ACADEMY OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Civic Engagement Student Artifact

Mentoring an Undocumented Student

My Mentoring an Undocumented Student learning experience took place during my practicum at Franklin High School in their ASPIRE (Access to Student assistance Programs In Reach of Everyone) program, in which I mentored a high school senior, who I will call Steven, as he prepared and planned for college. In our weekly meetings we typically focused on finding scholarship opportunities, working on applications, and finalizing scholarship essays.

One of the first applications we worked on asked Steven to discuss his experience with and commitment to diversity. It was while we were working on this essay that I learned Steven is undocumented and came to the United States from Mexico with his parents when he was just two years old. I found out that while he still does not have legal status, he has been given a temporary Social Security number and Work Visa through a federal program called DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals), but is unable to receive federal financial aid in order to attend college.

Learning that he is undocumented opened my eyes to the added barriers he will experience in wanting to attend college and finding ways to pay for it. Because he is not eligible for financial aid, the burden of tuition costs fall directly on him. We discussed his options; either he would need to work, likely full time, to pay his own tuition and/or he would need to rely on scholarships. Steven also told me his dream was to become a physician's assistant, which would require additional schooling and therefore additional costs. After finding out that he cannot get aid from the government, I researched additional, privately funded scholarships and grants and encouraged him even more to apply for as many as possible so that he could fulfill his goal of attending college despite his undocumented status. During this learning

experience I utilized theoretical knowledge that helped me understand the experiences of undocumented youth in public schools and what barriers they face (Lad & Braganza, 2013).

Completing the Mentoring an Undocumented Student learning experience showed me how oppressive forces linked to undocumented legal status can negatively impact students wishing to attend college, pursue careers, and better their lives.

The theoretical knowledge I used within the Mentoring and Undocumented Student learning experience was research findings. The authors studied formerly undocumented immigrants who had participated the US public school system as well as public school administrators and staff to learn what the school experience is like for undocumented youth. Lad and Braganza (2013) aimed to answer three different questions: what obstacles undocumented students face that limit their success, how undocumented students' experiences compared to public school administration and staff's perception of their experiences, and how the research of these experiences can help inform policy and inspire growth in school administration and staff.

To answer these questions, the researchers gave questionnaires to and/or interviewed 12 immigrants from an urban city in northern California who had been undocumented when they attended public school (Lad & Braganza, 2013). The participants ranged in age from 18 to 42 and all were originally from Mexico, with exception to two individuals who were from El Salvador. All of them were currently legal residents, but had formerly been undocumented. They were recruited by community organizers and established members of the Latino community. All participants completed both a questionnaire and an interview, with exception to three individuals who completed the questionnaire but were unable to be interviewed. The authors also gave questionnaires to two separate groups (of unknown size) of K-12 administrators, teachers, and support staff also from northern California.

From the interviews and questionnaires, the authors found undocumented students faced many obstacles that may affect their psychological wellbeing and educational success. These included being separated from family members still residing in their native countries and the fear of further separation via deportation. The language

barrier was another significant obstacle, not only for the students themselves but for their parents, who could not be very involved in their children's schooling if they spoke little or no English. The undocumented students also identified a lack of information about services and the educational system in general and fear of questioning school officials, who they worried may report them, as barriers to their educational success. Compared to the undocumented students' experiences, school staff and administration perceived mostly different obstacles. They did identify the language barrier, but they attributed the lack of parental or family involvement as an apathetic attitude towards education rather and believed that was the barrier to undocumented students' success. This suggests some level of disconnect between students' experience and staff's perception. In reference to the third research question, the immigrant participants believed undocumented students and their families should receive help from advocates who can provide them with useful information about services and assist them in navigating the education system. The K-12 staff participants also believed information should be made more available to students and their families through community outreach. The researchers suggest these results could inform new school policies that implement these ideas (Lad & Braganza, 2013).

Lad and Braganza (2013) believe this research will be useful for educators and school policy makers to understand. They believe that by understanding the needs and challenges of undocumented students, teachers and school staff can better serve them. They propose that this research inspires new policies and programs, such as teacher development, matching educational advocates to immigrant families, and community outreach campaigns. Lad and Braganza (2013) argue that because undocumented immigrants "fly under the radar" and are an understudied population, their research can be especially useful to inspire solutions for undocumented students in the public school system. I became aware of this theoretical knowledge when I completed the Mentoring and Undocumented Student learning experience.

