

# **Increasing Knowledge Related to the Experiences of Undocumented Immigrants in Public Schools**

**Kaetlyn Lad and Désirée Braganza**  
*St. Mary's College of California*

*This article describes the experiences of school personnel working with undocumented immigrants in public schools and the opinions and attitudes of school personnel. The resulting propositions are: (1) Undocumented students and their parents live with a great deal of psychological stress on a daily basis; (2) Undocumented students face multiple academic challenges and their families have difficulty maneuvering through the US education and social system to access services; and (3) The lack of adequate attention to the needs of undocumented students and their families is both a civil rights and human rights issue.*

Our interest in immigrant education evolved from two situations that occurred when working with “newcomer” students at a middle school in Northern California, the majority of whom were Latino. Newcomers are students who have lived in the United States for a year or less.

The first situation was a conversation with a colleague on the first day of teaching a new class. She informed me that a group of students had been termed the “No-Good-Morning-Kids” by faculty because whenever someone said good morning to them, they stared back blankly.

The second situation happened a few months into the school year and during an ordinary moment in the life of a middle school -- passing period. One of my students made the shape of a gun with his hand and from behind, pointed it to my head yelling “¡La migra! ¡Deme sus documentos!” (Translated from Spanish: Immigration! Give me your documents!). Then, the student giggled and looked to see whether I “got” the inside joke. Until then, I had missed a key factor driving my students’ everyday existence: their fear of being deported from the United States because of their immigration status or, as the students said, failing to have the proper immigration documents. These were the experiences that generated my interest in how immigration status as well as other obstacles such as language (as in the No-Good-Morning Kids anecdote), policy, social and cultural differences impacted undocumented students as they transitioned to schools in the United States.

## **IMPORTANTANCE OF THE PROBLEM**

The Immigration and Nationality Act, a core federal immigration law in the United States, labeled any non-citizen as a “nonimmigrant alien”. The Department of Homeland Security has used the term “undocumented immigrant” in defining immigrants who have entered the United States illegally (Pew Hispanic Center, 2006). Legal immigration to the United States.

Educational Leadership and Administration: Teaching and Program Development  
Volume 24, January 2013

ISSN 1532-0723 © 2013 California Association of Professors of Educational Administration

The United States Supreme Court decision *Plyler v. Doe* in 1982 upheld the rights of both documented and undocumented immigrant parents to send their children to American public schools. This law made illegal (a) asking parents for documentation of citizenship status or social security numbers when registering their children in K-12 public schools. (b) Schools sharing knowledge of a child's immigration status with other individuals or government agencies that enforce immigration laws (Joel, 2007).

Policies regarding the education of undocumented immigrant students have remained vague or absent in most school districts (Jung, 2006; Orfield, 1986). This study examined the self-reported experiences of former undocumented immigrant students compared to the perceptions of the K-12 staff and faculty in the school districts that they attended.

### **OVERARCHING RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Three questions guided this study. (a) What obstacles do students who were formerly undocumented report as barriers that impacted their educational success? (b) How did the experiences of former undocumented students compare with the perceptions of K-12 public school administration, faculty and staff? (c) How can we capture this research in order to encourage professional development of administrators, faculty and staff, and creation of school policies?

### **THEORETICAL FRAME**

The research was framed within the context of the intersection between social contract theory and social capital theory. Undocumented families experience the everyday tension that exists when agreements are nebulous and the contract is weak.

Social contract theory posits the existence of an understood agreement between individual members and society as a whole. This contract informs implicit and explicit conventions of behavior within that society (Enright, 2011; Halpern, 2004; Hobbes & Martinich, 2002; Lareau, 2003; Reed and Johnson, 2000; Serageldin & Dasgupta, 2001). All citizens theoretically enjoy privileges granted by the Bill of Rights based on upholding of their responsibilities (e.g., obeying laws, paying taxes, voting, etc...) (Morris, 1999; Reed and Johnson, 2000). Social capital theory is defined as one's access to and ability to take advantage of social network connections. This has placed undocumented immigrants in a unique position given their status and deportation if identified, and has kept undocumented parents from participating in their children's education even though their children have legally attended public schools (Baum & Flores, 2011).

