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

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

### ABSTRACT

*The 1.5 generation are the undocumented students who were born abroad and were brought to the United States by their parents at an early age. Many of these children came here during the population boom in the 1990's and are now teenagers or in their mid 20's. As they are finishing high school, nearly all of them are confused about their post-secondary options because of their undocumented status. The IL Dream Act, passed in 2011, qualifies undocumented youth to pay in-state tuition when attending public universities in Illinois and provides trained counselors who are aware of the college options and post-secondary resources for undocumented youth. However, this research shows that counselors may still be confused and unaware of the resources for their undocumented students, and about the struggles of their daily lives. This study intends to discover what school staff in McLean County know about the everyday life of their undocumented students and what kinds of post-secondary resources (available through the IL Dream Act) are being recommended to this unique group of students.*

Keywords: Undocumented Immigrant Students, Latinos, Dream Act, Academic Resilience, Daily Life, Mental Health, Role of School

The “Elephant in the room” is a famous English metaphorical idiom for an obvious truth that is ignored. Ironically, although an elephant in a room seems like it would be impossible to overlook, it gets avoided because it represents a problem or risk no one wants to discuss and results in a phenomenon known as the conspiracy of silence (Zerubavel 2006). According to many psychologists, silence, both a product and a source of fear, stems from the need to avoid pain and is often generated by a milder form of shame called embarrassment (2006). Together, this pain and embarrassment cause society to ignore uncomfortable issues and prevents it from confronting and solving some of its most significant issues.

The first thing people might think of in the presence of a literal elephant in a room is, *how did it get here?* And, *how can we get it back in the wild?* These questions can also be applied to the idiomatic “elephant in the room,” as people question why an issue exists and how to solve it. These questions are also typical of today’s illegal immigrants. *Why are they here? What can we do to get rid of the problem?* Such questions represent the confusion and lack of awareness about the historical, political and social backgrounds of this unique group of migrants. The world has constructed a knot of categories around legal and illegal immigrants, with a confusing set of policies, and cannot seem to untie it. In fact, it is so twisted that many of its victims are stuck inside without any access to the resources of the outside world. In the heart of this knot, where it is most difficult to crawl out, lie its youngest victims.

The term *illegal* is often used interchangeably with the term *criminal*. However, a crime is something done under one’s own volition. For many “illegal” children and minors, their status is a result of a decision and action made by the parents or adults who brought them to this country— a decision that, in many cases, even their parents had minimal control over given the political and economic instability in their home countries. Based on the lack of control behind their migration, these adults and children are not illegal and cannot be identified as criminals. For this reason, it is best to refer to this group of children as “undocumented.” An overwhelming amount of undocumented youth have grown up in the United States, attended US schools and internalized US cultural norms and values. Therefore, they are identical to their American born youth in many ways. They are football players, band members, and honor roll students. They want to be doctors, lawyers and teachers; these youth constitute the “1.5 generation,” but many people simply see them as elephants in a room.

Over the past twenty five years, the number of undocumented immigrants in the United States has grown to about 11.1 million, and an estimated 65,000 undocumented students currently graduate from the nation’s high schools each year (Abrego and Gonzales 2010; Gonzales 2011; Perez 2009). While there are some undocumented youth who learn about their status at an early age, there are still others who find out about their limitations when they cannot participate in normative coming of age activities such as getting a driver’s license or qualifying for financial aid. Each year, high schools are preparing thousands of undocumented students for an uncertain future. Although educators may be aware of the fact that their undocumented students have virtually no feasible paths for formal legal integration, they are also unaware of the resources that do exist (Chavez et. al 2007). For this reason, they actively contribute to the conspiracy of silence. Some may completely avoid conversations about post-secondary options with their undocumented students, while others, in order to prevent actually acknowledging

the elephant's presence by "accidentally bumping into it... keep a safe distance away from it by discussing 'safe topics' (Zerubavel 2006:84). Others may lead their students astray, not recommending any post-secondary education or scholarship opportunities simply because they are unaware of these options (Gonzales 2010). In response to their hopelessness and pain, undocumented students turn their barriers into personal elephants in the room, too ashamed and embarrassed to expose them to their teachers and counselors. In the end, the barriers associated with undocumented status are what become the real elephants, as teachers are reluctant to ask about them and as students are unwilling to share them. This problem stems from the lack of open communication that is responsible for bringing individuals closer. The closer people are socially, the more they tend to trust and reveal things to each other. "Elephants are fundamentally problematic entities," yet, "by avoiding them we do nothing to solve the problems they represent" (Zerubavel 2006: 86). In fact, they only become worse.

The conspiracy of silence is what is keeping society from untying the knot and setting undocumented high school youth free to dream. However, in order for a conspiracy of silence to actually end, there cannot be any conspirators left to keep it alive (Zerubavel 2006). Untying this knot has to involve an entire social system, not just a single individual. Nonetheless, by examining the gap between what school administrators know about the daily lives of their undocumented students and the types of post-secondary resources available to them, we can find the loops behind this lack of open communication and slowly begin to untie the knot.

Few statistics exist about undocumented immigrant youth; however, the research that does exist illuminates the vulnerability of this group. It is difficult to understand the constraints of undocumented youth because they are practically invisible. These youth live in fear and silence, hoping for some providential policy to change their fate while the rest of the world ignores their pain. Luckily, research on the general immigrant population, coupled with existing studies on undocumented youth, can be used to understand their daily life barriers, especially those encountered within their high schools.

## THE 1.5 GENERATION

The 1.5 generation are the children who were born abroad and were brought to the United States by their parents at an early age, and fit somewhere between the first and second generation (Gonzales 2009). Parents might decide to bring their children to the United States without papers because of long backlogs, higher rates of denials, or after realizing they are missing their children's childhood (C. Suarez-Orozco et. al 2011). In a sense, those who are part of the 1.5 generation straddle two worlds, having some association with their countries of birth, but primarily identify themselves through their experiences growing up in the United States. Although some members of the 1.5 generation learn about their undocumented status at an early age, there are others who find out when they are excluded from normative coming of age activities, like getting a drivers license or qualifying for financial aid. Almost overnight, they wake up to a nightmare where they learn about their undocumented status, and their worlds are turned around (Gonzales 2009). Today, there are more than 2.1 million undocumented young people in the United States who have been here since childhood (Gonzales 2011).

According to Hernandez et. al (2009), about half of undocumented adults live with their own children under 18. More than 1 of every 5 (22%) children in immigrant families in Illinois lives in overcrowded housing (Hernandez et. al 2009). Nearly 40% of undocumented children live below the federal poverty level (Gonzales 2009); 1 of every 7 immigrant children is officially poor; and the rate is even higher for children with origins from Mexico (Hernandez et. al 2009). Because of elevated poverty rates, many undocumented students are in reciprocal financial relationships with their parents and many times even support them (Gonzales 2011). In other words, at times when kids could be relaxing or studying, undocumented youth find themselves stressed by the necessity to support their families at a very young age. Research by Marcelo and Carola Suarez-Orozco has proven that children raised in poverty are more vulnerable to psychological distresses, which has significant implications for educational outcomes (2007). Some of these include difficulties concentrating and sleeping, anxiety, depression and a heightened propensity for delinquency and violence (2007). For undocumented students living in low-income households, space to study is often extremely limited, and undocumented parents who work long hours may have difficulty being fully physically or psychologically available for their children (C. Suarez-Orozco et. al 2011). Additionally, children of noncitizen parents are more likely than children of parents who are citizens to be in poor health, but less likely to display significant behavior problems (Huang et.al 2006).

In addition to financial strains and responsibility for their own care, nearly half of undocumented children (45%) are uninsured (Passel and Cohn 2009), and due to the fear of deportation, undocumented families are hesitant to apply for food stamps or health care benefits (Abrego and Gonzales 2009). Berk and Schur (2001) claim that undocumented persons have always feared that using publicly funded services might lead to discovery of their undocumented status. These are the same institutions that have historically benefited immigrant families. Rambaut and Kamaie (2010) argue that the 1.5 generation is more likely to still live with their immigrant parents, to study and work part time, and to postpone marriage and children. Additionally, research has demonstrated that impoverished undocumented youth are more likely to face high levels of street violence, have a greater chance of dropping out of high school, and experience an increased risk of teenage pregnancy (Abrego and Gonzales 2009). All this demonstrates the vulnerability of this group and the limitations attached to their undocumented status.

## LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

In addition to their socio-economic difficulties, undocumented youth face a range of legal barriers. Some of these include difficulties accessing higher education, gaps in policy like the Dream Act and recent changes in comprehensive immigration reform, blocks encountered in the labor market, and anti-immigrant sentiments. Legal constraints often create added layers of need in navigating the transition to 'the real world' (Gonzales 2010). Understanding these implications reveals some of the sources behind the daily life constraints of undocumented youth.

## *Access to Higher Education and the Dream Act*

Perhaps the most prevalent barrier for members of the 1.5 generation is their inability to qualify for federal or state financial aid as they near the end of high school (Abrego and Gonzales 2009). In 1982, the Supreme Court's *Plyer vs. Doe* decision established the right of undocumented children to a free public education; however, this decision only protects the educational rights of children under 18, leaving high school graduates with unprotected, uncertain futures (Perez 2009). Today, this decision affects approximately 1.8 million children, or about one-sixth of the total undocumented population. Consequently, only about 10% to 20% of undocumented youth who graduate from high school go to college (2009). Despite their lack of access to federal or financial aid, undocumented students demonstrate a great perseverance in their efforts to secure their own funds. In addition to applying for private scholarships, many work, participate in fundraisers, and actively solicit private donations in order to raise money for college (Chavez et. al 2007).

On August 1, 2001, Senator Orrin Hatch introduced the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act (DREAM Act), but the bill never received a floor vote. It was introduced once again in November 2005, however, it did not receive the necessary votes to be sent to President George W. Bush (Perez 2009). Finally, it was introduced again in March 2009, and although it is currently the subject of much debate, it is also experiencing substantial bipartisan support. The Dream Act would allow undocumented immigrant youth who were brought to this country as small children (the 1.5 generation) to obtain legal permanent status as long as they graduate from high school and pursue a college degree or join the military (Gonzales 2009). If students meet the conditions of the Act, they would be able to apply for a six year, "conditional" legal permanent status. If they complete at least two years toward a four-year college degree, graduate from a two-year college, or serve at least two years in the military, they could then apply for U.S. citizenship. Estimates say that the Dream Act would provide 360,000 undocumented high school graduates with a legal means to work and for another 715,000 youth between the ages of 5 and 17 to graduate from high school and pursue college (2009).

Although the Dream Act has not passed at the federal level, a separate Dream Act has passed on a state level in over ten states, including Illinois. The federal Dream Act should not be confused with the Illinois Dream Act, signed by Governor Pat Quinn on August 1, 2011, which qualifies eligible, undocumented youth to pay in-state tuition when attending public universities in Illinois, provides trained counselors on college options and resources for undocumented youth, and gives them access to savings programs so that parents can invest and save for their children's education. Additionally, an Illinois Dream Fund Commission is in the process of acquiring privately donated scholarship money for eligible students (ICIRR, IYJL 2011).

According to the Illinois Student Assistance Commission, nine members were appointed to serve on this commission on February 4, 2012, with a commitment to advance the educational opportunities of the 'children of immigrants' (2013). Their primary responsibilities include establishing a not-for-profit entity to administer the Fund, publicizing the availability of scholarships from the DREAM Fund, and selecting recipients. The DREAM Fund Commission is also responsible for researching issues

pertaining to access and success of children of immigrants in higher education, and developing and running training programs for high school counselors and admissions and financial aid staff. These training programs should teach the participating high school counselors about the educational opportunities available to college bound students who are the children of immigrants, including but not limited to in-state tuition and other scholarships. The Illinois Student Assistance Commission also states that the IL Dream Fund Commission should also establish a public awareness campaign regarding educational opportunities available to college-bound students who are ‘the children of immigrants’ (2013).

