

“It’s Always with You, that You’re Different”: Undocumented Students and Social Exclusion

Jean Calterone Williams

Political Science Department, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, California, USA

ABSTRACT

This study focuses on undocumented college students who overcame significant barriers to apply to and attend universities, and once on campus, were forced to conceal their immigration status from staff and peers, struggling to pay tuition without assistance from scholarships or federal loans. The concept of social exclusion is used to understand and explore the barriers to their access to higher education and experiences while in college, relationships to community and governing institutions, and struggles with poverty and discrimination. The Obama Administration’s Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals initiative provides the first real possibility to more fully pursue their educational and employment aspirations and allows students to live without fear of deportation and social stigma, if only temporarily.

KEYWORDS

Immigration; education;
poverty; social exclusion

The quote in the title comes from an interview with Manuel, an 18-year-old undocumented immigrant and college student at a California university. When he was age 2 years, Manuel’s parents crossed the border into the United States from Mexico, fleeing rural poverty and seeking a better life for their children. They carried him while they walked through the Sonoran desert for 2 days and nights. In 2012, Manuel had just begun his first year at the university, and struggled to pay for school, working for 30 hours per week in the informal economy while taking a full load of classes and maintaining a high grade point average. With minimal education, his parents could do little to help him financially; they struggled to support Manuel and his two younger brothers as migrant farmworkers. Nor could he receive state or federal financial aid, though his family income would make him eligible were he not an unauthorized immigrant.

Like the other undergraduates interviewed for this study, Manuel in many ways is indistinguishable from the rest of the student body at the university. His effortless English, major in the liberal arts, love for sports, and typical college student clothing mean that, on one level, he easily fits into college life. He confirms: “I’ve lived almost my whole life [in the U.S.], and I consider

myself an American.” Other research corroborates this finding. Abrego (2006), for example, observed in her interviews with undocumented young people, “After having been educated in our schools, they speak English (often with more ease than Spanish), envision their futures here, and powerfully internalize US values and expectations of merit” (p. 227). Yet later in the interview, Manuel also states that he experiences significant stress and a sense of exclusion associated with his unauthorized status, sometimes socially isolating himself to ensure that his family’s secret is not discovered (Pérez & Cortés, 2011). This is the essence of the contradiction that undocumented students face in a society where they are acknowledged but not fully accepted. Although on one hand they experience some institutional inclusion by virtue of having been accepted to college and by actively working toward degrees (Marrow, 2012), they also live with a sense of being “outsiders” and hide their immigration status from their classmates and professors, afraid to tell people that they are undocumented for fear of social stigma, rejection, and deportation (Coutin, 2000; Pérez & Cortés, 2011).

Manuel’s sense of being “different” and his experiences of poverty and exclusion are echoed by the other undocumented college students interviewed for this study. For example, Nelly, a 20-year-old junior who immigrated illegally from Mexico when she was in fourth grade, admits, “I feel like I’m nothing here,” going on to lament, “I can’t prove what I can do without papers.” And Jorge, a 21-year-old Mexican immigrant whose parents brought him to the United States when he was a baby, asserts, “at times you feel like an outcast.” Particularly, once they graduate from high school, educational access at the university level is not legally mandated and is restricted in a variety of ways (Abrego, 2006). As a result, undocumented students confront social exclusion and multiple disadvantages as they pursue higher education.

For these high-achieving college students, who have lived most of their lives uncertain if their efforts in school, work, and extracurricular activities would have any impact on their futures, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) initiative gave them hope that they could pursue education and careers and “come out” as immigrants. In June of 2012, the Obama administration announced that the DACA program would allow certain groups of young people to avoid deportation and acquire temporary 2-year visas. Applicants must show that they currently are enrolled in school, have graduated high school, or have served in the military and were honorably discharged. The initiative was widely seen as a stopgap measure to address the needs and demands of young immigrants until Congress passed either the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act or comprehensive immigration reform.

Young activists have been quite visible in their efforts to reform immigration and to support undocumented immigrants’ educational aspirations

(Corrunker, 2012; Galindo, 2012, 2011; Marquardt et al., 2011; Pérez, 2009; Pérez & Cortés, 2011; Rincón, 2008; Zimmerman, 2011). Before and after DACA, young people organized networks such as United We Dream, lobbied Congress to pass the DREAM Act and comprehensive immigration reform, and marched and protested. Since 2010, undocumented students intensified their political activism, engaging in more radical protest “including conducting hunger-strikes, staging long-distance marches, practicing civil disobedience, and organizing ‘coming-out’ campaigns” (Galindo, 2012, p. 590; Corrunker, 2012). In particular, undocumented high school and college students captured political, media, and public interest because they used the stories of their own lives to demonstrate the barriers to educational and employment goals resulting from their lack of documents (Corrunker, 2012; Galindo, 2011, 2012). These stories were told in the context of asserting that they define themselves as “Americans,” having lived most of their lives in the United States. Moreover, they had talents that cannot be used and aspirations that cannot be achieved without documents.

Based on interviews with 16 college students, this study gives voice to undocumented immigrants who overcame significant barriers to apply to and attend universities, and once on campus, were forced to conceal their immigration status from staff and peers, struggling to pay tuition without assistance from scholarships or federal loans. Analyzing their experiences in the context of the recent opportunity to apply for DACA illuminates many aspects of immigration policy in the current era: the reasons people enter the United States without legal authorization; their lifestyles, opportunities, and choices while living without legal documents; their relationships to institutions like the police and schools; their ability to meet the requirements of immigration law to pursue legal residency; and the impact of a temporary legal status. Despite the importance of this group for understanding immigration, undocumented students are one of the “least studied groups in higher education” (Garcia & Tierney, 2011, p. 2740; see also Pérez & Cortés, 2011).

The concept of social exclusion is used to understand and explore the barriers to unauthorized immigrants’ access to higher education and their experiences while in college, relationships to community and governing institutions, and struggles with poverty and discrimination. Yet “social exclusion” should not be perceived as totalizing; Interviews illustrate how unauthorized status may “constrain daily life, create internalized fears, in some ways immobilize their victims, and in other ways motivate them to engage politically to resist the dire conditions of their lives” (Gonzales & Chavez, 2012, p. 255; see also Coutin, 2000; Galindo, 2011). Students describe an economic, political, and social context that makes it difficult for them to pursue higher education and shuts them out of high-skill employment and fully realized participation in political and social life. Nevertheless, they are

enrolled in college and find ways to excel in school and community work. As they describe it, DACA provides the first real possibility to more fully pursue their educational and employment aspirations and allows them to live without fear of deportation and social stigma, if only temporarily. With this uncomfortable relationship between exclusion and inclusion, illegitimacy and legitimacy as a backdrop, this study explores the ways that undocumented status shapes the lives of impoverished Mexican immigrant college students in California, analyzing the effects of poverty and social exclusion on their educational, social, and political activity.