The success of immigrant students in American school systems has been partly attributed to the amount of social capital their families possess (Halpern, 2004; Pew Hispanic Center, 2006). Social capital has referred to connections within and between social networks. For immigrants, social capital has remained critical in whether they thrive in their new country (Douglass, 2007). If, for example, undocumented immigrants from Mexico have found a community network of support, their social capital correspondingly has increased (Espinosa & Massey, 1997; Fry, 2002; Fuligini, 2005).

## FROM THE LITERATURE

Forms of social capital were identified by Pierre Bourdieu who differentiated capital to include economic and cultural capital (Lareau, 2003). Lareau studied the influence of social capital on two very different socioeconomic school districts. She found that students and parents at a school in an affluent school district behaved differently than those in a low-income community (Lareau, 2003). The effect on the educational experience was that students and parents in the affluent district were more informed and strongly advocated for their needs, whereas students and parents in the low income districts were more trusting and believed that school officials would look out for their best interests. Students in the affluent school were also encouraged to engage with the adults at the school site while students in the low-income school were more fearful and reverent of adults and therefore their interactions were limited.

The challenges of “becoming an American parent” were studied by Perreira & Chapman (2006). Latino parents divulged the obstacles they faced when becoming acculturated to their new American community. The most difficult factor was overcoming the disconnection felt from loss of their social community and lack of extended family support that they relied on in their home countries. Additionally, parents felt “social and economic segregation” as many experienced a change in social status once they moved to the United States. Further, these parents said that they experienced racism as they sought to maneuver the system to educate and provide healthcare for their children.

At the same time, Lopez (2007), Monkman, Ronald, & Theramene (2005), Perreira & Chapman (2006) and Torres (2004) found that immigrant families were “resilient”, open to adaptations and often were willing to explore their options and let go of their own values in order to gain access to what they needed. For example, they sought help through Latino community centers to learn how better to support their children in American schools while at the same time holding on to their cultural heritage. In this sense, Latino immigrants, both parents and children, have “bi-cultural coping skills”.

Communication has remained a major barrier faced by Latino immigrants when their children entered school (Enright, 2011). In a 2003 study by Lipsit, 294 Latino immigrants were surveyed in New York City. The population was newly arrived immigrants to the United States who had registered to take English as a Second Language classes but this did not solve the immediate communication need. The majority of immigrant parents reported they had problems communicating with school site staff at their child or children’s school. This difficulty occurred when they were not provided translators. In cases where parents did request a translator, 22% of parents reported that their request was not honored. Parents also struggled to decipher written communication from school that was not in their primary language (Lipsit, 2003). Other obstacles have hindered parents from participating in their children’s school on a day-to-day basis (e.g., not being able to read parent newsletters and not learning about opportunities for parental involvement). Immigrant parents have been cut off from the more influential decisions regarding the course of their child’s education (Lipsit, 2003; Romo, 1996; Ramirez, 2003).

The literature showed immigrant parents have continued to be marginalized regarding involvement in decision-making involving their children’s grade assignment, school placement or placement in special education classes (Lipsit, 2003; Ramirez, 2003; Romo, 1996). Lipsit (2003) opined there was greater risk of immigrant children being assigned to Special Education because second language issues were interpreted as learning problems.

Over representation in special education has tended to occur because immigrant parents have felt intimidated by “highly educated school personnel” and/or not understanding technical assessment reports sent home that describe their child’s disability even when translated into their primary language (Al-Hassaon & Gardner, 2002; Lipsit, 2003; Romo, 1996). However, Al-Hassan & Gardner (2002) reported parents who had strong English skills were able to communicate effectively and better understood their children’s special educational needs.

### LAPSE IN THE LITERATURE

A review of the research indicated a dearth of studies related to the experiential challenges of undocumented immigrants. Specifically, research giving voice to the academic and affective needs of students and best practices in meeting these needs.

### DEFINITIONS OF TERMS

Following are terms that were used throughout this study.