In order to qualify for a scholarship through the IL Dream Fund, students must meet the same requirements that now apply to receiving an in-state tuition rate at one of Illinois’s public universities: In addition to having at least one parent who immigrated to the U.S., the student must have lived with a parent or guardian while going to high school in Illinois, graduated from that high school or received a GED, and attended school in Illinois for at least three years before graduating or receiving a GED certificate.

### *Recent Changes in Policy*

In August 2012, the Obama administration raised the hopes of many undocumented students with the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. Although this new policy does not provide undocumented immigrants with a path to citizenship, it does offer the possibility of suspended deportation and the possibility to apply for work permits for those who qualify (Gonzales and Chavez 2012). Although DACA has inspired a sense of hope in the hearts of many undocumented families, it has not eliminated the fear and uncertainty members of the 1.5 generation endure every day.

More recently, on January 28, 2013, a group of eight senators released a framework of their own plans for immigration reform. They broadly agreed on the need for a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, an easier legal immigration system, better enforcement, and more border security (2013). The Senate group framework would allow undocumented immigrants to gain provisional status, allowing them to stay in the United States, and to apply for green cards and eventually citizenship.

Additionally, on January 29, 2013, President Obama suggested a bill (in case bipartisan efforts fail) ensuring smarter enforcement, a pathway to earned citizenship for undocumented immigrants currently living in the United States, and improvements in the legal immigration system so that we continue to be attract students from around the world (Huffington Post, 2013). In addition, it would require the undocumented immigrants to get a background check, pay taxes and a fine, learn English, and “go to the back of the line” behind immigrants who have applied for a visa from outside of the United States (2013). This proposal proves that the nation is extremely close to a comprehensive immigration reform; however, the President’s proposal is still unclear about what the enforcement would look like and if deportation efforts will continue.

Possibly the most important part of the President’s proposal is the fact that it appeals to and invites the best minds of America to stay in this country after graduation rather than take their skills to other countries (Huffington Post 2013). Obama emphasized that any reform package must make immigrating legally easier to navigate



for high skilled workers and graduates with advanced degrees who are living in the United States (2013). Therefore, it is vital for undocumented students to prepare themselves with advanced degrees while anticipating this bill's inauguration.

### *Driving and Work Restrictions*

Another legal constraint faced by the 1.5 generation is work. Based on the current U.S. economy, post-secondary education is a necessity for nearly anyone who desires to make a decent living wage (Gonzales 2009). However, even if undocumented students do pursue a post-secondary education, without a social security number it is impossible for them to get a legal job. Since many undocumented youth live below the federal poverty level, they need to work in order to support their families. As a result, many of them resort to illegal forms of employment and resort to fake social security numbers. Even though work may be illegal for current undocumented high school students, research insists that they should continue navigating the educational system and finding scholarships available for undocumented immigrants. According to previous studies by Gonzales identifying legally permissible options for undocumented students can be accomplished "while maintaining the motivation required to produce workable routes to achieve desired larger goals," (*forthcoming*:25).

Additionally, many of these youth rely on driving cars in order to get to work; however, they cannot get a driver's license without a social security number, so they continue driving illegally. Yet, studies have shown that illegally working and driving is both physically and mentally detrimental. Not only do these youth face risks such as arrest and deportation, but also extremely high levels of stress and anxiety (Gonzales 2009).

However, on January 28, 2013, Governor Pat Quinn signed SB 957 enabling undocumented immigrants in Illinois to get temporary driver's licenses (TVDL's) and making Illinois the fourth state to authorize undocumented immigrants to drive legally (Dudek, 2013). TVDL's will be issued on October 1, 2013, ten months after the bill's signing, for those who applied. However, TVDL's are solely limited to driving purposes; they cannot be used to vote, get firearms, board an airplane, or enter federal buildings (ICIRR, 2013). To qualify for a TVDL, an undocumented immigrant must: prove that she has lived in Illinois for at least one year; provide a valid unexpired passport or consular ID; provide other proof of her identity and residency that the Secretary of State might require; provide documentation that she is not eligible for a Social Security Number; pass all applicable vision, written, and road tests; show proof of insurance for the vehicle she uses for the road test; and pay a \$30 fee (2013).

### *Anti-Immigrant Sentiment*

Additionally, today's political repercussion and escalating anti-immigrant sentiment has increased levels of fear in immigrant communities (Gonzales et. al *forthcoming*; Massey and Sanchez 2010). Immigrants who are racially distinct are at a greater risk for experiencing discrimination (Suarez-Orozco et. al 2012). In addition, xenophobia is an increasing problem for Latinos in the United States (2012). Undocumented immigrants who experience discrimination often feel guilt or shame, as

they are treated “second-class” people (Sullivan and Rehm 2005). Research shows that perceived discrimination correlates positively with psychological distress and negatively with a sense of personal control (Moradi and Risco 2006), and has the potential to lead to symptoms of depression and anxiety (Hovey and Magaña 2000).

According to the Pew Hispanic Center, more than one in two Latinos worries about discrimination and deportation (Gonzales et. al *forthcoming*). In the last fiscal year, the U.S. deported more than 400,000 immigrants. All this has an incredible impact on the mental health of undocumented youth as they live in daily fear and anxiety.

The mental health effects generated by the anti-immigrant sentiment and discrimination also contribute to the developmental patterns among undocumented youth. The fear and anxiety they experience as a result of anti-immigrant sentiment plays an interesting role in the development process of undocumented youth, as many of them struggle in defining their place in society. Additionally, growing up in the midst of a hostile environment may have negative effects on the developmental patterns of undocumented youth.

## DEVELOPMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

All people experience identity development, discovering a sense of self, as they mature. However, undocumented youth face an interesting set of cultural and psychosocial constraints that make these processes more complicated. As they struggle to define their role in society, undocumented youth may respond to the barriers associated with their legal status negatively, and therefore not only develop negative self-images but also negative social and academic patterns within their schools. In contrast, there are those who develop extremely resilient patterns in their development process, and actually exhibit positive self-images and healthy lifestyles. Understanding identity construction and its patterns among undocumented youth is essential when considering their daily life experiences.

### *Psychosocial Identity Construction and Health Effects*

Research suggests that culture powerfully shapes human experience (Suarez-Orozco et.al 2012). Although a specific identity development model does not exist for members of the 1.5 generation, models based on immigrant children can be applied to the undocumented population. One of these is the Bicultural Orientation Model (BOM), introduced by Vasti Torres at Indiana University. Torres demonstrates how generational status, the location where immigrant students grew up, and self perception of societal status all play a role in the development of Latino students and how they perceive their culture and environment (Prieto et. al 2011). The model displays four types of cultural orientations: Bicultural, a preference to function completely both in Hispanic and Anglo cultures; Anglo, a preference to function within the Anglo culture; Hispanic, a preference to function within the Hispanic culture; Marginal, the inability to function adequately in Anglo or Hispanic cultures. Although the model is based on Hispanic-Anglo identities, it can be applied to any ethnicity.

While identity development is something every teenager goes through, the process is especially challenging for undocumented immigrant youth. Gonzales et. al

(*forthcoming*) argues that immigrant youth navigate between different cultural systems and face the need to incorporate different worldviews into a single yet plural identity. Similarly, C. Suarez-Orozco et. al (2011) claims that the condition of illegality places children, adolescents, and young adults in the “untenable position of interminable liminality.” Thus, there exists an uncertainty of belonging, which becomes increasingly intolerable as they transition between cultural systems and engage in normative coming of age activities.

Many of these activities happen in what Gonzales et.al (*forthcoming*) labels a “discovery” stage, between the ages of 16 and 18. In this stage, members of the 1.5 generation begin to experience dramatic shifts in their daily lives and future plans. Here, they struggle to assimilate their undocumented status as an element of their self-identity as they “discover” their daily constraints. Some of these constraints may include inaccessibility to a driver’s license and inability to work legally. Recent studies have examined the psychosocial issues associated with this stage and reveal emotional problems such as shock, extreme stress, depressed motivation, hopelessness and anger (Gonzales et. al *forthcoming*).

Self harm behaviors and suicide attempts have also been observed among this population and serve as a clear reference to a sense of despair and an uncertain adulthood. Gonzales et.al (*forthcoming*) maintains that extreme isolation, concealment, graduation from educational institutions with tangible options, and reported fears and anxieties all serve as strong predictors of suicide. His scholarship also reveals a wide array of physical health issues such as stomach ulcers, chronic headaches, trouble sleeping, toothaches, and extreme fatigue. In addition, a wide range of mental health problems including anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, and a higher prevalence of severe mental illness and suicidal ideation have been observed among immigrant populations in the United States (Suarez-Orozco et.al 2012; Gonzales et. al *forthcoming*). Flores and Kaplan (2009) also claim that individuals who feel unsafe in their environments are more likely to abuse drugs than those who are comfortable with their surroundings.

### *Sense of Self*

Gonzales (2011) argues that stigmatized status reinforces legal exclusion, and fears of being discovered significantly impact interactions with teachers and peers. Stigma, or the shame often attached to being undocumented, plagues the lives of undocumented students. Scholarship has found that stigma makes the lives of undocumented students incredibly traumatic and full of fear. By internalizing their barriers and struggling to develop an identity, stigma keeps undocumented youth silent and afraid.

W.E.B. Du Bois termed the idea of looking at oneself through the eyes of others as “double-consciousness.” This philosophy can be applied when thinking about the role of the societal perceptions of an undocumented child and that child’s subsequent identity development. Child psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott suggests that a childrens’ sense of self is considerably shaped by the reflections mirrored back to them by significant others (C. Suarez-Orozco and M. Suarez-Orozco 2001). Although all human beings are dependent on these reflections, predominant negative mirroring can have significant

effects on children's sense of self worth. Positive reflections make an individual feel worthwhile and competent, while negative reflections make it difficult to maintain an untarnished sense of self-worth (2001). Reflections can be accurate or inaccurate, but they become a problem when they begin to foster negative distortions.

C. Suarez-Orozco and M. Suarez-Orozco (2001) argue that children who respond to the poisoned mirror develop adversarial identities. These children tend to have problems in school and are more likely to drop out of high school and face constant unemployment in the formal economy. Effectively, hopelessness and self-deprecation cause low aspirations and self-defeating behaviors. Many times, undocumented youth give up their ethnic identities as they adopt the adversarial alternative.

However, there are still youth who encounter negative distortions and defy them. Gonzales et. al (*forthcoming*) found that youth who actively sought out meaningful relationships and developed a capacity to trust dealt with stressors more effectively. C. Suarez-Orozco and M. Suarez-Orozco (2001) agrees that youth who are actively able to maintain and cultivate a sense of hope for the future are more promising and better able to maintain a healthy self esteem. In addition, Gonzales et. al (*forthcoming*) claims that youth who took on a shared identity with others in similar circumstances appeared less isolated and therefore maintained a more positive sense of self. Gonzales and Chavez (2012) interpret acts of resistance as acts of cultural citizenship, or a range of activities disadvantaged groups use to claim space and rights in society. Participation in civic activities has also proven to be a powerful tool in the defiance of immigration related controversies (Gonzales et.al *forthcoming*). Examples of these activities include serving communities by volunteering to help others, acting as role models, or advocating and working for social change (Gonzales et.al *forthcoming*; C. Suarez Orozco and M. Suarez Orozco 2001).