Social exclusion

The concept of social exclusion has been used in European countries since the 1970s and currently is employed by the European Union to measure and analyze poverty by focusing on the poor in relation to their higher-income counterparts (Silver & Miller, 2003; Todman et al., 2009). Although an absolute measure of poverty generally calculates levels of income deprivation, measures of relative poverty define the impoverished in terms of “inadequate resources” and their “ability to participate” in political, social, and community life (Iceland, 2012; Nolan & Whelan, 2010, 306). In this sense, social exclusion is experienced when particular groups cannot fully take part in society because they lack money, resources, and access to a variety of political, social, and economic institutions. They have little political voice, experience economic and physical insecurity, “educational disadvantage, poor health and access to health services, inadequate housing, and exclusion from the labor market” (Nolan & Whelan, 2010, p. 307; see also Gordon et al., 2000; Pantazis, Gordon, & Levitas, 2006). The combination of deficits works to exclude groups of people from conventional public and community life.

Increasingly, *social exclusion* is used more broadly, referring to social disadvantage that is “multidimensional, characterized by economic, political, civic, cultural, geographic, and judicial dimensions along which people may be excluded” (Todman et al., 2009, p. 331). The concept of social exclusion is useful in analyzing and contextualizing the poverty, discrimination, social isolation, and fear and avoidance of governing institutions that many undocumented immigrants express (Ismaili, 2010). The multilayered disadvantages experienced by undocumented immigrants powerfully convey social exclusion as “processes in which people are systematically blocked from access to the rights, resources, and opportunities that are normally available to members of the society in which they reside. Thus, the concept connotes an ‘extra-normative’ existence” (Todman et al., 2009, p. 330). Interviews with unauthorized immigrants in this study point to the multifaceted meanings and far-reaching impacts of their exclusion from local, state, and federal

government institutions and from the educational access and work-related benefits that most citizens have (Coutin, 2000).

One form of exclusion can intersect and exacerbate another form of disadvantage (Dymski, 2010; Velazquez & Kempf-Leonard, 2010). In particular, unauthorized immigrants are disadvantaged in the workplace, which compounds the ethnic and language discrimination that many experience, sometimes also separating them from some segments of civil society (Dymski, 2010; Negi, 2013):

The more socially excluded a group is—the more it is forced to engage in social relations and economic exchanges under disadvantaged terms, relative to other members of society—the more subject its members are to exertions of social and economic power... The extent of social exclusion depends on having “voice” politically or socially; but it may also depend on being free from being subject to social definitions as an “other” with fewer rights and less social power. (Dymski, 2010, p. 373)

Thus, a combination of factors build upon and intensify one another to restrict the opportunities afforded undocumented immigrants. Their lack of political voice, the constraints associated with poverty, and discrimination based on ethnicity and immigration status, intermix as a result of their particular position as “illegal.”

When analyzing the intersecting elements and various dimensions of social exclusion that affect undocumented immigrants, poverty is an essential factor. Although not all undocumented immigrants are low income, financial hardship typifies their experience as a group. They have almost twice the poverty rates of legal immigrant and native born populations (Passel & Cohn, 2009). The median household income of unauthorized immigrants is about 70% of the U.S. born, and they can expect to remain poor, “In contrast to other immigrants, undocumented immigrants do not attain markedly higher incomes the longer they live in the United States” (Passel & Cohn, 2009, p. iv). Educational attainment also differs noticeably between unauthorized immigrants and the native born: “Among unauthorized immigrants ages 25–64, 47% have less than a high school education. By contrast, only 8% of U.S.-born residents ages 25–64 have not graduated from high school” (Passel & Cohn, 2009, p. iv). Unauthorized immigrants also are less likely to attend college; of those age 18 to 24, just 10% of males and 16% of females are enrolled in college (Pérez, 2009, p. xxv).

Although they are revealing, statistics associated with poverty tell only a part of the story. Essentially, unauthorized standing leads to poverty or cements low-income status as much as poverty precedes immigration or explains why people enter the United States without documents. The limitations imposed by the lack of documents translates to an almost certain dearth of material advantage, pointing to the links between the

various aspects of social exclusion experienced by undocumented immigrants, and to the critical importance of noneconomic characteristics in utilizing the social exclusion conceptual framework. For example, unauthorized immigrants confront numerous restrictions on the kind of employment for which they can apply (Pérez, 2009). Participants in this study have jobs in the informal economy where they do not need to show authorization, or industries like agriculture where employers are known to accept falsified papers (Passel & Cohn, 2009). Such positions usually pay very little and lack health benefits, vacation, and sick leave; they do not provide an entrée into a career with potential for advancement (Massey & Sánchez, 2010). Likewise, undocumented immigrants have limited opportunity to pursue higher education to gain skills that translate to better paying employment (Abrego, 2006; Galindo, 2011). Their educational aspirations are truncated by the refusal of some universities to accept applicants without a Social Security number, their inability in most states to access the much lower tuition rates promised to applicants who live in the state, and the need to supply a Social Security number to apply for public financial aid and private scholarships in all but three states (Garcia & Tierney, 2011; Pérez, 2009). In the case of those brought to the United States as children, as they enter adulthood, the “effects of illegality become more prominent” (Boehm, 2012, p. 137; see also Gonzales, 2011). Particularly as they begin to consider applying for college, students realize that they are stigmatized by their unauthorized status and stymied in their attempts to pursue higher education (Pérez, 2009).

