

Examining Educational Equity for Undocumented High School Immigrant Students & The
Effects of COVID-19

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Introduction

For years the pervasive rise of anti-immigrant sentiments has constructed the narratives of undocumented immigrants by perpetuating harmful stereotypes and undesirable consequences for immigrant communities. These fabricated stories told by outsiders can shape the experiences and identity formation for immigrants. And for years undocumented immigrant youth have collectively resisted these arguments by publicly sharing their personal stories, challenging national and state anti-immigration policies, and expanding immigrant rights. These efforts had been demonstrated through the thousands of undocumented youth that organized and led marches, rallies, civil disobedience acts to gain national support for the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act (DREAM Act) despite the risk of deportation (Nicholls, 2013). Although the passage of the DREAM Act failed to pass in the Senate, youth leaders launched campaigns to pressure President Obama to sign an executive order, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) to grant temporary status and work authorization to eligible youth (Nicholls, 2013). Despite the current anti-immigrant actions and issues with DACA, youth leaders have reshaped the immigrant rights movement as the leading voices by organizing on the grounds to increase the voices of marginalized communities.

Founded in September of 2010 by UndocuQueer and UndocuWomxn folxs , The Inland Empire Immigrant Youth Collective (IEIYC) stemmed from the momentum of the DREAM Movement and the necessity of having a local grassroots organization led by immigrant youth to advocate for themselves ((Nicholls, 2013). The IEIYC is currently led by two empowering women, the executive director, Angel Fajardo, and the Youth Engagement Coordinator, Najayra Valdovinos with its mission: “to achieve equal access to higher education and to seek justice for

the immigrant community by empowering those most impacted by unjust policies” (IEIYC, n.d.). With over a million immigrants living in the Inland Empire (I.E.), the political environment has historically been hostile with I.C.E and U.S. Border Patrol raids in Latino neighborhoods and workplaces, while local law enforcement racially profiles immigrants and discriminatory policies impact these communities (De Lara, 2018). Organizations rooted in the community such as the IEIYC focuses on local advocacy and organizing in response to ICE and anti-immigrant policies and provides educational resources, legal assistance, and legal knowledge to empower community members. The IEIYC is heavily involved in organizing with local and national organizations such as Inland Coalition 4 Immigrant Justice and Mi Familia Vota to empower immigrant communities on social media and in-person through outreach events, programs, protests, and rallies.

The IEIYC actively supports equipping community members with knowing their rights through forums and “Teatro Popular” (an informational play performed by student actors about what to do when approached by I.C.E and local law enforcement). The organization is also igniting its efforts in advocating for Health4All California and researching UndocuElders for policy advocacy after the success of Health4Youth. To increase access to health care for all I.E. residents, the IEIYC hosts annual community health fairs for haircuts, dental care, vision screenings, physical therapy, and more services for free. Further, the IEIYC is currently educating and encouraging community members to participate in the 2020 Census to ensure that government funding is equally distributed based on the population.

By establishing relationships with high schools, community colleges, and universities across the Inland Empire, the IEIYC has played a central role in navigating high school

immigrant students through higher education. To bridge the educational gaps, the IEIYC hosts workshops on Money Matters, CA Earned Income Tax Credit, CA Dream Act, Citizenship and DACA Renewal, and scholarships for high school students, college students, and families. Also, the IEIYC seeks to empower the next generation of youth leaders to combat the evolving issues that impact them and their community through the Undocumented Mentorship Program (UMA).



For seven weeks, a cohort of youth ages 15 to 24 meet twice a week to undergo various workshops on organizing, advocacy building, leadership, and professional development led by the Youth Engagement Coordinator, Najayra Valdovinos. This program provides a safe space for youth to collectively gather, embrace, and share their identities without being labeled. The IEIYC counters the dominant yet tokenized stories of DREAMers by affirming the diverse experiences of students and empowering students to share their stories. Throughout the program, students learn how to create their platform and practice strategic storytelling rather than spreading blame on the institution. By providing students with the tools to succeed as community leaders, the IEIYC also alleviates the stress of students by providing holistic approaches to healing justice such as healing circles, indigenous practices, journaling, music, and art. In addition, each student receives a mentor as a resource to help prepare for interviews, careers/internships, and college applications. Once students complete the program, they receive a \$500 scholarship, long-lasting friendships, and mentorship.



