jobs that don't care about me being in school. My first year, I got

an award for entering the honors program, which I had to leave because I had to work so much.

Sense of Fear and Rejection

Undocumented Immigrant students also deal with a sense of fear for their family and themselves. They constantly worry about their future in this country. They fear deportation and family separation and often they encounter a dead end. The sense of fear is constantly present :

Jennifer: Now that my dad has been deported, everything just crumbled. We are financially unstable; we depended on both of my parents' income. All this made me realize how quickly things could go wrong. Attorneys said that if anything happens to the rest of the family, there is nothing that we can do. I am afraid. I think about it all the time and I know that something could go wrong at any moment.

Being undocumented brings a sense of societal rejection for students. These students are rejected from internship programs, scholarships, and academic outreach programs. They demonstrate high levels of academic achievement and a strong desire to contribute to society but are rejected for lack of a social security number. Daniela is an outstanding individual who maintains a high grade point average and has myriad qualifications:

Daniela: It has been frustrating... everything has been a fight. To get into a program, I have to prove not only that I am good enough, but the best. Because for whatever reason, some people think that those who don't have documents are inferior, and that's not true. Being AB540, I always have been rejected by a lot of programs and internships because I need a social security number. People shut me down because of my immigration status. At times I have felt hand tied and haven't been able to do much, even though I have all the academic qualifications and the desire to be a better person.

The AB540 Struggle

Although undocumented students in some states are allowed by the AB540 law to pay in-state tuition rates; they continue to face academic, social, and financial barriers. Despite constant struggles, all the participants are optimistic about the future. Take the example of Beatriz:

Beatriz: It's hard being uncertain about my education and how I will pay for college. Even if I get a M.A. or Ph.D., I don't know if I'll be able to use it. I received some offers for internships in Washington because of my academic record. I really wanted to go, but couldn't because of my legal status. I can't apply to many scholarships or get any financial aid, or travel to see where I was born. I keep going because I know that someday it will make a difference. I want to show everyone that AB540 students like me have great qualities, potential, and talents, even when society doesn't recognize our contributions and doesn't want to integrate us.

Environmental Protective Factors

Family's value of education and support

For the families of the participants in our sample the value of education was one of the most important. Adriana speaks about her parents' encouragement to reach high academic goals:

Adriana: Since I was a little girl, my family has instilled in me that education is the most important thing in life. Both of my parents came from very poor families, and my father says that the best inheritance is knowledge. I know that my family has high expectations for me... they have faith in me. When I accomplish something like graduating, getting an award- even if it is just a perfect attendance award- to see their faces, full of pride, is what keeps me going. They always encourage me.

For Juliana, seeing her mother's work, her parents' support, and their view of education, made it a priority for her and her siblings as well.

Juliana: My mom has worked in the fields, as a dishwasher and other similar jobs. In middle school, I worked with her cleaning hotel rooms on the weekends. At first she would bring me with her and I would do my homework there, then I began helping her. My parents always supported me. My mother always made education the most important thing. She always told me that she didn't want to see me working the same jobs that she was. My school was always her priority, so it also became my priority, and my sister's. It was always about school. My mother wanted me to go to college.

Mentors/ Role Models

Students in our sample had at least one mentor or role model throughout their educational experience. These role models were particularly important in obtaining information about opportunities in the educational system. For the majority of students, they were teachers and provided information about the system and served as sources of inspiration and encouragement.

Michael: Mr. H. who was a very influential teacher. He is also Latino and would give me advice and make sure that I was doing well. He later became the advisor for the club, MECHA. He would encourage me to go to college and would tell me about his experience in college. I was able to visualize myself through him. He was extremely supportive, especially towards my senior year when I dealt with these other issues.

Family Responsibilities and High Maturity

All of the students in our sample have had family responsibilities that ranged from general chores at home and taking care of siblings to assisting the family financially:

Eduardo: My family depends on me. I am the oldest and if I commit errors, everyone's bound to follow. I have chores like everyone else, and help my family by working, but I always do my homework first and help my little brothers with their school work. I also translate for my parents with paperwork at school and for official business.

Personal Protective Factors

Leadership Roles, High Academic Achievement and Sense of Serving the Community

Our participants showed high levels of civic engagement, leadership roles, and academic achievement. During high school, many were involved in athletics and most volunteered and organized clubs and activities. They also received awards for academic achievement and community service. Ivan's quote shows commitment to civic engagement and leadership:

Ivan: I graduated on the top 5 percent of my class and won awards for volunteer work and doing well academically. I took part in my school newspaper and became the co-editor. I was part of JSA in my four years of high school and I became the

president during the 11th and 12th grades. My friend and I also brought Teen Court to our school. I was also involved in MESA for math competitions. I participated in Speak Easy, for impromptu speeches. I won third place and I earned a medal. I participated in Chess club, where I won first place in a couple of competitions and belonged to Academic Decathlon. In the community, I participated in CHIRLA. There we used to discuss things like politics, immigration, etc. That motivated us to start a club in high school for AB540 students. Now I continue volunteering and helping the community. My goal is to make a difference.

High Levels of Motivation

Despite the barriers such as financial struggle, fear of having their dream end, and societal discrimination, these students demonstrate high levels of motivation. According to their interviews, their motivation comes from various places. Some of the motivation comes from their desire for a better future, some from the encouragement of teachers. However, most of the participants reported that their family struggles serve as the primary motivational factor in their academic endeavors. In addition, many aspire to be role models for their younger siblings. Societal injustices are also an inspiration for all undocumented immigrant students in our sample. Students like Beatriz are driven by a sense of cultural pride:

Beatriz: I get my strength and inspiration from my family and my own people because I see how hard they work. I see people in the streets begging for money, and then I'll see Latinos trying to sell flowers on the side of the freeway. I see that they are trying to work for their money. Many people within my culture inspire me. Many came here, leaving their family and culture behind for the dream of a better future. I feel that their struggles and mine are not in vain. We know that education is the way to a better future.

