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## **The Impact of Living in a Mixed-Status Family on PK-12 Students**

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### **Introduction**

*Juan, a 2<sup>nd</sup> grader, catches the school bus with his mother at his side. He goes to school as he does every weekday morning, just like other students in this country. When school is over, he takes the bus home. Unfortunately, no one is waiting for him at the bus stop when he arrives. He looks around for his mother, but she is nowhere to be found. He runs home and finds the house empty. Although Juan is documented because he was born in the U.S., neither of his parents has documentation to legally reside in the U.S. His parents were detained by Immigration Customs and Enforcement (ICE) as part of a raid in the factory where they work. Juan is sent to live with a foster family, unsure if he will ever see his parents again.*

Although the scenario described above was created by the authors of this article, this scenario happens to more U.S. children than one might expect. Between July 1, 2010, and September 31, 2012, “nearly 23% of all deportations—or 204,810 deportations—were issued for parents with citizen children” (Wessler, 2012). In addition, Homeland Security reported that 315,943 immigrants were “removed” from the U.S. in 2014 alone (U.S. Homeland Security, 2014), which is added to the nearly two million people who had been deported since President Obama took office (Corones, 2015). Hence, the government’s enforcement of its immigration policy has helped create several problems: 1) the foster care system is now more overwhelmed

(Wessler, 2011); 2) the fabric of thousands of families is being destroyed (Wessler, 2011); and 3) students are being emotionally, psychologically, physically, and academically affected by these deportations. ICE is separating family members, especially undocumented parents from their citizen children, by deporting parents and leaving children behind in either the foster care system or with relatives.

The purpose of this article is to map the impact that current immigration policies have on students in mixed-status families by reviewing the existing literature. Mixed-status families consist of at least one family member without documentation and at least one member with documentation (Newman, 2016). We begin by describing the problem, including discussion on the psychological, physical, and academic effects of living in a mixed-status family on PK-12 students. We conclude with potential solutions that teachers and schools can execute to improve the schooling experiences of PK-12 students in mixed-status families.

### **The Problem**

A review of the impact of living in a mixed-status family on PK-12 students is essential because of the sheer quantity affected. One in ten children in the U.S. is growing up in a mixed-status family (Suárez-Orozco, Yoshikawa, Teranishi, & Suárez-Orozco, 2011). Nearly 7% of PK-12 students have at least one undocumented parent, whereas only 1.4% are undocumented themselves (Passel & Cohn, 2014). Moreover, “on average, one or two students per American classroom live in mixed-status families” (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011, p. 242).

If students living in a mixed-status family were born in the United States, they are citizens and entitled to an education by law. Some students living in mixed-status families were brought to the United States as children and are therefore non-citizens. Nevertheless, according to *Plyler v. Doe*, all PK-12 students are entitled to a primary and secondary education, “whether they are documented or not” (Gonzales & Chavez, 2012, p. 258).

### **Psychological and Physical Effects**

Living in a mixed-status family has both psychological and physical impacts on PK-12 students. These children face several stressors that pose psychiatric risk, including: loss of family, friends, and country, language difficulties, poverty, discrimination, isolation, fear, and hopelessness (Mahoney, 2008). These students, documented or not, carry greater

psychological risk than students from documented families. Ortega, Horwitz, Fang, Kuo, Wallace, and Inkelas (2009) found that Mexican children with undocumented parents have greater parent-reported developmental risks than Mexican and white children with documented parents. The following research highlights specific psychological and physical risks for children living in mixed-status households.

