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Undocumented and Under Surveillance: A Case Study of an Undocumented Latina with a Disability in Juvenile Justice

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Abstract

Using data collected from a larger qualitative study that explored the educational trajectories of young women of color with disabilities through the School to Prison Pipeline, this empirical case study focuses on how one student's undocumented status impacted her education in juvenile justice. Research has begun to provide us with statistics about the Pipeline; however, there is still very little known about the actual experiences of students. Using a combination of interviews, observations, and document analysis, I collaborated with an undocumented Latina labeled with an emotional disability to share how her intersectional identities impacted her experiences in juvenile justice.

Introduction

Veronica and I were discussing her first days at a maximum-security juvenile incarceration setting for girls when she told me she was undocumented. Veronica was a part of the growing Latin@ population in the School to Prison Pipeline (the Pipeline). The Pipeline disproportionately impacted students of color through excessive discipline and increased police in schools (Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010). It is clear that the problematic interactions between education and other social service agencies as well as neoliberal immigration policies directly feed the Pipeline, which is part of the trend towards mass incarceration (Alexander, 2010; Díaz-Strong & Meiners, 2007). These interactions and policies must be examined and dismantled in order to construct undocumented students not as criminals, but as citizens with significant aspirations that contribute to society and limit their entrance into the Pipeline. This article focused on education experiences of an undocumented student inside juvenile incarceration, as it provided an understanding of what occurs once she entered the Pipeline (Kim et al., 2010).

Students of color experience the process of being simultaneously raced and criminalized in education (Rabaka, 2010). Connections between race, education and crime have been essential to understanding how children of color become incarcerated at higher rates than whites. However, there are other points of social location that made it more likely that students were relegated to juvenile detention. Pipeline literature often left special education unexamined (Kim et al., 2010). However, an average of 33-37% of students in juvenile systems have been identified with a disability⁴⁴, whereas public schools have a national average of 12-14% of students labeled with disabilities (National Education Association, 2007; Quinn, Rutherford, Leone, Osher, & Poirier, 2005). Moreover, particular types of disabilities are correlated with being incarcerated; students with an emotional disability designation comprised almost 50% of students with disabilities in juvenile incarceration but less than 1% of public schools (Osher, Woodruff, & Simms, 2002). In this article, I explored how Veronica's education was impacted by her intersectional identities, including race, disability, gender and undocumented status.

Undocumented and Identity Construction in Schools

In 2011, it was estimated that there were 11.1 million unauthorized immigrants in the U.S. and about one million of those were under the age of 18 (Passel & Cohn, 2012). The construction of an undocumented

44. Due to overrepresentation of students from non-dominant communities in judgment categories in special education, I say "labeled with a disability" in order to trouble the medical model of disability as a biological condition. As Harry and Klingner (2006) note, "many have questioned the accuracy of the professional judgments made in diagnosing" these disabilities.

status by the state negatively impacted the lives of the unauthorized immigrant population by questioning their legitimacy, affecting their safety and producing feelings of shame (Abrego, 2008). Basic statistics on students who are incarcerated and undocumented are scarce and literature that captured incarcerated education experiences of undocumented students was almost non-existent (Díaz-Strong & Meiners, 2007). Much of the literature on undocumented students' education focused on public school experiences and higher education access, experiences (Abrego, 2006; Pérez & Rodríguez, 2011).