In addition to the effects of resilience within the community, resilience also plays a key role in the academic trajectories of members of the 1.5 generation. In a sense, resilience defines the lifestyles of this unique group of youth, as those who exhibit more resilience tend to contribute more positively to their community and academic environments. The academic patterns of resilient youth, as well as the factors influencing resilience, are key in understanding the daily lives of undocumented youth.

## ACADEMIC TRAJECTORIES

Research has demonstrated that factors ranging from personal empowerment to family and school staff have influenced the resilience patterns of undocumented youth. Despite the inaccessibility to higher education for undocumented youth, resilient youth have been found to succeed and keep the American Dream more alive than ever before. A thorough examination of the factors responsible for academic success, as well as the role of the high school and its staff in fueling this resilience, provides a better understanding of the potential of this unique group of students.

### *Resilience*

Resilience is the process of overcoming the negative effects of risk exposure, coping, and trauma (Olsson et.al 2003). Researchers argue that both environment and personality play a role in building resilience. While environments can contribute to a person's risk of encountering various problems, they can also provide protection (Perez et. al 2009). Resilient children exhibit good communication skills, a sense of responsibility, achievement orientation, caring attitudes, an internal locus of control, a positive self concept, and a belief in self-help (Werner and Smith 1992).

The academic success of undocumented students is a common indicator of resilience. Gordon (1996) found that one of the main differences between resilient and non-resilient youth was faith in cognitive skills. Similarly, Gonzales et.al (*forthcoming*) argues that personal empowerment and self-motivation are known to be some of the most important predictors of school attainment. Students who achieved did so because they believed in their capabilities to achieve. However, faith in cognitive skills is not primarily responsible for academic success. Instead, a supportive social network seems to be the main factor behind success.

Family, and especially parents, are a critical factor in the development of resiliency (Perez et. al 2009). M. Suarez-Orozco and C. Suarez-Orozco (2007) maintain that families are perhaps the most powerful factors in shaping the well-being and future outcomes of their children. Families can establish value in education, actively support their children, and promote high expectations. Parents with higher educational levels can provide children with more literacy opportunities, communicate with more sophisticated vocabularies, offer greater access to computers, assist more productively with homework, and offer more knowledge about applying to and getting into college (Suarez-Orozco et.al 2008).

C. Suarez-Orozco and M. Suarez-Orozco (2001) argue that in all societies, a critical role of parents is to act as guides for their children. However, parents who never went to college are not always aware of what it takes to successfully finish high school and get into college. Undocumented students who find themselves in these situations need to rely on outside support and assistance. Recent scholarship suggests that relationships between peer networks and school officials can enable poor and minority youth to get useful post-secondary information (Gonzales 2010). Gonzales (2011) refers to these individuals as "really significant others," because of their knowledge, experience and ability to motivate students to graduate from high school and attend college.

Likewise, Perez et. al (2009) argues that supportive relationships, particularly from teachers, school personnel, and other adults are key in developing resilience. Similarly, Croninger and Lee (2001) found that when teachers take time and effort to assist students, they can be an important source of social capital. Gonzales (2010) maintains that student success is largely determined by ability to form positive relationships with school personnel and high-achieving peers. His research also finds that the inability to form relationships with teachers tends to shut students out of many opportunities. These relationships mean the difference between leaving school or going to college for many undocumented youth (Croninger and Lee 2001; Gonzales 2011; Gonzales 2010).

### *Role of the School*

Perez et. al (2009) found that academic success (resilience) was related to both personal and environmental resources. In the presence of various resources, academic achievement was generally positive, and despite the challenges associated with their undocumented status, resilient members of the 1.5 generation were able to draw on available personal and environmental resources to combat them. Giftedness, valuing of school, extracurricular participation, and volunteerism were all significant predictors of academic achievement among undocumented youth (Perez et. al 2009). However, in reality not all undocumented youth fare academically well. A combination of factors such as depressed motivation, lack of information about how to move forward, and limited financial resources play a role in the high school drop-outs (Gonzales 2011). Gonzales refers to these students as “early exiters,” and finds that this group tends to have children earlier, are in more direct contact with law enforcement, and have greater contact with drugs and alcohol (Gonzales et. al *forthcoming*). However, scholarship suggests that schools have the ability to prevent these types of risk taking behaviors. Perez et. al (2009) argues that resources can buffer or protect students from the negative effects of the psychosocial conditions that place them at risk of academic failure. Schools also have the potential to bridge the movement between cultural systems and help integrate various viewpoints into one plural identity (Gonzales et. al *forthcoming*).

Gonzales (2010) suggests that school provides students with the first opportunities to form important relationships outside of the household. A number of studies have determined that school structure plays a large role in the academic achievement of students; however, if structural changes are not complemented with changes in how educators think about their students, fundamental differences in student achievement will not happen (Da Silva et. al 2007). That is, educators need to understand and incorporate cultural, linguistic, and experiential differences, as well as differences in social class, into the learning process. In order to help their undocumented students succeed, educators need to first understand where they are coming from. Chen et. al (2010) argues that to overcome roadblocks, school counselors need to be knowledgeable about existing laws, gain support from other school personnel, form alliances, and reach out to undocumented students. Additionally, Da Silva et. al (2007) maintains that many young people feel that adults do not listen to them. The pain and fear undocumented youth bring daily to the classroom could be lessened if students voice their experiences and educators care to listen.

## METHOD

The participants of this study included eight high school staff who have contact with undocumented students on a daily basis in Bloomington-Normal, IL. This study followed an open-ended interview schedule based on face-to-face interviews with high school teachers and guidance counselors who were asked concrete questions about their experiences with undocumented students. While the purpose of the study was to investigate the gap within in each high school in terms of understanding the effects of undocumented status on undocumented students, no direct questions were asked toward this end. A more accurate illustration of these effects is revealed through an integration of common themes from multiple narratives. Thus, the focus of the interviews was on the personal experiences school staff had with undocumented youth and their perceptions

of the effects of undocumented status on these students as observed in the high school setting. The goal was to use the voices of research participants to portray the variegated effects of undocumented status in the daily life of students. Follow up questions were asked to gain an in-depth understanding of not only the daily psychosocial constraints of undocumented youth but also the general awareness of these effects and the IL Dream Act by school staff. Although awareness of the IL state and federal Dream Acts was not the focus of this study, questions about them were asked in order to develop a general understanding of the type of post-secondary advice provided for undocumented youth in each of the high schools.

The study addressed four main research areas: (1) Perceptions school staff had of common daily constraints among the undocumented student population (2) Post secondary aspirations observed among undocumented students (3) Awareness of the types of post secondary resources currently available to undocumented students to support their aspirations, according to the IL Dream Act (4) Perceptions of what undocumented students lack most within high schools. The results are based on participants' *perceptions* of their undocumented students, and therefore do not imply actual trends. Analyzing these perceptions helps to reveal gaps that can be closed in order to better support these students.

### *Data Collection*

The study took place in McLean County, Illinois and targeted research participants in three high schools in the region. Although the U.S. Census Bureau defines McLean County as a metropolitan statistical area, because it has a "high degree of social and economic integration," its population was 172,281 as of 2012 in comparison to 5,231,351 in Cook County in Chicago (2013). The results of this study can be beneficial when assessing larger trends and comparing them to larger metropolitan regions (2013). Such comparison can potentially reveal greater patterns and implications for work with undocumented high school youth. Additionally, McLean County has an interesting mix of heritage groups, with 4.6% persons of Hispanic or Latino origin in comparison to 16.2% in Illinois as of 2011 (2013). The U.S Census Bureau defines Hispanics or Latinos as "people who classified themselves in one of the specific Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino categories listed on the Census 2010 questionnaire –'Mexican,' 'Puerto Rican', or 'Cuban'-as well as those who indicate that they are 'another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin,'" (2013). General demographic information of the sample school staff is presented in Table 1 and 2. The sample consisted of high school teachers and guidance counselors who either currently have experience working with undocumented youth or have had experience in the past. In total, there were eight participants; there were considerably more female participants than male, with one male and seven females. Two of the participants identified as guidance counselors while six identified as teachers. Seven out of the eight participants were white and one was African American.

Table 1. Distribution of sample school staff in McLean County, IL according to various demographic characteristics (n=8). All names are pseudonyms.

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Profession</b>	<b>Gender</b>
<b>Janelle</b>	African American	Teacher	Female
<b>Pam</b>	White	Teacher	Female
<b>Kimberly</b>	White	Guidance Counselor	Female
<b>Laura</b>	White	Teacher	Female
<b>Stephanie</b>	White	Teacher	Female
<b>Danielle</b>	White	Teacher	Female
<b>John</b>	White	Teacher	Male
<b>Tina</b>	White	Guidance Counselor	Female

Table 2. Distribution of sample school staff in McLean County, IL according to various demographic characteristics (n=8).

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

Although the study took place in three high schools, notably more interviews took place at one high school, while only one interview was conducted in each of the other two. Since the study followed a snowball method, reliance on individuals for guidance to more research participants was vital. However, access to research participants was challenging, as the study's focus was on a vulnerable population. As there is no system for identifying undocumented youth, it was difficult to pinpoint where they were attending high school. Fortunately, personal contact with a teacher at one of the high schools opened the door to five other participants. Likewise, personal contact with a person who had former student teaching experience at another high school permitted access to another interview. Despite this limitation, personal connections provided a gateway to participants and ultimately sanctioned the progression of this study.

In regard to the snowball method, an email was sent to potential research participants, highlighting the goal of the project and seeking consent to an open-ended interview. The need for stronger support networks and better resources for undocumented students in the school system was especially stressed in this email to illuminate the need for and connotation of this type of study, and hopefully attract participants to contribute to the movement. A follow-up email was sent a week later if no response was received. Additionally, a few phone calls were made to the main offices of the high schools, with a brief presentation of the project and a request for an interview with either guidance counselors or interested teachers. Upon hearing back from the



participants, interviews were scheduled according to the participants' schedules and desired locations.

There were a few cases in which participants responded to the email unfavorably, indicating they did not feel adequately prepared to partake in the study. Some were confused about whether or not they needed specific experience with undocumented youth. Specifically, one teacher wrote, "I don't think that I am a person that would be able to help you with this. The main reason is because the only way that I have come to know some of my [undocumented] students is if they personally tell me." Another teacher responded similarly, "my current position doesn't bring me into contact with many students that are undocumented, and furthermore, I have no way of ascertaining their immigration status." While these participants were not interviewed, their comments reveal some of the lack of information that is also part of the larger analysis.

Before each of the interviews, the participants were given a copy of a statement of consent to keep for their records, and were asked to sign another copy indicating their understanding and voluntary participation in the study. By signing the statement, the participants also agreed to never reveal students' real names during the interviews, and were instead asked to refer to them by a pseudonym. They were also asked permission for voice recording to aid in accuracy of transcription. To ensure confidentiality, the participants' identities were coded by a pseudonym.

## RESULTS

The first section, Daily Constraints, describes six types of barriers observed by the research participants in their undocumented students. These barriers are classified as legal, cultural, psychosocial, interpersonal, institutional and systemic. The next section, Post Secondary Aspirations, addresses the second research question, describing the perceptions school staff had of plans their undocumented students had upon graduation from high school. The third section, Post Secondary Resources, describes school staff's conception of the types of post secondary resources currently available by the IL Dream Act and whether or not they are offered in their own high schools. The last section, Gap Analysis, speaks to the last research question, analyzing the research participants' opinions about what undocumented students lack most within their high schools.