### **Stress and Anxiety**

Students living in mixed-status families experience a tremendous amount of stress and anxiety, especially regarding deportation. Even if students are unaware of their family's mixed-status, they still live in a culture of fear, as Spanish-language media frequently feature stories of deportations. In some homes, this is a topic of "family conversation that children begin to metabolize" (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011, p. 451). Yoshikawa (2011) indicates that the psychological stress suffered by undocumented adult immigrants can be transferred to even young children, which is then carried into adolescence. These children may develop health risks like alcohol use, smoking, sexual activity, and depression, higher than those of U.S. born families (Yoshikawa, 2011). The American Psychological Association (2012) explains that these children are also at heightened risk of mental health issues, including anxiety, fear, depression, and anger. Their stress levels are high, and family relationships often become strained not only due to being caught between the culture of their parents and that of the new community (Ornelas & Perreira, 2011), but also to the looming threat of family separation (Chavez, Lopez, Englebrecht, & Viramontez Anguiano, 2012). Roblyer, Grzywacz, and ApanecatI-Ibarra (2015) found that major sources of stress for those in mixed-status families include fear of their loved ones not returning home, encounters with police, and family fragmentation. Deportations in the community add to stress levels of children, who then have more reason to fear the same will happen to their family (Human Impact Partners, 2013). Abrego and Gleeson (2014) elucidate that the "anguish that citizen children experience" in mixed-status families is a direct "result of current U.S. implementation of immigration policies" (p. 220).

Stresses of multiple dimensions, including psychological, social and physical well-being undermine the health of undocumented immigrants (Cavazos-Rehg, Zayas, & Spitznagel, 2007). Cavazos et al. (2007) examined the connection between undocumented immigrants' legal status and their health. They state that an undocumented status produces stress; although not always

acute in nature, it nonetheless persistently remains an “insidious psycho-environmental stressor” (Cavazos-Rehg et al., 2007, p. 1126). Cavazos-Rehg et al. (2007) learned that for undocumented immigrants, “worries about their legal status and pre-occupation with disclosure and deportation can heighten the risk for emotional distress and impaired quality of health,” and that prolonged exposure to this stress is a great concern (p. 1126).

### **Identity and Self-Esteem**

Eighty-one percent of undocumented immigrants are Latino (Passel, 2005). Latino and “undocumented” children living in mixed-status families carry multiple identities that can be difficult to hold. Roman’s (2008) research shows that the United States is experiencing heightened stigmatization and even demonization of Latinos. Negative media portrayals of Latinos and immigrants are common, and consequently, “non-Latinos commonly believe many negative stereotypes about these groups are true” (Barreto, Manzano, & Segura, 2012). Massey (2012) asserts that Latinos have become an “underclass,” and that immigration policies “affect Latinos in the same way that the criminal justice system affects blacks” (p. ii). The more Latino students internalize this stigmatization, the worse the effect on their self-esteem (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011).

Students from mixed-status families often face additional negativity specifically in regards to their family members’ undocumented status. That is, the “barrage of derogatory portraits of immigrants, particularly of unauthorized immigrants in the media, school, and community settings, will shape at the individual level a number of critical developmental outcomes for these children and youth” (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011, p. 450). Compared to those with non-immigrant parents, young children with immigrant parents fare worse on emergent reading and math skills assessments, and older children experience less academic success (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011). These derogatory portraits can affect them as they learn to view themselves as family members of these negatively portrayed immigrants.

In some instances, it has an even greater impact on their identity and self-esteem if they learn that they themselves are undocumented. Undocumented youth are at heightened risk of anxiety and depression compared to documented adolescents, and often feel uncomfortable talking to mental health professionals—let alone anyone in a position of authority—for fear of them disclosing their immigration status (Bonifacio, 2013). These negative psychological

ramifications are in part due to the fact that they face discrimination not only from outside groups but also from their documented Latino peers, who sometimes wish to separate and differentiate themselves from undocumented children (O’Leary, 2014).

For students from mixed-status families to maintain a positive self-image and self-esteem, they are forced to oppose what society communicates about them. Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2001) write about social mirroring, or the notion that one tends to view oneself as society views one’s racial and ethnic group. They state that, “When the reflection is generally negative, it is extremely difficult to maintain an unblemished sense of self-worth” (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001, p.98). Hence, in regards to undocumented students, the intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) of their identities, heavily influenced by society’s regard for immigrants (or lack thereof), makes it more difficult to maintain a positive self-image.