The concept of social exclusion also points to the ways that undocumented immigrants are effectively barred from customary or expected forms of interaction with most institutions associated with political and social life. In the interviews for this study, the police consistently were noted as the most discriminatory government institution. Thus, though they tend to live in high-crime areas and many are victims of crime (Velazquez & Kempf-Leonard, 2010), unauthorized immigrants often do not seek protection from the police. Instead, they fear the police, say that the police single them out, harass and treat them badly, pull them over under a variety of pretexts to check their documents, and are racist (Massey & Sánchez, 2010). Unauthorized immigrants especially fear driving but also fear walking outside because of the police. Until October 2013, they could not get drivers licenses in California, and in most states, they still cannot get them. In addition to the police, undocumented immigrants also may avoid any institution perceived to be linked to government officials. This can include schools and medical clinics (Marquardt et al., 2011; Pérez & Cortés, 2011; Sabia, 2010).

Finally, unauthorized immigrants experience multilayered discrimination, articulated in anti-immigrant sentiment expressed by peers, employers

(Massey & Sánchez, 2010), the media, political discourse (Velazquez & Kempf-Leonard, 2010), local ordinances and state laws (Cleaveland, 2010; Esbenshade & Obzurt, 2008; Ismaili, 2010; Sabia, 2010). Many of this study's participants maintain that anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States is anti-Latino sentiment (Pérez & Cortés, 2011). Immigrants identify Latinos as the primary targets of anti-immigrant legislation and political discourse, and similarly, anti-immigration legislation is perceived as racist legislation.

For those brought to the United States as children, their experiences are unique in some ways yet also overlap with other unauthorized immigrants. Public discourse tends to blame young people's parents for bringing them into the country illegally and for putting their children "at risk" (Boehm, 2012), perceiving immigrant children as victims to some degree. Yet even when unauthorized immigrant children have lived most of their lives in the United States, they also "are presumed to be foreign by the mainstream of American culture, and, at times, by the state" (quoted in Boehm, 2012, p. 134; see also Ngai, 2004), meaning that they suffer from discrimination similar to that experienced by adults (Rincón, 2008). Anti-immigrant attitudes among nonimmigrant populations result in the undocumented often hiding their identities and limiting their interactions with other community members for fear of exposure (Garcia & Tierney, 2011). Their social exclusion is produced and maintained by their isolation, "many undocumented Latino immigrants find themselves pushed into the shadows of society, reinforcing the stereotype that they do not want to be integrated. In a sense, these unauthorized immigrants do not resist assimilation; assimilation resists them" (Marquardt, 2011, p. 80; Massey & Sánchez, 2010).

Although social exclusion is a useful analytical concept, the profile of students created by this study also points to the limitations of the framework. For instance, though they are "illegal," they also are fully accepted by at least some university personnel, including administrators and faculty, as well as some peers. Those universities that accept unauthorized students choose to do so knowingly, even though they lack Social Security numbers. At one of the universities attended by a student in this study, undocumented young people are assigned to an administrator who assists them in their transition to college. Some students maintain close relationships with selected faculty members who give them support as well as financial assistance. The majority of the students in this study also are politically active; thus, they have discovered fissures in the system that allow them to make claims for inclusion and advocate for policy change (Coutin, 2000). Although they are technically illegally present, California students interviewed for this study demonstrate the means by which undocumented student political activity has assumed a central role in the immigrant rights movement, using their personal stories to reflect on citizenship and belonging, and also point to the ways that they do have a certain level of membership in the body politic.

Nonetheless, political participation by the undocumented is truncated “because informal and unrecognized or unreal forms of membership may approach and resemble but never fully replicate formal and recognized versions” (Coutin, 2013, p. 115).

Method

From September 2011 to January 2013, I completed interviews with 38 people who emigrated from Mexico to the United States without documents in the years spanning 1985 to 2006. The people interviewed represent a range of ages, family arrangements, and occupations to reflect the diversity of the undocumented population. This study, however, focuses on the 16 university students who were part of the group of interviewees. Although students’ experiences and struggles parallel those of the older adults and nonstudents, particularly in terms of their earning low wages, work in the informal economy, and fear of immigration authorities, students’ lives on university campuses are different enough to warrant separate analysis. Their distinctiveness is compounded by the introduction of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, which provides students a temporary reprieve from deportation and gives them a quasi-legal status.

Interviews took place with young people living in central and southern California, in small and large cities, who are currently enrolled in four universities and two community colleges. For some interviews, I had contacts at universities and community agencies who asked students if they would like to participate. For others, I approached people in person or by e-mail to ask for an interview. Interviews lasted approximately an hour on average and were conducted in person, with the exception of five that were by telephone. All of the students were proficient in English and Spanish, and all interviews were conducted in English, based on the students’ preferences.

Demographic information on the students is presented for informational purposes, though generalizations are limited by the small number of the sample. Nine women and seven men were interviewed; their average age was 21½. The average age of arrival was 6½, though students arrived in the United States at ages ranging from infancy to 15. All arrived from Mexico though two were Guatemalan by birth. Two entered the United States with legal visas and subsequently stayed after the visas were no longer valid, while the remaining 14 crossed the border illegally by walking or riding in a vehicle. Most were young enough that they could not remember details of the crossing but rather relayed stories that their parents had told them.

The students interviewed for this study were almost all top performers in high school. Although I did not seek out high-performing students for the research, the young people interviewed had excellent grades, had taken Advanced Placement (AP) and Gifted and Talented Education (GATE)

classes, and were involved in community service and many school-related activities. Other research has established similar findings (Pérez, 2009; Pérez & Cortés, 2011). All the students were also low-income and first-generation students, so they needed financial assistance to attend college (Pérez & Cortés, 2011). Since 2001, undocumented students have been able to pay in-state tuition for California community colleges and universities, but most of the students interviewed for this study entered college before the California DREAM Act was passed, so they struggled to pay for tuition and living expenses with their own savings, money earned during school, and some assistance from relatives.

Most of the students were active in some sort of organization that supported immigrant rights. Two of the five who were not stated that they feared deportation too much to be active politically. One student joined an organization but did not attend any rallies or protests for fear of being arrested and subsequently deported. Four of the young people interviewed had successfully obtained DACA permits. Of the remaining 12, most had applications in process though three were waiting to gather enough money to apply. Just one student said that his funds were so limited that putting aside an additional \$465 seemed financially impossible, and he could not foresee when he would have the means to apply.

Interview questions addressed a variety of issues associated with immigration policy as well as the personal experiences of immigrants. Questions addressed whether and why students had or had not applied to DACA, and their experiences applying to, paying for, and attending a university. The interview also asked about work and educational backgrounds, experiences crossing the border, whether they had become permanent residents or citizens, and their ties to the United States and Mexico. Finally, students discussed their political activism and their views on immigration policy, particularly whether current policy is sound, and if not, how it could be reformed to better reflect their understandings of immigrants' experiences and their personal histories.