### DAILY CONSTRAINTS

#### *Legal*

The results from the research reveal an interplay between work and the ability for undocumented high school students to pay for college. The two contribute to the way high school staff observe the daily life of undocumented youth. Possibly the most prevalent legal barrier observed by research participants was the inability of undocumented students to pay for college. Five out of eight, or 63%, of the participants found the inability to pay for college to be a constraint. This finding corresponds with research by Abrego and Gonzales (2009) who have also found that the inability to qualify for federal or state financial aid is perhaps the most important barrier for undocumented youth. Specifically, Stephanie spoke to the interplay between work and the ability to pay

for college, explaining how one of her students never got a raise even though he was promoted working at a car wash. “So he quit, and now he’s having a harder time finding a job. He can’t continue at [the community college] because he doesn’t have enough money” (Stephanie).

However, not all participants had a correct understanding of undocumented students’ ability to qualify for financial aid. Actually, the guidance counselor responsible for the majority of undocumented students in her high school was confused about the types of financial aid available to undocumented youth. This counselor claimed that undocumented students “can’t fill out the FAFSA” (Kimberly). According to the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (ICIRR), undocumented students can fill out a FAFSA when applying to college; however, they cannot officially submit it to the government without a social security number (2010). Without official submission to the government, these students will not get any financial aid, but if a post-secondary institution requires the FAFSA as part of the application process, students can still send a copy to the institution without submitting it the government. Therefore, this counselor’s understanding of undocumented students’ access to financial aid did not correspond with the types of aid that exist in reality. Similarly, an ESL teacher in the same school may have also misunderstood the financial aid process stating, “they pretty much know, they can’t get financial aid” (Stephanie).

Even more participants (75%) found work an important legal constraint for undocumented youth. Janelle highlighted the psychosocial impact of this constraint, acknowledging that “with no paperwork, that leaves them to a job that is degrading, that is humiliating.” Three out of the eight participants referred to these students as “survivors.” Kimberly explained that “there’s some families who are at a survival level, “go to work, we need to have money for food’—instead of at a let’s raise level.” Similarly, another participant described the lifestyle of “survivors” as “checking off a box... like why would I come to school when I could be at work and get paid?” However, one of the English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers, Pam, had a strikingly different viewpoint, firmly believing that work was not a barrier for undocumented youth but rather an opportunity for personal wealth:

But most of these kids can pay. You know these kids all have iPhones and iPods. It’s very rare that we see one of our students that doesn’t have an iPhone or an iPod. But I think if they want to go to junior college, they can save up enough to do that. Most of them are working. A lot of the kids are working, by the time they’re 16 at least. There are a couple where they’re expected to contribute to their income at home. But most of the kids, when you talk to them about their jobs and their money, the money that they make at their job is theirs.

The observations of all four of these participants correspond with research by Chavez et.al (2007) who found that despite their inability to qualify for financial aid, many undocumented youth work, participate in fundraisers, and actively solicit private funds in order to raise money for college. Actually, three out of the eight participants (38%) considered their undocumented students at or near poverty level. Although poverty level was not necessarily a legal barrier, the inability to qualify for financial aid was; thus, poverty contributed to the fact that most undocumented youth do not have the

financial means to afford college. In contrast to Pam, who did not consider her undocumented students impoverished since they “all have iPhones and iPods,” the three participants referred to details like trailer parks, overcrowded housing, and multiple jobs when talking about financial constraints of their undocumented students. Specifically, Janelle referred to a few experiences in which she actually visited some of her undocumented students’ homes and concluded that:

I can say through the exposure I have had, I find many people living in one particular place but it’s so disjointed that there isn’t time for laundry or cleaning, I mean there is time for family and eating, but those jobs that I suppose um we would consider like menial tasks like washing dishes and things like that. Um go without notice. But in my mind’s eye, that’s disarray, and these individuals are living in filth. But again, that’s me imposing, like how could you?—but then I get it, like you have 10 people living in a trailer. You know, everybody’s got 2 jobs, 4 of which are under the age of 5, how could you maintain that household?

Just like poverty was not necessarily a legal barrier for undocumented youth, neither was parents working. However, like poverty, parents working contributed to the fact that these students, and their families, could not afford college. Janelle was one of the five participants who observed an effect of parents working on the academic outcomes of their undocumented children. Pam pointed out that sometimes parents are “working around the clock, and they don’t have time to parent.” Kimberly shared similar observations, “...working, working, working... father has at least two jobs, and so most likely for [the undocumented student], nobody’s home when he leaves for school.” With parents constantly at work, some of the participants found that students simply did not come to school. Kimberly explained that:

Without mom, being there, without having that culture of you get up and go to school every day, even if you have the sniffles, even if you have a headache, that culture is not portrayed in some families.

In addition, 63% of participants also found lack of transportation as a daily constraint among their undocumented students. Since undocumented youth cannot legally drive due to their lack of a driver’s license, school staff observed a negative effect of school buses on grades. Although this effect was not necessarily a legal barrier, the inability to qualify for a driver’s license was. The school district in which the study was conducted relies on a bussing system of English as a Second Language (ESL) students who do not pass a language exam, the ACCESS, to one particular high school in the district. All of the research participants believed that the majority of undocumented students were ESL. In reality, not all undocumented students are also ESL students. Out of the five participants who acknowledged lack of transportation as a daily constraint, two observed the reliance on school buses as an impediment to participation in after school activities as well as an overall barrier in terms of academic excellence. Janelle explained this effect, stating:

Sometimes transportation is an issue like some of our kids—the kids that need it the most are getting here last. Because their bus fronts so far out. And so sometimes we have a free and reduced breakfast in the morning and the kids get here and they've already shut down the line so they haven't even eaten. So now you're putting this kid in a classroom, asking them to learn.

### *Cultural*

None of the participating high schools in this study had an official system of identifying undocumented youth. Whether or not schools can question students about their immigration status is not entirely clear; however, “state laws and guidance from state education agencies have generally endorsed the view that schools should not ask questions related to immigration status,” (Borowski and Soronen 2009:8). However, “no federal law requires school districts to report undocumented students to immigration authorities and arguably school districts are prohibited from reporting them by *Plyler vs. Doe*<sup>1</sup>,” (2009:10). So even if questions are asked, school staff are not required by law to report their undocumented students. Although identification of undocumented students is not necessarily a cultural constraint, it speaks to alternative ways school staff identify these students, such as cultural stereotypes and language cues.

The research participants in this study either assumed undocumented status or had students reveal their status to them in the past. In general, all of the research participants depicted typical undocumented youth as Hispanic and ESL students. Although these are characteristic of the stereotype of an undocumented immigrant, their perceptions were not necessarily stereotypical, as there was simply a larger overall population of Hispanic ESL students in the high schools where the study was conducted. Therefore, most of their experiences with undocumented youth happened to be with Latino/Hispanic undocumented youth. However, defining undocumented students as ESL and/or Latino/Hispanic was still a cultural constraint because this system of identification meant that stereotypes were being upheld. One of the participants actually emphasized that as teachers, they are trying to “open their [students'] eyes more to ‘hey these stereotypes aren't necessarily true,’ not every undocumented kid only speaks Spanish” (Danielle). Similarly, Janelle noted that it is difficult for students “to think about someone being from the Philippines or something being undocumented, it's always just the Mexicans.” Thus, stereotypes were being upheld even as participants were trying to prevent them.

However, there were other participants who strictly spoke about undocumented students as if they were all Latino/Hispanic, implying that they were one in the same thing. In particular, one of the participants noted that:

We tend to have the biggest attitude issues with the Spanish-speaking boys where you know, they just don't see the value of education... And that's generalization obviously, not all Hispanic boys are like that... It seems to be kind of cultural in general, for uhh boys, that are Spanish speaking I would say (Pam).

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<sup>1</sup> *Plyer vs. Doe* holds that states are prohibited from excluding undocumented children from public schools (Borowski and Soronen 2009:8).

When another participant was asked if she assumes that if there are more Hispanics in a certain college then that means that there are also more undocumented, she responded saying that “I don’t want to make that assumption but you know, it’s one of those things that you feel like it’s a big secret” (Tina).

In addition, although the participants seemed to attach undocumented status to English language learners, 50% of the participants recognized language as a barrier between students and teachers. Still, in all of the high schools, there was an observed deficiency of Spanish-speaking staff. Particularly in one of the high schools, budget cuts were responsible for the underemployment of Spanish-speaking staff, with only one ESL teacher left who only “minored in Spanish,” and therefore was not even fluent in the language.

For this reason, many of the participants attributed the lack of academic excellence on the part of their undocumented students to the lack of Spanish speaking teachers and counselors who could help them. This was a cultural constraint because undocumented Latino youth may have not had a counselor or a teacher they could culturally identify with, and therefore open up to about psychosocial or academic problems. Laura stated that “oh they’re [undocumented students] struggling... Like for an example, one math teacher emailed me because he had two new boys from Guatemala and he’s like ‘I don’t know what to do’. Additionally, two out of the eight participants found language as a barrier in terms of understanding and utilizing vocabulary. Kimberly said that one of her students “wanted to be an auto mechanic but he couldn’t make it through the vocabulary.”

Moreover, 38% of the research participants perceived language barriers between parents and teachers. In particular, one of the participants highlighted that “sometimes what ends up being our biggest issue is that we can’t speak to the parents at all... And the student often becomes the interpreter” (Tina). Another participant also noticed this role of the student as an interpreter, stressing that “sometimes the kids have to go and help the parents with court issues, documentation or status issues, licensing issues, you know” (Pam).

In addition to language barriers, participants observed a trend in the culture of their undocumented Latino students of career modeling after family members, particularly parents. This type of parental influence was identified by respondents as a potential cultural constraint because many of the careers undocumented students chose to model after their parents were not necessarily the participants’ ideas of “success,” but might have been in the students’ homes and cultures. Five out of the eight participants (63%) observed modeling after parents among their undocumented students in terms of general attitude towards school and pursuit of post secondary careers. Most of the participants noticed a trend in following “trade” careers instead of jobs requiring a college degree. Pam stressed that “they’re modeling themselves after their parents, so that’s where they see themselves going.” Janelle similarly explained that “if you see your mom and dad hustling, then yeah you’re going to be hustling.” Therefore, high school staff observed parents as definite role models in the lives of their undocumented students. C. Suarez-Orozco and M.Suarez Orozco (2001) believe that one of the main roles of parents is to act as guides for their children. This seems to be consistent with the observations made by school staff in this study. The findings also correspond with

research by C. Suarez and M. Suarez Orozco (2007) who argue that families are possibly the most powerful factors in shaping the future of their children.

However, none of the research participants seemed to believe that parents were necessarily “good” role models. A lack of an educational background in the cultures of undocumented students was perceived by seven out of the eight participants (88%). All seven of these participants observed a general pattern of following “trade” careers instead of jobs requiring a college degree because of a lack of a college bound culture at home.

Nevertheless, the participants’ definition of a “good role model” was heavily based on a distinct conception of the American Dream. This included the plans school staff imagined for not only their undocumented students, but also the student body as a whole. Kimberly perfectly depicted this concept when talking about a former undocumented student who is currently 21 years old and has five children:

I wish I could have taken her home with me, because she had a chance to have one child, finish high school, get a degree. But that would be the American life. She could have my American dream and be successful. Now she has 5 children, she got her GED, that was so exciting to see her walk across the stage. But she’s now going to Heartland and working on her degree, with 5 kids, and bless her heart, I would have loved to have supported her in another manner so she could have my dream. Because it sounded like her dream was my dream. But her dream... it’s not what I would have dreamt for her.

