

## Immigration and Education

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### **Abstract**

Barriers exist in accessibility to higher education for immigrant youth in America. We sought to understand these barriers and the effectiveness of Bronx International High School, a school specifically for immigrant youth, in countering them. To accomplish this, we conducted a debriefing session with a group of University of Michigan (UM) students who volunteered at the high school over their spring break. We also facilitated a dialogue about privilege in education access. This discussion revealed the many advantages our group of UM students had in accessing a University of Michigan education compared to many immigrant youth. We discussed what Bronx International High School does well and what they could improve on in countering these disadvantages, we realized that there are both social and academic needs of immigrant youth that need to be met. We concluded that the system Bronx International High School has in place does well in meeting the social needs but their students would benefit from greater academic challenges.

### **Introduction**

As a push to make secondary education universal in many countries, including the U.S., it is undeniable that access to secondary education in the U.S. is not equal to all. Young immigrant students are a specific subgroup of students who face many barriers to accessing higher education. To learn more about what barriers exist and the capability of programs to counter these disadvantages, we focused on Bronx International High School (BIHS) in Bronx, New York. BIHS has the mission of meeting the academic and social needs of recently immigrated young people. To gain greater insight into their program and its effectiveness, we debriefed a group of University of Michigan students who spent their

spring break volunteering at BIHS. To deepen our own understanding of advantages and disadvantages in accessibility to education, we conducted a dialogue about education. The intention of this project was to gain a deeper personal understanding of disadvantages around education and to examine how a program like that of BIHS is successful or unsuccessful in countering disadvantages for recently immigrated young people. This paper will present and discuss our findings.

## **Background**

A study on the decision making process of immigrant students (Valadez, 2008) showed that there is a significant difference in decision making between immigrant and non-immigrant students. The author conducted a study at a high school with a high percentage of Mexican immigrant students. The study focused on the immigrant students' decision about whether or not to attend college post-graduation from their high school. In making this decision, the immigrant students had to confront the existing practices and rules that govern college-going behavior but found that the existing rules and practices did not always coincide with the cultural norms and social structures that were encoded in their minds. Teachers reported frustration because they saw students capable of articulating the connection between higher education and opportunities, and who expressed the desire to attend college, continually make the decision to instead work full-time after graduation. Although some might make the assumption that these students did not value education, the evidence showed that decisions were influenced by factors such as limited understanding of society and its rules and expectations as well as cultural elements that influenced the students towards remaining close to their families. We saw through this study that the failure to recognize this cultural emphasis on collective identity and group achievement that differs greatly from the typical American emphasis on individual gain caused the teachers to misunderstand their students' motivation and was a cause of frustration for both students and teachers. These

findings reinforced our belief that there is a need for greater understanding of what is effective in immigrant education.

Another study examined how the intercultural competence of immigrant youth corresponded with cultural, relational, school, and personal factors (Yeh et al., 2008). Intercultural competence referred to the challenges in relating with others such as dominant groups like White Americans as well as one's own ethnic group and one's own family. The study found that higher levels of openness to European American culture, higher level of English fluency, higher levels of social support, higher levels of knowledge about and comfort in academic help-seeking and career help-seeking will all predict lower levels of intercultural competence concerns. These conclusions led us to ask how effective this specific high school for immigrant youth, Bronx International, is at providing high levels of these factors that are proven to lessen intercultural competence concerns.

## **Methods**

To fully grasp the dimensions of education that immigrants face in high school, we decided to have a two-hour debrief and dialogue with a group of UM students who volunteered at Bronx International High School (BIHS) for one week over their spring break. We structured the dialogue in a way to first fully understand their situation and experience in Bronx International High School. This part of the debrief included asking the team members to summarize their understanding of the school system, what a typical day looked like for a BIHS student, how the high school differed from a more traditional American high school experience, and to share their overall experience. This method of information gathering helped guide and solidify our understanding of immigrant education.

We then moved to discussion about privilege in education access. We prompted everyone to spend a few minutes describing their own high school experience – sharing information such as the geographical location, demographics, extracurricular and academic

opportunities that were available, etc. This helped to set the stage to target specific parts of our experience that differed from one another and from the students at Bronx International. From here, we branched out into a dialogue about what parts of the high school experience gave us privilege in access to higher education. The structure of the dialogue was formatted flexibly so that we could delve into many topics or specialize in one concept that interested us. We came up with three broad questions that we hoped to answer:

- How did your high school experience and the resources that were available to you influence your path to UM and your career aspirations?
- What advantages did we have as students compared to the students at Bronx International High School? Any disadvantages?
- What does Bronx International do well in countering these disadvantages, and what disparities still remain?

This dialogue format of information gathering, sharing experiences, and discussing the larger concept of immigrant education allowed for maximal understanding of our topic.