Table 1  
*Definition of Terms*

| Term                               | Definition  |
|------------------------------------|---|
| Undocumented Immigrant             | Constructed by the Department of Homeland Security as an official category identifying immigrants who have entered the country illegally. Other common terms: <i>undocumented alien, unauthorized immigrant, illegal immigrant, illegal alien, undocumented migrant, migrant, unauthorized immigrant worker, and unauthorized resident.</i> |
| English as a Second Language (ESL) | A long standing education term classifying students whose primary language is not English. The Department of Education replaced <i>ESL</i> with <i>English Language Learner</i> (ELL) and now <i>English Learner</i> (EL), although all three are commonly used interchangeably. This study will use the term English Learner.              |
| Social Capital                     | Refers to the value of one’s network of connections which allow you to build relationships, maneuver through social systems or gain access to needed or desired resources.  |
| Social Contract                    | An explicit or implicit set of agreements between the residents of a society that allow for social order. In exchange for following the social contract, residents are given certain guarantees.  |

### THIS UNIQUE STUDY

This study took place in an urban area of Northern California where there is a large undocumented Latino population (Pew Hispanic Center, 2007). Because of the sensitivity of

the topic and the difficulty gaining trust, immigrant participants were recruited using previously established connections with area community organizers and others who were close to members of the Latino community. Only adult immigrant volunteers who were formerly undocumented and who are currently legal US residents or citizens were asked to participate.

## **METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative methodology was utilized that combined convenience and snowball sampling (Patton, 2003) immigrant and K-12 site staff participants. Immigrant volunteers resided in the United States as legal residents or citizens.

In order to form a context for the data gathered, initial immigrant questionnaires and potential interview questions were developed using the two broad theories of social contract and social capital. These theories formed the basis for the theoretical framework and consistently emerged in the literature review (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Once the immigrant questionnaires had been collected, a Contact Summary Form for each questionnaire was utilized as a tool to outline key themes, summarize information, identify unanticipated responses and to develop questions to form interview protocol for in-person interviews. In the first source of data, former undocumented immigrants were asked to complete a written questionnaire. Responses from these questionnaires were recorded and coded and used as the frame for the in-person interview questions. Next, in-depth, in-person or phone interviews lasting one to two hours were conducted with each consenting participant.

Interview techniques were developed based on guidelines created by Merton (1990) that support “retrospection” or a participant’s ability to recount and self-reflect on specific experiences. Five interviews were conducted in-person. Most participants chose to meet in a public place like a coffee shop or a restaurant. Due to scheduling difficulties, distance or participant preference, four interviews were conducted over the phone. Three participants declined or were not able to participate in an interview, but gave permission for their questionnaire responses to be used in this study.

Follow-up phone interviews were scheduled as needed. Interviews were digitally recorded and saved on a hard drive as mp3 sound file then transcribed. Codes were identified and analyzed for patterns, from which emerged common themes.

A separate open-ended questionnaire was administered to two groups of K-12 school site faculty and staff based at schools located in the same area as the immigrant participants. One group consisted of teachers and administrators and the second group consisted of school site support staff ranging from counselors, administrative assistants, and parent liaisons to educational tutors. Both groups were asked about their training and experiences with undocumented students and their families.

These data were organized and displayed using Contact Summary Forms (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The data were then coded for patterns. As with the immigrant data, data sets two and three were analyzed for the emergence of key themes. Data from the two K-12 public school site groups were compared to the responses given by immigrant participants. While data from each group was analyzed separately, the resulting propositions were a product of the collective analysis of key themes from all three groups. Ultimately, crossing themes were stated as propositions.

Table 2  
*Demographics*

| <b>Psuedonym</b> | <b>Age</b> | <b>Sex</b> | <b>Country</b> | <b>Contact</b>                     |
|------------------|------------|------------|----------------|------------------------------------|
| Miguel           | 18         | M          | Mexico         | Questionnaire and Interview (IP)*  |
| Jair             | 26         | M          | Mexico         | Questionnaire and Interview (IP)*  |
| Roxana           | 34         | F          | Mexico         | Questionnaire and Interview (IP)   |
| Grecia           | 35         | F          | Mexico         | Questionnaire and Interview (IP)   |
| Pablo            | 37         | M          | Mexico         | Questionnaire and Interview (IP)   |
| Dora             | 22         | F          | Mexico         | Questionnaire                      |
| Marta            | 35         | F          | El Salvador    | Questionnaire                      |
| Laura            | 23         | F          | Mexico         | Questionnaire                      |
| Oscar            | 35         | M          | Mexico         | Questionnaire and Interview (PI)** |
| Alex             | 32         | M          | Ecuador        | Questionnaire and Interview(PI)    |
| Juan             | 33         | M          | Mexico         | Questionnaire and Interviews (PI)  |
| Raul             | 42         | M          | El Salvador    | Questionnaire and Interviews (PI)  |