I used this theoretical knowledge in my learning experience when I mentored Steven, an undocumented student. One of the obstacles to undocumented students' success Lad and Braganza (2013) identified was a lack of information about services and the education system in general. They also found that undocumented students could benefit from having an advocate help them navigate the education system. My job as

Steven's mentor was to help him navigate the education system as he prepared to graduate high school and move on to college. I was his advocate, and provided him with information that would help him navigate the system and help him achieve educational success. I helped him find information about college admissions, including test score and GPA requirements and how to send his high school transcripts. I also helped him research what education he would need to become a physician's assistant and what steps he should take to get there (i.e. completing a bachelor's degree in biology and preparing for graduate school entrance exams). I spent the majority of my time finding scholarships that he was eligible for and providing him with information about how and when to apply for them. Lad and Braganza (2013) found that the undocumented students wished they were given more guidance about how to succeed. This was my main objective in mentoring Steven: to provide him with information and guidance about how to succeed.

In the Mentoring an Undocumented Student learning experience I learned several lessons.. One lesson that I learned was what the DACA is. I learned that it is a policy implemented in 2012 that provides deferred action, meaning the government will neither deport nor provide citizenship or residency. I learned that DACA provides undocumented individuals who arrived in the US as minors with a Social Security number and a Work Visa for two years at a time and can be renewed if they avoid any criminal convictions. I learned this during my conversations with Steven, who explained to me how he was given a Social Security number and Work Visa but remained undocumented, as well as by doing my own research afterwards so I could better understand his situation. Learning what DACA is and how it works helps me understand dimensions of diversity in children, youth, and families and the role policy plays in their lives.

The other lesson I learned was that undocumented students who wish to pursue higher education have few options to pay for it. I learned that even with programs like DACA, the student is still considered undocumented, which means they are not eligible to receive federal student aid or grants based on need. I also learned that schools can charge them out of state tuition, which is substantially more, even if they have lived in there for the majority of their life. I found this out during my conversations with Steven, who told me he would need to rely on private scholarships to pay for tuition,

and learned more of the specifics as I did my own research on options for undocumented students. This lesson has helped me understand the oppressive forces undocumented students face that hinder their positive development and ability to attend college.

During the Mentoring an Undocumented Student learning experience, I had many conversations with Steven about his background, his experiences, and his fears and concerns for the future. This helped me understand his perspective not only as an undocumented individual, but as a Mexican American, low income, first generation student as well. This also helped me understand how these cultural identities intersect with issues such as immigration, public education, and college tuition costs. Together, Steven and I collaborated by doing research and finding scholarships to address and help overcome these issues facing him.

In my relationship with Steven, as his mentor, I also developed an ethical responsibility to him not to share specific information about his family or legal situation. During the learning experience, I did not discuss it with any other students I worked with nor any of the other mentors in the program in order to protect his privacy. This learning experience also increased my self-awareness as I became conscious of the privileges I have experienced simply due to my being an American-born citizen.

I began this learning experience not planning on or knowing that I would be working with an undocumented student. I was actually surprised when I found out that Steven was undocumented because that thought had never crossed my mind; to me, he seemed like a typical high school student. But when I did find out, and realized how many barriers stood in his way due to his legal status, it made me realize how privileged I was just to be a US citizen. I had never thought much about it before then.

My citizenship status has made applying for jobs, leaving and re-entering the country, getting a driver's license, receiving tax refunds, and applying for college, among many other things, so much easier for me. I never had to think twice about it. Mentoring Steven and seeing the struggles he had to go through made me realize how much I had taken my own legal status for granted.

These realizations I had during my Mentoring and Undocumented Student learning experience were similar to thoughts I had when I first began working with youth in foster care. When I started volunteering with foster children I learned how significant things like meals, a bed, your own room, a kitchen, and the concept of "home" is. I spent my childhood living in the same house, always having my own bed, having food in the kitchen, and a place to call my own. Like my citizenship, those were things that I expected and never had to worry about. To me that was normal; I didn't have to think about it. But when I began working with kids in foster care, I realized that for many of them, they didn't always know where their next meal would come from, they weren't used to having their own bed or their own room or even the same house or family for very long. In this experience, I also realized what privileges I had taken for granted in my life and I became more aware of them.

As I prepare to become a youth worker, I expect to work with young people from many different backgrounds, some of which may be similar to mine but many of which will likely be much different. When I am working in the field, it will be important for me to recognize what my own privileges are and how they have shaped my experiences while also recognizing that the children, youth, and families that I am working with may have a much different "normal" than the one I am used to.

References

Lad, K. & Braganza, D. (2013). Increasing knowledge related to the experiences of undocumented immigrants in public schools. *Educational Leadership and Administration: Teaching and Program Development, 24*(1), 1-15.

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