The Lives of "Undocumented" Students in Education

Article By:

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Abstract:

This article is the final installment of a two part series that analyzes how “undocumented” students make sense of school, schooling, and their social standing in the U.S. Based on two years of ethnographic research with 20 undocumented Mexican immigrant college students in California, this study examines the factors that have led these students to abandon their state of “social invisibility” and participate in higher education. The study finds that undocumented students decide to seek a higher education in an attempt to improve their chances for upward social mobility and incorporation into mainstream U.S society. They also see schools as safety zones and schooling as a mechanism of assimilation. This paper further explores how segmented assimilation theory can be utilized to understand the processes by which these students’ assimilate into mainstream U.S society. Lastly, the paper considers how assimilation theory can be expanded to better understand and depict the divergent paths of immigrant incorporation in the U.S.

The series continues with Confronting Obstacles through Agency and Social Networks. This second and final part of the series explores the obstacles, the safety issues and civic engagement these students enter into. The conclusion weighs in on the desire for the students to pursue higher education and not wait for the resolution of the political debates.
Introduction

Upon arriving in the United States, Mexican immigrant students face myriad obstacles, problems, and educational needs. In addition to dealing with the emotional stress associated with adjusting to a new physical and social environment, as students, they must cope with the need to learn English and adapt to new cultural norms and expectations. They are also confronted with problems like poverty, high residential mobility, broken ties with family and communities in their native countries, and the loss of social support networks (Duran & Weffer 1992). Immigrant students are also likely to face inadequate and unequal educational opportunities, and those without legal status are more likely to drop out of school and not pursue higher education.

In spite of these obstacles, some “undocumented” students make it into college and earn a degree. This is especially striking when one considers the relatively low rates of completed schooling among the Latino population as a whole. What are the reasons that explain the decision by some undocumented Mexican immigrant students to pursue higher education, while others (undocumented and documented immigrants, as well as U.S.-born Latinos) do not? What are the protective factors that allow some students to overcome the barriers that stand in the way of obtaining a college degree? These are the central questions that guide this study.

I explore these questions by first reviewing the historical and contemporary context that has produced the anti-immigrant climate undocumented students face in the U.S. today and the ways in which several key immigration policies and laws have helped to shape this context. I follow this historical overview in the first installment with a description of the different methodological tools utilized by this study to document the daily struggles of undocumented students.

In this second installment, I present excerpts of students’ stories which illustrate the complexities of their daily experiences as undocumented Mexican immigrant students and their incorporation into U.S. society and the obstacles they face. Lastly, I discuss segmented assimilation theory, its usefulness for explaining the experiences of the students profiled in this
study, as well as its shortcomings. I conclude with a proposal for how assimilation theory can be enhanced and best utilized to help explain the experiences of undocumented students.

The words and experiences of participants in this study demonstrate the complex circumstances and different situations that enable some undocumented students to pursue a college degree. They also show how students, whose lack of legal status places them at risk of arrest and deportation, can effectively negotiate and avoid the various obstacles that all too frequently push Latinos out of schools and institutions of higher education. These stories not only challenge the dominant belief that Latinos, and more specifically Mexicanas/os, do not value education, but they prove that the experiences of undocumented students are far more complex than what can be explained through dichotomous typologies of success and failure adopted by assimilation models.

Through this paper, I hope to challenge this prevailing dichotomy and present instead a more complex understanding of how undocumented students who come from rural backgrounds understand schools, schooling, and their social position within U.S society. I also propose an alternative way of viewing student persistence – one that recognizes the possibility of multiple pathways to higher education and as a result, multiple processes of community incorporation. Finally, in addition to revealing shortcomings in the literature on Latino youth achievement this paper proposes additional factors, including the importance of legal status, that must be considered when developing theories that seek to explain Latino youth achievement and assimilation. Let us continue.