## **Health**

In addition to psychological implications, living in a mixed-status family can have direct ramifications on health. Of all uninsured children in the United States, 42% have immigrant parents (Wolters Kluwer Health, 2015). Although this data corresponds to children of all immigrants, the financial status of mixed-status families is likely to put their children in even worse medical circumstances than other immigrant families. For example, though undocumented parents are eligible for perinatal and postnatal health care, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and cash welfare assistance, they are ineligible for most federal public benefits, such as Medicaid or Medicare (Yoshikawa & Kholoptseva, 2013). Although the Affordable Care Act aims to expand health care insurance, some undocumented parents incorrectly assume they cannot “apply for benefits even on behalf of an eligible child” (Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, 2012, p. 6). As a result, students in mixed-status families, even if documented themselves, have disproportionate access to health services than students in documented families (Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, 2012).

Many of the costliest health consequences of being undocumented are likely to emerge later in life (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011). According to Crosnoe (2013), “evidence suggests that early childhood may be an at-risk period for immigrants in terms of physical health” (p.8). A child’s health and educational well-being are intertwined, and early cognitive development is

linked with physical health, especially since health problems disrupt a child's ability to regularly attend school or fully participate in other school activities (Crosnoe, 2013; Hook, Landale, & Hillemeier, 2013).

## **Academic Effects**

### **Poverty**

The authors of this article have chosen to separately address poverty's impact on the academic success of PK-12 students from mixed-status families for two reasons. One, the correlation between socioeconomic status and academic achievement is too strong to ignore for any population of students. Two, in addressing poverty as a separate entity, we aim to quell the tendency to attribute the findings on the academic performance of students living in mixed-status families to their poverty level alone. Assuming that the academic performance of these students is solely related to poverty would undermine the academic effects of living in a mixed-status family. For example, undocumented low-wage workers experience substantially poorer work conditions than documented low-wage workers and have less access to sick days, overtime pay, and employer-provided health benefits (Bernhardt et al., 2009; Luce, Luff, McCartin, & Milkman, 2014). Hence, in addition to other academic challenges, it is likely that PK-12 students from mixed-status families experience poverty that is more impactful than most.

Students living in mixed-status families often attend under resourced schools (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011), have high mobility rates (Rumberger & Larsen, 1998; C.M. Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011), and lack rich early-learning experiences (Yoshikawa & Kholoptseva, 2013). By the time the children of undocumented immigrants reach age two, they show significantly lower levels of language and cognitive development than the children of documented immigrants and native-born parents (Yoshikawa, 2011), putting them at an academic disadvantage from the start.

Since 79% of children of immigrants were U.S.-born citizens in 2008 (Passel & Taylor, 2010), any social policy directed at their noncitizen parents automatically impacts them, resulting in fear and confusion, prohibiting these eligible noncitizens and their children from accessing necessary benefits for which they qualify (Yoshikawa, 2011). In some cases, it is mainly correctable misinformation that trigger these parents' fear (Ku & Jewers, 2013;

Yoshikawa, 2011), though there have been some outright efforts, like Proposition 187<sup>1</sup> in California in the late nineties “that barred illegal immigrants and their children from public education, non-emergency health care, and social services” (Hayes, 2001, p. 1).

The effects of Proposition 187 have had a lasting effect on the social climate of California and across the country. In California, people are still protesting undocumented immigrants. With the wave of unaccompanied refugee children arriving to the U.S.-Mexico border in 2014, hundreds of protesters flocked to several sites across the state proclaiming their disgust with the federal policies regarding undocumented immigrants (Shafer, 2014). Proposition 187 influenced the notion that undocumented immigrants are a group of people who can be held as the scapegoat for many of society’s ails and be discriminated against without much protest. In 2010, Arizona passed SB 1070 which essentially outlawed undocumented immigrants in the state making their lives unbearable, forcing them to move to other states. This ‘papers please law’, which allows police and regular citizens on the street to stop people who look ‘undocumented’ for their papers, has now been copied by many other states (i.e. Georgia, Alabama, Indiana, South Carolina, and Utah) (Cohen & Wickens, 2015). The effect these laws have on children in mixed status families is chilling.

