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POWER AND PRECARITY: EXPERIENCES OF AN UNDOCUMENTED TEACHER

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ABSTRACT

The article centers on an interview with Lupe, an undocumented teacher who also identifies as queer and Latinx. Through Lupe's story, we come to see how undocumented teachers experience a form of hyper-precarity shaped by the interlocking forces of racist, neoliberal immigration and education systems. Selected excerpts from my conversation with Lupe illustrate how hyper-precarity due to changing political climates, curricular backlash, and immigration policy can all lead to unstable employment and concerns over mental health and wellbeing. In spite of these considerable challenges, Lupe's story also reflects the critical contributions undocumented teachers are making in their classrooms and communities.

Keywords: undocumented teacher, precarity, Teachers of Color, teachers' work

Fondly recalling their own schooling journey, Lupe found that what stood out most about their teachers was that they were "constantly fostering that sense of education can really liberate." It was the possibility of liberation that propelled Lupe to become a teacher. As a teacher who is undocumented and identifies as Latinx, queer, and indigenous, Lupe has found great meaning–but also considerable struggle–in their chosen career path. At the time of our interview, Lupe was preparing to enter their seventh year in the classroom. By that time, they had begun to see the notion of "liberation" in a new light. After commiserating with an undocumented friend, Lupe began to ponder leaving the country to maintain their dignity amidst attacks on their status, profession, and intersectional identities. To them, "part of that liberation is valuing myself enough to know that I should not have to constantly go through this," referring to the various political, social, and financial struggles of being an undocumented teacher.

My conversation with Lupe (a pseudonym) was part of a larger project that included interviews with 25 current and future undocumented teachers (Syeed et al. 2023). Lupe's candidness and story reflect many of the wider themes discussed at length in our report. Notably, our conversation took place before Trump returned to the White House and unleashed new levels of state violence. Utilizing Castro's (2022) multidimensional framework analyzing labor precarity impacting Teachers of Color, I specifically focus on how undocumented teachers like Lupe have experienced a form of hyper-precarity well before the specter of masked officers began terrorizing immigrant communities. In particular, we bring to light the socioeconomic and ontological forms of precarity that undocumented teachers experience, causing insecurity, lack of job protection, and impacts on wellbeing. As Castro notes, research has focused little on the actual work experiences of undocumented teachers in schools. Despite having a pathway into the teaching profession in a handful of states like California, the interlocking forces of a racist immigration system and inequitable schooling conditions still leave them open to a host of challenges. These challenges become more fraught in the face of increasing attacks on public education as well as violent anti-immigrant criminalization. Along with these obstacles, we also discuss opportunities for resistance and change that can further intersectional solidarity across other Teachers of Color.

What follows are a few selected excerpts from my conversation with Lupe that illustrate how hyper-precarity due to an increasingly nativist political climate, curricular backlash, and expanding "crimmigration" policy can all lead to unstable employment and concerns over mental health and wellbeing (Menjívar et al., 2018). Throughout these sections, we come to understand these forms of precarity through the prism of Lupe's unique intersectional identity.

PRECARITY AND POLITICAL CLIMATE

Along with neoliberal reforms that have brought about a more contingent and insecure educational workforce, the changing political climate has made undocumented people increasingly unsafe. Lupe recalled what it was like teaching in a largely immigrant community during the 2016 election as Trump's campaign had ramped up racist, xenophobic rhetoric to a fever pitch:

> I remember kids asking me throughout [election] day, like "what's gonna happen, what does this mean?" I remember kids telling me like, "my parents had the conversation with me of, 'if you ever come home and we're not here…' I felt really privileged to be able to be a teacher for students who felt so much fear during that time. At the same time, I was fearful for my own well-being. I remember having the conversation with them and being like, 'I may not be here to close the year with you.'
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> I haven't thought about this in a while… Had this happened now, I would've quit. I would've been like I knew about mental health but I was a first-year teacher super bright-eyed on that good jazz. I was willing to be that person for them even though I wasn't able to be that person for myself.
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> That same year, when Trump was elected, there were walkouts throughout the district and my seniors asked me, "Can we walk out? Should we walk out?" And because I was still trying to play by the rules and be a good person, I was like, you know what, let's try to find a way which we can like express what we're feeling without like leaving campus or without breaking the rules. Time passed. Somehow the principal was told that I told children to walk out because I was very open about being undocumented. And so there was like a spotlight on me, and then the next time that there were walkouts planned, I remember immediately being like, they're gonna come look for me. They're gonna assume that I did something. And second period, they were knocking on my door being like, 'what happened?' And I was honest. I was like, 'No, I didn't tell them to walk out.' Whatever, at the end of the year I was fired. I was 'non-reelected' under, like whatever fake terms of unprofessionalism 'cause of the whole walkout situation.
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> Honestly, it's funny 'cause years later I got the vocabulary necessary to explain what had happened that year. Basically, I was with a school leader who upheld every pillar of white supremacy. The sense of urgency, the sense of like don't make connections, the sense of like don't show emotion. My principal hated everything that I did even though those were my strengths… And all of my strengths were literally like community building, empathy. And so when I was non re-elected again, it was like unprofessionalism or whatever.

