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Invisible Harms:
Barriers to Undocumented K-12 Students' Education

Who is Harmed?

Approximately one-fourth of all immigrants residing in the United States are unauthorized, meaning they do not have US citizenship or official government approval to live in the US. That statistic looks like 11 million people. 11 million people who experience significant disadvantages which result in mental, emotional, and sometimes bodily harm. 2019 data results from the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) tell us that of these 11 million people, roughly 600,000 are ages 16 and under. This number serves as a proxy for unauthorized or undocumented K-12 students who are currently enrolled in the US public school system. Forward US, a pro-immigration lobbying group, found that 54% of all K-12 undocumented students are immigrants from Central and South American countries, which has implications for teachers and schools who serve students in this population related to lingual and cultural challenges. In their article “They’re in the Shadows,” Bernal-Arevalo, Pereyra, Griffin, and Sharma tell us that “as these students navigate the U.S. educational system without legal status, they experience numerous challenges that limit their opportunities to further their education.” (94) In this paper, I explore the stressors and educational barriers that Latinx undocumented students face in US schools and offer some potential recommendations for addressing these harms and inequities.

In total, these harms and disadvantages affect approximately 4.5 million K-12 students. According to Forward US, “about 8%, or some 4.5 million, of all K-12 students—undocumented and U.S. citizen—have an undocumented parent.” This number includes 600,000 unauthorized K-12 students and 3.9 million K-12 students with US citizenship who have at least one

undocumented parent. This issue is more salient in some states than in others. For example, percentages of students with an undocumented parent are less than 1% in states like West Virginia or Maine but are closer to 15% in states like Texas or Nevada. These numbers were collected and organized using data from the US Census Bureau's 2015-2019 American Community Surveys and are likely conservative estimates. It is important to note that gathering reliable data on undocumented immigrants is challenging because of the sensitive nature of this issue. Many of the publicly available statistics are estimates. While exact numbers are unknown, we do know that many of the disadvantages and harms that accompany an unauthorized citizenship status affect several million children in K-12 schools.

Children with US citizenship who have undocumented parents or family members also experience many of the harms and disadvantages that undocumented students do. While different citizenship statuses present different barriers and lived experiences, there tends to be a lot of overlap between the two. Some of these harms include the possibility of deportation (of oneself or a loved one), a culture of silence, prejudice, and cultural imperialism. These harms manifest in the social, cultural, and academic isolation of undocumented students and their families. They often go unnoticed because of the invisibility of one's citizenship status. But these harms exist, and they are pervasive and significant enough—in scope and in numbers—that they warrant addressing. Later in this paper, I will explore some possible avenues for addressing these harms, including disseminating knowledge about legal rights and resources for families with undocumented members, creating and strengthening social ties, and creating an open and welcoming learning environment.

Everyday Harms

What are the harms and disadvantages that affect unauthorized immigrant students? In her article on racialized inequity and the miseducation of undocumented Latinx students in the American South, Sophia Rodriguez focuses on “everyday experiences of racism, racialization, and racial inequality that undocumented students face in the classroom” (565). Her research found that racial microaggressions against undocumented students from teachers and classmates are a common occurrence. Every day, undocumented students experience taxing, negative emotions like fear, anxiety, uncertainty, distrust, and confusion. And every day these students confront barriers to their education. Whether they be psychological and emotional stressors from their immigration status which interfere with ones’ ability to learn, a “deficit mentality” that some teachers express towards undocumented students, or insufficient language and academic support (Rodriguez, 578).

These disadvantages greatly challenge undocumented students’ abilities to succeed in academic spaces. Persistent stress, fear, and uncertainty (which result from an unauthorized immigration status) greatly interfere with learning. As do negative messages that these students receive and prejudice or ignorance that these students endure from peers, teachers, counselors, and administration in schools. Many of these negative messages appear in the narratives we share in our schools. Often, these narratives take on culturally imperialistic tones and devalue immigrants, Latinx students, and other minority students to uplift a narrative that centers whiteness and privilege. These harms, disadvantages, and stressors are cumulative and are added on top of other stress-inducing barriers to education such as language differences, cultural differences, and differences in experience and prior knowledge. Journalist Valeria Lopez from the journalism non-profit, Latina Republic, lists barriers such as financial struggles and non-

accessible health care as additional stressors and William Perez points to the role that poverty plays in this growing list of challenges and harms.