## **RESULTS: THE INTERSECTION OF THEMES IN THE THREE STUDY GROUPS**

There were several similarities in the themes that emerged from the immigrant interviews. The overarching theme in all three groups was the psychological effects that stemmed from immigration status. Where K-12 staff expressed that they had a sense that students and their families were under a great deal of stress on a daily basis, the immigrant interviews confirmed this. Participants in the immigrant groups not only verified that their undocumented status impacted them psychologically, but many of the immigrant participants suffered both physical and emotional stress from crossing the border. The Salvadorian participants may have also experienced post-traumatic stress from being exposed to war and having family members murdered in their home countries.

Once in school, immigrant participants expressed that they and their families were fearful of school staff. Immigrant participants also said that by moving to the United States, they became separated from family members in their home countries and this was the cause of emotional anguish. A daily psychological impact that all but one immigrant participant acknowledged was the consuming daily fear that grew from the possibility of being deported or further being separated from family members at any time.

Other emergent themes in the immigrant group interviews that were also shared by the K-12 groups were academic challenges; a language barrier; financial and social capital difficulties; and the need for information and advocacy.

While all of the immigrant participants graduated from high school, college or graduate school, most said that they “lucked out” in that they had a teacher, another adult or older sibling that mentored them through school. All of the immigrant participants thought that they were good students, the majority still struggled with homework or figuring out how to do assignments. This was stated to be the case because their parents were not able to help them with school work because of their language barrier or because the parents themselves had not had much formal schooling. The language barrier also affected students academically in that parents did not participate in school and were not able to read or understand school

communication, therefore their children were not able to get needed academic support at home.

While the K-12 participants considered the lack of family participation at school a form of apathy towards education, the immigrant participants stated that their parents had come to the United States for better educational opportunities. One of the primary reasons that parents did not participate at school was financial. The majority of the parents of the immigrant participants worked several jobs or took care of younger children in their family or those who belonged to neighbors.

Latino communities culturally have viewed educators as professionals not to be questioned. This general fear of school officials and their parents own limited education were reasons the immigrant participants believed their families had difficulty navigating the educational system and were not able to access the kinds of support needed. Additionally, immigrants felt schools did not do much to make information known to parents about resources and parent rights, and that students were functioning under two sets of assumptions: one for “documented” students and the other for “undocumented” students

While the K-12 groups acknowledged the need for community outreach and access to information, several immigrant participants took the idea a step further and recommended that families have advocates to help maneuver the educational system. Another recommendation was that parents be informed of differences between the education system in the United States and their home countries and the importance of an education in the acquisition of wealth in the United States. Although the three sets of data were collected and analyzed separately, when compared, the perceptions of K-12 administrators, teachers and staff were collectively similar to the self-reported experiences of the immigrant participants. The distinct difference was that the K-12 personnel perceptions were largely based on random interactions with people or from what they learned from the media. School personnel, for the most part, disclosed that they did not receive any training about the policies regarding undocumented students or regarding their learning needs. While the three groups of personnel (administration, faculty and staff) had a broad understanding of the challenges that undocumented immigrants faced, individuals were not aware of the depth and complexities of those challenges. The lack of perception of “depth of challenges” was seconded also in the immigrants’ account of their schooling experiences where the perception of school staff was undocumented parents were “doing the best that they could” given what they knew.

## **RESULTS: PROPOSITIONS**

Propositions resulted from the themes created during data analysis (Miles and Hubermann, 1994). These propositions followed from analyses of the data collected from the three study groups first separately and then collectively. Propositions were developed from strong themes or recommendations that ran across the three groups studied.