Lupe's openness about their undocumented status also put a target on them. Even as they were attempting to foster community and care for undocumented students who were facing immense uncertainty, Lupe also became suspect in the eyes of the administration. While the precarity Lupe endures was heightened by the policies and discourse surrounding a national-level election, it was locally repressive actors who ultimately caused them to lose their job. Not only does the action of the administrator foreclose the possibility of teacher-activism, but it even disregards and devalues the critical care work that teachers like Lupe often provide. Not only do teachers need to be protected from such reprisals that limit their ability to advocate beyond the classroom, they need to be recognized for effectively cultivating community and relationships that may go beyond the typical job description.

PRECARITY IN THE CLASSROOM

After being let go, Lupe decided to move to a more affluent district, in part for the higher pay, but also because they believed they might be able to enact a different form of change. Their experiences in the new school hearken to the anti-CRT and curricular backlashes that have overwhelmed districts nationwide.

> I ended up working at an affluent school, predominantly white. This was [during] COVID. So, I was online, teaching world history. And I was very open about my status… Being who I am in front of a classroom...is a statement within itself. So, when I show up, showing up, my authentic self is redefining history. The fact that I'm not a cis, white man teaching children history...
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> In my mind, I was like, I'm gonna work with people who will hold positions of power in the future who need to maybe unlearn certain biases, unlearn certain ideas. I struggled a lot because parents were not with it. Parents did not like the way I was teaching. I had a student drop the class because her parents said that I was racist to my white students. Because when we talked about the scramble for Africa and they claimed that I made their daughter feel uncomfortable for being white.
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> It just so happened that it was like the morning of the [2020] election, the second round… I was like, there's no way in hell I'm gonna show up [at school] and put myself through that. So, I literally, drove [out of town], got a hotel, and was like, I'm gonna escape the world and find out what happens…I got a call from my principal being like, "Can you explain to me what you're talking about in class? What was your curriculum? Did you teach them about socialism? Did you teach them about white people? Did you say that the textbook was inherently racist?"
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> The textbook is called Western Civilizations. And so to me, I was like, this doesn't seem like the textbook we should use in an advanced world history course. And so I had explained to the children, I was like if we're gonna be critical about history and if we're gonna learn world history, this textbook probably is... I told them, I was like, we're not gonna pick this [textbook] up very often. And then we had the conversation of like, how do we redefine who tells history, how history is told through what perspective? And so apparently a parent had said that I said that this was the worst book ever. And that like because we were on our units on types of government and I was teaching them socialism, communism, capitalism. And one of the questions was like, if somebody from a socialist nation were to look at capitalism, what are the flaws? And the student wrote, "I can't think of any flaws why would anyone…" So the parents thought that I was… trying to indoctrinate like little socialists.

Ultimately, the family that complained had their student removed from the class because otherwise, Lupe suggested, "they were just gonna try to find everything wrong and try to get me out." In spite of facing aggressive pushback on their teaching, Lupe was open about their status. During Lupe's time at the school, they agreed to be featured in a student publication discussing their status:

> One of my students asked me like, "Hey, you've shared with us that you're undocumented. Do you mind if we do a piece in the newspaper about like being undocumented and what that is like?" And so that information was out there again, I was very open about putting that information out. Should I maybe have done that in a predominantly White space? Who knows? But I did.

Although Lupe enjoyed some support from the administration, they decided to leave the district after just one year. They eventually found another job back in an urban school district. Like other Teachers of Color, Lupe's unique identity and positionality made them a target for criticism and allegations that diminished their teaching abilities. Moreover, the climate undercut student learning by expelling critical perspectives from the world history classroom. Nonetheless, Lupe was uniquely outspoken and wanted to ensure that they were able to show up as their full self in the school community. In the end, while not removed from their position, Lupe felt they needed to leave the job due to the climate at the school. Showing up as their full self was simply not possible there.

PRECARITY AND DACA

When first introduced in 2012 through executive order, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program was heralded as a major victory for immigrant rights. The program allows certain undocumented immigrants access to work authorization and protection from deportation. A key target of Trump's first administration, DACA has faced an injunction on new applicants since 2017. It is through DACA that Lupe and other undocumented teachers are still able to continue being employed in public school districts. But their experiences navigating the system remind us that DACA beneficiaries are not simply living out their "happily ever after." Lupe relates what happened during a recent renewal application:

> I don't have a safety net to fall back on, and so the [DACA] reapplication every two years causes me a lot of anxiety. And it's something that I will literally hold off until the last minute, and so this last cycle, the school year ended last May, and I missed my... I didn't submit my paperwork on time, so I was without status for six months during the pandemic… I try to be kind to myself and remind myself that I have every right to be anxious and like it's a scary thing…
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> Like USCIS (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services) always takes forever, but COVID made it even longer. So I didn't start this school year in the classroom, because I didn't have work authorization. And so when I tell you that I went into a deep, deep depression because I blew through half of my savings in six months because there was no option for me, right? Like when I was without status, I remember being like, I might have to do construction, I might have to sign up to like clean houses, I might have to do the work that many undocumented people do.
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> Also, knowing that I'm a teacher, knowing that I work a job that's for the community, and being an undocumented teacher through all of this, I give so much of myself away... I feel like part of that liberation is valuing myself enough to know that I should not have to constantly go through this. Again, throughout my schooling, I've over-documented myself. I've done everything. I went to an elite university. I did everything possible. And there's still... It still doesn't mean anything... I still had to do six months of no employment.