The interview data initially was explored using narrative analysis, whereby each student's interview was analyzed as a distinct story: this approach ensured that each participant's experiences, as he or she interpreted them, were made central. Narrative analysis "focuses on how respondents impose order on the flow of experience in their lives and thus make sense of events and actions in which they have participated" (Schutt, 2012, p. 339). It became clear, however, that narrative analysis was not sufficient, as it revealed many patterns and parallels among the interview responses that needed to be explored in more depth. Thus, given the frequency of similar responses and life experiences among the students, I identified eight demographic variables and nine themes that were prevalent in the interviews. Principal themes included levels of poverty, impact of the DACA program, student

access to higher education, political activity, and discrimination, among others. I employed a grounded theory approach to make sense of these patterns, proposing and exploring explanations to make sense of similar events, experiences, and feelings described by the students. As the parallels among students' narratives, and the relationships between their undocumented status and lived experiences became clearer, the social exclusion framework served as a context to explain undocumented students' lives, particularly their shared experiences of poverty, discrimination, and struggles pursuing higher education.

The interview protocol relied on strict procedures to protect participants' confidentiality and anonymity. Interviews were tape recorded to ensure accuracy, but the recordings did not include the names of participants. Names were changed to pseudonyms, with only the pseudonym appearing on the transcription, with the exception of several students who requested that their real names be used. All interview materials were kept confidential, with access provided only to the principal investigator and two transcribers. The protocol for transcribing the interviews utilized best practices as recommended by Knight, Roosa, and Umaña-Taylor (2009). When participants were discussed individually, details of each person's background, such as age, family structure, and city of residence were changed in the manuscript to further protect participants' anonymity (Kaiser, 2009; Weiss, 1994; Wiles, Crow, Heath, & Charles, 2006). This step was taken to provide additional protection for individuals who risked deportation should their identities become public. To ensure that such changes did not affect the findings, when the data was presented in the aggregate, as it is in the Method section, then family structure, age of arrival, and age were not altered. When modifications to a participant's age or family structure occurred when they were discussed individually, they were minimal enough that they did not affect the argument or outcome of the study.

The number of students interviewed represents a limitation of the study. Based on the relatively small group, students' experiences might not be generalizable to undocumented students as a whole. A survey with more responses—and randomly generated responses—is likelier to provide results that can be generalized. Moreover, because some California laws are distinctive, this study better relates to the position of undocumented students in California than necessarily represents the position of students in other states. In-depth interviews, rather than a survey, were pursued largely because the goal of the research was to provide extensive and profound information about students' experiences as opposed to the more circumscribed information that a survey produces. Relatedly, given that undocumented students fear exposing themselves and their families, trust had to be created before they were willing to answer any questions about themselves, and a one-on-one interview is more likely to allow a deeper connection than a survey.

Undocumented Mexican immigrants in California

The stories of undocumented Mexican immigrants living, working, and attending school in central and southern California reveal rich information about the impact of immigration policy (Gonzales, 2011). California provides a distinctive view of the issues, as it leads the nation in the number of unauthorized immigrant residents (Passel & Cohn, 2011). Estimates suggest that in 2010, 2.6 million undocumented immigrants lived in California (Hill & Hayes, 2013). Although California is home to 12% of the national population, 23% of the undocumented immigrant population lives in California (Hill & Hayes, 2013). Forty percent of undocumented students graduating from high school reside in California (Pérez, 2009).

California is home to many young unauthorized Mexican immigrants who are potentially eligible for DACA and represent a pool of prospective applicants for higher education. The Immigration Policy Center (2012) reported that 30% of all potential beneficiaries of DACA age 15 to 30 lived in California in 2012. Nationwide, 71% of potential DACA applicants are originally from Mexico, and in California, 81 percent are Mexican (pp. 6–7). Although DACA does not assist only those interested in applying to or currently in college, the efforts of the high school and college student unauthorized population are closely tied to advocating for the federal DREAM Act (Rincón, 2008) and the passage of DACA (Galindo, 2012). Along with California state legislation to support financial aid for undocumented students, DACA is key to advancing the prospects of college-age young people in California.

Federal law does not ban undocumented students from applying to college, though South Carolina, Alabama, and Georgia disallow it. In states without specific legislation, individual colleges and universities may decide whether to accept undocumented students (Marquardt et al., 2011). Even in states that admit unauthorized students, many cannot attend due to the cost of education, because they are not eligible for federal financial aid or scholarships that require a Social Security number, and most must pay out-of-state tuition (Marquardt et al., 2011). California is one of only 16 states that have passed laws allowing undocumented students to pay in-state tuition at public universities; California and Wisconsin were the first states to pass such laws in 2001 and five states have done so since 2011 (National Conference of State Legislatures [NCSL], 2012; Rincón, 2008). To be eligible under the California law, AB 540, students must have attended high school in the state for at least 3 years and have graduated from a California high school. Students also must file an affidavit with the university indicating that they will pursue legal residency when eligible to do so (Rincón, 2008, p. 120). It is instructive to note that though California's in-state tuition law provides more opportunity for undocumented students than the norm, students without legal status still

struggle to pay in-state tuition; as low-income students, many are priced out of attending a 4-year university.

In 2011, California passed the California DREAM Act to allow undocumented students who met the AB 540 requirements to apply for private scholarships beginning January 1, 2012 and state financial aid beginning January 1, 2013. Four other states have similar laws allowing students to receive state financial aid (Minnesota, New Mexico, Texas, and Washington). The Board of Governors community college fee waivers, University of California grants, and State University Grants were available January 2013, and some students were able to receive tuition waivers by the start of spring semester 2013. Other forms of aid, such as Cal Grants, were not available until the 2013 to 2014 school year (California Student Aid Commission, n. d.). The legislation requires that for Cal Grants, in particular, legal immigrants and citizens will receive funding before unauthorized immigrants. Colleges and universities responded somewhat inconsistently to the legislation; some awarded financial assistance to undocumented students as early as January 2013, whereas others did not provide monetary support until March 2013 or later. Almost all of the students interviewed for this study were looking forward to the new forms of assistance available under the DREAM Act, though very few had benefitted at the time of the interviews.