The first proposition was: *Undocumented students and their parents have lived through and continue to live through a great deal of psychological stress on a daily basis.* This was echoed in sentiments expressed by almost every K-12 teacher and administrator and school site staff member who participated in the study as well as every immigrant participant. Psychological stressors included fear in many forms.

Table 3  
*Table of Fears*

| Fears                                | As Illustrated By  |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| Fear of school authorities           | As illustrated by students being afraid to go to school authorities and “trust” during uncertain situations; keeping the “family secret”; staying “under the radar.”                           |
| Fear of immigration authorities      | Accounts of students becoming distressed during routine fire drills at school or taught by parents to stay away from people in uniform.  |
| Fear of being deported               | Students being unable to concentrate at school because of crises in the family.  |
| Fear of being separated from parents | Students having family members who have been deported and worrying that they will be left alone or have to run away to another city.   |
| Fear of being found out              | Students worried about standing out in class or participating fully for fear of drawing attention to themselves; reticent to make new friends and share personal information about themselves. |

The following was an example of the extent of the fear experienced by undocumented families:

One undocumented family confessed to me that they did not go to see the Fourth of July fireworks display in their city because the parents were afraid that if the crowd got too rowdy, the father and mother might be picked up by the police and eventually deported.

Another psychological stressor that was mentioned by school personnel (though not corroborated by the immigrant participants) was apathy about their schooling experiences because of the “temporal” nature of their immigration status. School personnel also believed that because of the sense of indefinite insecurity, undocumented immigrants fall victim to believing that learning might be a temporary thing and no great effort should be placed on such a task. The immigrants who participated in the study did not express this attitude.

Even those undocumented immigrants whose early years in the United States were tenuous, felt they worked hard at school and tried to be on their best behavior. One participant said even though academics were hard for her, she took the long-term approach, “I feel that having to struggle for hours prepared me for the future and for that reason, and I was able to go through school with good grades.” Immigrant participants expressed other and more alarming physical and mental stressors that stemmed from their long or tense journeys into the country to the long-term effects of living in poverty and uncertainty for prolonged periods of time. The underlying psychological effect seemed to be a student’s inability to express herself or himself fully and grow to his or her potential either because they were asked to keep a

family secret or because they acted as adults in the family. In many cases, once they were able to learn English, they took on the role of representing their siblings at school and translating for their parents.

The second proposition was: *Undocumented students face multiple academic challenges and their families have a great deal of difficulty maneuvering through the US education and social system to access services.* These academic challenges and challenges of maneuvering different systems were brought up by all three groups of participants. School personnel and immigrants expressed that parents and families were reticent to participate in the educational system.

Table 4  
*Table of Challenges Students Faced when Entering School*

| Challenges                               | As Illustrated By   |
|--|---|
| The language barrier                     | Unable to communicate with students and adults at school; having their academic skills underestimated.  |
| Missing records                          | Missing birth certificate, report cards, emergency information making it difficult for school officials to assess learning needs and communicate with family members.   |
| Increased mobility                       | Moving from place to place for parents work or because a member of the family was deported.   |
| Difficulty forming relationships         | Unable to trust or open up to classmates or the adults at school for fear of being reported; inability for teachers and staff to tap into the wealth of students' prior knowledge.                                      |
| Detachment                               | Not knowing when they will be deported; focusing on making money rather than on school as a contingency plan; students, knowing that they would not be able to afford to go to college without financial aid, drop out. |
| Lack of a family advocate/representative | Students advocating for younger brothers and sisters, not having anyone they feel comfortable with advocating for them; parents working long hours and are unable to attend school activities.                          |

From the accounts of immigrant participants, there was a sense that they were successful in maneuvering the educational system because they were lucky or because they had family members that instilled in them the importance of going to school. For most of the immigrant participants, their parents did not participate directly in their schooling. Even so, they were all able to succeed. One immigrant participant wrote:

My mom was not involved with my school. The language barrier was one reason. Also because as an undocumented worker, her salary was low so she had to work extra hours in order to make a living. She had little time or energy left after work in order to help my sister and I with homework or to go to school to talk to our teachers or attend parent meetings.

