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Addressing the Elephant in the Room: Understanding the Daily Life of Undocumented High School Youth

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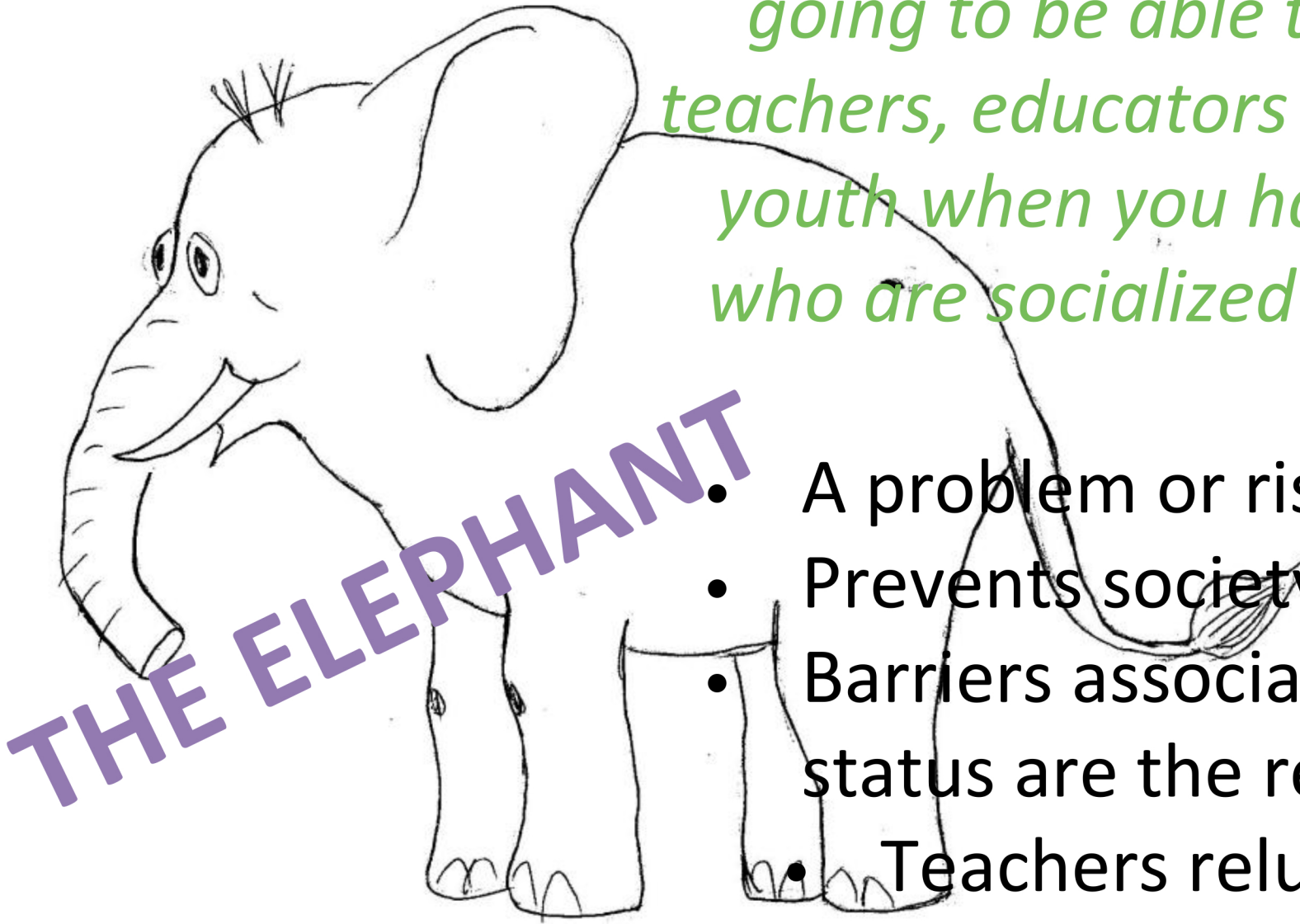
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Addressing the Elephant in the Room: Understanding the Daily Life of Undocumented Youth

By: Sylvia Rusin



“It’s a larger problem... I don’t think you’re going to be able to address the problems of teachers, educators working with undocumented youth when you have teachers and educators who are socialized in an unjust system.” (R92)



- A problem or risk no one wants to discuss
- Prevents society from solving issues
- Barriers associated with undocumented status are the real elephants
- Teachers reluctant to talk about them
- Students unwilling to share them

DISCUSSION:

- Exit points blocked on educational pipeline
- Educators unaware of post-secondary options
- “Trained counselors on college options for undocumented students” are supposed to exist according to the IL Dream Act but they do not
- Lack of psychosocial/post-secondary support in schools
- Students are struggling academically due to:
 - Parents working
 - Language barriers/Lack of Spanish speaking staff
- ESL students placed in Special Education classrooms with
- “learning disabilities”
- Need for better placement tests