Perez, from UCONN's Center for Education Policy Analysis, claims that "nearly 40% of undocumented children live below the federal poverty level" (5). Undocumented students are already vulnerable to the incredibly destructive and often dehumanizing possibility of deportation. Poverty adds to existing everyday harms and barriers to education that undocumented students are forced to reckon with and attempt to overcome. Education is often referred to as the great equalizer of humankind (a phrase originally coined by the father of US public education, Horace Mann). In failing to acknowledge the vulnerable position of undocumented students and provide them with the necessary support, we are depriving these students of access to equitable education and asking them to accomplish a daunting task: to learn in an environment that was not built for them and that actively works against them. Undocumented students struggle daily for a plethora of reasons unrelated to education. I could not possibly do justice to each of the harms and disadvantages that these students face in their daily lives. So, I have chosen to narrow my focus and explore harms that occur and are exacerbated in schools and potential ways that teachers, students, administrative staff, and others can attempt to mitigate them.

The Social and Structural Aspects of Everyday Harms

How does our education system actively harm undocumented students and perpetuate educational inequity? Through social structures. Eastwood and Smith define social structures as "durable, individual-spanning aspects of the social environment that both enable and constrain action." (1) Institutions, like schools, are physical and relational structures that endure over a

substantial period and have allowed for certain socially constructed rules, representations, and relations to be cemented. We might consider rules as “social norms” or relations as hierarchical power dynamics between teachers and students. These socially constructed cultural values and practices operate within institutions and manifest in formal and informal rules and spoken and unspoken expectations and norms. In this way, social structures, or institutions, directly influence individuals’ behaviors as well as school policies and practices.

One such practice that is maintained and reinforced by social structures (in this case, school) is cultural imperialism. Young lists cultural imperialism—the imposition of a dominant culture’s beliefs, stories, norms, etc. onto a subordinate culture—as one of 5 faces of oppression because it threatens individuals’ humanity by denying the value of their culture, beliefs, and ultimately their dignity. Culturally imperialist practices in K-12 classrooms teach primarily from the perspective of the dominating culture—which in the United States is a culture founded on colonialism and white supremacy. These practices “silence the experiences of marginalized [or subordinate] cultures in the U.S.” (Nganga, 4). US schools have an extensive and tragic history of “silencing” minority groups and forcing their assimilation into US culture. One of the most well-known examples of forced assimilation through schools was the “Indian boarding schools” which attempted to colonize Native Americans through the guiding philosophy “Kill the Indian. Save the man.” Schools like the Carlisle boarding school in Pennsylvania practiced cultural genocide by isolating young Native American children from their families and “educating” them, often using cruel forms of discipline when they practiced elements of their native culture like speaking their native language.

What does cultural imperialism (assimilation) look like in the classroom, and how does it devalue nondominant or minority cultures? Cultural imperialism is found most explicitly in the

historical narratives that are taught in our schools, especially in English, history, and social studies classes. These narratives attempt to assimilate people from nondominant cultures into mainstream American culture in ways that devalue the nondominant culture. In their work on resisting whiteness in schools, Josue Puente and Stephanie Alvarez suggest that “public schools [in Texas] push an assimilationist historical narrative of whiteness reinforcing white supremacy through social studies state standards” which exclude accurate perspectives and stories featuring diverse people and result in a white-washed curriculum (65). Excluding accurate historical accounts is both symbolic and a state-supported norm or “rule.” Assimilationist state standards function as representations of American cultural values—suggesting that we don’t value minorities’ voices in our schools—and as rules or norms—we don’t include perspectives in our schools that challenge established norms or “the way things are.”