Despite attempting to "over-document" and prove their worth through work or school, Lupe still came upon the limits of an exacting, racist immigration system. DACA, even with the access and protection it provides, can also take on an ominous presence for undocumented teachers. Even as undocumented professionals, teachers like Lupe may continue to face precarious and exploitative working conditions. What their experiences speak to is not only the connection between immigration and education workforce protections, but also the need for solidarity and mobilization across undocumented workers. Voices within the undocumented community have sought to interrupt popular narratives around "dreamers" that elevate hard-working and ambitious undocumented youth as more deserving (Abrego & Negrón-Gonzales, 2020). Instead, Lupe's experiences point to the need for more radical changes to immigration policy that combats labor precarity for all workers.

PRECARITY AND WELLBEING

Our interview was a journey through the inspiring highs and crushing lows of Lupe's life as an undocumented teacher. More than just an emotional rollercoaster, teaching clearly has a profound impact on teachers' wellbeing. And for those who experience hyper-precarity, the impact may be even greater. As we neared the end of our conversation, Lupe turned their thoughts to the future and what their career may have in store for them:

> I cleared my credential, so I'm good to go for forever, I guess I just renew it every five years. So I know that for me again, it's not a bad place to be, but teaching is kind of like, I know this will always be here. I know that I'm good at it. I know that I like it, but I do need a break 'cause COVID and just the experiences that I just told you about.
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> I have been pretty beat up by the education system as a teacher and so, I think I'm, again, am I gonna sell out and like work for a company? Probably not. I'm probably gonna wanna do something that focuses on community building and works to genuinely help people. But I need a break from the classroom. I'll probably come back probably in five, 10 years, when I've been able to fill my cup.
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> And so I think it's a constant re-centering, it might be monthly, it might be yearly or it might be weekly… It's like teachers, in general, are underpaid, under-resourced, overworked… To be undocumented and choose to teach, I think is selfless in the sense of clearly putting other people and that aspect of giving back over sometimes our own wellbeing. I would advise any people who are trying to teach in general to just really set those boundaries, really give what you can without over-giving. We always hear about burnout right? And I was able to push through the two-year burnout, but six-year burnout, yeah. Six-year burnout should not be a thing... The fact that I made it six years with the experiences that I've had in the schools that I've had, I'm proud of myself. I've never felt successful as a teacher because a lot of what I care about is not measured. They don't care about student relationships, they don't care about like, did you create safe spaces? They just care about like, did your students pass, did they fail?

> I think there's definitely like a key piece of being undocumented and teaching in the sense of especially when teaching undocumented students. I think it's almost cathartic to be able to support another undocumented youth knowing I wear my heart on my sleeve with my students because I want them to know that it's not gonna be peachy, it'll get better, but they need to know that they're capable of so much more. They deserve so much more, but also it's an uphill battle. And so, I share my successes and I share my feelings with students. And I think sometimes when we have undocumented students in our class that almost refuels our fire, because it's like, it's looking at yourself, looking at your high school self... 'Cause I've also met undocumented people who like didn't have an amazing schooling and chose to be teachers because of that. And for me, it's more like, I know what people did for me. I wanna make sure that these students are just as cared for…

In terms of the ontological experiences of precarity, undocumented teachers like Lupe discussed profound impacts on their wellbeing and mental health**.** Teachers experience a host of stressors, but also derive strength from their roles. The support they provide students also reflects a form of uncompensated identity taxation. In addition to increasing access and support for targeted mental health resources, education leaders and policymakers can look more structurally to reducing job demands and ensuring that teachers have more voice in decisions that impact them the most (Marshall et al., 2022). Professional development and teacher education can also incorporate humanizing approaches to support teacher growth and sustainability (Mawhinney & Baker-Doyle, 2024).

Through the experiences of Lupe and other undocumented teachers, we come to see the old union adage that a "student's learning conditions are a teacher's working conditions" in a new light. The kind of hyper-precarity inflicted upon undocumented communities impacts students as well as the teachers charged with educating and caring for them. As recent struggles have made the intersections between education and immigration ever more clear, we must also bear witness to the impacts on teachers' labor and further expand possibilities for solidarity. Near the end of our discussion, as Lupe considered their uncertain future, they returned to the idea that teaching for liberation is their one, true calling. Fellow education workers and other allies standing with undocumented communities as part of a swelling protest movement can help ensure that heeding the call does not come at such immense costs.

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