Clearly, it could be inferred that Kimberly had a biased conception of success but she also acknowledged that maybe her idea of success was not the same as the undocumented student’s. All but one of the participants seemed to interpret success in terms of pursuing college. John referred to the idea that education will lead to opportunity as “abstract, like if they get well educated, do math, understand science, learn about the world, they will be better equipped to succeed.” John was the only participant who actually encouraged alternative post-secondary options to college, like “starting a band and going on tour.” Similarly, only one of the eight participants, Janelle, realized that her conception of success was actually a constraint for her undocumented students:

As teachers that’s the message we’re giving, like raise the bar, raise the bar, for some of these kids if they don’t have the essentials then you just tossed them in, you know some of these kids, especially some who are undocumented, that have just entered the US have never been to school formally before. So now I’m putting you in a classroom of twenty-eight other people and I’m telling you to hit it at their level. Bad.

### *Psychosocial*

In addition to legal and cultural barriers, the study also assessed school staff’s understanding of psychosocial daily constraints, such as identity formation and mental health aspects such as attitude.

In terms of identity formation, only two of the eight research participants (25%) referred to identity formation as an observed daily constraint. Janelle’s observation was

consistent with W.E.B. DuBois's theory of double consciousness, when she said that undocumented students "see themselves almost in duplicity, who I am at home with my friends and who I am here." The other participant, Kimberly, considered this a constraint because of the inability to find a place to "fit in." Kimberly noticed an identity shift, explaining that undocumented students "don't fall anywhere. They're not American, they're not Mexican. They're somewhere in between." This participant's analysis of undocumented student's sense of self is characteristic of Gonzales (2009) general definition of the 1.5 generation, as children who fit somewhere between the first and second generation.

Similar to Kimberly's observations, Gonzales also believes that these youth straddle two worlds (2009). Although identity development is characteristic of all youth, regardless of status, research by Gonzales et.al (*forthcoming*) as well as C. Suarez Orozco et.al (2011) considers identity formation a different process for undocumented youth as these youth fight to make sense of their undocumented status and relate it back to their overall sense of self. The fact that such a small percentage of participants even considered identity formation to be a daily constraint could be perceived as a gap in their understanding of the daily life of undocumented youth.

Although only one participant acknowledged the literal development of identity, quite a few spoke to products of this stage of development, such as acting out and hiding as daily constraints. Five out of the eight participants noticed acting out as typical behavior among their undocumented high school students. Most of the participants defined acting out behavior in terms of loud remarks, rude jokes, truancy and lack of respect. Although it was implied in the interviews with other participants, one of the research participants specifically attributed language disparity to acting out:

Of course they're making these nasty comments that they're laughing at because they're funny and no one knows what they're saying and they're getting away with it. So if they said that in English, it would be a suspension but since no one really knows what they're saying, they're getting away with it.

Another one of the five participants believed that behavior typical of acting out "could just come from, you know, how they feel on a daily basis. Like if they don't feel wanted, or if they don't feel like they're good enough" (Danielle). Mental health effects such as feeling unwanted and feeling not good enough were also observed by Janelle, an African American teacher, who disclosed a personal connection with undocumented students. Out of the eight participants, Janelle was the only one who revealed this emotional connection with this group of students:

I guess I felt that sting. I mean not in terms of being undocumented but not having a place of my own. Feeling unwanted. Feeling judged. Feeling like less. Still at 40 years old I have to prove myself and I may just be wearing like Jeans and a baseball hat and instantly people make assumptions about my world and are thinking like oh, she's an educator and she has her graduate degree. And you know, they just see some black chick.

On the other hand, research participants noticed that not all undocumented students tend to act out; still, there are those who prefer to hide. Five out of the eight participants (63%) observed hiding as characteristic of the behavior of their undocumented students. One of the participants defined an observation of hiding in one of her undocumented students as “holding like a secret, and not sure how everyone would judge her if they knew she was undocumented” (Tina). The same participant denoted fear and worry as aspects of hiding.

Out of the three participants who talked about their experiences with students who revealed their undocumented status, two participants, Tina and Pam, observed nervousness upon disclosure. Both of them also observed relief: “she was relieved when she was finally able to tell me about that and knew that I wasn’t going to turn her in or anything like that. I think that there was that fear that something like that would happen.” Participants’ observations of hiding are characteristic of what Gonzales (2011) considers the effects of stigmatized status. Research by Gonzales (2011) finds that stigma makes the lives of undocumented students full of fear and keeps them silent as they internalize their barriers.

Other mental health aspects such as attitude were also observed as daily constraints among undocumented youth. A general mindset of “what’s the point?” was perceived by five out of the eight research participants (63%). Participants credited this attitude with psychosocial issues such as lack of motivation and lack of hope. Specifically, one of the participants described this attitude in one of her students as, “well I’m undocumented, so who cares, I’m never going to be able to make anything of myself” (Stephanie). Gonzales et.al (*forthcoming*) studies important questions about “where am I going” in examining the future progression of undocumented youth into society. He claims that their sense of dislocation and level of uncertainty about the future has a powerful effect on their self-esteem, motivation, and sense of personal empowerment (*forthcoming*). Thus, the “what’s the point?” attitude seems to be a product of the sense of dislocation and uncertainty presented by Gonzales et.al (*forthcoming*).

Research participants found two general elements of the “what’s the point” approach. The first was a non-college bound attitude, observed by six out of the eight participants (75%). One of the participants pointed out the gravity of this attitude, saying, “I can’t even think of one Hispanic boy who’s graduated from here, who’s undocumented, who’s even trying to go to college” (Stephanie). Another participant said that “we’re thrilled if we can get them to community college” because “the vast majority of our kids don’t finish high school” (Pam). Yet another participant made a similar observation referring to a specific undocumented student:

I just want him to get through high school. I see a lot of my undocumented boys come to high school and it’s not easy for them and they struggle, and about Junior year, about December time, they’re gone (Kimberly).

Gonzales (2011) refers to undocumented students who do not finish high school as “early exiters.” Based on the observations made by the research participants in this study, “early exiting” seemed to be coupled with the “what’s the point” and non-college bound attitudes. Actually, five out of the eight participants (63%) mentioned early exiting



as a daily constraint in the lives of undocumented youth. In addition to early exiting, another psychosocial constraint mentioned by four out of the eight participants (50%) was teenage pregnancy. One of these participants connected premature sexual behavior to culture: “I’ve seen that happen often in the Mexican community. Where very young parents have lots and lots of kids... a lot of the parents of my students are like 30. (laughs) they’re like really young” (Kimberly). A study by Wolff et. al (2008) on undocumented migrants in Geneva, Switzerland found that undocumented migrants seem to have more unintended pregnancies when compared to legal residents. Thus, since participants in this study also perceived actual teenage pregnancies among their undocumented students, these perceptions correspond with findings by Wolff et. al (2008).

On the other hand, half of the participants (50%) also observed the opposite effect, perceiving signs of resilience in their undocumented students. This finding parallels research by Gonzales, who also claims that undocumented youth seem to exhibit two extremes: early exiting and resilience. According to the perceptions of the research participants, resilient undocumented student cultivated academic success and were involved in extracurricular activities. Specifically, one of the participants described a certain resilient student as:

He’s generally surprisingly upbeat, he’s one of those people that doesn’t let on the fact that he’s gone through stuff. He does well academically... He’s got a lot of friends, he seems like he likes to be there. He gets along with his teachers, he’s surprisingly easy going for somebody who has gone through what he’s gone through. He’s the sort of kid that appears to want to go to college. A lot of the ESL kids don’t seem interested in being at school or going to college (John).

Most of the participants focused more on their less resilient students; however, when describing the characteristics of the resilient ones, many shared the same general idea that a resilient student does well academically, has many friends and is not afraid to ask for help from those who are willing and able to help. For this reason, there is a clear need for individuals who have the knowledge and guidance necessary to help not only resilient students, but also the less resilient ones pursue their post-secondary aspirations.

### *Interpersonal*

Besides speaking about undocumented students on an individual basis, participants also discussed their observations of the students as a group. Generally speaking, school staff addressed interpersonal daily constraints such as sticking together, racial friction, anti-immigrant sentiment and the influence of what Gonzales (2011) deems “really significant others” or people who possess the knowledge necessary to motivate students to graduate from high school and attend college.

Four out of the eight participants (50%) observed a pattern of similar-status friend groups, or sticking together, among their undocumented students. Danielle made a connection between the effect of sticking together on the overall stereotypes generated by the rest of the student body:

So like I said, all the kids in my class, that get a long with one another, tend to all hang out with each other, and I don't think it's a resource that the school can provide, I just think it's going to enhance their stereotypes even more, if we have all the supposed kids who are undocumented hang out with one another. Because that just gives those kids who don't understand what is undocumented immigration or the huge problem behind it, more fuel to have stereotypes against them.

Based on the observations made by the participants, students were not the only ones generating negative attitudes toward undocumented youth in high schools. Two out of the eight participants (25%) conveyed anti-immigrant sentiments in their interviews. Both of these individuals were ESL teachers, who served as gatekeepers to the undocumented student community in a specific high school. In their testimonies, they conveyed an interesting mix of progressive and unexamined ideas that may have indicated a gap in their understanding of the effects of daily constraints in the lives of undocumented youth. Specifically, Stephanie emphasized that, "we do want to help them but when you have kids who won't bring their materials, won't do their work, who are rude, who call you a bitch, who basically say get out of my face when you try to help them." Because of these experiences with undocumented youth, Stephanie revealed that "then you start questioning uhh why are you here and why is our government paying to help you? (laughs) I mean, you know what I'm saying? Let's face it all of these kids are not, 'oh poor thing, they're in this horrible situation.'" The other participant shared similar thoughts:

I look at these kids that don't want to do absolutely anything, who are in trouble with the law, that are having babies right and left, that have free lunch, that you know are getting wic services getting food stamps, that aren't doing a damn thing except causing problems and I get really aggravated by it because a lot of my relatives came here by getting visas and waiting for years in order to come. And it's like, why should these guys be able to sneak in and get all this stuff and cause nothing but trouble. So you know I think I have much more of, I just, I get frustrated much more easier with that (Pam).

Like Stephanie, Pam also expressed disillusionment with the political process as a result of negative experiences with undocumented youth, when she expressed that "I just hope that as time goes by we can close the border and stop this inflow and the people who are here can be given a fair shake and will go ahead and, you know, be contributors to society." This quote is a clear example of a gap in terms of understanding the daily life of undocumented youth. Implying that undocumented immigrants are not yet contributors to society and need to be given a fair shake, Pam not only illustrated a stereotypical analysis of immigration, but also a hostile attitude towards their presence in this country.

Furthermore, only one out of the eight participants exhibited a thorough understanding of the reasons behind illegal immigration. Recollecting a story about a former undocumented student, Stephanie illustrated the danger in the home country and the need to seek out a safe environment:

The girl student told me that in that town the gang or whoever is in charge will write on a house and say “you need to vacate this house by next week” and if the people don’t vacate they murder them, and they basically take over the house, and take over their belongings. There’s nothing they can do about it. That’s why they left.

In addition to anti-immigrant sentiment, participants also recalled examples of alleged racial friction within their high schools. Three out of the eight participants (38%) considered racial friction when talking about their experiences with undocumented youth. The friction was mostly between the white and “brown” students; however, one participant did note “some underlying friction between the Hispanics who are undocumented and the Puerto Ricans” (Stephanie). This participant analyzed the friction, offering examples such as anonymity, jealousy and fractured family lives as possible reasons behind it. Another participant, Janelle, analyzed the dynamics of interracial friendships, referring to the white students who had Latino friends as ‘blancos.’ The problem with ‘blancos’ was that if certain undocumented students chose to hang out with their white friends, or ‘blancos,’ their Latino friends would call them ‘sell outs.’ The participant used a soccer field as a metaphor for the racial friction, “it’s like ‘oh you’re choosing to play for the team at school with ‘them’”(Janelle). In this example, the participant conceptualized the racial friction between multiracial groups as “us vs. them.”