Informal rules and symbols manifest in intentional curricular choices which support ideals like discipline, progress, and perfectionism—American values that stem from a Protestant work ethic and white supremacist culture which has promoted these ideals at the expense and dehumanization of others. While these ideals are important and valuable, they are often framed against ideals and practices from other cultures in ways that devalue and dehumanize minority cultures. For instance, a history class curriculum might frame American colonization as white European settlers educating ignorant masses of Native American people and introducing them to civil ways of life. This narrative often includes descriptions of Native American people as savage, illiterate people, their values, and beliefs as superstitious and false, and their culture as uncivilized and in need of reform.

The way in which teachers frame class discussions, content, and the curriculum communicates to students what the teacher—who serves as a cultural authority figure—values and

what they do not. Popular narratives of “America the great, land of liberty and justice” pervade our history curriculums and often result in forced cultural assimilation which requires immigrants to abandon aspects of their culture and to adopt the values and narratives of American culture in order to “fit” in. While understanding the culture of the country in which you are residing is important, assimilation is oftentimes rife with dominant and subordinate power relations. It devalues and encourages the abandonment of the subordinate cultures’ epistemology, values, beliefs, etc. to promote an easier transition process. Unfortunately, cultural imperialism is still practiced in US schools. One common example appears in the microaggressive statement that many bi or multilingual students hear in schools when they speak a language besides English: “This is America. Speak English.”

Cultural imperialism can occur in many ways, through censorship, misconstruction, false representation of the truth, and so on. A testimony from a Latinx student interviewed by Nganga, Kambutu, Scull, and Tao Han highlights the frustration that students of color experience when incomplete or false narratives are taught in class:

Instead of demonizing Mexicans who come to the United States to look for better economic opportunities, for example, a background of why they immigrate to the U.S, might be helpful. In my history class, they seem to focus only on the *right* of the whites to acquire land from others in Manifest-Destiny. If we are taught about how the people of Mexico felt about their land being taken after the Mexican American war and how this has impacted Mexicans up to today, maybe they can better understand my culture. (13)

In teaching history that presents Mexican Americans in a negative light, history teachers introduce their class to and affirm existing stereotypes of Mexican Americans and Latinx

immigrants more broadly. In their journal article on school counselors' perceptions of undocumented students, Bernal-Arevalo, Pereyra, Griffin, and Sharma state that "undocumented immigrants are frequently generalized in the media with descriptions such as "job thieves," "social threats," or "criminals." (95) If non-immigrant students are receiving narratives that depict Latinx immigrants in negative ways, they may adopt or internalize xenophobic views and may replicate these narratives in school and in their daily lives. This perpetuates a pattern of hostility and racism against undocumented students and contributes to their marginalization and oppression. In the same class, undocumented students who learn that Mexican immigrants are demonized and who see unauthorized immigrants depicted as social threats and criminals in the media, also learn that people who share their citizenship status are stereotyped and perceived in negative ways.

If harmful, inaccurate narratives are not challenged by alternative narratives in schools, negative stereotypes of immigrants and undocumented students will persist and create an unwelcoming and potentially hostile environment for undocumented students and students of color who are perceived as immigrants or outsiders. Carola Suarez-Orozco, Marcelo Suarez-Orozco, and Adam Strom found that "immigrant students still perceive negative attitudes about themselves and their countries of origin in the public sphere." One 14-year-old boy from their study said that most Americans see Mexicans as "lazy, gangsters, and drug addicts that only come to take their jobs away." Their findings coincide with Nganga, Kambutu, Scull, and Tao Han's observation that students of color are especially vulnerable to "stereotype threat." (7) Undocumented students who receive negative messages about themselves are more likely to internalize those stereotypes which interferes with their academic performance.

Rodriguez opens her article on racialized inequity with a story about a student returning from visiting family in Mexico. This student was welcomed back with a stinging, racially targeted remark from his teacher: “They let you back in?” (565) Students perceived as outsiders or members of a subordinate group endure microaggressions like this regularly. Representations or stereotypes of Latinx students as undocumented—and therefore unwelcome—often make Latinx students feel that they do not belong. One can only imagine the effect that these types of statements have on undocumented students who experience daily reminders that they do not belong. In Eastwood and Smith’s work on social structures, they refer to the power of representations or symbolic language (like the teachers’ in the above example) in shaping people’s perceptions and actions. Representations, one of their 3 elemental forms of structure, refers to the power of symbolism and how members of a specific culture classify things and people through socially shared concepts. Negative perceptions of immigrants like the idea that they are stealing jobs from American citizens or that they are lazy gangsters and drug addicts infuse the popular cultural consciousness through stereotyped representations of undocumented immigrants in the media, in conversations with neighbors, and in our schools.