At welfare offices across the country these aforementioned policies coupled with a general distrust of undocumented immigrants can further scare non-citizens with citizen children. In their study, Kalil and Crosby (2009) concluded “...we found more negative health outcomes among children of immigrants leaving welfare than among any of their counterparts. We might expect that immigrants fared worse afterward, particularly if they left the system because of fear or confusion despite continued need (p. 204).” Hence, policies such as Proposition 187 and others that are directed towards the undocumented members of a family, also directly affect the documented members.

## **School Success**

Though students from mixed-status families face many academic obstacles, it is not to say that they have no means of overcoming them. An important academic support they may have is their parents’ high hopes for their educational achievement. Although immigrant

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<sup>1</sup> Proposition 187 was ultimately found unconstitutional in the courts and was never enacted (ACLU, 1999).

parents may not have attended school in their own country and may not be able to help their children with academic material or navigate the U.S. educational system, they still “carry tremendous hopes about U.S. schools and value education” (L. M. Gonzales, Borders, Hines, Villalba, & Henderson, 2013, p. 2). In fact, undocumented parents are just as dedicated to their children’s education as are parents with documented status (Yoshikawa, 2011).

Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, and Cortes’ (2009) study on the personal and environmental protective factors of undocumented students shows that, despite the challenges they face such as societal rejection and low parental education, those with high levels of personal and environmental protective factors have more academic success than those with low levels. These protective factors include supportive parents, friends, and school personnel, and participation in school activities.

Finally, while many schools that students from mixed-status families attend are under resourced (C. M. Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011), they can still provide the stability and structure these students need for positive academic and personal development (Chaudry et al., 2010). Specifically, “students appear to have benefitted from school routines and the support they received from teachers and school personnel” (Chaudry et al., 2010, p. x). Potochnick and Perreira (2010) found that social acceptance from school staff and peers can ameliorate the stress associated with discrimination and living in a mixed-status family and boosts psychological well-being. Parental engagement with the school offers children even more benefits in terms of academic achievement and self-esteem (C. M. Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011). Unfortunately, these forms of support are sometimes not enough.

### **School Challenges**

For many students in mixed-status families, school is not a place where they readily find success. A solid 49% of undocumented immigrants in the United States drop out of high school, compared with only 11% of citizen children (Golden Door Scholars, 2012). Covarrubias and Lara (2013) found that undocumented Mexicans are “pushed out” of high school at nearly three times the rate of their U.S.-born peers. Having at least one undocumented parent is also correlated with lower education rates, as having an undocumented mother is associated with 1.25-1.5 less years of schooling compared to those with documented mothers (Leach, Brown, Bean, & Van Hook, 2011).

Students from mixed-status families have unique needs and “may need additional school support for ESL, trauma, legal entanglements, and poverty” (Saenz-Alcantara, 2015, p. 2). Consequently, schools are frequently ill-equipped to meet the needs of this population (Tamer, 2014). López and López (2010) attribute this decreased educational achievement to racially blind school policies, which Marx and Larson (2012) elucidate is “the avoidance of talking about race, racism, and systemic inequality...which contributes to racial inequality by preventing useful conversations about race and racism” (p. 265). Not understanding racial issues directly affects culturally and linguistically diverse students due to the lack of awareness that many school personnel have regarding the privileges their own skin and language afford them (Bennett, 2011). By being unaware of these privileges, school personnel tend to be less empathetic than those with similar backgrounds or do not have the awareness that lives, and thus experiences, are different depending on skin color or linguistic repertoire (Lensmire, 2012).

Another reason students may not find academic success is due to fear of immigration authorities (Lopez & Lopez, 2010). Although it is not common practice for ICE to raid schools, it is not unprecedented (Mendoza & Olivas, 2009). Typically if rumors spread through a community that a raid is going to happen by ICE, parents keep their children home to prevent separation (Lofholm, 2013), disrupting the lives of everyone involved. In Alabama, after HB 56 was passed in 2011, requiring school personnel to discern the residency status of all students, thousands of undocumented immigrants left the state overnight and 7% of the state’s total Latino student population was reported absent from school (AFL-CIO, 2011).

