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Exposing Invisible Walls: Understanding Transition for Students with Disabilities and Undocumented Immigration Status

Presenters:

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Valentina Arango-Correa: Thank you all for joining us to expose some invisible walls where we seek to understand the transition for students with disabilities and undocumented status. I'm Valentina. I'm a tan skin woman with brown hair and a blonde streak wearing a beige blazer. My co-presenter is Rob and he will introduce himself momentarily. We're part of a cross team initiative at the Boggs Center on Disability and Human Development. We have just begun to explore this intersection and we welcome anyone interested who has experience to reach out and help us better understand these unique challenges. Next, right, next. Again, these are all some of the intro sides. One more, Rob.

Robert Kimmel: All right, perfect. My name is Robert Kimmel. I also hail from the Boggs Center on Disability and Human Development. I'm a white male with dark hair. I'm also wearing glasses and a black headset. So to get us started, one of the ways that we look at undocumented individuals and specifically how we were centering our work was starting with the transition process, the secondary transition process within our schools, which through law research and practice, suggests that this is a very critical period for individuals with disabilities to support them through the school and into meaningful and successful outcomes in adulthood. Next slide please. And so within secondary transition services, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA, guarantees free and appropriate public education to all students with disabilities to prepare them for an adult life. And so transition services facilitate that movement by focusing on further education and post-secondary goals, integrated employment as a primary initiative, focusing also on independent living, the development of those skills, as well as increasing and optimizing community participation. Furthermore, transition services are meant to bridge from school into adult service supports. Next slide, please.

Unfortunately, in practice, secondary transition services do not in any way, shape or form account for the adult lives of those that are undocumented. So undocumented students with disabilities are just not within that lens, not within the purview. And so when we look at transition services and understand that

transition is defaulting to Euro-American cultural beliefs on individualism and independence and capitalism. It presumes - transition services presume - that students will have access to eligibility based adult services such as vocational rehabilitation or their division of developmental disabilities. Furthermore, presumes that families have equal capital for participation. And then from there, schools tend to, for their transition services, default to resources and connections that are convenient for the school or for personnel to execute versus ones that are more relevant for a student and their families. Next slide, please.

And so to understand this, we come from the world of disability, and that's where all of our work centers in. But to understand this better, we need to define what it is to be undocumented. And for all of you, it's all immigrants who reside in the United States without legal status. And there's a lot of other terms that get thrown around too, such as aliens, unauthorized or illegal immigrants. And those are not ones that we recommend the use of for a variety of reasons. But the first being that undocumented is the catchall for this understanding of what it is to be undocumented in this country. There's a lot of ways that someone is undocumented, such as they could have entered past a border or through a port without checking in. That's true. But there's also many other ways it's not as black and white as that. They could have had legal status and then overstayed their visa. They could have been part of a group called Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, also known as DACA. And then there's others that are in the process of becoming citizens or becoming legal permanent residents. And in doing so, they're still undocumented during that time period. So it's better to use that term, but that's this definition. Next slide, please.

And so when we're looking at this and focusing specifically on transition within our schools and into adulthood, how many are we talking about? Is it three? Is it a hundred thousand? How many are we talking about here? So roughly 10 and a half million people in the United States are undocumented. But to try and figure out how many students we're talking about and then from there, how many students with disabilities that are also undocumented. Looking at this intersection, it is very difficult to find that data because Plyler v. Doe in 1982 was a landmark case that stopped schools from recording that information for families or for individuals on their migratory status. There is some ways that we can extrapolate numbers, and when we did so for New Jersey, we had roughly of the student body K through 12, roughly 5,500 undocumented. But even then, that's a big extrapolation and we're not sure, it's likely higher. Next slide please.

Valentina Arango-Correa: All right. So once we got an understanding of what does it mean to be undocumented and about how many students that affects, we began diving into undocumented critical theory, which examines the lived experiences of undocumented individuals focusing on how immigration status intersects with race, power and oppression. It challenges and looks at systemic inequities, and it highlights the resistance, resilience, and the pursuit of equity for undocumented communities. This research gave us four beliefs or tenets. The first one being fear is endemic. A simple way to define it is that it's a part of people's everyday lives.