Table 5  
*Challenges to Maneuvering the Educational and Social System*

| Challenges   | As Illustrated by  |
|--|--|
| Goes against cultural norms                              | Cultural “hands off” approach; teacher as the expert.  |
| Parents not literate in their primary language           | Some parents having little to no formal education depending on the type of area they immigrated from (rural or urban); unable to read in their primary language.   |
| Distrustful of school officials                          | Not being made aware of their rights and fearful that school officials will disclose personal information to immigration officials.  |
| Not being made aware of resources available to them      | Lack of community outreach to inform families of the resources available to them.  |
| Lack of financial opportunity to attend higher education | Students afraid to apply to higher education for fear of being found out; unable to afford higher education because of lack of access to financial aid.  |
| Lack of financial capital                                | Even though many parents work multiple job or long hours, most families lived below the poverty line according to federal guidelines and are unable to access “for pay” services.                            |
| Lack of social capital                                   | Even though families capitalized on their family and cultural connections in their own neighborhoods, they formed few relationships with outsiders who might have been able to extend their social networks. |

The third and last proposition was: *The lack of adequate attention to the needs of undocumented students and their families is both a civil rights and human rights issue.* Several participants in all three groups studied stated that there was a great need for community outreach to undocumented immigrants and access to information. Immigrant participants stated that their families had not made aware of support services that were available to them, and that they believed that there existed an unfair system that limited academic opportunities.

One immigrant participant wrote, “The lack of adequate attention to the needs of undocumented students and their families is a human rights issue.” All three groups studied echoed sentiments about the basic living conditions of undocumented immigrants. One K-12 staff participant wrote: “There were several accounts of civil and human rights violations in the accounts of school site staff and immigrants.”

Table 6  
*Themes all Three Groups Felt were Civil Rights Issues*

| Issues  | As Illustrated By   |
|---|---|
| An incomplete or inconsistent social contract | Parents and children are “illegal,” but children are allowed to attend school; student and parent participation is compromised. |
| Not being made aware of rights                | School staff untrained regarding the rights of undocumented students; lack of community outreach.                               |

Several participants in all three groups studied stated that there was a great need for community outreach and access to information. One immigrant participant wrote:

I began working when I was 13 years old. They paid me cash. My mother told me that I had to work because I would not be able to go to college because we could not afford it and would not be able to get financial aid because of our status. My parents did not come to school so they also didn’t know what the options were for college. I did not apply for college until I got a green card much later which was much later than everyone else.

Another immigrant participant said, “[The school] should have given us more guidance about how to succeed. My dream was to be an RN, but because of my family’s ignorance, I could not complete my dream.”

Table 7  
*Issues All Three Groups Indicated were Indicative of a Lack of Human Rights*

| Human Rights Issues      | As Illustrated By   |
|--------------------------|---|
| Illegal worker practices | Students and parents are paid “under the table”; below minimum wage and work in substandard conditions.   |
| Housing                  | Multiple families living in close quarters; multiple family members living in one room or rooms that do not meet code for sleeping (laundry rooms). |
| Access to healthcare     | Unable to access medical and counseling services because of lack of information.  |

All three groups studied echoed sentiments about the basic living conditions of undocumented immigrants. One K-12 staff participant wrote:

Many of my students lived in small apartments with several family members. Time and space to study was challenging. There were other things that were also strange. Students told me that family members would frequently come and go and that they weren't supposed to talk about it. Sometimes they weren't sure about the relationships to certain adults and didn't know how long they'd be staying.

Immigrant participants recalled that they did not realize the limitations they faced while growing up. Only as adults did they become conscious of the types of opportunities missed out on or how some fears had been unfounded. One immigrant participant wrote:

I think the biggest obstacle in how my parents participated in my education was their lack of education and the language barrier. Since they were not educated, they trusted that the school system would take care of everything. And since they were not English speakers, they didn't have access or were not able to advocate for me.

Another immigrant participant said, "Most Latino parents tend to leave education in the hands of educators and will generally agree with their decisions." A K-12 staff participant told of a time when an undocumented family was threatened by a teacher and how the encounter perpetuated their fear of school officials.