**Confronting Obstacles through Agency and Social Networks**

*It is something I have to think about every day, it is something that whether I like it or not dictates many things in my life. Even in little things like where to go look for a job, going clubbing and not having an ID, or simply driving....I have to worry about check points or getting pulled over, that is why I drive like an old lady....It’s funny, but anytime I go out with my friends we might leave at the same time to go somewhere, but I am always the last one to get there because I drive so cautious.*

-Laly, female, 18 years old
Undocumented students face myriad obstacles when it comes to school and schooling. They not only have to worry about learning the language and making sure they pass the rest of their general education requirements, but they also have to deal with daily struggles that for many of us are simple and insignificant.

For example, finding a way to get to school is something many of us do not think about very often because we drive and or have easy access to transportation. However, many of these students have to think about this and “say a prayer” every morning before they walk out the door. Most perform their daily ritual of making the sign of the cross, as devout Catholics do, the minute they jump in their cars. They ask God not only to protect them from getting involved in an automobile accident, but also to protect them from getting pulled over or running into a police or ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) check point along their way:

*I just ask God to watch over me. He knows I am not trying to cheat the law. He knows I have to por necesidad no por gusto [due to necessity not want], because believe me, I am always super scared to be driving, especially when I see a police car behind me, I start shaking so bad and then I just start praying.*

-Chiquilina, female, 20 years old

For most of these students, schools have provided them with the opportunity to expand their social capital and form ties and friendships that help to “shield” them from the legalities that threaten their freedom, such as ending up in jail for driving without a license or not holding a valid ID. Many have made friends at school who are now aware of their situation and provide transportation for them.

Schools can also be a source of stress for these students. Finding a way to pay for tuition, fees, and books is a struggle these college students face every semester. Because of their legal status, these students are barred from receiving any financial aid. In addition, their undocumented status forces them into low paying service sector jobs. All participants in this study hold one or more part-time or full-time jobs. This places an additional burden on these students, as they are forced to juggle multiple jobs, academic work, and domestic responsibilities.
Schools serve as spaces where strong alliances and connections can be formed with other individuals who may, in different ways, aid them through their academic journey. In Jalisqueña's case, school friends offered her financial support:

* * * 

*I feel really good and lucky to know that I have met good friends here at the college. They are always there to help me in any way that they can. Like in finding a job or for example, this semester all the [Latino higher education student organization] club members, which happen to be all my friends, got together and decided that the money we had gathered through participating in some events was going to be given to me so that I could pay for my classes and books for this semester….It wasn’t enough, so some also gave from their pockets and one even asked her parents to help me and they paid for my tuition.*

-Jalisqueña, female, 20 years old

* * *

These students also enjoy considerable emotional support from their friends at school and often state that they could not imagine their life without school or their friends.

*I probably would have no friends and I probably wouldn’t go out very much since that is who I go out with. My life would be depressing and boring, I probably wouldn’t even have goals. For me, I get my motivation from my friends at school. They are always cheering me on and telling me I can do it and I also learn a lot from them about different careers and stuff.*

-Gigi, female, 19 years old

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These students not only receive considerable support from friends and family, but they are also grateful to have the opportunity to attend school, especially since back in their native, rural Mexico, public education ends at sixth grade (Valenzuela 1999). While these students also have criticisms of American schools, their sense of gratitude and privilege tend to mute those criticisms. Guero states,

*I am grateful and thank God that I somehow have the opportunity to go to college because I am sure there is lots of other people that also don’t have papers and wish they could attend. In college I have had the opportunity to meet people in the same situation that I am in and with the same goal of getting educated. I know that if I was just working, I would probably only know*
undocumented immigrants whose goal was just to earn money to pay their bills here (the U.S.) and send money back to Mexico. - Guero, male, 23 years old

Schools as Sites of Safety and Civic Engagement

[B]esides learning what I need to learn for school and my classes, when I come to school it is the only time I also have to hang out with my friends, like in between classes, you know. - Laly, female, 18 years old

Obtaining a degree is not the only reward that can accompany the pursuit of an academic career. These students also recognize that schools and schooling offer them a space in which to expand their social capital by building social networks and a space that fosters a feeling of “normality.” Many of these students, such as Laly, find that school and home are the only two places where they feel “safe” and “normal”:

