

Children in fear: Working with undocumented families

Alma Contreras-Vanegas, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor, School of Teaching and Learning

Sam Houston State University

Mary Petron, Ph.D.

Professor, School of Teaching and Learning

Sam Houston State University

Abstract

Immigration is a contentious issue in the US today. Phrases like *build a wall* or *send them back* are commonplace. Images of children being separated from their parents at the border pepper news reports. Temporary protected status, which was given to immigrants from war-torn countries, like El Salvador and those affected by catastrophic environmental disasters, like Haiti, is under siege. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids are commonplace. Multiple factors are important to keep in mind when working with immigrant children. This column provides an overview of critical information that public school teachers and administrators need to know regarding this population.

Introduction

Immigration is a contentious issue in the US today. Phrases like *build a wall* or *send them back* are commonplace. Images of children being separated from their parents at the border pepper news reports. Temporary protected status, which was given to immigrants from war-torn countries, like El Salvador and those affected by catastrophic environmental disasters, like Haiti, is under siege. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids are commonplace. The threat of deportation and family separation is a real fear for many children. The US has long been a country created by immigrants and will continue to have a diverse population. Teachers cannot avoid the issue of immigration. According to Child Trends Data Bank (2014), “children and youth living in immigrant families are the fastest growing group of American children.” Immigrant children, including those who lack legal status, have every right to an education.

Multiple factors are important to keep in mind when working with immigrant children. They are more likely to live in poverty, have little access to social services, have parents with little education, and have three or more siblings in comparison to non-immigrant children (Child Trends, 2014). These particular children may experience emotional or physical health concerns which may be difficult for educators to see (Paterson, 2018). Unfortunately, in a political climate in which immigration is seen negative, immigrant families experience a high degree of anxiety (Lind, 2018). In this column, we provide an overview of critical information that public school teachers and administrators need to know regarding this population.

Actions are illegal, people are not

Passel and Cohn (2016) of the Pew Research Center estimated that 3.9 million or 7.3% of K-12 students have at least one parent who is undocumented. In contrast, 81% of these students are US born citizens. Thus, while these US born children have legal status in the US, their

parents and siblings may not. Government agencies use the term *illegal alien* frequently to refer to immigrants who do not possess legal authorization to live and work in the US. However, advocates for immigration reform reject this term as offensive and use the term, *undocumented immigrant*. As educators, we must recognize that children are never aliens or illegal. They are *children* who did not ask to be caught up in the immigration fray. Furthermore, their parents are their *mothers* and *fathers* with respect to the educational system. Labels matter: actions are illegal, people are not.

Mistrust and fear of the public education system is high among the immigrant population. This is especially true in light of recent comments by the Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, in which she asserted that local school districts could decide whether to report undocumented students and their families to ICE (Balingit, 2018). Civil rights groups condemned her view, citing the landmark case 1982 Plyler vs. Doe in which the Supreme Court ruled that *all* children had a right to a free public education (Balingit, 2018). DeVos later had to walk back those comments; however, the damage was done.

Given the current climate, it is critical to separate fact from fiction. Teachers and administrators need to understand the legal rights of undocumented families in public schools. First, neither parents nor children are required to divulge their immigration status by school officials. Second, neither parents nor children are required to have Social Security numbers, since this number is an indication of immigration status. Third, teachers and administrators have no legal obligation to work with ICE agents or enforce immigration laws. Finally, and most importantly, all children have the right to attend free public schools and, in fact, are required to do so (American Immigration Council, 2016).

Schooling in an environment of fear

Children are not immune to the negative discourse surrounding immigration and are aware of the increase in immigration enforcement. Some have lost friends or even parents or siblings to deportation. Immigration raids have had ripple effects in the school system. In a survey of educators across the country conducted by the UCLA Civil Rights Project (Gándara & Ee, 2018), 84 % of respondents indicated that students expressed fear of immigration enforcement at school. Almost 90% of administrators noted that they saw increased behavioral or emotional problems among the immigrant student population. Seventy percent of school officials reported an academic decline among immigrant students and 68 percent report a rise in absenteeism of immigrant students. One of the lead researchers on the survey project, Patricia Gándara, Co-director of the UCLA Civil Rights Project, stated:

Educators from all parts of the country tell us their immigrant students are distracted and living in fear of losing their parents to deportation and this is affecting all the students in their classrooms. As a result, teachers in these mostly low-income schools are being stressed sometimes to the breaking point. The unintended consequences of an immigration enforcement policy that did not consider its impact on the nation's schools will continue to jeopardize the educations of millions of students if allowed to persist (Gándara & Ee, 2018).