PURPOSE:

- Investigate what undocumented youth lack most in high schools
- Assess school staffs’ understanding of the daily constraints of undocumented youth
- Examine understanding of the IL Dream Act
- Find out what type of post-secondary advice is provided for these students

QUESTIONS:

- Observed common daily constraints
- Observed post secondary aspirations
- Awareness of the types of post-secondary resources currently available for undocumented students in their high schools (*acc. to IL Dream Act*)
- Perception of what undocumented students lack most within their high schools

SAMPLE:

Table 1. Distribution of sample school staff in Bloomington-Normal, IL according to various demographic characteristics (n=8).

Characteristic	Number	Percent
Gender		
Male	1	12.5
Female	7	87.5
Race		
Caucasian	7	87.5
African American	1	12.5
Profession		
Teacher	6	75.0
Guidance Counselor	2	25.0

METHOD:

- Three high schools in Bloomington-Normal, IL
- Snowball Method
- Ethnographic qualitative research design

LIMITATIONS:

- Reliance on a vulnerable population
- No system to identify undocumented students
- Gathering sample size
- Unfavorable email responses: not enough contact with undocumented students
- Reliance on referrals from university staff
- Opposition from one of the high schools (university building relationship)
- Small sample size (8 participants)
- Significantly more interviews conducted at one high school (6) than at the other two

RESULTS: (Observed Daily Constraints)

Legal:

- Work & the ability to pay for college
- ESL teacher and guidance counselor had a vague understanding of ability to pay for college/fill out FAFSA
- Lack of transportation (5 out of 8 participants)
- Reliance on school buses = impediment
 - Students cannot participate in after school activities
 - Barrier to academic excellence
- Parents working (5 out of 8)
- Poverty (3 out of 8)

Cultural:

- Stereotype of undocumented as Latino/Hispanic and ESL
- Language barriers between Parents and Teachers (5 out of 8)
- Parental Influence/Modeling (5 out of 8)
- Lack of Educational Background (7 out of 8)
- Pattern of following trade kind of careers
- American Dream [success]: All but one participant interpreted success in terms of pursuing college

WHAT STUDENTS LACK MOST:

Table 4. Distribution of assets undocumented students lack most within high schools as observed by sample school staff in Bloomington-Normal, IL (n=8).		
Participants	What Undocumented Students Lack Most Within High Schools	
B12	Examples	
C35	Academic Motivation	Newcomers Program
F57	College bound culture at home	Transportation after school activities
G82	A go to person	Guidance
J45	A counselor to talk to	
L79	Awareness of students who are undocumented	Identification system of undocumented youth
R92	The system	
S84	Trust	

POST-SECONDARY RESOURCES:

Table 3. Distribution of the types of post secondary resources currently available in high schools for undocumented high school students as observed by sample school staff in Bloomington-Normal, IL (n=8).				
Participants	Available Post-Secondary Resources for Undocumented Students			
B12	State Farm work days program	Guidance in the form of three people: herself, guidance counselor, two ESL teachers		
C35	Counseling Office	Tutoring Office	After school buses that go to socio-econ. depressed areas	Trade school encouragement
F57	Career Cruising website	Conexiones.org: by State Farm	She will contact the school they want to go to	Eric Career Center
G82	Money for Scholarships	People who help them fill out paperwork for college		
J45	Immigration Project	Western Avenue	Guidance Counselor	
L79	IL Hotline	Guidance Counselors: "People who might have more answers about options after school"		
R92	Privately funded pool of money that is "supposed to be available"	"If we're doing anything for the IL Dream Act, I don't know what it is and nobody has talked about it"		
S84	Career Cruising Activities	Pre-ACT test	Financial aid nights/ stuff to prepare them for	"They can identify they're undocumented and we can work with them"

Psychosocial/Interpersonal:

- Products of identity development
 - Acting out (5 out of 8)
 - Hiding (5 out of the 8)
- Mental Health Issues
 - Feeling unwanted/judged/not good enough
 - Lack of motivation/“What’s the point?” attitude (5 out of 8)
 - Dropping out of high school (5 out of 8)
 - Teenage pregnancy (4 out of 8)
- Undocumented students sticking together (4 out of 8)
- Anti-immigrant sentiment (2 out of 8)
- Disillusionment with political process and stereotypical manifestation
- Racial Friction (3 out of 8)
 - Whites vs. “browns” and Hispanics vs. Puerto Ricans

Institutional:

- Trained counselors on college options were never mentioned by the participants
- None of the participants embodied trained individuals on post-secondary options for undocumented youth