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7-31-2018

## "It is hard right now": High School Educators Working with Undocumented Students

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### Recommended Citation

Valdivia, Carolina and Clark-Ibáñez, Marisol, "It is hard right now": High School Educators Working with Undocumented Students" (2018). *Latino Public Policy*. 10.

<https://scholar.smu.edu/latino-policy/10>

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## **POLICY BRIEF**

“It is hard right now”:  
High School Educators Working with Undocumented Students

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The UndocuResearch Project: A Study by, for, and about Undocumented  
Students

July 31, 2018

*The UndocuResearch Project is grateful for the generosity of  
the Latino Center Leadership Development grant and  
support of the Southern Methodist University Tower Center.*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### **Introduction to the Study:**

This project began with an interest in learning about the experiences of educators working with undocumented high school students in San Diego County. The backdrop for this study is the current anti-immigrant climate, specifically targeting Latinx undocumented immigrants. Educators in the San Diego County are working in a context where immigration authorities are deporting their students' family members. Our aim is to begin painting a picture of who these educators are and some of the practices they employ to support their undocumented students. We hope our findings will begin to support educators and in turn their students.

### **Literature Overview:**

Scholarly literature has shown the important role educators occupy in students' lives. In the case of undocumented students, educators are found to be misinforming and discouraging students. However, educators who are genuinely involved with undocumented students can make the difference. We were interested in fostering supportive educator practices.

### **Methods:**

We ground our study in a humanizing framework, where collective efforts based on dignity, care, and respect are pushing forward our work. From the beginning of our study, we have collaborated as a team: discussing the scholarship on undocumented students, learning about theory, methods, and ethics. We conducted structure qualitative interviews with 35 educators who had experience working with undocumented students. The majority were female (60 percent) and White (70 percent). The educators in this study have been teachers for an average of eight years.

### **Findings:**

(1) The educators in this study supported undocumented student wholeheartedly. However, some felt their hands were tied under the current anti-immigrant political and climate. (2) Most expressed that they were the only one who undocumented students could trust. Some educators described ways they supported their undocumented student population directly (e.g., validating their voices and spending extra time talking to these students) and indirectly (e.g., creating an expression wall for students). (3) Despite this commitment to supporting undocumented students, many educators found out about their students' immigration status when the student asked for a letter of recommendation or needed a letter of support for one of the family members going through the immigration system. (4) Educators and students differed in their priority of leaving home to attend a university, attending a college closer to home, or deciding to work instead of going to school. Further, some educators felt parents were keeping their children from reaching their educational goals, even though they rarely or never interacted with the parents. (5) We also found

that some educators held limited knowledge about undocumented students and their rights to an education related to information about the enrollment process, financial aid, and difference between DACA recipients and undocumented students (no DACA). (6) Others supported their undocumented students by explaining they support all students the same way; this reflects color-blind ideology which negated their students' unique circumstances.

**Limitations:**

The geographical area and sample size result in a non-representative sample. However, those interested in educators working with undocumented students would still glean important promising practices and pitfalls that could be applied to other contexts.

**Innovations:**

This study represents one of the largest *qualitative* studies about educators who work with undocumented students. It is also timely due to the current intensification of immigration enforcement and the anti-immigration rhetoric at the national level. Our findings provide a starting point for schools, districts, and states to focus on training and supporting educators to best serve the needs of undocumented students.

The UndocuResearch Project is a collective effort that gives scholarly primacy to those most impacted by immigration policy. The study is by, for and about undocumented students. Of interest to universities and colleges that strive to engage first generation, immigrant students in high impact practices, the UndocuResearch Project delivers high quality work and creates a sense of community among the research team members.

**Recommendations:**

We recommend advocacy for comprehensive, inclusive, and humane immigration reform. Based on our study, some of our recommendations include: (1) Educators who feel they are the only ones supporting undocumented students or who truly understand their struggle should be supported and connected to other educators feeling the same way. (2) An effort to provide all educators working with undocumented students with knowledge about the struggles their students face and the ways they can be supported should be considered. (3) Safe spaces for undocumented students where educators can spend time with these students should be created. (4) Color-blind racism should be directly addressed in the school context – both with teachers and district or school policies. (5) The intensification of deportation and related fears require educators to learn trauma-informed pedagogies. (6) Outreach to parents and partnerships with community based organizations would further support students' academic success and overall well-being.