Though not directly related to juvenile detention, this literature provided insights about unauthorized students' education and the construction of their identity in schools. Unauthorized students who had access to institutional agents, such as teachers and counselors, through "positive" tracking had better chances of achieving educational success than students who felt disconnected from school and its agents (Díaz-Strong & Meiners, 2007; Gonzales, 2010; Pérez & Rodríguez, 2011). Undocumented high achievers spoke of aspirations that allowed them to re-define their citizenship and discussed belonging neither to their home country or the U.S.; this social exclusion resulted in exhaustion (Torres & Wicks-Asburn, 2013). College-going literacies, the learned participation of accessing higher education, were inequitably taught to undocumented students and they had less access to these literacies than peers with citizenship documentation (Gildersleeve & Romero, 2010). Understanding undocumented status not as a demographic descriptor, but a tool in which students can learn about their potential educational outcomes, provided a nuanced understanding of children's education experiences (Gildersleeve, 2009). Every aspect of undocumented students' lives was impacted by neoliberal immigration policies (Díaz-Strong & Meiners, 2007). Those disconnected from school and its agents were constructed as not only undocumented but also problematic in achievement, limiting access even further to college-going literacies and their opportunity to re-define their citizenship, while increasing their social exhaustion.

Conceptual Framework

Critical Race Theory (CRT) and its branches, FemCrit, LatCrit and DisCrit, enabled an intersectional analysis that rendered visible how Veronica was positioned and educated in the Pipeline (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2013; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Montoya, 1994). CRT exposed how "neutral" policies and pedagogy reinforced normative standards of white, male and able-bodied; marking those that differ from norms as biological deficits, medical conditions of bodies and minds (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ferri & Connor, 2009; Watts & Erevellas, 2004). In other words, CRT recognized the social construction of race, gender, and disability as society's response to differences from the norm and the material impacts of those constructed identities. Issues viewed uni-dimensionally, (e.g., *only* race or gender) limited the understanding of how multiple subordinated identities interacted (Crenshaw, 1991; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). CRT troubled singular notions of identity and deeply analyzed the intersections of race, ability, and gender (Garland-Thompson, 2003; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). Finally, CRT demanded a focus on counter-narratives contrasted by the master narrative (Matsuda, 1987).

For example, the master narrative highlights how young women of color are more dangerous than their white counterparts and more deserving of incarceration (Chesney-Lind & Jones, 2010). Though there is little evidence for this claim, dominant discourse highlighted the rise of the "bad girl," a modern girl who is more violent than in the past (Chesney-Lind, 2010). An analytical approach that emphasizes intersectionality and counter-narratives provided an opportunity to view Veronica not as inherently bad or violent, but as a thoughtful young woman maneuvering dangerous situations. This approach allowed me to center Veronica's voice, as a historically marginalized person, in order to understand not only ways hegemony is enacted, but also ways an undocumented student resisted institutional racism, sexism and ableism.

Methodological Pluralism

This case study is part of a larger empirical study, in which I collaborated with 10 young women of color with disabilities to map their trajectories through the Pipeline. The research site is a maximum-security center (e.g., chain link fences, barbed wire, security guards, intercom system, locked doors). At the time of the study, 26

of the 40 girls were females of color and 19 had a disability label (principal interview, 2012). Because of the doubly sensitive nature of this case (under 18 and incarcerated), specific details about Veronica were not provided.

Critical phenomenology attended to two interdependent strands of social life: “the conditions of structural inequality and structural violence that shape...position and status” and impacts on “individual and collective experiences” (Willen, 2007, p. 13). Methodological pluralism is, a “strategy of data collection and analysis to document how change and discontinuity, braided with a desire for narrative coherence and consistency, shape the stories young people tell about themselves, over time and space” (Katsiaficas, Futch, Fine, & Seluck, 2011, p. 120). Accordingly, this case study included: in-depth phenomenological interviews with Veronica (5), classroom observations (12), document analysis of school records (4) and data analysis by the participants. The research question was: How did Veronica’s undocumented status impact her education and experiences in juvenile justice?

To answer the research question, I sifted data throughout the collection process and included participant analysis whenever possible (Erikson, 1996). In mining the data, the girls made connections I had not. Data construction was top down from the literature and bottom up from the data. I looked for patterns and disconfirmed evidence, generated conceptual categories, developed a code thesaurus and frequency counts (Erikson, 1998). I refined my codes by continually returning to the data, settled on final codes and used them to systematically explore the data for atypicality (Glaser & Straus, 1967). I then crafted vignettes representative of the common experiences in different points of the Pipeline as well as outliers that represented each girl’s individual experiences. Veronica’s story emerged from these outliers as someone undocumented in detention. I then re-coded her interviews as single case study (Yin, 2009).