I was teaching Special Ed at the time and we were having trouble getting the parents of a student to come in for the IEP meeting. We tried several times and they didn't show. Then a teacher said that she would contact them and soon after that they came to the meeting. When I asked the teacher how she had got the parents to come she said, 'Oh that was easy, I just told them that if they didn't space come, I would call INS [immigration] and report them.'

## **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS IN LIGHT OF THE THEORETICAL FRAME AND LITERATURE**

The immigrant participants and their families all possessed the cultural connections or network of family and friends that enabled them to remain in the United States. The degree to which those connections materialized into social connections outside of their cultural network determined their social and financial capital and subsequently, their standard of living. In a rare study of undocumented immigrants, Neuman and Massey (1994) identified the factors that determined whether Mexicans will consider moving to the United States. They determined that if a Mexican native had a family member residing in the United States, they were significantly more likely to make the journey and more likely to make a smoother transition and remain in the United States. Social capital was more valuable than if a Mexican resident had a friend that lived in the United States or a family member who simply visited. This connection rang true in this study as the majority of the immigrants who participated had family members who already resided in the United States who helped them get started.

Finally, the tensions and fears documented by Abarca (2011), Enright (2011) and Laffee (2007) were mirrored by accounts given by school site personnel and immigrant participants. There were several stories of relatives of children being deported leading children to become afraid of anyone of authority, especially in uniform.

This study confirmed the relationship between the degree of social capital an undocumented family possesses and their ability to create and enforce a social contract for themselves. The consensus in this literature was the greater the amount of social capital of a family, the greater the likelihood for children's success in school.

Another factor in the acquisition of social capital was a parent's education level. Alex's parents, who came to the United States by way Ecuador and Canada, were well educated in their home country. His mother graduated from high school and went on to get a degree in the United States and his father had a degree in Ecuador and a very marketable skill of an air plane mechanic. Alex was not even aware that he was undocumented until college. His family's social capital compensated for their undocumented status and did not make a significant impact on a restrictive social contract.

The right for undocumented immigrants to attend K-12 public schools in the United States came by way of a US Supreme Court ruling (*Plyler v. Doe*). However, this ruling was not constitutional law. If families were identified according to immigration status and if *Plyler v. Doe* were overturned, school officials may be required to divulge the names and contact information for these students.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Practical recommendations for use of the results of this research study for educators and school policy makers include: (a) Encouraging school principals to create a bill of educational rights for undocumented students and their families identifying schools as "safe zones"; (b) Holding mandatory professional development for school staff about current policies concerning undocumented students and their families; (c) Offering teacher development regarding learning needs of undocumented students as part mandatory professional development of teachers and administrators; (d) Providing undocumented families with a school advocate to act as a liaison between the school and the family and to help them access resources needed, and (e) Developing a community outreach campaign that informs families of their rights and builds trust with school officials. The aforementioned recommendations, when developed into practices can serve as the basis of creating a comprehensive plan for meeting the needs of undocumented immigrants.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

This research was exploratory and served as a gauge for issues concerning an understudied group. There is a great need for more studies of this kind simply to bring to the forefront the reality of the conditions of a significant number of people living in the United States. While there are many families who believe they live "under the radar", this study found that school personnel were, for the most part, aware of the challenges faced by illegal undocumented immigrants and their parents.

Undocumented students and parents, while acknowledged by staff and "documented" students, lead parallel lives that do not intersect. This dynamic exists because of the greater political uncertainty for federal and state immigration issues. Even though schools are open

systems, they are able to create their own cultures and rules. In this sense, schools are empowered to meet the needs of all students, if they choose to do so. It is vitally important that the needs of undocumented students become part of the professional discourse at all levels of education from the state to district to school site level. In order for substantive changes to occur, principal training programs need to provide educators with the guidance, tools and support to effectively engage in the change process.