## POLICY BRIEF

### Topic

This study is part of the UndocuResearch Project and examines the experiences of school personnel who work with undocumented Latinx<sup>1</sup> high school students. This policy brief focuses on the data collection and analysis based on the first stage of our research: interviews with 35 educators on the frontlines with undocumented students.

Our study contributes to our understanding of the undocumented students' lives and educators since the 2016 presidential election. The anti-immigrant and anti-Latinx climate negatively impact the everyday routines for undocumented student (Andrade, 2017). The study takes place in San Diego County, which has an intensive presence of immigration enforcement and shares an international border with Tijuana, Baja California, México.

We studied educators in high school because they represent a key stage for undocumented students: only half graduate high school, and of those who graduate, only 5-10% pursue a college education (US Department of Education, 2015).

### Research Question & Problem

This study asks the following empirical research questions: **(1)** How do school personnel make sense of undocumented high school students' circumstances? **(2)** What are the ways that school personnel mitigate, advocate or exacerbate the situation for students? **(3)** What are the characteristics of school personnel who help keep the dreams alive for undocumented students?

The school context is an important site for deploying district level policy and to discover promising practices to be shared at state and national levels. Educators are on the frontlines of understanding undocumented students' dreams and addressing challenges.

### Literature Review

The scholarship about undocumented students have focused on their educational trajectory and address issues such as mental health, deportation fears, and political incorporation (Abrego, 2011; Clark-Ibáñez, 2015; Gonzales et al., 2013; Mangual Figueroa, 2011, 2017; McWhirter, 2013; Rubio-Hernandez & Ayón, 2016; Wong et al., 2018). However, we know less about the high school personnel who work with undocumented students.

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term "Latinx" instead of Latino or Latino/a to be gender inclusive.

### *Students' Perspective about Educators*

Research focusing on undocumented students reveal that school personnel discourage or misinform students during college application process (Abrego, 2011; Negron-Gonzales, 2017; Perez, 2010). Lauby (2017) conducted a study on 60 undocumented youth in New York and New Jersey. She reported that high school students often resort to their own strategies to navigating college pathways and that counselors rarely know how to help them. This resulted in students doing most of their own research and other forms of information gathering. Lauby concluded that schools became “a place of negative bureaucratic incorporation” (pg. 31) for undocumented students. These studies offer us an important starting point to understanding the impacts and their outcome of educators on students.

### *Focus on Schools and the Role of Leaders*

Research on schools (through ethnography or participant observation) find that leaders have a pivotal role in the way that undocumented students and their families are treated and the extent to which schools provide high quality resources. Crawford et al. (2017) found that effective school leaders act as a bridge for others to help address common problem. Julián Jefferies (2014) found that schools must be identify their undocumented population in a way that is non-threatening “in order to have a concrete plan of specialized counseling and mentoring that will help students and families to navigate their education” (pg. 293).

In the case study of a Northern California elementary school that experienced immigration enforcement at the school site, Crawford (2017) explained the educators, staff, and leaders exhibited an ethic of community by (a) minimizing uncertainty for students and families, (b) facilitating a community-oriented and community-sensitive school culture, (c) filling in knowledge gaps and magnifying community voice, and using (d) critical consciousness as a catalyst to enhance community moral agency” (pg. 164). They “critiqued the social, political, and legal realms that challenged undocumented families’ access to the school” (pg. 170).

Julián Jefferies (2014) studied undocumented status in school in a four-year high school ethnography. He observed when migration status played a role in the daily routine of the school. He found that “misinformation about the immigration status of students worked to silence these students, reproduced misinformation about legal status with other students, and had devastating effects on the educational aspirations of undocumented youth” (pg. 289).

### *Perspectives from Educators*

There are national surveys that seek educators’ opinions about immigration and political climate. For example, teachers were surveyed about their working lives and school climate since the 2016 presidential elections (Rogers et al., 2018). It was found that 68 percent of teachers reported increased stress and that 58 percent expressed concern about deportation. Other studies have interviewed

educators who are exemplars for Latinx students, such as Irizarry and Raible, (2011), who found that they were engaged in the community and culture; shared of their own experiences to connect with students' lives; and, knowing how to speak Spanish. While immigration was included in their students' lives, it was not a focus of the study.