Racial friction was also observed in the construction of relationships between school staff and students. The “us vs. them” split was also present as students found themselves struggling to find someone who they could identify with and go to with their problems. Kimberly, a white guidance counselor, expressed that:

I have one student who continually tells me that I’m racist and I tell him that my heart is Latina. And just because I look *Guerra*, doesn’t mean I don’t know his struggles, and that I can’t empathize with him. And you don’t know anything about me because you’re not Mexican. And it frustrates me to no end, for him to say that to me. But it’s his way to exclude me from his world.

This student clearly could not identify with Kimberly because she was not Mexican like him; therefore, there exists an interesting parallel between students’ ability to identify with a teacher or counselor based on race. This is an interpersonal constraint because this parallel may play a role in the way relationships are formed between students and teachers. In reality, Janelle, an African American teacher, emphasized the lack of diversity among the school staff. “There’s only like 12% of ethnic minority in this school. I mean, it really is kind of like us and them” (Janelle). When analyzing the attitudes of these two participants, it is necessary to take into account their own racial backgrounds. Kimberly was white while Janelle was African American; therefore, it is laudable to examine that the black participant identified more with undocumented students in terms of understanding the importance of diversity in building trusting relationships. Janelle expressed that “I guess sometimes I feel like I’m the closest thing to you know, to what they have.”

In building these relationships, school staff like Kimberly and Janelle are characteristic of what Gonzales (2011) calls “really significant others,” because of their willingness to use their knowledge about college accessibility to invest their time in guiding their undocumented students. All eight of the participants made references to significant others in their interviews. Most of them identified these key people as friends, extended family, teachers, guidance counselors and especially school staff who speak Spanish. Out of the six teachers who were interviewed, only one embodied a significant other in the lives of undocumented students. Responses ranged among the other five teachers when asked about their daily conversations with undocumented students, especially conversations about college and legal status. Pam said, “I can’t understand their psyche because I’ve never lived it,” and noted that the students do not talk about their undocumented status. Likewise, John did not recall any conversations about undocumented status and expressed that he does not talk to his undocumented students about college because it just does not come up. Danielle mentioned that “I’m only with them 15 minutes a day, and it’s usually just a study hall so I don’t get to learn a crazy amount about them.” This participant also believed that conversations about college was a role of guidance counselors and enunciated that “I would hope they’re well versed in the Dream Act” if they’re responsible for the guidance of students. Danielle considered ESL teachers and friends as significant others in the lives of undocumented students. Although Stephanie did not mirror a significant other, undocumented students did approach her with questions about college and legal status.

Although both of the guidance counselors, Kimberly and Tina, typified significant others, the extent and type of knowledge they had about undocumented students’ accessibility to college varied among the two. Their interaction with undocumented youth revealed an interpersonal constraint, as one of them had limited contact with undocumented students even though she had more post-secondary resources available for them. As these counselors worked at two separate high schools, it was interesting to evaluate the counselors’ awareness of undocumented student options in the two high schools. Tina said that she attended a few ‘articulation conferences’ over the years, where she learned about a variety of public universities, as well as a three-day ‘College 101 program’ over the summer. This program was not funded by the high school, but Tina expressed that she needed an update on college material and was willing to pay \$350 to attend the program. Tina was particularly knowledgeable about a variety of colleges who not only accept undocumented youth but also offer them financial aid. She had a variety of pamphlets and a binder full of available scholarships and other resources for undocumented youth. All of these resources were provided to her at the ‘College 101 program.

On the other hand, Kimberly had no readily available resources for undocumented youth in her office. When asked what she would recommend to an undocumented student who was pursuing college, she said that she would call the college the student was interested in and find out if they accept undocumented students and/or provide them with financial aid. Like Tina, Kimberly expressed that although conferences and meetings about college material are highly recommended by the high school, none are required. Unlike Tina, Kimberly has never attended any trainings/workshops on college accessibility for undocumented youth.

When analyzing the disparity in the extent and type of knowledge about undocumented students' accessibility to college, it is worthy to note that all ESL students at Tina's high school were bussed over to Kimberly's high school. In other words, Tina dealt with few undocumented students, as the majority of undocumented students were ESL. Thus, even though Tina was more aware of resources and information about college accessibility for undocumented students, Kimberly was the one who worked with the majority of them.

### *Institutional*

In addition to analyzing school staffs' understanding of the interpersonal relationships of their undocumented students, this study sought to interpret their understanding of institutions such as the Dream Act and other recent policies. Investigating the participants' understanding of the Dream Act was necessary in order to develop a general understanding of the types of post-secondary advice provided to undocumented youth in their high schools.

Out of the two guidance counselors, only one correctly defined the federal Dream Act. Kimberly fathomed a general understanding of the federal Dream Act as "legislation that never came about... that was more of immigration thing, where they would get citizenship after." The other guidance counselor expressed that she was "not aware" of the federal Dream Act (Tina). Moreover, neither of the counselors accurately defined the IL Dream Act. Kimberly confused the IL Dream Act with the recent Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), explaining that "all these kids kept coming in asking for documents," as they were requirements in DACA applications. The other counselor said she was "not aware" of the IL Dream Act, just like she was not aware of the federal one.

Analogous to the guidance counselors, half of the teachers, or three out of the six, possessed a correct conception of the federal Dream Act. Among all six of the teachers, three understood that the Dream Act involved certain requirements. Two out of the three of these teachers accurately listed the military, entering a post-secondary institution, and good moral standing as requirements of the federal Dream Act. Although one of the participants had a general sense of the federal Dream Act, he still expressed doubt, "I'm actually teaching about this in a few weeks so I need to get my shit together" (John). Danielle said that the federal Dream Act was a required part of the curriculum, so all of the teachers were responsible for teaching about it.

Likewise, the IL Dream Act was also taught by a few of the teachers. Out of the six teachers, two accurately defined the IL Dream Act, although both of them demonstrated doubt in their definitions. Additionally, both of the teachers were aware of the fact that the IL Dream Act passed, while the federal Dream Act has not. Laura explained the IL Dream Act as "private scholarships for undocumented youth, so they can pay for college tuition." Similarly, John said that the IL Dream Act is "a privately funded means to help pay for college," but "does not offer a path to citizenship."

Out of the four teachers who did not define the IL Dream Act correctly, two confused it with recent policies such as DACA and the TVDL's. Both of these teachers admitted that they either "don't know the particulars" (Stephanie) or "don't know the difference between the IL and the federal" (Pam). One participant expressed her interest in learning about it, "I would like to research it more in the future because I do know that

it influences a lot of our kids” (Danielle). Yet another participant apologized for her lack of understanding, admitting that “that’s what I teach. Which is shameful because right now I’ve got nothing” (Janelle).

In addition to teaching about the Dream Acts, all six of the teachers described a variety of other immigration related lessons taught in the classroom. Specifically, Janelle listed the Immigration Nationality Act, legislation under Clinton and Bush, steps made with Obama, NAFTA, and stereotypes of immigrants. Similarly, Danielle listed the IL hotline, Alabama schools, and the Georgia law as core pieces of her immigration lesson plan. Therefore, although not all teachers accurately defined the Dream Acts, they did all, at some point, teach about them in their classrooms and were conscious of current immigration issues and policies.

Still, all of the participants, teachers and counselors alike, never mentioned trained counselors on college related material in their understanding of the IL Dream Act. Likewise, none of the school staff exemplified the trained counselors on college related material that are supposed to exist according to the IL Dream Act. When asked if they saw a need for more resources and information on college accessibility for undocumented youth, six out of the eight participants answered yes, while one claimed that they already exist in her high school (Laura) but could not think of any examples, and the other answered no claiming the population of undocumented youth was simply too low in his high school (John).

### *Systemic*

The participants observed an interesting effect of the educational system on the daily lives of their undocumented students. Although the purpose of the study was not to focus on the political opinions of school staff, these opinions were helpful in assessing their understanding of the daily constraints their undocumented students face.

In particular, socialization, a product of the educational system, was a noteworthy systemic constraint perceived by school staff. Although the educational system is an institution in itself, socialization is its product, and functions in a systemic manner, as it affects students, teachers and counselors alike. The participants revealed an overall dissatisfaction with the system. One of the participants referred to the inability for undocumented students to qualify for financial aid after high school by saying, “our government is screwy, you know, they say “okay yeah we’ll educate you up till high school and we’re not going to ask any questions” but then boom now you’re done.... I mean it just doesn’t make any sense” (Stephanie). Another participant separated the educators from the actual system, saying:

It’s like me, I’m in the system, I know it’s bullshit but I’m doing my best to not to or try to not get to think like I do, but just think for themselves... You can’t fault the educators because they’re a product of this system too. So, they’ve been socialized and now they’re like adults and they’re working people and they’re supposed to be role models, but they’re a product of the same system, they’ve been socialized to believe that this is the way it is (John).

This participant also analyzed the place of undocumented students in the educational system believing that they “are just caught in it. Who have nothing to do with it. They’re just caught in it, and they get vilified” (John). Another participant, Laura, spoke directly to the budget cuts in her high school that were responsible for laying off all but one of the ESL teachers and canceling the study hall where the ESL students usually went for academic help. Laura observed that because of this the undocumented students “are struggling. We have no assistance who speaks Spanish.... It’s not a priority.”

When asked if it is possible to change the system, John claimed that “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.”

Still, five out of the eight participants (50%) had hope in a better future for undocumented students. There was a trend among the participants, as they associated hope with current legislation. “I mean right now the students are riding on a high” because of DACA and the TVDL’s (Janelle).

Nevertheless, possibly the greatest systemic constraint observed by research participants was the misplacement of undocumented students in special education classes. As an extension to the civil rights movement of the 1960’s to people with disabilities, the National Research Council was “asked to conduct a study to determine the factors accounting for the disproportionate representation of minority students and male students in special education programs for students with mental retardation and to propose criteria and practices that would address this problem,” in 1979 (Rueda and Windmueller 2006). However, some three decades later, there is still disproportionate representation of various ethnic groups in special education classes (2006). As of 2006, there are now more than 3.5 million English language learners in U.S. schools (Klingner and Artiles 2006). In addition, “Hispanics are the fastest growing ethnic group in U.S. schools and have passed African Americans as the largest minority group in the United States,” (2006). This finding was consistent with the English language learners in the high schools where this study took place, as most of them were Hispanic. And just like Rueda and Windmueller (2006) observed a prolonged misrepresentation of certain ethnic groups in special education classrooms, so did the participants of this study.

Four out of the eight participants of this study (50%) acknowledged the presence of ESL students in special education classes. Kimberly reported that “we have a very high population of undocumented students in special education. In my opinion. Um of those six boys I was talking about just a while ago, I think three of them are special education students.” When asked if she believes that all three of those boys are “actually special ed.” she responded, “I do... I don’t know if it’s that the parents don’t read them books when they’re babies. You know, I don’t know if it’s the language that’s... I don’t know. I truly believe that they are not misplaced in special ed. They are placed appropriately” (Kimberly).

Other participants shared the opposite opinion. Stephanie highlighted that out of 25 current ESL students, 8 or 9 of them are receiving special education services in addition to their ESL services. She also talked about the ACCESS and its effect on placement. The ACCESS is a standardized test for students who identify their primary language at home as Spanish (Tina). In other words, it is a placement test for students

whose primary language at home is not English, and therefore may qualify for ESL services.