It's deeply rooted in widespread within a system or a community. It's on the regular, it's persistent - every day they're experiencing it. Next, we looked at liminality translates to reality. That's like you're part of one identity and another one, but you're kind of in the middle so you don't fully belong to either.

And it really transferred to being in a state in between where policy can shift from one day to the next, and you're considered legal and then undocumented in the next inclusion and exclusion between belonging and alienation. That liminality really emphasizes the constant state of flux and uncertainty that folks face as they navigate the world and society and our systems. Next, we have parental sacrificios. That's the sacrifices that parents make that become valuable resources that benefits families in the long run. And lastly, we have Acompañamiento as mentorship, which provides guidance and support through personal presence and shared experience highlighting community. Next, when we looked at the undocumented critical theory, we coupled that with disability critical theory or disparate. And we said, well, what are the similarities here between the two? And what we found was an overlap in these beliefs. And we have fear that coupled with othering, where undocumented students or individuals feel othered in school as in being othered for their disability, that requires a navigation through disclosure.

In order to get resources, in order to get programming, you have to tell folks that you have a disability. But then again, living with the fear of if people find out that I'm undocumented, well what do I do? So fear and othering. Next, you have that invisibility and visibility. Again, having to, in order to receive disability services, you have to disclose, but remain invisible to the fact that you are undocumented. And again, this is highlighted in the complex systems in that liminality living between two spaces and having to navigate the complex systems of disability services. Lastly, we have Acompañamiento, which really is highlighted through care communities. And again, it's very similar and it emphasizes the use of communities and others and how crucial it is to fall into communities and use communities. Next. So what we found in terms of challenges at the intersection of undocumented and disability is through the use of these lenses, we can identify some systemic barriers that hinder students development.

First, we found that there is a fear and risk of deportation and family separation, that there is a health and economic insecurity and inaccessibility. Families are in constant fear of sharing information with publicly funded programs because they feel that if they share their information in order to receive services, they're not remaining invisible. Additionally, parents have reported being afraid to bring their child to the hospital or to receive healthcare if they're injured, due to again, having to disclose. Again, there's also that limited navigational capital or limited skills in navigating the systems in the complex social institutions. And there is uncoordinated supports and services. Again, multiple systems tied to migratory status and disability. Although research is still limited in this area, these compound barriers and challenges have real life consequences in which there are under-reported needs and decreased enrollment. Next.

Robert Kimmel:

So it's here that we go and pivot from our analysis of this understanding to action. There's a lot that we can do as practitioners in the fields as well as researchers to focus more in these areas, to ask these questions, and to understand how we could have a positive effect for students and for adults with disabilities that also are undocumented. So within our schools, many of the questions that started us on this track were from schools who were working with undocumented students and working with their families and wondering what can we do? So our legal and ethical obligations as professionals and educators is to provide free and appropriate public education to all students, including those that are undocumented, and also for those with disabilities, provide quality relevant transition supports, and relevant being the keyword. Moving into the adult service sphere and questions that we received from adult service providers included, again, what can we do for them? And when it comes to those that are undocumented, it goes back to that definition of understanding what it is to be undocumented. We ethically cannot support under the table work as adult service providers, but what we can do is still connect them into the working world. There's many individuals that are undocumented that still can have work permits, that can still engage in work. Working and residency status are two separate things. Being undocumented here does not mean that you can't work. We can support individuals to receive their individual taxpayer ID numbers so that they're feeding back into the economic fabric of their communities. And then from there, we also are ethically bound to also provide resources around legal permanent residency, citizenship, and other forms of employment. Next slide, please.