## REFERENCES

- Abarca, C.G. (2012). *Securing Work and Keeping the Family Together: a Study of Latino Immigrants in New Mexico*. Retrieved from ProQuest.
- Al-Hassan, S. & Gardner, R. (2002). Involving Immigrant Parents of Students. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 34, 52-59.
- Douglass, J. (2007). *The Conditions for Admission: Access, Equity, and the Social Contract of Public Universities*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Baum, S. & Flores, S.M. (2011). Higher Education and Children in Immigrant Families. *The Future of Children*, 21. Retrieved from <http://www.futureofchildren.com>
- Enright, K.A. (2011). Language and Literacy for a New Mainstream. *American Educational Research Journal*, 48, 80. doi: 10.3102/0002831210368989
- Espinoza-Herold M. (2002). *Issues in Latino Education: Race, School Culture, and the Politics of Academic Success*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Allyn & Bacon.
- Fuligini, A. (2005). Ethnic Identity and the Academic Adjustment of Adolescents from Mexican, Chinese and European Backgrounds. *Developmental Psychology*, 41, 799-811.
- Fry, R. (2002). Latinos in Higher Education: Many Enroll, Too Few Graduate. Retrieved Online: *Pew Hispanic Center Report*.
- Green, P. (2003). The Undocumented: Educating the Children of Migrant Workers in America. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 27, 51-68.
- Halpern, D. (2004). *Social Capital*. UK: Polity.
- Hardy, L. (2007). Coping with Illegal Immigrants in School. *The Education Digest*, 72, 4-6.
- Hobbes, T. & Martinich, A.P., ed. (2002). *Leviathan*. Buffalo, NY: Broadview Press.
- Immigration Policy Center (2006). Undocumented Immigrants as Taxpayers
- Joel, S. (2007). My Obligations during an Immigration Crackdown. *School Administrator*, 10, 14.
- Jung-Sook, L. (2006). Parent Involvement, Cultural Capital, and the Achievement Gap Among Elementary School Children. *American Educational Research Journal*, 43, 193-218.
- Lafee, S. (2007). Fighting for Immigrant Children's Rights. *School Administrator*, 64, 10-13.
- Lareau, A. (2003). *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race and Family Life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Lipsit, M. (2003). Newcomers Left Behind: Immigrant Parents Lack Equal Access to New York City's School. *Milano Graduate School of Management and Urban Policy*.
- Miles, M. & Huberman, A. (1994). *Qualitative Data Analysis*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publication.
- Merton, R. (1990). *The Focused Interview*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. New York, NY: The Free Press.

- Monkman, K. Ronald, M. & Theramene, F (2005). Social and Cultural Capital in an Urban Latino School Community. *Urban Education*, 40, 4-33.
- Monzo, L. (2006). A Sociocultural Perspective on Acculturation. *Education and Urban Society*, 38, 188-203.
- Morris, C. (1999). *The Social Contract Theorists: Critical Essays on Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau*. Lanham. MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Neuman, K. & Massey, D. (1994). Undocumented Migration and the Quantity and Quality of Social Capital. *The Population Research Center at the University of Chicago and NORC*.
- Orfield, G. (1986). Hispanic Education: Challenges, Research and Policies. *American Journal of Education*, 1, 1-25.
- Pierce, W.J. & Hudson, R.E. & Singleton, S.M. (2011). Ethnic Identity and Propensity for Practice Among African-Descended MSW Students. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 47, 403-417. doi: 10.5175/JSWE.2011.200900079
- Pew Hispanic Center. [www.pewhispanic.org](http://www.pewhispanic.org)
- Perreira, K. & Chapman, M. (2006). Becoming an American Parent: Overcoming Challenges and Finding Strength in a New Immigrant Latino Community. *Journal of Family Issues*, 1383-1413.
- Ramirez, F. (2003). Dismay and Disappointment: Parental Involvement of Latino Immigrant Parents. *The Urban Review*, 35, 93-110.
- Reed, F. & Johnson, T. (eds.). *Philosophical Documents in Education*. New York. NY: Addison Wesley Longman.
- Romo, H. (1996). The Newest "Outsiders": Educating Mexican Migrant and Immigrant Youth. *ERIC Digest*, 393-635.
- Serageldin, I. & Dasgupta, P. (2001). *Social Capital: A Multifaceted Perspective*. World Bank Publications.
- Sneed, M. (2007). Questioning Immigration Status When Students Enroll. *School Administrator*, 10, 12.
- Torres, V. (2004). Familial Influences on the Identity Development of Latino First-Year Students. *Journal of College Student Development*, 45, 457-469.