Scholars estimate that there are 1.8 million undocumented children younger than age 18 (Marquardt et al., 2011) and 3.4 million young people between ages 18 and 29 living in the United States (Pérez, 2009). “Higher education is an elusive dream for these young adults, with only 10% of undocumented males and 16% of undocumented females ages 18 to 24 enrolled in college” (Pérez, 2009, p. xxv). With the passage of the DREAM Act, California may see more unauthorized students pursuing higher education. Media reports indicated that for the 2013 to 2014 school year, 20,000 new students sought state financial aid under the California DREAM Act (Murphy, 2013).

Undocumented college students

The undocumented college students interviewed for this study describe the struggles and triumphs on their paths to higher education and while attending college. They are motivated to succeed, yet their potential is hampered by the social exclusion that they confront. As first-generation students, they navigate the college application process with little family guidance, find ways to finance their educations without federal assistance and minimal access to family income, and often work long hours to support themselves and sometimes contribute to their parents’ households as well. They depict the significant impact that unauthorized status has had on their relationships, choices, and opportunities. Some have “come out” publically as

undocumented students and work with organizations to support immigrant rights and immigration reform. Finally, undocumented students discuss their decisions to apply for DACA and their experiences with the process, and the sense that DACA has somewhat mitigated their social exclusion.

Social exclusion and the college application process

Applying to and attending college were turning points for young people, as they were confronted with the difficulties associated with living as undocumented immigrants in new ways (Abrego, 2006; Garcia & Tierney, 2011; Gonzales, 2011; Pérez, 2009; Pérez & Cortés, 2011). Gonzales (2011) calls the ages from 16 to 18 the period of “discovery,” where seeking part time work, getting a driver’s license, and applying to college “require legal status as a basis for participation” (p. 609), and thus force young people to grasp more fully the implications of being an unauthorized immigrant. Daniela describes the realization that she had:

When I was younger . . . I was oblivious to all the things that were wrong about me being here unlawfully. So I didn’t really have any troubles. . . . I think applying to college was really when it hit me. . . . All my friends were like, “Oh we’re going to universities! We’re getting all this money to go.” And it was just so hard because I’d been with them in all these GATE [Gifted and Talented Education] classes . . . and we were all going through the same steps. . . . And all of a sudden when I have to apply it’s like, “oh I can’t apply because I don’t have the money for it.”

And so it was really difficult trying to manage it on my own. Everything that had to do with college applications, everything that had to do with financial aid, it was my own research that I had to do. And sometimes it was hard for me to tell my counselors, “I don’t have a Social Security number,” and so that kind of closed some of the doors for me to attain that information about undocumented students and what it’s like to come to college.

Many other students echoed Daniela’s experience. For example, Marvin had a similar realization in high school, when he wanted to begin working and driving but could not. He describes the psychological impact that fully comprehending his undocumented status had on him:

It didn’t really start affecting me until my sophomore, junior year [of high school] when you start seeing kids apply for work permits and driver’s permits. So that’s like the beginning of the feeling and emotion of being undocumented. And as you get older, as you hit eighteen, as you graduate high school and enter college and slowly, slowly start [realizing] what you’re missing, what you’re lacking, what you are not, what you don’t have and how you’re different—I guess it expresses everyday life. You do not wake up not knowing your status; you do not wake up not knowing that you are not American. So as a child, I felt American. As an adult, I’m not and I wouldn’t even say I’m American, not by U.S. standards.

For many young people, reaching the age that they began to think about applying to college corresponded with a fuller comprehension of the exclusion and discrimination experienced by undocumented immigrants. Although their parents had tried to shield them as young children, as they grew up, particularly as they grappled on their own with the college application process, the participants in this study had to come to terms with the multifaceted barriers that they faced based on the realities of immigration policy, barriers that built upon and magnified one another (Gonzales, 2011). They were poor at least in part because of the limited employment opportunities available to their undocumented parents, yet unable to seek scholarships and financial aid because of their undocumented status, and further afraid to look for help and guidance for fear of exposing themselves and their families to deportation. When it came time to apply to college, even with their stellar academic records, they faced many difficulties posed by unauthorized status (Abrego, 2006).

For some students, grasping the meaning of their positions as unauthorized immigrants resulted in a period of depression and a sense of hopelessness (Pérez & Cortés, 2011). Manuel talks about his high school years:

I realized that I couldn't get a license and it really hit me and I actually was in a state of depression for a couple months. . . . Sometimes I'd think about my situation and I'd start crying because, you know, I can't get what my friends can get. I'd already learned to cope with not having the material stuff that they do, and I don't and I'm ok with that. But to not be able to have a license, which everyone should be able to have or all citizens are able to have. And I was afraid I couldn't go to college. That was a fear. I didn't really find out I could go to college until my junior year in high school because I didn't have much information. . . . So that made me really sad also.

Similarly, Yolanda states:

I was labeled as an AB 540 student as soon as I graduated from high school, and I didn't know exactly what that was. Once I found out, I just cried so much, and I went into a state of depression. I didn't know how to tell my Mom [that] basically I have to pay for all of my education and she's going to have to help me. It was just a lot of money for them.

As Daniela, Marvin, Manuel and Yolanda explain, students felt overwhelmed and saddened as they began to realize the challenges they faced; many feared that they might not be able to go to college. This was exacerbated by the lack of information most had about the college application process and the few people they knew who could provide direction regarding applying to and attending college. For first-generation students who were also undocumented, their access to information was sometimes truncated by their need to conceal their unauthorized status, or by their unwillingness to discuss it with school counselors or others who might have provided help.

Poverty

Even when students received guidance about the process of applying to college, many were discouraged by the cost of school (Abrego, 2006). The cost of even the most inexpensive higher education options were often out of reach. For example, like most undocumented students, Yolanda's family is low income. Her mother is a single parent, supporting Yolanda and her siblings with an annual income of less than \$15,000, earned as a migrant farm worker. When she was accepted to a university, Yolanda realized that the cost of one year of tuition and living expenses totaled more than her mother earned in a year, a situation shared by many of the students in this study. Similarly, Paco stated: "My parents, they only make enough for my siblings and for the rent and all those expenses. So I wasn't counting on them. They wanted to help me, but they're not going to have money." Thus, for these low-income students, it is with great difficulty that they finance their college educations, due to a combination of poverty and few private and public resources to assist them (Garcia & Tierney, 2011; Gonzales, 2011).