When I am at home or at school I feel like a normal young person. I don’t worry about watching my back to see if la migra is anywhere around. I feel like in those two places I don’t...like....I don’t feel like I am doing anything wrong or like I am not supposed to be there. At home...well...it is my house and everyone knows my legal status even though we don’t really talk about it much and at school, well, I forget that I am undocumented and just focus on doing my work, doing it well, and getting good grades just like any other normal student... -Laly, female, 18 years old

Fear often pushes undocumented immigrants into the “shadows” and away from many community events. They avoid being highly active and visible within their communities and shy away from anything that might highlight their presence for fear of getting caught by ICE. As a result, they become isolated from the larger community. Schools serve as spaces where these students can create or plug into pockets or “safety zones” where they are able to share their stories and their daily struggles without feeling judged.

The fear of being judged, reported to ICE, and “caught” and deported is a pressing fear in these students’ minds. Polls show that just over half of all Hispanic adults in the U.S. worry that they, a family member, or a close friend could be deported. Nearly two-thirds say the failure of
Congress to enact an immigration reform bill has made life more difficult for all Latinos (Pew Hispanic Center 2007). Many of these students carry with them a pocket phone book or a list of phone numbers in their cell phones that they can call if they get “caught” and deported. Most have talked this through with their families and have developed a plan for whom they will call, where they will go, and how they will get back to the U.S.

Additionally, schools serve as a place where undocumented students “recharge [their] batteries.” It is a place where they find friendships and motivation, and oftentimes it is a place where they find people who care about them without caring about their legal situation. In her study of Mexican immigrant students, Angela Valenzuela writes that Mexican immigrant students will tend to care more about their classes and schooling if they find that their professors care about them (1999). My informants also indentified the caring they receive as an important factor in their desire to do well in school. Lola explains,

*Here [at Napa Valley College] I found counselors and professors that really care about me and not my papers. They see that I am a hard worker and that I want to do well in life. They are always here to help me in whatever I need. They are always keeping me informed of scholarships and laws that are out there that could help me. Like for example, thanks to my college counselor, I found out I could come to college and he helped me fill out all the paperwork...and then sometimes I have had to explain to my teachers that I won’t be able to afford my books till later in the semester, and they always give me copies of the readings or let me borrow the books while I save enough money to buy my own.* -Lola, female, 20 years old

Schools also provide opportunities for undocumented students to become active within the larger community by participating in different academic clubs and student organizations. Because of their student status, students like Princhipecha believe that if an immigration raid were to happen at a community event, they would be less likely to be targeted by ICE than immigrants who are not students:

*Being in college allows me to uhmm...the opportunity to join clubs through which I can participate in school and other community activities that I know I would not participate in if I was just doing the regular undocumented Mexican thing. I know other people who don’t come to college and they are afraid to participate in community events because they think that someone*
might ask them for their papers or something.
- Princhipeccha, female, 22 years old

Through an array of clubs and organizations such as ASB (Associated Student Body), CHA (Club Hispano Americano), SRB (Students Rompiendo Barreras), RISE (Rising Immigrant Scholars Through Education) and other university-based clubs and organizations at UC Davis, UC Berkeley, UC San Francisco, UCLA, and Stanford, undocumented students become highly active within the school environment. They use these activities as “shields” that help to facilitate their participation in larger community activities which in turn fosters a feeling of membership in the American mainstream.

Clubs not only help students become integrated into the life of the college and community, they also act as encouragements for staying enrolled in college. As Tinto (1975, 1993) suggests, the more students feel they are part of the college context, the more likely they will be to stay.

**Conclusion**

Immigration reform dominates contemporary political debates, but undocumented Mexican students pursuing a higher education are not willing to wait for it. They are not willing to put their academic careers on hold for something that might take decades to achieve. Instead, they have chosen to step out of the shadows, risking deportation, in order to advance their educational goals. Hope and the opportunity for social upward mobility are two major reasons that explain why these students take such risk.

