

How Do Students Decide Whether to Discuss Their Immigration Status?

By Corey Mitchell on March 14, 2017 2:28 PM

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A new small-scale, ethnographic study published in the *American Educational Research Journal* explores when and how undocumented students decide to discuss their citizenship status.

Elementary school-aged students are often acutely aware of their immigration status—and it affects how and when they participate in school activities, Rutgers University researcher Ariana Mangual Figueroa found in her exploration of how educators can best serve students who are undocumented or have parents who are.

An assistant professor of language education in Rutgers' Graduate School of Education, Figueroa sought to challenge the assumption that most children are unaware of their citizenship status until adolescence.

Through her examination of transcripts documenting classroom interactions and reviews of writing samples, Figueroa—a former New York City English-as-a-second-language and Spanish teacher—profiled a set of 5th grade students at a Brooklyn-based school where more than 90 percent of students are Latino and nearly half are classified as English-language learners. She observed students from January through June 2014 in classrooms where social studies and social-emotional learning were taught.

Two students identified by the pseudonyms Ruth and Lupe were the focal point of the study. Both were born in Latin America and entered the United States as undocumented immigrants.

While Ruth had obtained her green card since coming to the United States from El Salvador, Lupe—and her parents—are Mexican-born and remained undocumented

As a result, Ruth felt more confident sharing her immigrant status, going so far as to sharing her border-crossing experience. Lupe often declined to participate in classroom activities that risked disclosing her immigration status. Figueroa cited Lupe's reluctance—she was otherwise a socially and intellectually involved student—as evidence of the protective stance she took when topics of legal citizenship arose.

The study also makes the case that aiming to protect the rights of undocumented students by avoiding any discussion of their status during the enrollment process, schools often overlook the obvious: students will likely disclose, intentionally or unintentionally, during their schooling.

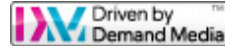
"We bear a particular responsibility to better prepare educators who can support their immigrant students, regardless of their legal status," Figueroa wrote in her study's conclusion.

As a first step, she recommends developing training that helps teachers move from a nonexistent or individual attempts at supporting undocumented students to "intentional advocacy across the students' educational trajectories."

Here's a **link to the abstract of the study**, "Speech or Silence: Undocumented Students' Decision to Disclose or Disguise Their Citizenship Status in School."

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