For most students, working long hours provides one way to finance higher education (Pérez, 2009; Pérez & Cortés, 2011). Manuel is employed for 30 hours per week during the school year, earning money under the table that he saves to pay for tuition installments. Paco pays for school with money he earns as an agricultural worker and a loan from his boss:

It's really difficult for us to pay for tuition. I have to work all summer, winter, spring break. Every time I have a chance to work, I get it and I work just to pay for school. There are a lot of sacrifices that we do just to come to school.

Paco's parents are agricultural workers as well, and he describes the work ethic that he learned from his father:

[I'm] always looking for a job, not waiting for someone to offer me a job. Always the one, if I didn't have a job: "Hey, can I work? Can I work during Saturdays, Sundays?" ... My dad always will tell me, "Always try your best. Never give up and you will get somewhere..." Because he works really hard. He never stops. That's one of the things that I learned from him... [He hasn't] taken a break since probably 10 years. I mean, imagine, there's people that take breaks from the beginning of summer to the end of summer. We don't. We just can't.

Like his father, Paco does not take a break either. Although some university students vacation over spring break or intern over the summer to gain experience, Paco must work for low wages in the agricultural and construction sectors that will employ him as an unauthorized immigrant. Numerous other students also earned money in the fields or in the informal sector during the semester and when they were on breaks from school.

Erica labored as a janitor, and Nelly worked at a restaurant. Daniela worked in a small family-owned grocery store and contributed some of the money to her parents' household to help pay the rent. Like Paco, Nelly, Erica, and many others, Daniela did not have the luxury of enjoying a vacation, "I don't have one. I just have to work and save up as much money as I can." Given that their job opportunities are limited to the few sectors and positions willing to hire illegal immigrants, the difficulty students face in paying college tuition results directly from their undocumented status. Their struggles paying for school, and the necessity that they work constantly, elucidates their social exclusion as it relates to poverty.

Because they squeeze their work hours in between classes, many students have to forego not only vacations but extracurricular activities and other important educational opportunities. Additionally, without legal documents, traveling to conferences, completing internships in their fields of study, attending study abroad programs, and even serving in student government or other elected positions at the university are out of reach (Garcia & Tierney, 2011; Pérez, 2009). Isabella is eloquent in describing how these lost opportunities are tied up with unauthorized status and connect to numerous other hurdles that she must overcome:

I have to be perfect. Because any mistake can land me in the system ... basically, for any traffic violation, [when] they pull you over, they ask for your license. You don't have it, that's an automatic infraction. So it's the fear of always looking over your shoulder. You can't drive, you can't travel, you can't fly. So there's no going on vacation, there's no going to technical conferences, there's no going to visit grad schools. There's nothing... On an everyday basis it limits you. You have to constantly be thinking about it. For example, opportunities [at the university to work] with Engineers Without Borders: I don't even try to go near that because I know that I can't go.

Every student lamented the loss of prospective employment, forgone opportunities to participate in training or other extracurricular programs, and difficult choices that they had to make as students, related to the need to support themselves and to mask their identities. Their unauthorized status clearly made the playing field very uneven, as they could not fulfill their potential as students or young adults emerging into the workforce.

Isolation

In addition to lost opportunities, a theme repeated by every person interviewed was the isolation that that person felt, some since they were young children. For most, it intensified when they started college in an unfamiliar environment. Isabella notes the fears of deportation and of rejection that keep undocumented people from revealing their status:

With people, you always are aware to see how conservative they are and how Republican. Because there have been people that I actually really enjoy, you know as company and friends. But then the topic of immigration comes up and they are totally on the opposite side of the spectrum than I am, and then it suddenly becomes, “Oh we can’t be friends. If you only knew,” kind of deal. It’s a very secretive thing because . . . if I told someone that I’m undocumented, I’m not only putting myself at risk, but I’m putting my entire family at risk. So it’s kind of always been one of those things that you don’t really come out and say it unless it is a necessity. . . . I’ve experienced things where people find out I’m undocumented, and resentful things come out of it. So again it puts me back in this shell where I don’t want to tell people.

Hiding the fact that they are unauthorized is an everyday reality and the substance of an enduring isolation for many students (Garcia & Tierney, 2011; Pérez, 2009). As Isabella indicates, undocumented students are hyperaware about the political perspectives of their peers, professors, and university staff. In addition to political perspectives, they sometimes use a person’s ethnicity or class as indicators of whether he or she might be supportive of them. When undocumented students did overcome barriers to telling the truth about their legal standing, it sometimes backfired. Student after student told about experiences “coming out” as unauthorized to a friend, coworker, or romantic partner, and being shunned, fired, or rejected. Already very careful about keeping their status private for fear of deportation, these personal encounters made them even more wary about when and to whom they reveal their full identities.

Discrimination

Anti-immigrant attitudes, in particular, feed the likelihood that undocumented students will face social exclusion and shape students’ decisions to hide their lack of legal standing. Students are aware and articulate about the stereotypes that are the essence of and further feed discrimination against undocumented immigrants (Pérez & Cortés, 2011). As Erica attests, students perceive discrimination against undocumented people and racism against Mexicans/Mexican Americans as intertwined. When asked about public discourse associated with immigration, Erica describes a link between Mexicans and undocumented status and the resentment associated with immigrants and the job market:

They have a stereotype of Mexicans being ignorant, not being able to speak English, and some people think that all undocumented people are short and brown and that’s not the case. . . . A lot of Americans judge, like they feel like we’re taking away their jobs and we’re not, we’re just doing the jobs that they don’t want to do. . . . They just think the worst things of undocumented people, and they don’t realize that we’re just trying to make it. We’re trying to achieve an American dream, you know? Just like their ancestors before them came to the U.S. trying to

find a better life. That's what we're doing too, but they're not giving us a fair chance.

Likewise, Rafael notes the stereotypes that define undocumented immigrants as criminals:

Right now, they're just generalizing everybody and giving that criminal stereotype [to them], even to those students who are undocumented. Anytime you hear someone say "undocumented" and "illegal immigrant," they just automatically think [about] a criminal in jail who came here to the U.S. illegally and is doing all these bad things. They don't think about a student who has lived here for so long, trying so hard, gone to school, did all the right things, and I would definitely like to see that go away because I really think it's very unfair.