The majority of my experiences as an intern have been socializing and fostering relationships with students in UMA. Speaking English, Spanish, and Spanglish, the UMA family has welcomed me into a warm environment with jokes and laughter. Through these workshops, I have witnessed their personal growth and willingness to be vulnerable and share their fears. As a

collective body, students mobilized and advocated for equal opportunities for higher education by sharing the obstacles they face, the resources that help, and the demands for improvement to California State Assemblymember Sabrina Cervante's (D-Corona). As conveyed through their personal experiences, the politically charged environment of illegality has embedded another layer of complexities that undocumented immigrant students face in schools such as restrictive access to postsecondary and career pathways. Further, a student recalled experiencing institutional neglect for the lack of inclusion at a high school for students who recently arrived in the United States and spoke no English. However, students also highlighted the roles of supportive teachers, counselors, and club advisors who made learning accessible by providing students with resources to succeed.

Research Focus

To advance the IEIYC efforts in creating a safe learning environment for undocumented immigrant high school students to reach their full academic potential, I want to understand the the roles of schools and educators with mitigating challenges that students chronically face in accessing learning and especially now during COVID-19. The purpose of this report is to shed light on the current inequities that could be exacerbated by the pandemic and the institutional services and programs that could support students during the academic year in the I.E.. Therefore, this report will be guided by three research questions and adopted to the context of COVID-19: What is the impact of exclusionary immigrant policies on a student's access to quality education? What are the roles of schools and educators in enhancing the overall support of students? What are the strategies to address the challenges faced by students?

I hope that this research provides education systems with an opportunity to bridge the academic achievement gaps for students by taking a holistic approach to issues impacting their education.

Literature Review

In *Plyler v. Doe* (1982), the Supreme Court upheld the rights of undocumented immigrants to attend K-12 public schools (Lukes, 2015). The Court ruled that “the deprivation of education takes an inestimable toll on the social, economic, intellectual, and psychological well being of the individual, and poses an obstacle to individual achievement” (Lowrey, 2019, para. 8). With access to education, schools are intended to socialize and discipline youth while preparing them with skills to contribute to the workforce and civic infrastructures (Lukes, 2015). The *Plyler* ruling, however, did not mention protecting students beyond post-secondary education, so undocumented students have continuously pushed for their rights to pursue a higher education and a path to citizenship through the DREAM movement and DACA. Some states have passed legislations for in-state tuition for public college and universities to increase access and affordability for undocumented students.

In spite of these effort, approximately 65,000 undocumented high school seniors graduate each year with only 5-10% enrolling in college (Gonzales, 2009). And, it is estimated that 1-3% of students become college graduates each year (Gonzales, 2009). Given the substantial low numbers of high school graduations, college enrollment, and college graduation, it is important to address the disparities in graduation rates among undocumented students. Therefore my literature review will highlight the inevitable barriers undocumented student (specifically Latinos, low-income, first-generation college students, ELLs) may face in accessing higher education and the important roles of schools and educators as allies.



English-Only Initiatives

English Language Learners (ELLs)—both undocumented and documented immigrant students—have been susceptible of underperforming in national and state standardized testing, and graduating at lower rates than non-English Learners (Lukes, 2015). Lukes stated that, “more than half of the 19 million first- and second-generation immigrant young adults in the U.S. come from Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America” (pp. 5). However, the U.S. allocates meager resources for immigrants learning English especially for learners over the age of 16 (Lukes, 2015). Throughout the U.S., public K-12 programs prioritize standardized-testing and proficiency in English and math, so ELLs are placed at disadvantage from non-ELLs because of literacy differences while the consequences are worse for newly arrived high school immigrant students with limited years of schooling (Lukes, 2015).