Crawford et al. (2017) found that there is minimal research on the ways undocumented students come to form strong relationships with school personnel. They interviewed 7 school counselors and 1 interventionist in Texas and found that teachers who formed strong bonds with undocumented students possessed empathy about the inequalities faced by undocumented students and also recognize forms of injustice faced by the students and their families. The educators confronted discrimination and biases at their school and with leadership so that they can better advocate for the undocumented students. They also set up services and opportunities based on students' needs and goals. The researchers summarized the extraordinary work of the counselors in their study: "Counselors' knowledge and abilities showed their ability to engage as boundary spanners and border crossers on the borderlands, intentionally transcending and working to transform the material and immaterial realities of undocumented students and families" (pg. 19).

Some studies indirectly observed the role of immigration status had on educators' ability to teach and reach undocumented students. Based on a five-year ethnography at a Pennsylvania middle school, Gallo and Link (2016) observed that "markers of citizenship related to documentation status were highly relevant but rarely visible in classrooms spaces" (pg. 183). They argue that educators should not rely only on "how immigration practices affect students' well-being and learning at school; they provide[d] support to children who have experienced harsh immigration practices and [found] ways to draw on these experiences to facilitate successful classroom learning" (pg. 183). However, in their interviews with the white female teachers, most were unaware of students' immigration status and relied on a "don't ask, don't tell" approach. Only one teacher engaged in meaningful work with undocumented students: she gained trust of families; became familiar with laws, policies and practices regarding undocumented immigration; and, learned from her students and built upon their knowledge.

The research on educators and undocumented students tends to focus on the deficits of teachers and other school personnel. Indeed, we know that educators play a crucial role in the educational advancement of undocumented students (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). However, as Sociologists, we cannot only focus on individual actors' injurious actions (teachers) but rather understand the educational process as a complex journey that is shaped by oppressive structures, institutional and national policies, and historical processes. Our study seeks to highlight the experiences of educators who are working with undocumented students within the current socio-political context to better

understand how we can elevate promising practices and where can we build capacity.

## **Method**

Our research is characterized by taking a humanizing approach to research (Paris and Winn, 2013). It requires that we make the process of research more collaborative, respectful, and therefore humane. It also involves developing relationships of dignity, care and respect with our participants and among our researchers.

### *The Researchers*

This study was conducted by The UndocuResearch Project team, which is comprised of over 40 college students and community leaders who are directly affected by immigration policies. Carolina Valdivia Ordorica & Marisol Clark-Ibáñez intentionally sought Latinx researchers who were directly or indirectly impacted by undocumented immigration status(es). Members were recruited from local community college, universities, and immigrant advocacy groups in the San Diego area.

The team members participated in a 6-week (or equivalent) training program that included: reading and discussing the existing literature on undocumented students; understanding theories that inform the research on undocumented students (e.g., Latinx Critical Race Theory, Validation Theory); learning about qualitative methods; practicing how to conduct interviews; discussing and debating research ethics; providing feedback and revisions to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) documents and material for the study; and, becoming certified by the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI), a national program in human subject research protection. All certified team members conducted interviews. UndocuResearchers conducted all the interviews, transcribed them, engaged in data analysis, and participated in the dissemination of the research findings.

### *The Method*

We sought to conduct qualitative structured interviews with educators who worked with undocumented students. The goal in conducting interviews is to obtain a rich description about people's lives, including memories, places, journeys, milestones, interactions with others, and challenges.

The interview questions were collaboratively created by the UndocuResearch Project team members and focused on four main themes: experience with teaching in general; views on immigration; experience working with undocumented students; and, describing the extent of support for undocumented students at the school.

We contacted the educators through local education list serves and through personal networks. After informed consent was granted, the interviews were



digitally recorded and lasted between 45 to 90 minutes. At the end of each interview, educators were given a \$5 Starbucks gift card as a thank you and a packet of resources to support undocumented students. The interviews were transcribed. Identifiers were removed to protect the confidentiality of the educator; this version of the transcript was shared on a Google folder for research team members to conduct data analysis.