Undocumented students hope that by obtaining a higher education, they will ultimately be granted a path to legalization that will allow them to become fully incorporated into mainstream America. Also, for these students, schools and schooling function as mechanisms not only for becoming legalized, but for achieving social upward mobility. Contrary to the myth that Latinos do not value education, these students are not only willing to risk deportation to get an education, but they see the benefits of obtaining a higher education even if they do end up getting deported.

These students also utilize and conceptualize a variety of protective factors that allow them to overcome barriers that stand in the way and truncate many students’ dreams of pursuing and
obtaining a college degree. For example, they utilize and conceptualize schools as “safety zones” that help them cope with their legal status and also “shield” them from the obstacles they have to deal with on a daily basis. Their “illegality” does not prevent them from participating in activities that foster a feeling of U.S. membership. Instead, scholastic mechanisms, such as clubs, facilitate the involvement of undocumented students within college and community life.

The fact that these students use schools as a means for participating within the larger community also reflects how they view the U.S. These students view this country as their homeland and place of permanent residency. The only thing keeping them from fully being incorporated as citizens of this country is their legal status – an ascribed characteristic given by the state. Gigi and Guerrero both offer powerful expressions of these sentiments:

*My mom brought me here to have a better life...I want to be a normal [American] person you know. I don’t want to feel like I am different. I don’t want to be another uneducated illegal Mexican in the states, Quiero ser alguien importante, quiero ser una persona educada y pues asi poder alcanzar el famoso sueno Americano [I want to be someone important, I want to be an educated person and that way be able to reach the famous American Dream].*

-Gigi, female, 19 years old

*I am doing what many U.S. citizens are not even doing. I have never gotten in trouble with the law, I have excelled in school and have received numerous awards that show my potential and hard work, I am now getting close to reaching my career goals...What else does the government want to see?...All I can say to people who think us immigrants shouldn’t be here is...give us the opportunity, don’t cut our wings off before we can fly...*

-Guerrero, male, 23 years old

By illuminating the struggles, motivations and successes of undocumented students, and the critical role that higher education plays in their lives, this paper contributes to our understanding of immigrant incorporation trajectories. It also sheds light on an area that is not accounted for in current discussions of immigrant incorporation and assimilation and in segmented assimilation theory, especially. Segmented assimilation theory is by far the only theoretical framework that comes close to providing an explanation of the varying educational achievement levels and of the divergent paths immigrant youth take when transitioning into the receiving society.
Unfortunately, those segmented assimilation studies that do include undocumented students in their sample do not analyze the effects of undocumented status on these youths’ educational trajectories (Portes, 1996; Fernandez-Kelley & Curran, 2001). In addition, segmented assimilation theory does not fully account for the role of the state in restricting the assimilation of immigrants who lack legal status.

Instead of the multi-tiered and linear model of assimilation offered by segmented assimilation theorists, I propose that we recast this model in the form of a three dimensional sphere – what I call “La Esfera De La Vida del Imigrante en los Estados Unidos” (i.e “The sphere of U.S. immigrant life”). (See Figure 1.) This sphere represents U.S. society and contains two “pipelines” through which immigrants enter – one for documented immigrant flows and the other for undocumented immigrants.

Figure 1 contains two pipelines because the traveling experiences and mode of entry of documented and undocumented immigrants and the reception they encounter when they set foot upon American soil differ greatly. While documented immigrants enter the U.S. through traditional legal routes such as airports or border entry points, undocumented immigrants typically do so by traversing dangerous terrain – a journey that can often lead to death. Additionally, immediately upon arrival in the U.S., documented immigrants are welcomed by flight attendants and federal immigration officers, whereas undocumented immigrants are hidden by “coyotes” (smugglers) who transport them to different points along their journey until they reach their final destination in the U.S. where they are received by family or friends.