Drawn primarily from Lukes’s (2015) study examining the narratives of Latino immigrant youth, immigrants with very limited years of formal education experience feelings of fear, embarrassment and shame when entering classrooms. These challenges occur in navigating through subject-content courses taught in English, making these learning objectives inaccessible for students due to existing language barriers between a teacher and a student and the course material (Lukes, 2015). According to Cleung & Drabkin’s Bilingual Education in California (1999) case study, teachers at Bell Haven School reported that the majority of Latino students in their class lagged behind because of not comprehending the English-only material, while their parents could not support them with homework because they also lacked literacy.

Lukes (2015) revealed how administrative data perpetuate ELLs, particularly Latinos as high school dropouts without examining the factors that influence their educational pathway.

Further, Lukes (2015) suggested that the dropout stigma upon Latino ELLs as a “hard to serve population” prevents schools from enrolling students with literacy gaps due to the accountability systems that punish schools for not achieving mandatory academic standards. Although there are additional barriers that impact an ELL’s access to education, it is apparent that the linguistic challenges exacerbate academic struggles based on the disproportionately high dropout rates for ELLs. Lukes (2015) argued that the graduation rate in New York for non-ELLs was 75% which was half of the graduation rate for ELLs at 40%.

However, research studies propose that schools can restructure their ineffective programs to improve their achievements, graduation rates, and experiences at school by incorporating a student’s native language into instructional teaching for core classes (Lukes, 2015). Since traditional ELD programs have utilized a subtractive approach to heavily teach English-only, these programs subordinate native languages and dismiss the assets of bilingualism (Lukes, 2015). Since mastering English has been promoted highly with academic success, social, and economic opportunities (Lukes, 2015), ELLs must also be given the same opportunities to reach for their academic potential, which means building proficiency in grade level content areas through bilingual instructions.

Systemic Barriers

According to Enriquez’s (2015) research on the intersecting barriers that shape undocumented youths’ educational journeys, “Race, class, gender, and first-generation college student social locations largely set up undocumented youths’ social worlds so that immigration status limitations function as the reason for stopping out toward the end of their educational pathways” (pg. 1537). Multiple scholars have highlighted the primary limitations of immigration status to

access higher education, but these findings only attribute the voices and experiences of high-achieving undocumented college students and youth (Enriquez, 2015). However, Enriquez (2015) argued that race, class, and gender intersect with immigration status to shape educational pathways.

Research studies claim that low-income, undocumented, and ELLs are inadequately prepared for higher education due to attending underfunded K–12 schools (Chomsky, 2018). Garcia & Tierney (as cited in Chomsky, 2018) found that many undocumented students are first-generation college-goers and may not receive college preparation information and resources. According to the National Association for College Admission Counseling (as cited Kuroki & Preciado, 2018), undocumented students face severe challenges with being the first in their family to graduate, being less academically prepared, ineligible for federal financial aid, and forced to work to support their families.

In Enriquez's (2019) study to examine University of California's policies mitigating the consequences of illegality, 508 students responded to questions relating to immigration status and academic disruption. Among the 508 respondents, 79 percent reported being distracted in class,  74 percent lost time to study, 62 percent performed poorly on exams, and 52 percent missed class (Enriquez, 2019). Bean et al. (as cited in Gates, 2017) noticed that students living with an undocumented parent missed 1.25 and 1.5 years of overall K-12 school attendance, which can lead to lower academic performance and increase the likelihood of dropping out.

Furthermore, multiple studies report that youth impacted by anti-immigrant policies suffer holistically, experiencing an increased risk of mental and physical health problems, isolation, and significant academic underperformance when compared to their peers (Gates,

2017). The effects of raids, detentions, and deportations severely impact children's cognitive, behavioral, and psychological functioning, especially the trauma of witnessing their parents or family members being detained and deported (Gates, 2017). A study by Brabeck & Xu, (as cited in Gates, 2017) indicated that the legal vulnerability of parents and family members have direct consequences on children's well-being.