And so when we know better, we can do better. At the Boggs Center in New Jersey, we are a University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disability. And a lot of what we do involves disseminating research and supporting best practice, supporting families, supporting individuals, building capacity. And so one of the things that you see here is a timeline that we created for educators, for schools, for families, for individuals that's widespread throughout New Jersey. And it was to provide a comprehensive timeline for people to understand transition for individuals with disabilities. Next slide please. But knowing what we know and applying these lenses, this learning that we've done and now shared with you, we can start to see the gaps and issues within our own work. And when we can do that and do that with sincerity and faithfulness to wanting this to be good for everybody - Next slide please - we can start to see the gaps and we can decide what we can do. What more can we add to this? We don't have the time to go through each of these things that we found. We do have them on the slides for you, and we welcome questions on it. But this is what happens when we apply and do better. Next slide.

Valentina Arango-Correa:

So what we do when we utilize these lenses is we adopt and use a culturally responsive framework to adjust and improve our practices. We value individuals' identities, cultures, languages, and experiences as assets as we begin to shift our practices to be more culturally responsive and person-centered. This is just one tool - the identity web - of many that exist for culturally responsive reflection and activities. Next slide. One of the key things that we want to do is build trust and

respect with families. We want to ultimately, we want to make sure that we focus on building trust. We can start to do this intentionally by inviting interpreters, cultural liaisons, not just one time to that one event, but making a consistent part of our practices. We want to demonstrate a commitment to shared decision making and making sure families' voices are being heard and valued. We want to be reliable and dependable, non-judgmental, in the way we communicate with families. Next.

So one of the ways that we can do this is by drawing on principles from culturally responsive practices and person-centered practices that help us recognize that students' communities are resource rich and can be a source of wealth and information. So community resource mapping is one way. It's also known as asset mapping. It's a helpful process for identifying community resources that can create a successful transition for all students. The goal is to ensure that students have access to a broader, more comprehensive and integrated system of services and supports. That means informal and formal supports. And we can use it also to identify legal, economic, and mental health services available to families.

Again, it goes back to those care communities in that Acompañamiento. Next slide. So one of the other things we want to keep in mind is some language and information considerations. The way we use our language can either deter or bring people on board. So we want to make sure that we understand that sometimes folks don't come to us because they see our services as a part of an extension of the policing and surveillance state. So we want to make sure that they understand the system, they build confidence in using it. And especially during the transition process, we want to make sure we're aware of triggering language that might make some students and families feel like the school's trying to catch them. So our goal, again is to foster trust by reducing the feeling of risk when discussing services. We want to make sure that we're, again, it's that fear is endemic. We keep it in mind when we talk to families next.

Robert Kimmel:

Alright. And so we started putting these same things into practice. One of the things that we have the privilege of doing is as a university center connected to many partners in our state of New Jersey, we have direct connections with New Jersey's vocational rehab division. And because of that, we noticed when we apply this lens to pre-employment transition services. So services within schools that individuals with disabilities, students with disabilities can access that are provided by vocational rehabilitation. Which vocational rehabilitation programs are typically ones that require you to be a citizen, require you to have a social security number. But these services within schools do not require that. Anyone that is undocumented - a student that's undocumented - can access these services. Unfortunately, the forms that VR was giving to everybody throughout the state had social security before even a person's name, before even the date that this form was being filled out. And with these lenses, by knowing better, we can do better, we brought this up to them. We saw the friction point, and we offered that they should remove this to remove a roadblock to access. And just by doing those things and asking those questions, we saw change, and it was wonderful to see. Next slide please.

And so there's so much more that we can do in exactly that same example. We can take a step back and look at our systems and look at our processes and be intentional about bringing this group in, understanding what language we're using, how do we create spaces that are safe? Next, please. And so this really beyond sharing what we've learned is a call to action to recognize that our staff, what can we do to empower staff to understand immigrant legal rights more? This can be further PD. We could invite lawyers and advocates and other resources and groups to support these families, support these individuals, and to make our programming more relevant. Furthermore, leaning into the multilingual and multicultural staff is putting our money where our mouth is and showing that we are stepping forward to include these groups. And next slide. And I believe that's it for us. So thank you very much for your time.