In a way it's kind of ridiculous because we're pulling them out of special ed. resource where they're already getting serviced and putting them in an ESL resource because until they pass the ACCESS, they need to receive some sort of ESL service (Stephanie).

Tina explained that all ESL students go to one of the high schools in Bloomington-Normal while all "students which we consider as cognitively impaired students" go to another high school. The problem is, sometimes students require both services. In that case, Tina explained that "you have to determine what the primary, I don't want to call it an ESL disability, but what's the primary educational concern and from there you make a decision."

According to Klingner and Artiles (2006) "it can be difficult to determine who actually has a disability because the characteristics of students acquiring a second or additional language in many ways parallel those of students with language and/or learning disabilities." Typical disability categories associated with the issue of disproportionate placement of certain ethnic groups in special education classes include mild mental retardation (MMR), emotional-behavioral disorders (EBD), and specific learning disabilities (SLD) (Rueda and Windmueller 2006). The real problem is the lack of tests to appropriately distinguish between cognitive impairments and second language acquisition (Klingner and Artiles 2006).

## POST-SECONDARY ASPIRATIONS

In addition to analyzing school staff's understanding of the types of constraints in the lives of undocumented youth, this study aimed to discover the types of post-secondary aspirations school staff observed in their undocumented students. Table 3 provides a diagram of the range of responses gathered from interviews with research participants.



Table 3. Distribution of the types of post secondary aspirations of undocumented high school students observed by sample school staff in McLean County, IL (n=8).

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Post-Secondary Aspirations of Undocumented Students</b>				
<b>Janelle</b>	Get a Job	Community College			
<b>Pam</b>	Restaurants	No College	Food Industry	Cleaning Crew	"The kids who have gone on to college have been documented"
<b>Kimberly</b>	Architect	"Rarely see it" [college]	Cosmetology	Accountant	Auto Mechanics
<b>Laura</b>	No talk about aspirations				
<b>Stephanie</b>	Girls: think long term	Boys: think short term	Nursing		
<b>Danielle</b>	One student mentioned college "a few times"	A two year, or a 4 year [college] but "it's not something that he brings up all the time"			
<b>John</b>	Education will lead to opportunity is an abstract idea	"I'm usually telling them they should start a band and tour, they can figure out what they want to do later"			
<b>Tina</b>	Teaching	Nursing	International Business		

Based on the results, three out of the eight participants (38%), observed college, both two year and four year, as a post secondary aspiration in their undocumented students, while two out of the eight participants (25%) detected community college as a post-secondary aspiration. One of these three participants considered college as a common aspiration in a conversation about one of her undocumented students but said that the student only mentioned it "a few times... it's not something he brings up all the time" (Danielle). Particularly, Stephanie noticed a gender difference in the way her undocumented students thought about their post-secondary plans. According to Stephanie, females tended to think more long term while males thought short term. Additionally, Stephanie and Tina found Nursing to be a common aspiration.

On the other hand, two out of the eight participants (25%) found more "trade" careers instead of jobs requiring a college degree as common post secondary aspirations of their undocumented students. Specifically, Pam noted that "the kids who have gone on to college have been documented," and listed food industry careers as common current as well as post secondary aspirations among her undocumented students. Similarly, Kimberly said that she rarely sees college as an aspiration for her undocumented students but did list two careers, architect and accountant, which would require college degrees.

Still, Kimberly observed trade careers like cosmetology and auto-mechanics. Kimberly also added, “I don’t think we as counselors do as good a job of trade school information. I don’t think we do a good job of saying here are the different options.”

Only one participant admitted that she does not have conversations about college with her undocumented students. “There’s not a lot of talk about what we’re going to do afterwards yet,” because she has mostly freshmen and sophomore students in her classes (Laura). Yet another participant displayed a philosophical difference when compared to the other participants. John considered the idea that education will lead to opportunity as “abstract,” and said that he’s “usually telling them [undocumented students] they should start a band and tour and then they’ll figure out what they want to do.”

Therefore, based on the results in Table 3, the most common post secondary aspirations of undocumented high school youth seemed to be “trade” careers instead of jobs requiring a college degree. Most of the participants admitted that most of the students who have gone on to college have been documented, and as teachers and counselors, they were more focused on getting their undocumented students to graduate high school than on getting them to pursue college. The results also reveal an overall lack of conversation about college with undocumented students.

## POST SECONDARY RESOURCES

In addition to assessing the aspirations of undocumented youth, the study also sought to discover the types of resources currently available in high schools to support those aspirations. In order to assess this, participants were asked what types of post secondary resources are currently available in their high schools according to the IL Dream Act. As most of the participants were confused about the IL Dream Act, all but two of their answers did not address the Dream Act but rather spoke to available resources in high schools and the community in general. Table 4 displays a range of observed, currently available post-secondary resources for undocumented high school students.

Table 4. 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 McLean County, IL (n=8).

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Available Post-Secondary Resources for Undocumented Students</b>				
<b>Janelle</b>	Work days program		Guidance in the form of three people: herself, guidance counselor, two ESL teachers		
<b>Pam</b>	Counseling Office	Tutoring Office	After school buses that go to socio-econ. depressed areas	Trade school encouragement	Erie Career Center
<b>Kimberly</b>	Career Cruising website	Conexiones.org: by State Farm	She will contact the school they want to go to		
<b>Laura</b>	Money for Scholarships	People who help them fill out paperwork for college			
<b>Stephanie</b>	Immigration Project	Western Avenue	Guidance Counselor		
<b>Danielle</b>	IL Hotline	Guidance Counselors: “People who might have more answers about options after school”			
<b>John</b>	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”			
<b>Tina</b>	Career Cruising Activities	Pre-ACT test	Financial aid nights/ stuff to prepare them for college	“They can identify they’re undocumented and we can work with them”	

Based on the results in Table 4, only two out of the eight participants (25%) accurately listed resources provided by the IL Dream Act as currently available resources for undocumented youth in their high schools. However, the only resource they referred to was the privately-funded pool of scholarship money. The fund they were referring to is the IL Dream Fund, which offers scholarships for undocumented youth. According to the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, the IL Dream Act also provides trained counselors on college options and resources for undocumented youth and gives them access to savings programs so that parents can invest and save for their children’s education (2011). Neither the trained counselors nor the savings program was mentioned by these two participants.

Furthermore, five out of the eight participants (63%) referred to guidance counselors as key available resources for undocumented students. One of the participants, a teacher, stressed trade school encouragement when talking about available resources.

This finding contrasted the guidance counselor’s opinion, who thought that the high school actually lacked trade school encouragement. Another participant considered guidance counselors as available resources but misconstrued undocumented students’ accessibility to scholarships when she said that the counseling office has “scholarships for Latinos, but you have to be documented” (Pam). In fact, many of the teachers did not feel like they were the best people undocumented students should have gone to for advice on post secondary resources. Pam noted that some of her undocumented students try to talk to her “about their problems and so on and so forth. But I don’t really know what to tell them. I just say well, “do you know who you need to contact?... I’m not a counselor you know. And plus, I don’t want to give false advice for something I know nothing about.”

On the other hand, three out of the eight participants (38%) referred to specific resources in community organizations as important post secondary resources available for their undocumented students. A local business was a definite asset for undocumented students according to school staff. Janelle highlighted events where students can sign up to spend a day at on site and become “acclimated to the professional business world.” Janelle referred to an undocumented student who partook in the program and was employed by this company for years after. Similarly, Kimberly cited [conexiones.org](http://conexiones.org), which used to be a book published by State Farm about college accessibility and scholarship information but is now a website. Another participant mentioned other organizations like the Immigration Project and Western Avenue Community Center.

Other currently available resources available for undocumented youth mentioned by participants were after school buses to socio-economically depressed areas in the community and the IL Hotline. This hotline is a resource provided by the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, and offers help to immigrants nationwide. Therefore, participants listed a mix of post-secondary resources both within their high schools and outside in their communities. The most prevalent resources mentioned by the participants were guidance counselors and community organizations in McLean County. However, only two of the participants defined resources provided by the IL Dream Act, revealing a possible disconnect between the resources which are supposed to be available—like trained counselors and information about college savings programs—and those that actually exist in high school settings statewide.

## GAP ANALYSIS

After assessing the aspirations of undocumented youth and resources available in the pursuit of these aspirations, this study captured what undocumented students lacked most within their high schools. The term “gap” is a nominal definition, referring to the assets that participants considered undocumented students lacked most in their high schools. Table 5 shows this “gap,” illustrating these assets. The results reveal a wide array of criteria, suggesting a possible systemic gap.

Table 5. Distribution of assets undocumented students lack most within high schools as observed by sample school staff in McLean County, IL (n=8).

<b>Participants</b>	<b>What Undocumented Students Lack Most Within High Schools</b>	
<b>Janelle</b>	Examples	
<b>Pam</b>	Academic Motivation	Newcomers Program
<b>Kimberly</b>	College bound culture at home	Transportation after school activities
<b>Laura</b>	A go to person	Guidance
<b>Stephanie</b>	A counselor to talk to	
<b>Danielle</b>	Awareness of students who are undocumented	Identification system of undocumented youth
<b>John</b>	The system	
<b>Tina</b>	Trust	

Only two of the eight participants shared similar observations, referring to “a go to person” (Laura) and “a counselor to talk to,” (Stephanie) or what Gonzales (2011) would refer to as “significant others,” in their responses. The rest of the participants referred to a range of systemic paradigms in their analysis of what undocumented students lack most within their high schools.

Tina elaborated on the presence of ‘significant others’ by considering trust as a fundamental lack for undocumented students. When asked to elaborate on this idea, Tina said that:

I think they’re trying to figure out who they can trust. I feel like they feel like they have this secret, and they’re nervous about people finding out and so they’re a little more tentative in approaching new people and new situations.

Janelle found examples, or “enough individuals who are like them in positions of authority,” as key deficiencies for undocumented students. This participant explained the importance of role models in students’ lives, “kind of like I could be that person. Like I could do that, so let me.” Another participant observed a need for an identification system of undocumented youth, so that others can be aware of the students who are undocumented. Danielle reflected on an experience with a student who revealed her undocumented status during class and felt like “had another teacher known or another student, things might have been different.... I think that might make a big change. Just so that teachers could know and help, and don’t make a stupid mistake along the way or anything like that.”

Pam suggested lack of academic motivation, but “as a group” as opposed to on an individual basis. This participant considered lack of motivation as a result of a poor educational background coming in:

Some of the kids have such poor educational background, that they’re bringing in. Their gaps are so enormous that it’s so difficult to catch them up. Which is so difficult at a high school level. I mean, if they’re coming in at 4<sup>th</sup> grade and they haven’t been to school for three years, that’s a lot different than coming in to high school and not being in school for three years. You know?

Based on this observation, Pam described a need for Newcomers Program for students who exhibit this lack of educational background but she expressed that “it would be incredibly expensive to start and I don’t see any movement in that direction.” Another participant observed a similar systemic block as well. When asked what undocumented students lack most within high schools, John responded, “I’m not so sure if what they lack is specific to our high school.” Instead, John identified the educational system as an overall barrier for undocumented students, finding a problem in the way it socializes both educators and students.

On the other hand, Kimberly thought that a major lack was a college bound culture at home. She linked the absence of a college bound culture to the fact that parents were consistently working so they were not physically there to build the drive for academic success in their children.

## LIMITATIONS

This study indicates that there may be a gap in the work of school staff with their undocumented students. The primary limitation of this study is its reliance on a vulnerable population. As there is no system to identify undocumented students in high schools, it was difficult to create the sample. Moreover, there was a noteworthy level of risk involved in focusing on undocumented youth. The research also had to be especially careful not to reveal any personal identities in transcriptions and analyses. Finally, the high schools demonstrated possible resource challenges for undocumented youth. This can also be perceived as a limitation as participants could not reflect on readily available resources in the high school when asked about them during the interviews.