Even worse, undocumented immigrants are barred from accessing health care and government services (Gates, 2017). Despite being tax payers, undocumented immigrants are denied Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), the Social Security retirement benefit, Medicare, nonemergency Medicaid, the Children's Health Insurance Program, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, and the Housing and Urban Development Public Housing (Chomsky, 2018). According to Chomsky (2018), undocumented students are eligible for free and reduced-price meals but parents are fearful about filling out personal information. Xu and Brabeck's (as cited in Gates, 2017) study revealed that U.S. citizen children with undocumented parents have lower participation rates in social welfare programs due to the fear generated by anti-immigrant policies. In Enriquez's (2019) study, a UC first-year student recounted experiencing food insecurity and being stressed out because of hunger. Not only do these findings reflect the systemic barriers that influence youth's educational trajectories, but they focus on youth's overall physical, psychological, and social safety that impact their education.

Roles of Schools and Educators

Despite the adversities that students come across, schools and educators can play a pivotal role in supporting the needs of students (Chomsky, 2018). Since K-12 public schools cannot legally disclose a student's legal status (Gonzales, 2009), Chomsky (2018) suggested that schools can

become sanctuaries for immigrant children and their families too. In William Pérez's book about navigating higher education for undocumented Latino youth, Pérez emphasized the role of schools in shielding students from the effects of illegality:

“The school system . . . shelters them from the constraints and effects of ‘illegality.’ . . . The better and longer the buffer that suspends the effects of their ‘illegality’ is preserved, the stronger the opportunity to successfully compete in school, develop a positive self-image, and prepare themselves for full and active participation in the legal world” (Chomsky, 2018, pg. 160).

Multiple studies affirmed that schools served as trusted institutions to support the academic and psychosocial needs of students with higher at-school service utilization rates than community health centers (Gates, 2017). Students experience feelings of institutional neglect and isolation when schools are not prepared to meet their needs because they do not lack a form of social and emotional support (Enriquez, 2019). A study by Abrego (2008) found inclusive educational policies foster a sense of belonging, legitimacy and deservingness (Enriquez, 2019).

In Enriquez's (2019) study of the University of California policies on supporting undocumented students, 89% of 374 respondents reported that having a resource center dedicated to undocumented students positively impacted their academic success. The framework of the UCs policies aimed to meet the overall needs of undocumented students lead to better academic success reported by students with access to basic services (Enriquez, 2019). Students also reported that institutionalized services geared toward undocumented students increased access to information and support (Enriquez, 2019). Students also reported positive feelings of belonging and self-esteem with the representation of undocumented staff members on campus (Enriquez, 2019).

Educators serve as allies protecting the wellbeing of students (Chomsky, 2018). Chomsky stated, “teachers have an opportunity to create a safe haven for children who are threatened by immigration enforcement and who live under the cloud of family separation” (pg. 40). Further, Chomsky (2018) said, “teachers can communicate... that their classrooms are safe spaces where they have allies and can safely voice their fears. Teachers can become skilled at addressing the behavioral and performance challenges” (pp. Hammond (as cited in Chomsky, 2018) claimed positive social relationships can create a sense of physical, psychological, and social safety for students.

Studies have examined the positive relationships of students with organizational leaders, teachers and other program staff with providing institutional resources and academic opportunities, but these relationships may be the only forms of support that students have (Lukes, 2015). Further, educators can encourage grit (Enriquez, 2011). Drawn primarily from Gonzales’s (2010) article about the high school experiences of 78 undocumented youth in L.A., students in college-prep classes such as AP/IB and honor benefitted from the small class sizes, the college-going culture, and the relationships with teachers and counselors to advance to postsecondary education. A student recalled school being an escape for them where they could tell their teacher about legal status and difficulties at home and received support on college resources and scholarships (Gonzales, 2010). However, findings from this study indicate how respondents in general classes at overfunded urban high schools with teacher–student ratios as high as 40 to 1 experienced less individualized attention and opportunities to form positive relationships with teachers and school officials (Gonzales, 2010). Therefore, students who come

from socially disadvantaged backgrounds need school-based networks of support to guide through transitions in their lives while teachers can reduce the likelihood of dropping out.