Much of the school policy that endangers the academic achievement of students living in mixed-status families has to do with language, as many are English Learners (ELs). Only five states require bilingual education (Harris, 2012); therefore, many ELs are not taught in a way that promotes the development of content-area knowledge by strengthening their native language. In addition, schools that serve a high number of ELs more frequently hire unqualified teachers and experience high teacher turnover rates (Orfield & Ee, 2014). Finally, of second-generation Latino immigrants, 28% have parents who did not graduate high school (Pew Research Center, 2013), so parents may simply lack the experience needed to help their children successfully navigate school. While they can certainly rise above the challenges, living in a mixed-status family often puts students at an academic disadvantage.

## Schools as a Source of Fear

It can be difficult to learn while afraid. For many PK-12 students and their mixed-status families, schools evoke fear of exposure due to the types of information collected from them (i.e. during registration) and the uncertainty of whether or not immigration enforcement may happen within or around their school (Lopez & Lopez, 2010). According to Morse and Ludovina (1999), there are three practices that make schools a source of fear for mixed-status families: chilling, exposure, and disparity. Chilling refers to any action that causes fear such as using documents requesting, but not requiring Social Security numbers. That is, the effect of asking parents and families for documents that could possibly reveal their status has a chilling effect on them. Exposure refers to providing information to agencies, such as immigration enforcement, that would expose citizenship status. The simple act of enrolling their children can create feelings of exposure for the family. Finally, disparity refers to using different rules for different individuals or groups, such as accepting copies of documents from some students, but only original documents from more “suspicious” families (Morse & Ludovina, 1999). All three of these practices could lead to reduced parental and student involvement, negatively affecting students, families, school officials, and, ultimately, the community.

While legal protections are in place to prevent some of these practices from happening, they still occur. In 2012 in Alabama, the legislature passed *Section 28*, an anti-undocumented immigration law. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the 11<sup>th</sup> Circuit enjoined *Section 28*, “which required school officials to determine whether a child enrolled in school was foreign-born and, if so, to determine the child’s immigration status” (Belanger, 2012, p. 2). *Section 28* was later overturned; however, it serves as an example that chilling, exposure, and disparity are practices that still happen in today’s schools (Belanger, 2012).

For another example, we turn to No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which currently allows “recently arrived” students a one-year grace period before they are tested in reading/language arts. In order to qualify, students and families must reveal how long the child has attended schools in the United States, which may encourage students and families to hide or misrepresent their status (Lopez & Lopez, 2010). Students in this situation may be forced to enter the testing stream prematurely. The practices of chilling, exposure, and disparity can have a major impact on the academic achievement of PK-12 students from mixed-status families. At the basis of it all, though, is the fear of deportation.

## **Immigration Enforcement**

Some argue that mixed-status families do not have to fear immigration enforcement in schools. ICE Spokeswoman Virginia Kice claims, “A school is not a place we would routinely conduct an enforcement operation” (Tucker & Van Derbeken, 2008). Others claim, however, that mixed-status families do indeed have reason to fear immigration enforcement in schools. Cullen Casey, a lawyer for the National School Boards Association, warned that in schools, as anywhere else, anyone could make a phone call to immigration authorities and report information about a particular person's legal status (Zehr, 2007). Schools following the practices of chilling, exposure, and disparity may have even more access to this type of information than other types of services.

Yet, others claim that similar to the “school-to-prison” pipeline for African-American youth, there exists a “school-to-deportation” pipeline for undocumented Latinos (Saenz-Alcantara, 2015). In 2012, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) was passed, protecting individuals under 31 years old who came to the United States before age 16 from deportation who “are currently in school, have graduated or obtained a certificate of completion from high school, have obtained a General Educational Development (GED) certificate, or are [an] honorably discharged veteran” (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2014). Despite this, some students through-out the country still face the fear of deportation at their schools. Jeffries (2014) explains that, “even though there are policies in place that impede immigration and police authorities from accessing information about students in schools... it is the mere threat of deportation, not the practice of deportation, that has such an important effect” (p. 286).