And Marvin speaks to the notion that undocumented immigrants are undermining national security:

Every day you have to prove who you are, where you're from and your patriotism for this country . . . I've been in discussions with my friend's parents where they're blaming undocumented people for the lack of security . . . You are always the example, you know. You don't want to be the aggressive, angry undocumented person because the whole idea is that you want to be a citizen . . . We're sacrificing, we're working, we're taking this beating for the simple idea that there's something better for me if I'm a U.S. citizen.

As the students describe, discrimination based on immigrants as lazy, welfare cheats, terrorists, and criminals shape the environment that they experience on an everyday basis at their universities (Cleaveland, 2010). Students' secretiveness and seclusion are wrought by a political and social environment that is quite hostile to immigrants, "characterized by an exceptional degree of anti-immigrant framing and immigrant-isolating boundary work" (Massey & Sánchez, 2010, p. 24). They are subject to offensive comments from friends, coworkers, and professors who usually do not realize that the students are undocumented, as well as institutionalized discrimination in the form of "laws banning undocumented immigrants from renting homes, penalizing employers who hire them, and barring undocumented youth from universities" (Zimmerman, 2011, p. 14).

Political participation

For some students like Marvin, college organizations devoted to assisting undocumented immigrants provide an opportunity to combat stereotypes, connect with other undocumented immigrants, and "come out" as an undocumented person. His work with the California DREAM Network allowed him to move beyond the fear of deportation to engage politically with the immigrant rights movement. Through his political work, Marvin has been able to challenge aspects of social exclusion on personal and political levels.

On a personal level, he refuses to hide his identity any longer, even at the risk of deportation, allowing him to connect to other undocumented students and to gain some sense of power over his life. That stance is clearly also a political one, since speaking out about his personal story, being “undocumented and unafraid” (Corruner, 2012, p. 149; see also Galindo, 2012), is a central tenet of the movement:

I grew up with a lot of Latinos, but they're all documented, or the people who were undocumented were quiet because you do not talk about this. So that one aspect of my life was always really lonely, always very sad. And because of it, I've never really met another undocumented person that was my age and trying to go to school and have the same goals as me until I got into the California DREAM Network. For me, this is like a fresh emotion [because] this is within the past twelve months.

Marvin's story is echoed by other undocumented young people, such as those who have engaged in civil disobedience and risked deportation by revealing publicly that they are undocumented. They argue that “the only way the undocumented community could have a voice is through openly sharing their experiences about being undocumented” (Corruner, 2012, p. 149). Marvin's participation in the California DREAM Network entails organizing retreats and summits to teach students about the issues and how to organize politically, reaching out to unauthorized students, and helping to push for comprehensive immigration reform. They focus on lobbying for specific legislation that will affect college students and advocate for the California DREAM Act, DACA, and the like.

Similarly, Sergio helped to found an organization at his university devoted to assisting undocumented immigrant students. His trajectory of “coming out” as an undocumented person started at a younger age, as he recognized the implications of being undocumented at age 9 and began to isolate himself. The process of applying to college actually helped him come to terms with his lack of legal standing and to decide that he did not want to continue “hiding himself”:

Once I found out the risk of just letting anybody know what I was, I started to isolate myself from a lot of people, especially [when] I was going to school in a white area. I ended up going to fourth and third grade at a school where the majority of it was Caucasians. So my relationship with other people wasn't exactly the best. I pretty much kept to myself because of that fear. I didn't go outside that much. ... About the third year of high school was when I started to come to the decision that even if I am an undocumented immigrant, it doesn't matter. I need to get out there in order to at least go on to a university. ... I had to go to a lot of counselors, a lot of teachers, and ask for help. And when they would ask why, I'd say “well I'm illegal. I'm undocumented.” That was kind of hard to get off my chest, especially just saying it constantly over and over and over again. Some teachers would question it and then I would just give an honest explanation. Once I started to do that more and more, I was able to freely talk about it.

Sergio is now an engineering major and math minor at a state university. He has a strong sense of self and has become proud of his status and devoted to helping other undocumented students. Clearly, like Marvin, his activism is connected to overcoming his own social isolation and allows him to challenge aspects of the social exclusion of unauthorized immigrants as a group. As Galindo argues, Sergio and Marvin are disrupting:

the regime of enforced invisibility that positions undocumented immigrants as a subordinate group of anonymous manual laborers.... Marginalized actors challenge invisibility and exclusion by naming a wrong that makes their plight visible. In the naming of a wrong, an assertion of equality is given shape by the excluded, and the basis for exclusion is brought under critique. (Galindo, 2011, p. 382)

It is in becoming visible and claiming political subjectivity that Sergio and Marvin are able to make clear the significant and varied disadvantages that they confront and to advocate for reform.

Deferred action for childhood arrivals

The announcement of the DACA initiative likewise provided a chance for students to become more engaged socially and politically. DACA gave them the means to overcome some aspects of social exclusion, particularly the need to hide their identities to protect themselves and their families. They suddenly were eligible for competitive internships, had a wider variety of paid employment from which to choose, were able to get drivers licenses, and could use their new Social Security numbers to apply for scholarships previously unavailable to them. These specific and tangible benefits were just part of the change that DACA wrought in the lives of students. Students whose applications had been accepted felt immensely buoyed by the new opportunities available to them and were visibly relieved that they no longer had to hide aspects of themselves from others. Although some also feared the threat of deportation associated with giving the government detailed information about themselves and their families, it provided the only chance they had to legalize their status, if only for 2 years. Nelly, for example, applied to pursue opportunities previously closed to her:

I'm kind of, I guess, ambitious.... I want to do better than people like me who don't have papers and they just stay home and work for like eight dollars an hour and have kids and they're always struggling with money. I don't want to be like that. I want to have better things for me or my family, and I want to change who we are.... With that Social Security number that I'm getting, I'll be able to work and my parents will have a little bit more money too.... Over the summer I can get an internship. I can join the Army with that Social Security number.

Nelly's determination to better the economic situation for herself and her family echoes the classic striving of new immigrants that often leads to a rise

in socioeconomic status for the second generation. Without documents, however, Nelly and others in her situation have been prevented from working their way out of poverty or using their college degrees (Gonzales & Chavez, 2012). Although Nelly's DACA application had not been approved at the time of the interview, she remains hopeful that she will be able to regularize her status. In particular, she wants to work, do an internship in her field of study, and follow her dream of participating in the Reserve Officers' Training Corp (ROTC) at the university, something she has been doing informally for the past year without the financial award other students receive.