Methodology

Although the literature review did not mention the impact of COVID-19, research studies focused on the existing barriers and educational inequities that impact academic learning and disruption. Since schools may serve as an escape for students from their environment at home, what does it mean for students who heavily depend on school for emotional, physical, and social support? As pointed out by literature review, undocumented students often experience institutional neglect depending on the attention and support that receive but how does virtual learning impact a student's learning especially ELLs and access to technology? However, institutional support services and educators interplay on the educational success and empowerment of students. Thus, I want to take a holistic approach like the IEIYC to ensure that students are being adequately supported during challenging times that impact their learning and the overall physical and mental well being of students.

The IEIYC seeks to understand the overall prioritization of institutional services geared toward undocumented high school immigrant students which can range from nutritional services, health services, and academic support before and during COVID-19. Therefore this study looked at the institutional services and programs geared toward undocumented students before and during COVID-19 to assess whether students were receiving appropriate support.

To evaluate students' feelings of the level of support received by institutional services before and during COVID-19, I used a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative data. My supervisor and I sent surveys (in English and Spanish) to 100 students to rate the services and programs at their school, the quality of ELD courses and their instructors,

and their school's effort to provide resources before and during COVID-19 on a 5-point Likert scale. The emails of students were obtained through IEIYC's Undocumented Mentorship Academy cohorts. Students under the age of 18 were required to fill out a consent form beforehand. Further, students had an option to explain their ratings and leave additional information on their experiences. We also followed up with each student to provide a list of resources.

Since my literature review indicated that educators may serve as the closest support system for students, I wanted to compare the students' feelings of the level of support with educators' and their perception on the quality of services in their high school. From my experience, I noticed that a large proportion of high school students from this current UMA cohort were enrolled in the Riverside Unified School District and Alvord Unified School District. So, I administered surveys to 23 educators (counselors and ELD teachers) from these districts via their email on the high schools websites. The survey designed for educators focused on their perception of the services and programs available for undocumented students before and during COVID-19. I asked participants to describe their years of professional experience and the amount of training required by their schools for development in cultural responsiveness.

Participants were also given the same questions of rating services and programs geared toward undocumented students prior to and during COVID-19 on a 5-point Likert scale. There was an option for participants to list and describe the current services and programs available while providing additional input on services that should be implemented to improve educational access for undocumented students. In addition, I collected data through the policies and budgets of the



California Department of Education, and school districts' superintendent meetings of the school districts to identify the resources provided for undocumented students.

I wanted to assess the quality of services prior to and during COVID-19 by finding the average ratings among the two sample populations, and comparing the average ratings between the two groups. My ultimate goal was a significant relationship between the student's rating before and during COVID-19, as well as the educator's rating before and during COVID-19. And, whether there was a relationship between the quality of the services based on the educators' perspective and students' rating as a result of COVID-19. However, only one student and one educator completed the survey



Findings

Although I could not complete my research study, I hypothesize that based on the current impacts of COVID-19, students may not receive enough institutional support that they previously had access to such as academic support, social network, nutritional, and health services. Further, school districts have ensured that students, specifically high school students were given chromebooks and hotspots for virtual learning. Based on the available data from the superintendent meetings, the Riverside Unified School District has served a total of 300,592 meals to schools, Meals on Wheels, day care, and shelters since March 16th to April 16th (Riverside Unified, 2020). And, the Riverside Unified School District has provided 14,000 chromebooks to students, specifically credit-bearing high school students. Even though schools have purchased hotspots for students, it is unclear to how many students actually have access to technology. Teachers from the Alvord Community Update April 15, 2020 reported that students were still being trained on how to use chromebooks and access resources from online. And, an ELD teacher (Alvord Unified School District, 2020) reported that students were being supported on how to navigate through both English language and computer jargon. From these superintendent and community meetings, school districts have been equipping students with technological devices to narrow the disparities in remote learning. However, how does remote learning impact academic performance for students who come from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and do not have the same resources?