I faced a precarious position researching undocumented status in the Pipeline. I did not want to share Veronica’s undocumented status but wanted determine how it was being addressed. Veronica told me that all the staff knew, including her teachers. However, the principal and teachers claimed there were no undocumented students. School personnel could have known but did not want to expose the legal status of their students. However, this reveals a complex situation for researchers. How do we recognize the dangerous situations our students face and get them support without exposing them to harsh penalties (Paris & Winn, 2013)? It is clear that part of the answer is linking undocumented students’ education experiences to neoliberal immigration policies (Díaz -Strong & Meiners, 2007).

Findings

The case study uncovered two major findings: 1.) Often in juvenile incarceration, Veronica’s behavior was interpreted without consideration of the sociocultural context of her life 2.) Efforts to regulate and control Veronica’s body and thoughts were not met with passive acceptance or impulsive resistance. Instead, they exemplified Veronica’s thoughtful and complex negotiation of how to respond to efforts to surveil and control.

Undocumented and under surveillance

Over the course of several interviews Veronica told me how her undocumented status was discovered, addressed and how that impacted her experiences in juvenile incarceration.

SAA: How did they figure out your immigration status?

Veronica: They did because I got arrested by the (Western City) Police...they took my fingerprints and they ask me if I have a security number and I was like no. And then they’re like, you’re Mexican, huh? And I was like, yeah. And they’re like well you’re undocumented right? And I was like yeah. And then they filed it and everything.

This was the first concerning part of Veronica’s story; the police questioned a juvenile with a disability without a lawyer or even an adult present to advise her. Veronica revealed her undocumented status without fully understanding the potential consequences. The ramifications were long lasting. She explained what she faced

after incarceration.

SAA: What do you want to do after school?

Veronica: I don't know. I have this like immigration thing coming up. So before I parole, they come, well somebody has to call them, ya know? And then they'll come....then I have to go like get detained but we're fighting, because there's more chances they'll send me out of the country.

SAA: So they're threatening to call?

Veronica: No, they're not threatening. They just have to call. So then they make the decision if they want to come or not. They got 24 hours to pick me up. But for that time, I have to have like a packet so like show them that I did good and that I need one more chance, you know?

It was difficult for Veronica to imagine a life after incarceration. Uncertainty about her future was compounded by potential deportation.

SAA: Do you know how old you were when you came over?

Veronica: Yeah, I was 7.

SAA: And do you remember what it was like?

Veronica: Well we came here with our passports and stuff, our visas and stuff. So we came here legal and then I don't know, we only had it for like 2010 or 2011. Then we lost it because we never went back and like, go through the same process again. We were leaving there, my dad had a business and it was too dangerous to go back. So we just didn't go.

SAA: So you said your mom and your stepdad are in the process of trying to get their stuff?

Veronica: Yeah.

SAA: So is part of the stress around that is like, even if you get sent back, would they go back too?

Veronica: No, they wouldn't go back. My family would stay here.

SAA: So you'd have to go live with relatives or something?

Veronica: Well that's the problem; I don't have no one in Mexico.

Veronica was fearful of being sent back to a country she had not lived since she was seven.

In 2010, over nine million people belonged to a mixed status family, where some family members have documents that authorized them to be in the country while others do not (Taylor, Hugo Lopez, Passel & Motel, 2011). Veronica identified this mixed status as a major stressor because she faced deportation without any family or friends to return to in Mexico. She faced losing access to her family and the country she had known since she was seven. I asked her who she talked to about this in juvenile incarceration,

SAA: Have you talked about your immigration status with (your therapist)? Does she know for sure?

Veronica: Yeah.

SAA: I don't think any of your teachers know.

Veronica: Why do you say that?