The process of applying for DACA proceeded smoothly for most students. To apply, students had to show that they had arrived in the country before age 16 and lived in the United States for at least 5 years without a protracted absence, establish that they were in the United States on June 15, 2012, the precise date required by DACA to prove physical presence in the country, and provide evidence that they were currently in school (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2013). Although it was time consuming, most had no trouble gathering the paperwork because their parents had saved school transcripts and attendance records, baptism and other religious certificates, medical records, and the like, hoping that their children would one day have the opportunity to regularize their status.

The cost of applying represents the real difficulty for some students, as the \$465 fee was far more than they could afford. Although he had researched how to apply and guided several friends through the process, Manuel has not applied to DACA because he cannot afford it:

It makes me a little sad because my friends already applied. They already got their fingerprints, and I feel excited for them. I felt really excited. It feels so good. But at the same time, it hurts because I haven't been able to and that's because again, I have to worry about the school finances. How much money I have to pay. I don't have extra money.

Manuel's finances are so tight that he spent just \$10 on himself since the beginning of the academic year. Every penny he earns goes toward the next tuition installment, so earning an extra \$465 needed to apply for DACA is inconceivable.

The students who had received a work permit and Social Security number through DACA at the time of the interview were elated. Their relief at being able to drive legally, find employment, and speak openly about their status was palpable. Carla's application was approved in November 2012, and she now is considering a job in journalism and plans to start a nonprofit organization focused on motivating Latino youth to pursue higher education. Her comments demonstrate her sense that her prospects suddenly have

expanded significantly. Carla is exploring many options previously closed to her:

I was so happy that I decided to apply for DACA because I see it as an opportunity. I know that if we start thinking like in a negative way, you could start thinking that maybe something will happen or things like that. But I always try to be more positive, and even if something happens, I know there is a way to continue with your dreams.

Similarly, Rafael, who received his DACA work permit in November 2012, applied with his sister: “When this opportunity came up, we didn’t think twice about it. We just went and filed the paperwork and tried to get it done with so I could exercise my degree as soon as I graduate.” He maintains that DACA changes his prospects markedly:

There are all these opportunities that I’ve seen, all these internships that come up through my department. . . . Since some of those positions I think that I would be perfect for, I want to try it. But you know . . . I couldn’t legally work, and so I couldn’t do any of those things that I wanted to do.

Now that he has legal standing, Rafael has been assessing his career options in a new way. His ability to participate more fully in the work sector means that he can earn a salary commensurate with his degree in architecture, which also shapes his lifestyle choices and socioeconomic status. In articulating their sense that opportunities have broadened so significantly for students who successfully apply for DACA, the social exclusion of undocumented immigrants is underscored. The “new” opportunities they can enjoy are assumed to be available by many people with documents: to pursue an education, use educational training in a career of one’s choice, drive a car, or start a business.

Conclusion

It is instructive to explore the degree to which social exclusion shapes the lives of students currently eligible for DACA to better understand the obstacles they face in applying for college, attending college, and using their degrees in careers. They demonstrate extraordinary perseverance and notable maturity in grappling with the barriers to their full inclusion in a country they perceive as their own. In addition, they are an important group to study because they presumably are first in line for authorization should comprehensive immigration reform occur.

It is essential to note, then, that college students represent a relatively small group, even a privileged minority among undocumented immigrants. Their social exclusion is by no means absolute, as revealed by their academic success at high school and college levels, and for some, their political activism with groups like the DREAM Network. In addition, participation in higher

education means that they have surmounted some of the social, economic, and political impediments that limit undocumented immigrants. Although they struggle with multilayered aspects of social exclusion, they also experience levels of inclusion as members of their university communities and in the student and community immigrant rights groups they join. Students themselves maintain that they have benefited from numerous factors: supportive families, specifically parents who value education; access to the financial means to attend school, such as wages and savings provided by themselves, family members, and family friends; knowledge of community organizations that connect them to other undocumented students and teach them about policy issues; and in some cases, access to guidance from school counselors or teachers who encouraged them to apply to universities.

Analyzing college students' experiences also sheds light on those not eligible for DACA. The evidence suggests that though the students interviewed for this study are best situated to meet requirements and thus benefit from immigration reform measures, other unauthorized immigrants will have a more difficult time gaining legal status. Undocumented immigrants who presently do not qualify for DACA, particularly older people, may not have easy access to records showing that they have lived and worked in the United States. Specifically, college students relied heavily on school records, such as diplomas, transcripts, school schedules, and attendance records, to show when they had arrived in the United States and that they had been in the country for at least 5 years without an absence, and to prove that they were present on June 15, 2012. Adults are more likely to have false identification and work under a different name than their own, thus impeding upon their ability to prove when they arrived, where they have lived, and how they have contributed to the U.S. economy.

In addition to demonstrating residency, other impediments for adult unauthorized immigrants include language barriers, educational status, and police records. Immigrants who arrived when they were already adults did not learn English in American schools like their children did, so they may not speak with the facility that the students do. Many of the adults interviewed for the larger study (of which the student interviews were one segment) indicated that they do not speak English at all because they did not have the time to take English classes or extra funds to pay for them; instead, they worked long hours to support their families and give their children the opportunity to attend school. Given that they often have low educational attainment, learning English may be difficult even when they can access classes. Adult unauthorized immigrants, including the parents of students like the ones interviewed for this study, also may be more likely to be in removal proceedings, to have worked under a false Social Security number, and to have police records for driving without a license. Students describe how their parents worked hard to shield them from the possible

negative outcomes associated with these facets of being undocumented, specifically because they thought their children might have a chance to legalize their standing in the future. It was, however, impossible for most of the parents to avoid these aspects of undocumented life if they wanted to earn an income to support their families.

For all these reasons, undocumented students enjoy some privileges relative to other undocumented people. Although they experience multifaceted social exclusion, then, they also benefit from the families and communities that support them, and from a privileged political position in comparison with nonstudents and other adults. They have leveraged this political power to argue that though they will benefit personally, students are reticent to support immigration reform that focuses exclusively on the DREAM Act because it overlooks their parents, siblings, relatives, and friends. For many, gaining legal status when their parents cannot means that they would not have a stable home base from which to attend school, and further seems patently unfair to a group of young people who often credit their parents with the emotional and material support needed to concentrate on and succeed in school.

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