According to segmented assimilation theory, after arriving in the U.S. immigrants are slowly subdivided into different segments. These include the three segments outlined by Portes and Zhou (1993) (acculturation and integration into the white middle class, “permanent poverty and assimilation into the underclass,” and rapid economic advancement while preserving the immigrant community’s “values and tight solidarity” [p. 82]), and a fourth segment – assimilation into America’s upper class. The segment each immigrant will ultimately fall into largely depends on the context of reception, which Portes and Rumbaut define to include racial stratification, spatial segregation, and government policies (2001). I argue that the role of the state and its stringent policies that prevent undocumented students from fully assimilating and
Joining the middle and upper classes of American society must also be included in how we conceptualize the immigrant’s context of reception.

In contrast to Portes and Zhou’s (1993) one-dimensional model of segmented assimilation, I propose a multidimensional model represented by the sphere above, in which the four segments blur into one another with no clear delineation of where each segment begins or ends. Individuals may enter a specific segment of American society, but they also move in or out of these segments depending on their individual circumstances at specific points in time and the array of factors that affect the upward (or downward) social mobility of immigrants.

My model also designates the role of the state, which has been underemphasized and underdeveloped in previous models of segmented assimilation. The dashed line represents the powerful role played by the state as both a gatekeeper and a filter. The state permits those who hold the proper U.S. documentation (permanent residents or naturalized citizens) to advance into the white middle and upper classes, and it obstructs those who do not. Emphasizing the role played by the state in shaping immigrant assimilation exposes the fact that no matter how hard an undocumented immigrant works, as long as his or her legal status remains static, he or she will never be fully integrated into the American white middle or upper classes. This is the case for undocumented students in higher education who seek to follow what Portes and Zhou (1993) describe as the “time-honored portrayal of growing acculturation and parallel integration into the white middle class.” Without legal status, even after obtaining a college degree these students are unable to fully participating in mainstream white middle-class professional American jobs and institutions. By denying legal status to undocumented immigrant students, the state effectively blocks their integration into the middle or upper sectors of American society.
Figure 1

Within the Sphere:
Purple = upper class
Blue = “growing acculturation and parallel integration into the white middle class”
Yellow = “rapid economic advancement with deliberate preservation of the immigrant community’s values and tight solidarity”
Red = “permanent poverty and assimilation into the underclass”

Within the pipelines:
Purple, blue, and yellow = upper and middle class immigrants
Yellow and red = middle and lower class immigrants

Dashed line: the state and its stringent immigration policies

NOTE: The pipeline that is predominantly blue and purple represents legal entry into the U.S.
(The yellow within this predominantly blue and purple pipeline represents middle and upper class immigration policies.
undocumented immigrants who pay “coyotes” higher prices to enter through legal checkpoints.) The pipeline below it, which is a mixture of red and yellow represents illegal entry into the U.S. The dashed line represents the state and its restrictive immigrant policies. The specks of red and yellow within the predominantly blue and purple area above the dashed line represent educated professional immigrants who have become permanent residents or naturalized citizens and have managed to assimilate into the top strata of U.S. society. The mixture of purple, blue, yellow, and red colors below the dashed line represents the co-existence of those who at one point belonged to the top strata of society but for some reason have “moved down” and joined undocumented immigrants within the middle and lower classes of the U.S. social structure.

**Segmented assimilation theory** offers an idealized, simplified, and one-dimensional model of assimilation. It must be modified to be useful as a framework for explaining and illuminating the divergent outcomes of immigrant incorporation, especially those experienced by undocumented immigrants in the U.S. As this paper demonstrates, the experiences of undocumented students are far more complex than what can be explained through dichotomous typologies of success and failure adopted by assimilation models. Indeed, it is imperative that other factors such as the role of the state and its stringent policies are emphasized and fully taken into account when discussing the assimilation or lack thereof of immigrants in the U.S. It is my hope that by recasting segmented assimilation as both multidimensional and mediated by the state, scholars, politicians, policy makers, citizens and residents of the U.S. will better understand and respond to the complexities of the lived experiences of underrepresented minorities within the U.S., including those of undocumented students in higher education. Finally, I hope to provide individuals who are not already aware of and are not sensitive to the daily struggles faced by undocumented immigrants, a small but significant window into the everyday struggles these students face and the austere and unequal terrain on which these students are expected to perform but nevertheless succeed in reaching their academic goals.

**References**


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