In Richmond, Virginia, for instance, Latino students reported having their bags searched and being threatened with deportation by school staff (Reid, 2015). In addition, in 2014, a Texas student was deported to Mexico after punching another student at his high school (Kriel, 2014). However, the Los Angeles Unified School District, which has the highest number of ELs in the country, has taken a stand against the deportation of its students by permitting its staff attorneys to represent students pro bono at deportation hearings (Blume, 2015). While there are measures set in place to protect students, schools may very well be a dangerous place for mixed-status families. This does not support the nurturing environment in which students should be able to expect from school.

## Implications

School officials may never know that they are serving students in mixed-status families. These children make up an invisible, yet important, student body entitled to a PK-12 education (Office for Civil Rights, 2014). School officials can create an educational experience sensitive to this population by understanding their special needs. Educators should assume that there is always a student living in a mixed-status family in their classrooms. This is the only way to improve their educational experiences, as they will likely never know who has documentation or not.

Attending to the psychological needs of students from mixed-status families is similar to those of other students from difficult family situations. First, while educators may be unable to ameliorate the stress of living in a mixed-status home, they can be deliberate about making the class-room a more welcoming, reduced stress learning environment. They can ensure students are taking advantage of their school's health services and free and reduced breakfast and lunch programs. Educators can support the positive identity development of students in mixed-status families by actively opposing stereotypes, as well as opposing school policies and programs that perceive ELs as "deficient." Educators can, and should be, an oppositional force to eliminate the negative psychological impact of living in a mixed-status family.

There are numerous ways educators can work to make schools less intimidating to mixed-status families and students. They can be on the lookout for practices of chilling, exposure, and disparity and work to create change. For example, they can re-view school documents for any request for Social Security numbers and create documents that are not discriminatory toward mixed-status families. School personnel can also implement a policy for dealing with immigration enforcement with the safety of students as primary importance. López and López (2010) make the following suggestions to execute this policy: 1) inform the school district attorney and the superintendent immediately when immigration enforcement is at the school, 2) put possible affected children in a safe room, never turning over the students unless advised to do so by the school district's attorney, 3) if immigration enforcement insists on entering a school campus, always accompany them with a witness for the entire process, and 4) document all incidents, conversations, and proceedings.

School can play a significant role for a child who has experienced the detention or deportation of a family member. If the school is aware that a raid or other type of immigration

enforcement has recently taken place in the community, school personnel can ensure that no children return to an empty home. They can work to increase the attendance of affected students by explaining to families the school's plan to keep students safe from further immigration enforcement. Schools can also raise money for affected families and students. Teachers can track make-up work and help them catch up on what they missed while in hiding. If teachers notice a drop in attendance, significant changes in student behavior, or student references to immigration law enforcement, they can notify administration and consult the school psychologist or social worker. Not only are these students often missing a primary caregiver, they are also undergoing severe family hardship. Following a detention or deportation of a family member, the school may be the most consistent and structured place for the child.

Educators can also be aware of the challenges that await their students from mixed-status families, especially those that are undocumented, as they transition into adulthood. Some undocumented students benefit from support from school counselors and psychologists during this transition. Above all, educators can advocate for their students' access to higher education, understanding that this goal may not be financially viable for them. Teachers can inform students of their options and get involved in movements to increase their access to higher education and citizenship.

The authors of this article are troubled that many students in the United States are prevented from obtaining the same opportunities as others, so we have written this article with the intent of educating the reader to advocate for their students. Like all children, those in mixed-status families have the right to an appropriate education. The Office for Civil Rights (2014) unequivocally states, "the undocumented or non-citizen status of a student (or his or her parent or guardian) is irrelevant to that student's entitlement to an elementary and secondary public education" (p. 2). Students in mixed-status families face enormous stress and uncertainty, but schools can and should act as stable, safe havens for these children.

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