SAA: Cuz I asked them the general question, are any of your students undocumented and they all answered, no one....The reason I bring this up is because, I feel like this might be a big stress point in your life and I'm just not sure who you are getting to talk to about it.

Veronica: I don't really talk to no one. I just kind of keep it to myself.

SAA: That seems to be a big part of what your therapy should be about. That's a scary thing to have hanging over your head.

Veronica: I know. I go to sleep over it and I'm like, what the fuck? My life depends on what the immigration judge is going to say and I'm like, damn that sucks....Yeah, and there's a lot of things that I haven't told (my therapist) yet. And she's like, I don't know, I would tell my therapist but it doesn't feel right. I feel like, like I should have never told no one, it was a long time ago when I was young. I thought that if I ever told someone, they better die (laughing). Or I'll be dead or something. Like I was going to take that secret with me to the grave. But I let it out and I was like what the fuck, that was a big mistake....And then I'm just like, oh I should have never done that.

Veronica suffered from shame and recognized that staying in the US hinged on a packet and an immigration judge. Admitting this secret intensified rather than alleviated her struggles. This psychological stress that many undocumented students face was compounded by Veronica's additional status as an incarcerated juvenile (Jacobo & Ochoa, 2011). She divulged the secret with major consequences and had no one to help her face those consequences.

I wondered how compounded psychological stress impacted her behavior and she told me a story about "cheeking her meds," or saving prescription drugs to ingest many at once, allowing the person to feel high.

Veronica: I was cheeking my meds and cheeking other people's meds. Everybody was like, what is wrong with you and I was like, nothing....I was just not paying attention in class and anything. I was blowing everything off. And then, they're like, oh you're cheeking your meds. Cuz one of the other kids said that we were passing meds....And they're like, wow you're just wired in the brain to do criminal things. And I was like I know. It's like that criminal thinking is always on my mind.

SAA: What do you mean by criminal thinking? Where does that language come from?

Veronica: It comes for T4C, Thinking for Change. And it was like, you have to like, criminal thinking is like you always want to do the wrong thing to get away with something or hide something. And what I was doing was like, getting high to hide my feelings because the immigration thing had me all upset...and I was like oh my god, this is going to happen. But I was just assuming the worst. And that's just another thing that I learned in T4C, like I learned a lot. If it happens, it happens. I'm not going to get overwhelmed about things that are out of my power.

Veronica started "cheeking her meds" directly in relation to her fear of deportation without friends or family. The description of her actions as "criminal thinking" was grossly oversimplified. The Thinking for Change curriculum (Bush, Glick & Tymans, 2002) never used the term "criminal thinking" but did discuss "self-centered thinking that leads to criminality" (p. 144). This may indicate that staff, teachers, or students were using this term incorrectly.

Thinking for Change did not address social identities. It was not directed toward children or adults but could be used with both, meaning there were no developmental supports for juveniles. I searched for the terms:

culture, cultural, ethnicity, race, gender, sex, sexuality, orientation, gay, lesbian, bisexual, LGBTQ, immigration, illegal, undocumented, ability and disability and found none were included. The curriculum had no specialized instructions for students with disabilities or English Language Learners. I discussed this with a child psychologist who had experience working within the juvenile incarceration system and she stated, “Cognitive behavioral therapy does not have those identity markers included. However the therapist should be trained in multicultural issues and should integrate them” (Dr. Amanda Bye, personal communication, November 5, 2012). Though Dr. Bye was describing best practice, Thinking for Change stated,

The curriculum has been designed so that any staff person may facilitate groups and teach its content. No special credential or level of education is required.

Trainers should be caring, like to teach, understand group processes and interpersonal interactions, and be able to control an offender group. (Bush et al., 2002, p. 4.)

The curriculum ignored ways that structural racism, sexism, ableism, and xenophobia may affect people’s actions and instead labels “offenders” criminals with self-centered thinking. Bush et al. (2002) stated that Thinking for Change builds upon “strategies and curricula to teach skills to skill deficit individuals.” So, the cognitive behavior therapy in Thinking for Change took a deficit approach to the “offender.” Overall, it allowed a juvenile’s actions to be considered without context.