## **Results**

Through our debriefing with the student volunteers, we learned much about Bronx International High School. We first learned some of the context of the high school. BIHS is located in a low-socioeconomic status area of Bronx, New York. The high school accepts students who score at or below the 20th percentile on the Language Assessment Battery and who have been in the U.S. fewer than four years. The student body is small, approximately 320 students with the majority coming from the Dominican Republic, Guinea, and Yemen. Students usually spend four to five years at BIHS before graduating.

Three key methods that emerged in how BIHS seeks to meet these academic and social needs of its students were the personal outcome system, the language classes, and the dedicated teaching staff. Each student had an academic and a social profile maintained by his

or her teachers that contained personalized outcome goals for that student. For a given class, outcomes were crafted so that the student would have attainable goals to work towards and constant feedback on their progress. The grading scale was also atypical, with possible scores ranging from NY (Not Yet) to HP (Highly Proficient). This more positive way of presenting scores contributed to the community mentality that all students could succeed. BIHS is unique in that they provide English classes geared towards bringing non-proficient students to a proficient level as well as classes continuing the students education in their first language (the majority of students having either French or Spanish as their first language). In this way, they hope to not only bring students to English proficiency but also provide a very rich learning experience that takes advantage of the diverse student body to encourage collaboration. The dedicated teaching staff also played a large role in meeting the needs of the students. The volunteers described the school atmosphere to have a greater sense of community than the typical American high school, something they attributed to the teaching staff. The majority of teachers had a genuine interest in seeing their students succeed, and continually offered whatever resources were available to them. If a student were struggling to meet their outcomes, many teachers would repeatedly offer to stay after school to help the student catch up.

The dialogue about our own high school experiences focused on enhancing our team as well as the volunteers' understanding of privilege around education. We began by sharing our own high school experiences and quickly realized that nearly all of us came from a similar middle class background and attended well-funded high schools. Thus, we all recognized some of the same privileges including availability of AP classes to challenge ourselves academically, wide opportunities to participate in musical, athletic, or student government extracurricular activities, the perspective of attaining a 4-year college degree as being the cultural norm. Additionally, our high school environment had some influence on

each of us in choosing a career path. Whether our families were higher or lower-socioeconomic status, attending a school where the majority of our peers came from financially comfortable homes, financial security was something we learned to value. Our schools provided resources specifically to aid us in determining which career we wanted to pursue through counseling, advanced classes, shadowing opportunities, and career fairs. In comparison to the volunteers' experience at Bronx International High School, we realized just how many advantages we had that made the University of Michigan and the path to a professional career very accessible to us.

We then discussed how BIHS is or is not effective in making secondary education accessible to immigrant youths. The perspective that emerged was that BIHS does an excellent job of meeting the social needs of the students. The community-centered school, individual attention, and grading system aid immigrant students in making the transition to the American school system. Also the collaboration that is encouraged ensures that the students are capable of working in diverse teams, improving their intercultural competence. However, it was our consensus that BIHS does not meet the academic needs of the students. The volunteers who worked with the students observed that many of the students spoke of being bored with the coursework and not being challenged. Although students are supposed to speak English only while at school, this rule is not enforced which hinders the students from having the immersive experience that would lead to quicker English proficiency.

## **Discussion**

As intended, the project did increase our awareness of privilege around education. We were challenged to consider whether or not we would be in our current position at the University of Michigan if just one of our privileges had been taken away such as English as our first language, our parents' high level of education and our attendance of dominantly middle-class high schools. Through this dialogue, we were able to empathize with those who

do not have these advantages, especially the group of immigrant youth. We realized that not only do these immigrant students deserve the same access to education simply as a human right, but also that by doing nothing to aid or empower them through the education process; we deny them the opportunity to better their situation. As a result, we as a country harm ourselves by denying a significant amount of people the opportunity to contribute their diverse perspectives in the professional world.

Looking at the case of Bronx International High School, we were able to see one establishment's attempt at meeting the needs of these immigrant students. We saw that even in a school devoted to immigrant youth, the needs are far from fully met. There appears to be a delicate balance between creating an intensive academic environment that will challenge students to catch up to proficiency levels that at the same time leaves space for students to be encouraged and have their social needs met. Though it seems a daunting task, we believe that by openly communicating with the students, this type of environment can be created effectively.

## **Conclusion**

In contrast to the many advantages our team members had in accessing higher education, many young people arrived as immigrants to the U.S. with limited or no English language proficiency and must immediately assimilate to the new peer culture and balance academic demands and family obligations. Youth from low-income families often have limited knowledge about and access to the resources that would help them navigate the U.S. education system and be able to make informed education and career choices. Making education accessible to these immigrant youth is a challenging issue that schools like Bronx International High School are trying to tackle. The issue cannot be solved without careful thought to creating an educational system that not only encourages students in their social needs as they transition to a new culture and educational system, but also challenges the

students with academics, making it clear that higher education is accessible if they take advantage of the resources that the high school provides.



## References

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