Undocumented and mixed-status students and their families are disproportionately impacted by the negative economic and political consequences and adverse health effects of

COVID-19 (Gelatt, 2020). Millions of undocumented immigrants are either losing their jobs or working at the frontlines as agricultural workers, grocery workers, medical providers, and custodians. Yet they are excluded from receiving unemployment benefits, food stamps, federal relief funds, health insurance, and other government benefits due to their status and the public charge rule of inadmissibility. While family members are separated and detained at detention centers with COVID-19 cases (Solis, 2020). As pointed out by literature review, socio-economic hardships, family separation, and immigration status have direct effects on a student's physical, mental, and social well-being. It seems that undocumented students are not receiving the support they need to succeed in school due to the challenges of COVID-19.

Limitations

There were many limitations ranging from the unforeseen circumstances of COVID-19, sample population, and bias that affected the study. Since the surveys were conducted during COVID-19, I believe there are widespread issues such as health, economic, emotional, and physical challenges that students and educators had to deal with which may have prevented them from completing the surveys. Further, convenience sampling and selection bias limited the data to specifically UMA cohorts and educators from Riverside Unified School District and Alford Unified School District rather than the entire Inland Empire. I selected educators with emails listed from these school districts based on my experiences with the current UMA cohort however, I did not consider the educators of the school districts that UMA students attended and some educators did not have their emails listed. Therefore, the ratings of services available for educators were only applicable to their high schools and not representative of other school districts' services.

Recommendations

I recommend that researchers administer the online survey to every UMA students even those who graduated this academic school year and post this survey across undocumented high student-led organizations across the Inland Empire once the pandemic effects plunge. I also recommend that researchers spread the survey across counselors and ELD teachers across all school districts in the I.E.. This will provide a representative sample of students and educators in the I.E. The survey questions will encapsulate the three types of services that exist for students at their high schools and the quality of these services before and during COVID-19: (a) academic support, (b) mental health, (c) college preparation. I believe that this would provide a comprehensive understanding of the existing programs that support the overall needs of students and indicate the lacking services.



Conclusions

Although the impacts of COVID-19 have intensified systemic barriers for undocumented immigrant students especially ELLs, schools and educators can redefine their roles as academic gatekeepers to nurture, engage, and empower students beyond classroom walls. With school districts focused on the academic achievements and standardized test scores, administrators and educators feel pressured to prepare students for remote learning but need to address the disparities in remote learning that may affect their education. It is predicted that for every 1,000 high school freshmen in the I.E., only 151 students will complete a bachelor's degree at a California public university (Complete College America, n.d.). Therefore, the IEIYC is committed to addressing the challenges that affect low-income and first-generation high school

immigrant students in accessing higher education. The Public Policy Institute of California projects that “California needs 1.1 million more workers with bachelor’s degrees by 2030 to keep up with economic demand” (Strean, 2017, para.1). To bridge the opportunity gap and meet the future needs of California, high schools need to empower and provide students with accessible resources to achieve their economic goals especially with the effects of COVID-19. The shared adversity has given schools an opportunity to assess what they can do to ensure the success of all students as Harvard Professor Paul Reville states:

the best that can come of this is a new paradigm shift in terms of the way in which we look at education, because children’s well-being and success depend on more than just  schooling. We need to look holistically, at the entirety of children’s lives’ (Mineo, 2020).

In order for school districts to prepare for the upcoming academic school year, schools can focus on the existing services that already support students and build on these resources to improve educational experiences and opportunities.



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