To describe Veronica’s actions as self-centered implied that Veronica had no reason to take prescription drugs except for the thrill of doing something wrong. On the contrary, Veronica was facing the very real possibility of being deported to a country she had not been to in over 10 years without friends or family to protect or support her. That she was taking drugs because she was self-centered or trying to get away with something seems naïve—simplistic in light of what she was facing. Veronica recognized that self-medicating was linked to her anxiety about the pending immigration hearing. The curriculum used by the juvenile justice system addressed Veronica’s behaviors punitively and without context.

Veronica: Like sometimes I feel like that’s the pressure on me. That’s why I get so irritated. Cuz like whenever staff is doing something to me or like I have a different opinion, I can’t argue with them because they have some kind of power. And I’m like, sometimes I take it out on them...Like I was just mad cuz one time (my teacher) told me to go do something. And I was like I already did it and he was like well it doesn’t matter, do it again. And I was like, I hate when people talk to me like that. Like, I feel like I’m a dog and like I just get weird feelings and I act on it cuz I don’t know how to handle it.

SAA: Does it make you feel disrespected?

Veronica: Yeah and when that happens, you have this whole other thing going on like if I argue right now, how is that going to help or hurt me?...I hear myself thinking, if you do this, you’re going to get into this kind of trouble. This and that. And my head just doesn’t care.

Surveillance of her behavior proved to be a continual stressor for Veronica. She had to consider not only the immediate consequences of her behavior in an institution that continually criminalized her, but also to weigh how it affected her chance to stay in the country. Her statuses as an undocumented student, an English Language Learner, and a female with an emotional disability had been ignored. At times, the juvenile incarceration system even attempted to eradicate those identities (Díaz-Strong & Meiners, 2007). The only label the teachers and staff embraced for Veronica was “criminal.” This limited the support Veronica received and the impact the program had on her.

Fake it to Make it

Socializing practices, defined for the purposes of this study as the rituals and routines of the institution, were meant to teach its inhabitants about the philosophy of the program. Socializing routines “teach both to

and through” institutional practices (Gutiérrez & Larson, 1994). For instance, in one 45-minute class I observed, implementing these routines took 26 minutes. One major socializing practice for a new female inmate was to keep feet together at all times when sitting. When I asked why this practice was necessary, a security staff responded, “They need to learn to behave like young ladies”. This comment reflected an attempt to enforce normative femininity on criminal female bodies, a common effort in female juvenile incarceration (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004).

In the video data, I noticed that Veronica kept her feet apart, however the rest of her body language indicated attending to the conversation (e.g. eyes on teacher, recording notes). Even after security staff directed her to put her feet together, Veronica would often change her foot position back to open. I asked why Veronica continually moved her feet into a position prohibited by the institution.

I knew like I could get away with it. And I felt like, I get comfortable in the places I am. I don’t care who says no or what, if I’m comfortable with it, I’m going to sit the way I want. And I’ll just do what I do and I never got in trouble for it. And when I did, I would just close them back and spread (my feet) again.

Veronica resisted this expectation though it could have made her more susceptible to punishment. Teachers and staff did not take these socializing practices lightly. In one 45-minute class I observed, class was interrupted 18 times to enforce these rules.

When I asked about the purpose of these socializing routines, one teacher responded, “It’s not that hard to follow the rules here. You follow them and you get more privileges, just like life.” The teacher’s attitude reflected the beliefs of many experienced, well-meaning juvenile justice educators. She thought the small instances of rule breaking were irrational and was irritated by the refusal to follow simple rules.

However, from a youth perspective these small gestures had a different meaning; breaking rules became a resource in a place where the girls had little autonomy. Incarcerated girls were continually monitored for compliance and every part of the girls’ bodies was policed, from how they could wear their hair to what color clothes they wore. For some, breaking the rules seemed to be a response to the sheer quantity of rules, their arbitrary nature, and their irrelevance to “real life.”