The team read the transcripts and participated in group coding and analysis. Researchers identified themes that emerged across the interviews and themes were further distilled through group discussion.

### *The Sample*

Our team interviewed 35 high school educators in San Diego County. Their demographics include: 60 percent female; 70 percent white, and averaged 8 years in the profession. Everyone in the sample had experience working with undocumented students.

### **Significance**

The Migration Policy Institute estimates that people from Mexican and Central American total about 7.9 million of the 11 million undocumented immigrants who are estimated to be in the United States (Hayes & Hill, 2017). About 50 percent of Latinx undocumented immigrants are from Mexico. The diversity within the undocumented population reflects the multi-cultural growth of the general Latinx population in the United States (Cuellar, 2017).

Undocumented students have a right to an education. The 1982 Supreme Court decision, *Plyler v. Doe*, granted all undocumented youth the right to attend public schools, from kindergarten through high school. Yet, the context and conditions in which undocumented students learn is often stressful. This law does not ensure that undocumented Latinx students feel safe to attend school. States are enacting laws to undermine the spirit of *Plyler v. Doe*. After Alabama passed a law requiring officials to check birth certificates, 2300 of the 36,000 Latinx public school children vanished from classrooms (Dias, Gray & Scherrer, 2011:14). The court left the decision about higher education eligibility and admissions to the states, which is why we see differential pathways to access and resources in higher education across states.

Educators often represent a turning point for students – their pivotal role in students' lives can serve as gatekeepers to or as the gateway for success. Illuminating the educators who are actively supporting undocumented students can offer important lessons.

Finally, this study is about more than just educators and undocumented students. The educators in this study also discussed parents and siblings, who may or may not be undocumented. In the United States, approximately 16.7 million have at

least one unauthorized family member living with them in the same household (Mathema, 2017). Our results also led us to better understanding educators and mixed-status families.

### **Key Findings**

We identified themes that emerged from the educator interviews and they are summarized here:

1) The educators interviewed demonstrated passion and commitment to help undocumented students. The majority of the educators in the study were compassionate, knowledgeable about local community concerns, and were working hard for their students. Similar to Andrade (2017), the educators reported that the 2016 presidential election results negatively impacted students. An educator shared, “A student asked me, ‘Am I going to be deported?’ And I did not know what to say because I felt like I couldn’t lie. It is hard right now.” Most wanted to do more for their undocumented students, but felt limited and viewed their administrators as reluctant to be pro-active due to the conservative regional and federal political climate.

2) Educators felt they were the “only one” at their school with knowledge and trust of the students. This position generated stress due to the intense circumstances of advising and supporting students who were often in crisis. They had an extra workload compared to other colleagues. However, they felt extremely fulfilled by working with students which, many reported, “made it all worth it.”

3) Educators found innovative methods connect with their students and signal their support of undocumented immigration issues. All participants reported they had gained trust of students (and some family members) by consistently validating student voices. Some educators simply allowed for more time to talk, one on one. Others were creative, for example having an expression wall, where students could put post-it notes of how they were feelings and what they were going through. The teacher would review the wall each week and allow time in class to discuss what was important to the students. Some shared that they had posters and brought up issues of immigration in positive ways to signal to their students they were an ally. Yet, about half of the educators revealed they found out about students’ immigration status when the student was asking for a letter of recommendation or needed a letter for a family member going through deportation hearing. Oftentimes, this was quite late into the students’ educational process or crisis that had been occurring for the family.

4) Educators reported having conflicts with students that can be conceptualize as having different worldviews. For example, educators were exasperated and disappointed when an academically strong student decided to work instead of going to college, not leave the area to attend a “better” school, or attend community college instead of a university. Some educators viewed the parents of

the undocumented students as being “in the way” of a student’s academic success. Few educators directly interacted with their undocumented students’ parents.

5) Despite their passion and commitment to support undocumented students, the educators in our study displayed some areas of inaccuracy related to immigration status and access to higher education, for example, not being aware of the admission process. The educators could not counter the students’ misperceptions about how to get into school and pay for it. Also, we noted that most of the educators inaccurately conflated DACA with being undocumented.