Determination and Optimism

Other personal characteristics of the participants in this study are their determination to reach their goals and their optimism for life. These students have a higher purpose in life. Their barriers, accomplishments and educational achievements serve as motivation for a better life for themselves, their families, their communities,

and society. Adriana sees her struggle as a way to demonstrate the determination that undocumented students have to become successful.

Adriana: I will be graduating soon, and through my experience I am helping others realize that they just need to open their eyes and see that you can be everything you want to be. We are making a difference in society, we are helping different communities. I represent AB540 students showing that even with struggles, life continues... We will be successful, we are strong, and we will not give up!

What to Tell Policy Makers

Undocumented college students demonstrate a strong commitment to their education and to making a difference in society. However, because of current immigration laws, they are held back and do not have access to many resources that citizens or those with a green card have: essentials that are taken for granted by many citizens such as a drivers' license, an identification card, or a social security number. Undocumented students are grateful for the opportunities that this country has offered them and they have demonstrated their commitment to serve this country by becoming professionals. In fact, they are already making a difference in college campuses and community organizations. However, their freedom has been taken by laws that do not consider their contributions and attempt to imprison them in a lower socioeconomic and cultural class in society. All these students ask is for the laws of this country to consider their contributions and to give them an opportunity to become citizens, so they can freely contribute to this society. When asked what they would say to policy makers, this is what Alma responded:

Alma: We might not have documents, but it doesn't mean we have limited talent. We have high hopes and aspirations, and want to help the U.S. economy and society. We can make a difference! When we came, we weren't aware of our status. Most of us were brought here at a young age; we weren't free to say, "I don't want to go because I will be undocumented." We were brought here and we are making the best out of it. We're doing our part in society. Most of us have lived here since we were little kids, we don't know any other home. We are part of this culture and are here to support this society.

Discussion

The interviewees presented different risk factors and challenges. Apart from their immigration status, other factors such as commuting, discrimination, low socioeconomic status, first generation status, and family stress were common. However, the greatest challenge reported was financial. Many of them have dealt with issues such as teachers' low expectations, a poor school environment, and many institutional barriers.

Despite these obstacles, most participants demonstrated characteristics such as an optimistic attitude towards life, a sense of responsibility, a positive ethnic identity, and the ability to turn difficult situations into goal-oriented actions. These findings indicate that undocumented immigrant students who develop a support system are not only able to access more cultural and social capital, but also become advocates and leaders for others in their family and community. Many of these individuals are able to overcome depression and feelings of hopelessness, to see life as a challenge with a light at the end of the tunnel. And even though frustration and struggles sometimes delay dreams, most persist in their academic endeavors.

The majority of the undocumented students in this subset are highly mature. They see education as their way out of poverty and discrimination, as well as their hope for a better future and a safe and financially stable life for themselves and for their families. Their academic achievement is not solely for individuality or personal satisfaction, but for the better of their families, their communities, and society. Values such as education, diligence, integrity, family, determination, hard work, ambition, and hope are seen in a great deal of this study's subjects.

In their educational endeavors, students in this study demonstrated high levels of social support as well as the influence of a mentor or teacher. All participants had a strong sense of civic engagement and demonstrated leadership abilities. A prominent pattern established by these individuals was that of resourcefulness and cooperation within the undocumented student community. The sense of collectiveness rooted in their ethnic cultures was applied to their educational environment in the majority of cases. All the participants indicated high academic and professional aspirations and the intent to pursue a graduate or professional degree. Many of them expressed interest in holding a government office in the future and were very well informed of current world, national, and local events.

Conclusions and Implications

Undocumented adult immigrants take the risk of coming to the United States for the opportunity for a better life and a better education for their children. However, there are factors that create numerous barriers toward the achievement of goals for themselves and their families. Many undocumented youth have lived in the United States for most of their lives. They are strong contributors to society, but are still considered second class citizens and are denied such things as a social security number, identification card, driver's license, and others.

Although undocumented immigrant students face many stressors and barriers, many overcome these obstacles, become academically successful role models, and continue to make a difference in many lives. Resilient undocumented immigrant youth are making valuable contributions in our society and we have much to learn about them, and from them.

As educators, we must support their resiliency by creating more educational opportunities, and resources for external support. We must provide teacher training about immigrant youth and their families. These students bring a world of wealth to the classroom and their attributes are beneficial to the rest of the school and to society. They bring leadership skills, language skills, motivation, and a commitment to their community.

As policy makers and responsible citizens, we must create policy to assist these students, because their responsibilities match those of good citizens but their privileges do not. Their potential is being wasted by not allowing them to work legally, even with prestigious degrees. These youth have the potential, the intelligence, and the desire to become the next generation of doctors, lawyers, teachers, engineers, and other professionals that will assist the United States society in becoming more successful.

Although the research on undocumented immigrant youth is only beginning, it is important to continue studying this population, and the various factors that support and develop resiliency in youth from different ethnic groups. We need more quantitative and qualitative studies that explain the psychosocial impact of immigration on children, adolescents, and their families. The support provided for the current immigrant students will not only affect them directly, but will change future generations. As shown by many of our participants, the cycle of success starts with one academically successful individual, then becomes empowerment for a family, a community, a culture, and for society.

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