Practices like stereotyping, false narratives, and assimilation are manifestations of cultural imperialism and makeup what Collins refers to as the institutional dimension of oppression. In addition to the institutional dimension, these unjust practices are also created and reinforced by the symbolic dimension of oppression which Collins defines as “widespread, societally-sanctioned ideologies used to justify relations of domination and subordination.” (32) These ideologies often take the form of stereotypes or “controlling images” which pervade the shared cultural consciousness and influence the ways in which we interact with each other. (Collins, 32) Symbols and representations of undocumented immigrants that promote harmful

stereotypes perpetuate the disadvantages that undocumented students face and present significant challenges to their social-emotional wellness and subsequently their ability to learn. In their article on immigration policy and education in lived reality, Figueroa, and Turner state that “students of immigrant-origin are experiencing fear, anxiety, and difficulty concentrating; bullying and hateful speech from peers” and “traumas” which collectively result in a poor learning and living environment. (549)

Ethics and Responsibility

While I have identified some of the harms here and the ways that they negatively affect undocumented students, I have yet to outline why these harms are unjust and why they merit a response. Using contractualism as a moral framework through which to explore the injustices occurring and Young’s concept of “political responsibility,” I argue why we have a duty to address this particular injustice. Scanlonian contractualism posits that an act is unjust if any individual involved could reasonably reject the principle or rule determining or governing the act. (Scanlon, 234) A helpful way to consider contractualism is to imagine a table in which all parties or individuals who are affected by a particular action or harm are each evaluating the justness or unjustness of said action or harm. In this paper, the harm that I present for evaluation is specific practices and policies in our current education system that harm undocumented students. Namely, cultural imperialism and policies, practices, and norms that support cultural imperialism.

Using Scanlonian contractualism it seems very likely that an undocumented student, who is one of the stakeholders at the table, could point to state-supported history or social studies standards that present an incomplete or false historical narrative and argue that that principle is

harming them and therefore unjust. And that the injustice that they suffer is greater than the burden of changing curriculum and state standards or of changing ones' pedagogy. The teaching of incomplete or false history, social rules like "speak English," content that devalues other cultures and other ways of knowing to promote American superiority, and stereotyping are a few principles that negatively affect undocumented students in schools.

These principles also harm students who are racialized as Latinx, who endure the negative effects of these harms as well because they are grouped into the category of "other" or "immigrant" by peers and teachers' stereotyped perceptions of their race, regardless of their actual race or citizenship status. While these issues affect several different social groups—Latinx students, undocumented students, and students who are immigrants—I cannot comprehensively address the many harms and disadvantages that cultural imperialism imposes on each of these social groups. Instead, I attempt to better understand and address some of the harms borne by undocumented immigrants while acknowledging the pervasiveness of cultural imperialism and that its' use in schools also negatively affects people in other social groups.

We know that undocumented students are experiencing unjust harms that serve as barriers to their education. So, the question is, what is our role at the table? Do we have a responsibility to address unjust harms even if we are not liable or at fault? Young suggests a framework through which to consider these questions. In her chapter on structural injustice, Young proposes the concept of "political responsibility" which argues that "we who are part of these processes should be held responsible for the structural injustice, as members of the collective that produces it, even though we cannot trace the outcome we regret to our own particular actions in a direct causal chain." (605) Young's concept suggests that we have a duty to address structural injustices (like culturally imperialistic practices in schools) because we are

members of a social collective that produces those injustices. In defining our responsibility in this manner, Young de-emphasizes the role that liability or blameworthiness plays in our response to matters of injustice and instead centers action and tangible impacts. Those of us with the ability and means to do so (ie. educators, school boards, etc.), have a responsibility to support undocumented students and attempt to eliminate some of the unjust barriers to education that they face.