6) Some educators described their approach to undocumented student as “no different” than how they teach other students. Some of the phrases we noted in the interviews across the educators were: “I teach everyone the same”; “Their immigration status does not matter to me”; and, “It doesn’t have to be one ethnicity over another. [Hardship is] across the board for all students.” They demonstrated what Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2018) calls color-blind racism: an ideology that all people are the same and that struggles are the same. It perpetuates inequality because we are blinded from seeing the uniqueness of a students experiences and potential struggles. Color-blind racism dismisses the racialized system in education and negates that various groups require different access to resources.

### **Innovation**

This study represents one of the largest *qualitative* studies about educators who work with undocumented students. It is also timely due to the current intensification of immigration enforcement and the anti-immigration rhetoric at the national level. Our findings provide a starting point for schools, districts, and states to focus on training and supporting educators to best serve the needs of undocumented students.

The UndocuResearch Project represents an innovative approach to research. We are a collective mainly comprised of undocumented students and students from mixed-status families who train, analyze, present, and write together. Of interest to universities and colleges that strive to engage first generation, immigrant students in high impact practices, the UndocuResearch Project delivers high quality work and creates a sense of community among the research team members.

### **Limitations**

As a qualitative study, the sample is not meant to be representative of the teaching population. The methodology invites storytelling, remembering, and active problem solving throughout the interview.

Also, the educators in this study are teaching in a geographical space with intensive immigration enforcement. As an educator in the region explained: a

parent's deportation is no longer a crisis but a regular occurrence (Clark-Ibáñez, 2015). Yet, as we see immigration enforcement and work place raids extend to diverse regions in the United States (e.g., New Hampshire, Tennessee), the San Diego educators in this study are at the frontlines of communities under siege.

There was selection bias in the sample: teachers who were interested in sharing their experiences working with undocumented students were likely to be more knowledgeable about and have compassion for undocumented students. However, we noted that even educators at the forefront of working with undocumented students could still benefit from professional development and more resources.

### **Policy & Practice Recommendations**

The most impactful recommendation is to pass comprehensive, inclusive and humane immigration reform at the federal level. States that have no laws or have exclusionary laws and policies for higher education must reverse to increase opportunity and resources to for undocumented students.

Until then, schools, districts, and states can positively impact the educational trajectories of undocumented students. There are numerous high quality guides, such as from the American Federation of Teachers (2017) and Immigrant Rising (formally Educators For Fair Consideration), that educators and community members will find valuable.

Here, we share what emerged from our study:

- Educators should not feel alone in supporting undocumented students, which is the task of all educators. Administrative leaders and teacher unions have a crucial role to set the tone on making the laws clear, for example explaining the meaning of *Plyler v. Doe*.
- Educators who are on forefront exceptional teaching of undocumented students should be acknowledged and brought into community so that they can mutually support each other.
- All educators could benefit from professional development on key terminology and policies, an overview of the laws and policies of their state pertaining to education and immigration, and (if relevant) review the messages from leadership about the right to education for undocumented students.
- Creation of school-based resources offices for undocumented students, students from mixed-status families, and their families would consolidate resources, leverage expertise for training educators, and create networks and mentoring across centers/schools.
- Resources and training on trauma informed pedagogy.
- Transforming school and district policies that acknowledge changes in household, attendance, and other issues due to deportation of a family member.

- Creation of affirming spaces for undocumented students to receive accurate information from trusted educators and counselors.
- Supporting student clubs that attract undocumented students. Educators are often key partners and even initiators of clubs.
- Parent liaisons who are cultural ambassadors between the teachers and families and who serve as cultural translators to the school about Latinx norms and expectations in a way that retains the dignity of the Latinx parents and siblings.
- Hiring more bilingual staff and educators to meet the needs of Latinx, Spanish speaking undocumented families.
- Explicitly address color-blind racism with educators and at district levels.
- Partnerships between community based organizations and schools to provide the support to undocumented students and their families.

Bottom line: Empathetic educators who learn about policy and practices to support undocumented students and their families are trailblazers. The efforts of the individuals – especially when coming together in coalition with others – can and do make a significant impact on policy and practice.

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