Administrators should consider providing training to teachers regarding immigration issues and the responsibilities of schools to serve this population. It is also critical to sensitize teachers to the emotional needs of children from undocumented families. It was only last Halloween that elementary teachers in Idaho dressed up as a wall with the slogan, *Make America Great Again* (Mervosh, 2018, November 4). These teachers demonstrated an incredible lack of sensitivity. Teachers should serve as role models that provide children with a safe environment,

not the opposite. Celebrating an image that symbolizes horror to undocumented families is never a joke.

Children in undocumented families are frightened. Many are trained not to divulge where their parents work or to answer questions, like where the family lives. Thus, even a common classroom activity such as drawing a map of your neighborhood may provoke resistance by these children. They may identify themselves by the generic categories like, *American* or *Hispanic*, to mask immigration status. Parents may not participate in school events, like parent teacher conferences out of fear of deportation. In Texas for example, Senate Bill 4 “Show-me-your-papers” provided police officers the right to stop and question individuals about their legal status (Vertuno, 2017). Although parts of this bill were blocked, the effect was to drive many undocumented families underground.

Teachers and administrators must recognize this fear is based in reality and take appropriate steps when contacting parents or planning instruction. Siblings, aunts and uncles who are documented may take on the role of mediator with the school. However, teachers should make the extra effort to reach out to all parents directly to foster a positive and trusting relationship. Virtual environments, like FaceTime (Francis, Haines & Nagro, 2017) are a non-threatening way to establish open lines of communication.

Teachers and administrators may also need to talk with other students on how to be friendly and inviting to someone who may look, speak or behave differently. For example, the children of one of the authors have been the victims of inappropriate statements, such as “go back to Mexico” or “speak English, you are in America.” Although many teachers intervene when children are saying something mean to another child, they do not take the time to have a conversation as to why they should not say certain things. Children need to learn that all

children, regardless of ethnicity or national origin, have a right to be in school and that speaking other languages other than English is not un-American.

Conclusion

Today's political climate concerning undocumented individuals is overwhelmingly bleak. Unfortunately, this negativity carries into schools and affects children's education. Teachers and administrators have an important role to play in establishing safe learning environments for all children, especially those whose legal status and/or that of their parents may be in question. Establishing open lines of communication with parents and other caregivers is complicated by immigration status; however, continued efforts to communicate are critical. Teachers should also validate the backgrounds' of immigrant children and promote diversity and acceptance in the classroom. All educators should remember that all children have the right to quality education no matter their legal status.

References

American Immigration Council (2016, October, 24). Public education for immigrant students:

Understanding Plyler v. Doe. Retrieved from:

<https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/plyler-v-doe-public-education-immigrant-students>

Balingit, M. (2018, June 5). Can educator call ICE on students? Betsy DeVos finally answers.

The Washington Post. Retrieved from:

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/education/wp/2018/06/05/can-educators-call-ice-on-students-betsy-devos-finally-answers/?utm_term=.7da7b048956e

Child Trends (2014). Immigrant children: Indicators of child and youth well-being. Retrieved

from: <https://www.childtrends.org/indicators/immigrant-children>

Francis, G.L.; Haines, S.J. & Nagro, S.A. (2017). Developing relationships with immigrant

families: Learning by asking the right questions. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 2, 95-105.

Gándara, P. & Ee, J. U.S. Immigration policy and its impact on teaching and learning in the

nation's school. UCLA Civil Rights Project. Retrieved from

<https://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/immigration-immigrant-students/u.s.-immigration-enforcement-policy-and-its-impact-on-teaching-and-learning-in-the-nations-schools>

Lind, D. (2018, March 5). Trump wants immigrants to be afraid. 2 new studies show it's

working. *VOX Media*. Retrieved from <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/3/5/17071648/impact-trump-immigration-policy-children>

Mervosh, S. (2018, November, 4). School district in Idaho apologizes for Mexican costume and a mock border wall. *The New York Times*, p. N 25.

Passel, J.S. & Cohn, D.V. (2016, November 17). Children of unauthorized immigrants represent rising share of K-12 students. *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved from <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/17/children-of-unauthorized-immigrants-represent-rising-share-of-k-12-students/>

Paterson, J. (2018). Long tradition of English language learning may need a jolt. *Education World: Connecting Educators to What Works*. Retrieved from: <https://www.educationworld.com/teachers/long-tradition-english-language-learning-may-need-jolt>

Vertuno, J. (2017, May 3). Texas lawmakers pass bill allowing police to ask about immigration status. *USA Today*. Retrieved from <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2017/05/03/texas-sanctuary-cities-bill-immigration-status-police/101268244/>