Gathering the sample was a notable limitation, as many potential participants responded unfavorably to emails. As the study focused on school staff’s experiences with undocumented high school students, prior work with undocumented youth was a necessary component for participants. However, some potential respondents admitted that they were not sure if they knew any undocumented students in their email responses, and therefore felt inadequate to participate in the study. Other respondents felt like they did not have enough contact with undocumented students, and also refused to participate in the study. Yet another administrator was hesitant to approve interviews with his staff and suggested contacting his superior for authorization instead. In reality, it is difficult to distinguish the undocumented students from their legal-statured peers, so this was not only a limitation in gathering the sample for this study but also a limitation for the potential participants who could not pinpoint these students. Thus, there was clear

hesitation on the part of potential participants, which played a critical role in gathering the sample.

As the research process appeared complicated, the study depended on referrals from university staff to potential research participants at that high school. This proved to be another limitation, as one of the university departments was hesitant to provide referrals since they were currently building a relationship with the high school and felt like a study like this would hinder that connection. In addition, the culture at that local high school was cautious, requiring extensive background checks on student mentors and volunteers. Therefore, only one interview was conducted there, thanks to a personal connection with a university student who had previously completed a student teaching semester with one of the teachers. This reveals possible opposition encountered during the research process, and the consequential averseness of participation.

Additionally, this study had a small sample size of eight research participants and focused on three high schools. It would be revealing to repeat the study with a larger sample size, of at least fifty participants, in more high school settings. This way, there would be a richer illustration of common themes from more narratives. Likewise, there were significantly more interviews conducted at one of the high schools than at the other two, with only one at each of the other two and six at the primary school. If this study were to be repeated in the future, the amount of interviews conducted at each of the high schools should be equal. Furthermore, since the study took place in a less metropolitan area in McLean County, Illinois, it would be interesting to repeat the study in a more metropolitan area, in order to determine if geography had an effect on the results.

Despite the limitations encountered in the research process, this study examined school staff's understanding of undocumented status in the daily lives of their undocumented students. By interweaving common themes from multiple narratives, this study discussed important constraints and may have revealed a disconnect in the way high school teachers and counselors are working with undocumented youth and a possible shortcoming in the way the policies of the IL Dream Act are being carried out. Nonetheless, this study will hopefully not only add to but also inspire new thoughts in the midst of today's comprehensive immigration reform.

## DISCUSSION

I don't know how they [school staff] could live on Earth's surface and not know [the daily constraints of undocumented youth] but to acknowledge it is to, I guess, accept it, and then I guess, do something. So they choose to be like, 'Oh I don't know what you're talking about.' (Janelle)

An estimated 65,000 undocumented students currently graduate from high schools around the United States every year (Abrego and Gonzales 2010; Gonzales 2011; Perez 2009). Educators nationwide persist in preparing these youth for an uncertain future, avoiding conversations about the limitations attached to their undocumented status and their post-secondary opportunities. Some of these educators may simply be unaware of those options while others just choose to ignore them as they present problems or risks they prefer not to discuss. Either way, this unawareness may be the unintended consequence of contributing to the conspiracy of silence and preventing the 1.5

generation from pursuing bright futures. It is time to address this elephant in the room. It is time to set these youth free to dream.

When thinking about the exit points of the educational pipeline, it is laudable to recognize the differences in the transition for undocumented youth in comparison to their legal-statured peers. Considering the legal, psychosocial, cultural, interpersonal, institutional and systemic constraints observed by school staff in this study, it is possible that the 1.5 generation not only does not have access to all of the pipeline's exit points as members encounter legal blocks along the way, but also no easily accessible advice on how to pursue their post secondary aspirations. This study recognized that the academic struggle of undocumented students may largely be due to language barriers, parents working, and lack of educational background. These findings attest that there is a potential gap in the way undocumented students are being funneled through the pipeline, and a possible lack of focus in the cultural and psychosocial constraints that may be prohibiting them from excelling. In addition, the study found a general underemployment of Spanish-speaking staff in the participating high schools of this study. Specifically, one of the high schools' budget cuts were responsible for the deficiency of Spanish-speaking staff, as ESL was not deemed a priority by administration. As a result, undocumented students may have struggled academically, with no one to turn to for help due to this decision.

Thus, there seems to be a systemic issue in the way undocumented students are included in the educational system. A way to mediate this issue would be to rethink the system, address the elephant in the room, and start having conversations on the cultural and psychosocial gaps behind the academic struggle of undocumented students. Possibly the most noteworthy finding of this study illuminated the misplacement of undocumented ESL students in special education classes based on some misdiagnosed learning disabilities. The participants in this study revealed that many of their ESL students are sitting alongside intellectually-disabled students in classrooms. Although some participants did observe learning disabilities in these ESL students, the learning process of a second language learner is different from that of an intellectually-disabled student. Klingner and Artiles (2006) noted that it can be difficult to determine where to place English language learners because the characteristics of learning a second language sometimes mirror those of learning disabilities. The problem lies in adequate placement tests for these youth (2006). Therefore, a potential recommendation for educational psychologists would be to investigate the benefits of incorporating a multi-level approach in developing placement tests for English language learners in order to slow this misplacement.

Likewise, although the sample size of this study was small, results revealed a lack of post-secondary resources available in high schools and knowledge about the resources provided by the IL Dream Act. This demonstrates that more resources are needed in the high school setting to prepare undocumented students for a successful future so that when trying to pursue college, undocumented youth have adequate college guidance and recommended means of financial aid. More importantly, the study demonstrated that institutions dealing with undocumented youth should adhere to policies set forth by the IL Dream Act. It has been two years since the passing of the IL Dream Act, and undocumented students, as well as members of the 1.5 generation, may still be graduating



from high school without adequate information about their options after college. It is time to address this problem.

Likewise the majority of post-secondary aspirations observed by the participants in this study included “trade” careers as opposed to careers requiring a college degree. However, participants also attested to a possible lack of adequate information on how to pursue those types of careers. This was most likely due to the college-bound culture of the high schools, as participants commented on the constant push to raise the bar, instead of focusing on the individual interests of their students. A recommendation for future trainings of college guidance counselors and teachers is to include trade school, in addition to college, accessibility information so that school staff can advise students based on interests, instead of biased conceptions of success and the American Dream.

Moreover, these students may be graduating without any psychosocial support, as many school staff do not feel like it is their place to advise them. “I’m not a counselor you know... I can’t understand their psyche because I’ve never lived it,” (Pam). However, research shows that psychosocial support is important in the academic and social success of undocumented youth. Perez et al. (2009) claims that supportive relationships, especially from teachers and school personnel, are key in developing resilience for undocumented students. Similarly, Gonzales (2010) found that student success is affected by the ability to form positive relationships with school staff. Thus, having educators who are trained to deal with psychosocial issues may be vital to those undocumented students who have no one else to turn to.

The problem is the discomfort associated with dealing with undocumented students and the unawareness that stems from that discomfort. “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” (John). However, solving this systemic issue involves an entire social system, not just a single individual. It involves examining the gap between what school staff actually know about the daily lives and the post-secondary resources available to their undocumented students. It is time to address the elephant and begin turning those sparkles of post-secondary dreams into realities.

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# ESSENTIAL FACTS FOR THOSE WORKING WITH UNDOCUMENTED HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS



ILLINOIS WESLEYAN

Spring 2013

Sylvia Rusin



## POLICIES [DEFINED]:

### 1. Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act (DREAM Act):

- Has not passed yet, currently experiencing substantial bipartisan support.
- The Dream Act would allow undocumented immigrant youth who were brought to this country as small children to obtain legal permanent status as long as they graduate from high school and pursue a college degree or join the military.
- If students meet the conditions of the Act, they would be able to apply for a six year, “conditional,” legal permanent status. If they complete at least two years toward a four-year college degree, graduate from a two-year college, or serve at least two years in the military, they could then apply for U.S. citizenship.
- . Estimates say that the Dream Act would provide 360,000 undocumented high school graduates with a legal means to work and for another 715,000 youth between the ages of 5 and 17 to graduate from high school and pursue college.

### 2. Illinois Dream Act:

- Has passed, signed by Governor Pat Quinn on August 1, 2011.
- Qualifies eligible, undocumented youth to pay in-state tuition when attending public universities in Illinois.
- Provides trained counselors on college options and resources for undocumented youth.
- Gives undocumented youth access to savings programs so that parents can invest and save for their children’s education.
- Illinois Dream Fund Commission is in the process of acquiring privately donated scholarship money for eligible students; the fund is currently accepting applications for scholarships:
  - (See <http://www.illinoisdreamfund.org>)
  - In order to qualify for a scholarship through the IL Dream Fund, students must meet the same requirements that now apply to receiving an in-state tuition rate at one of Illinois’s public universities: In addition to having at least one parent who immigrated to the U.S., the student must have lived with a parent or guardian while going to high school in Illinois, graduated from that high school or received a GED, and attended school in Illinois for at least three years before graduating or receiving a GED certificate.

## POLICIES [DEFINED]: *(continued)*

### 3. Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA):

- Does not provide undocumented immigrants with a path to citizenship but does offer the possibility of suspended deportation and the possibility to apply for work permits for those who qualify.
- Individuals who meet the following criteria can apply:
  - 31 years of age as of June 15, 2012; came to the U.S. while under the age of 16; have continuously resided in the U.S. from June 15, 2007 to the present; entered the U.S. without inspection before June 15, 2012; or individuals whose lawful immigration status expired as of June 15, 2012; were physically present in the United States on June 15, 2012, and at the time of making the request for consideration of deferred action with USCIS; are currently in school, have graduated from high school, have obtained a GED, or have been honorably discharged from the Coast Guard or armed forces; have not been convicted of a felony offense, a significant misdemeanor, or more than three misdemeanors and do not pose a threat to national security or public safety.

### 4. Temporary Driver's Licenses (TVDL'S):

- TVDL's are solely limited to driving purposes.
- TVDL's cannot be used to vote, get firearms, board an airplane or enter federal buildings.
- To qualify for a TVDL, an undocumented immigrant must:
  - Prove that she has lived in Illinois for at least one year, provide a valid unexpired passport or consular ID, provide other proof of her identity and residency that the Secretary of State might require, provide documentation that she is not eligible for a Social Security Number, pass all applicable vision, written, and road tests, show proof of insurance for the vehicle she uses for the road test, and pay a \$30 fee
- Illinois is the fourth state to authorize undocumented immigrants to drive legally
- TVDL's will be issued on October 1, 2013, ten months after the bill's signing, for those who applied.

## RESOURCES [DEFINED]:

1. Resources and scholarship information for immigrant students:
  - Student Scholarship Guide: <http://icirr.org/content/immigrant-student-scholarship-guide>
  - <http://www.illinoisdreamfund.org>
2. Guides to College Accessibility
  - Student guide: <http://icirr.org/content/undocumented-students-guide-college-illinois>
  - Counselor Guide: <http://icirr.org/content/counselor-guide-resources-undocumented-students>
3. Legal Help
  - <http://endnow.org/>
  - <http://icirr.org/content/immigration-legal-resource-referrals>
4. Community Resources
  - Keep yourself updated on your community's events, scholarships...etc.
  - <http://www.immigrationproject.org/>
  - <http://www.westernavenueecc.org/>

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1. Definitions of recent policy changes, Dream Act, IL Dream Act, DACA, TVDL's
2. Resources for undocumented students, Scholarship information, guides to college accessibility, legal help



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