Recommendations

How do we even begin to address a giant like cultural imperialism? And how do we ensure that our efforts are helping eliminate stressors and educational barriers for undocumented students? The Department of Education came out with a Resource Guide in 2015 for supporting undocumented youth in schools which outlines 5 actionable avenues of support. Here, I include the 5 recommendations as well as some of my own thoughts on how to implement them.

1. *Create Open and Welcoming Environments (9)*

Many of the suggested practices for facilitating an open and welcoming environment appear in social justice and social action pedagogical frameworks. Many of these efforts have positive effects on students in other social groups who also experience unjust, institutionalized educational disadvantages. Tools such as culturally responsive teaching (which centers students' cultures in the learning process, allowing them to connect class material to their lives), multi-cultural pedagogy (which expands class content to include perspectives from many different cultures and places), and explicitly modeling inclusive, respectful, and critical thinking and behaviors are all aspects of social justice pedagogy. Jach and Storlie state that educators have the potential to remove obstacles to undocumented students' education by working "collaboratively

toward systemic social justice advocacy” in their classrooms. (99) These are actionable pedagogical practices that teachers can use in the classroom to deconstruct some of the uglier aspects of assimilation which attempt to dehumanize minority cultures, while also supporting their students’ cultural literacy.

These practices benefit all students regardless of their citizenship status but are crucial in creating an environment in which undocumented students feel like their culture and by extension themselves are represented and valued. Social justice pedagogy attempts to acknowledge and correct “the uneven distribution of knowledge, power, and access to resources found among student populations.” (Medina, 63) Validating students’ experiences and cultures is crucial in fostering an inclusive and supportive learning environment. Medina and Walker’s work suggests that “social justice pedagogy...can have a positive impact on underrepresented student populations.” (46)

Another crucial practice in creating an opening and welcoming environment for students involves language. Language matters greatly. It crafts our schemas—our way of grouping or organizing people—and it shapes the perceptions that we have of particular groups of people. Unjust institutions are upheld by symbols and representations of people that are molded and manipulated by language. Language has the potential and the power to cast groups of people as dangerous “social threats” and to normalize and condone hateful or discriminatory behavior towards already vulnerable populations like undocumented students. (Bernal-Arevalo, 95) Educators should use language carefully and responsibly and should “debunk the stigma of undocumented students” by modeling respectful and accurate use of language—ie. not using “disparaging terms such as ‘illegal’ or ‘aliens’” (95, Bernal-Arevalo)—and by addressing the issues of micro-aggressions by peers. (Jach, 107)

2. *Build Staff Capacity and Knowledge about Undocumented Youth* (11)

In their article “Social Justice Collaboration in Schools: A Model for Working with Undocumented Latino Students,” Jach and Storlie recommend that schools “develop and host multicultural trainings and workshops that educate school staff about the unique struggles of these students, including adaptations to different levels of acculturation” and “provide information about undocumented students to school professionals via email, handouts, and presentations.” (106) Often faculty and staff at K-12 students are unsure in navigating issues surrounding their students’ citizenship. Turner and Figueroa suggest that *Plyler v. Doe* may have blurred educators’ understanding of their roles in supporting undocumented students because students’ citizenship status was “legally separated” from their ability to attend US public schools. (550) They suggest that “some teachers have avoided discussion of students’ citizenship status in schools due to fears of violating Plyler.” (550) Teachers and counselors need to have a working understanding of both undocumented students’ legal rights and how to best support them. Building staff knowledge only strengthens educators’ capacity to support undocumented students which, in turn, improves students’ experiences in schools and student outcomes.

3. *Share Information and Resources with Youth and Families* (12)

4. *and Actively Engage Families and Community Organizations* (13)

Here, the authors of the resource guide highlight the need for counselors to communicate potential routes to higher education for undocumented students. “School counselors are often referred to as the institutional ‘gatekeepers’ to the futures of undocumented students due to the ability to aid students’ transition to college,” suggest Bernal-Arevalo, Pereyra, Griffin, and Sharma. (97) The resource guide also emphasizes the importance of helping “connect undocumented youth and their families to community resources and stakeholder organizations

for more support.” (12) There are many actors who have the ability to support undocumented youth. Schools are uniquely situated to introduce undocumented students and their families to existing resources and to help strengthen their connections to the community. Lopez tells us that undocumented students often experience “social, cultural, and academic isolation.” Supporting avenues for undocumented students and their families to build robust social networks will aid in building social capital, creating a sense of belonging, and accessing organizations that seek to support undocumented immigrants.