Veronica refused to comply with the socializing practices and stated that she is not willing to “fake it to make it.”

Fake it to make it to me means that you put up a front. That everybody likes, like you’re the golden nickel or whatever. That everybody likes and everybody wants. And I feel like I don’t have to be that person. I don’t want to be that person...I feel like if I’m going to get there, I’ll get there the way I am. I’m not gonna change. I’m not willing to change for anyone.

Veronica shared how she struggled to comply with rules without changing her character.

Rios (2011) used the term “striving for dignity” to describe students “demanding the right to be seen ‘as normal’, to be treated as fellow human beings, to have a sense of positive rites and not to feel criminalized” in the community (p. 115). When girls were incarcerated, they still fought to be treated with dignity and this conflicted with the tight regulation and control of their bodies.

Discussion

Veronica shared how being an undocumented Latina with a disability impacted her education experiences in juvenile incarceration. Veronica got tired of holding such a large secret but her impulsive honesty resulted in increased criminalization. Confessing her undocumented status during police questioning reflected how psychological exhaustion that undocumented students experience can actually increase interaction with the Pipeline. Once incarcerated, the juvenile legal system surveilled and punished Veronica’s behavior without consideration of the sociocultural context of her life. Every decision was impacted by her undocumented status, but juvenile justice curriculum and school personnel only focused on her behaviors and alleged self-centered thinking.

Veronica’s responses to efforts to criminalize her thinking and feminize her body were not passive acceptance or impulsive rejection. Instead, Veronica thoughtfully navigated these complex situations, refusing to

conform in order to meet standards. This strategic maneuvering is something students with emotional disabilities are thought unable to do. Veronica was continually forced to follow rules in order to stay in the country, knowing she could be deported if too many minor rule infractions marked her case. At times, Veronica was able to hold this knowledge and found it motivated her to comply with the regulation of her body. Other times, the consequences beat down her will to comply with the rules. Veronica knew that her behavior was constantly being surveilled and would affect whether or not she could stay in the country, but she could not constantly comply without losing her dignity. This is the exact opposite effect that potential consequences should have on anyone. The intersections of race, immigration status, gender and ability left her vulnerable to “stated-operated systems of domination” (Richie, 2012).

Implications

A student who is undocumented already faces the construction of a criminal identity (Abrego, 2008). Once the student becomes part of the Pipeline, that state constructed undocumented identity is further criminalized, surveilled and punished. The major implication from this study is that all behavior in education should be understood within context. Students need to have institutional support, via school and juvenile justice personnel who care enough to listen to why students act in ways not sanctioned by those institutions (Pérez & Rodríguez, 2011). Personnel must be aware of the structural racism, sexism, ableism and xenophobia students face and consider their behaviors within that macro-context. Considering sociocultural factors would reflect authentic care that embraces and affirms Veronica’s culture and community and replaces a false sense of care that is prevalent in juvenile justice, which divorces students from their lives (Valenzuela, 1999). In the small, personal setting that many juvenile justice settings provide, teachers could positively “track” students by knowing enough about them to interpret their behavior in context (Gonzales, 2010). In this way, teachers and juvenile justice personnel can become college-going pedagogues who focus on empowering and teaching undocumented students in the juvenile justice system about their potential to access higher education (Gildersleeve & Romero, 2010). This would replace what school and juvenile justice personnel have become within the School to Prison Pipeline, surveillance pedagogues who focus on identifying and eradicating “problematic” emotions and behaviors from these institutions (Meiners, 2007).

The rising Latin@ presence in the School to Prison Pipeline continues to be problematic in its own right. Veronica’s story illustrates how little understanding is extended to undocumented students in juvenile justice, but it also provides an opportunity to do better. By re-imagining the role of school and juvenile justice personnel within the Pipeline, we can improve futures outcomes for students like Veronica.

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