Strong social networks are crucial for undocumented families’ transition. Flores-Yeffal suggests that networks “go beyond the concept of people having contacts and accessing social capital through those contacts.” (1) She says that often a “series of social obligations based on trust relationships” emerge, especially among immigrant families. (1) Expanding those trust relationships to include non-immigrant families in addition to strengthening undocumented families' connections to other immigrant families who may have had similar migration and transition experiences, is crucial in ensuring their support and their ability to provide for their families. In eliminating barriers like poverty and social and cultural isolation, undocumented students and their families gain more equitable access to opportunities and to feelings of belonging and security.

5. Provide Additional Academic Supports to Undocumented Youth, if needed (15)

Many Latinx undocumented students face not only cultural but linguistic barriers to education as well. It is important for schools to have strong programs for English language learners and to provide other academic means of support for students who are attempting to navigate an entirely new education system. The benefits of this recommendation would be higher

levels of academic success, an increase in attendance to institutions of higher education, better job opportunities, and an overall high-quality education.

Counterarguments

Granted, not everyone will agree that we have a responsibility to address the harms suffered by undocumented students. Some may even question whether undocumented students should be able to receive an education. While that particular concern was handled in 1982 during *Plyler v. Doe*, which set the precedent that states (and the schools within them) cannot withhold education from a student because of their immigration status, there are a few legitimate concerns that I believe merit a response. They are as follows:

Does ensuring extra support for undocumented students mean that there will be fewer resources and support for other students? While certain action items, like offering additional academic support through tutoring or better ELL programs, will use financial resources, the positive effect that these programs have on the students in them and on society is greater I would argue than the cost. In a country that is diversifying at a fast rate, we need to offer more services to ensure an equitable education for all students, citizens, and non-citizens alike. Both students will become contributing members of society and should be well-equipped with the knowledge and skills that they need to do so happily and healthily. Programs that offer additional support to students like programs that serve exceptional learners (students with disabilities and students with gifts and talents) and ELL programs should not necessarily be considered an additive program that is included or cut based due to financial reasons. They should be baked into the framework of public education as necessary programs that serve as resources for students with particular needs. Most of the other supports listed for undocumented students refer to

pedagogical practices and training, the latter of which will require financial resources and both of which will support all students.

Is it appropriate to educate students using social-justice-oriented pedagogical practices? Some may argue that our teachers are not well-equipped to engage in such sensitive teaching practices and that they may not receive the support and training that they need to teach well using a social justice framework. It is a very real possibility that these pedagogies could be poorly implemented and that efforts to support undocumented students could do further harm. Some onuses then should shift to states and to local districts that allocate school funding to provide high-quality training and support for teachers to implement these pedagogies in the classrooms. Teacher preparatory programs too should take up this responsibility and continue to teach future teachers these pedagogies. Really, what these pedagogies boil down to is respect for and inclusion of cultural differences in the classroom and the modeling of open-minded and critical thinking and engagement with both class material and with the people around you. Teachers and students have the capability to practice these ideals in the classroom and in doing so, help create a more educated and just society.

Concluding Thoughts

Jach and Storlie tell us that “practices by teachers, counselors, and school personnel within the K-12 classroom may be of substantial impact to the undocumented Latino student.” (106) While many other barriers and stressors continue in the lives of undocumented students, educators have the ability to eliminate or ease many of the harms undocumented students encounter in the classroom. US public schools should not add to the list of disadvantages undocumented youth face, especially not when they have the power and ability to positively

influence their lives and the lives of their families. Educators and other stakeholders in education have a responsibility to address the harms that undocumented students face in the classroom. To foster a welcoming environment, share information and resources, engage, and connect families, and offer additional support in academics and in other areas.

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