

The Shuffle

From September 2017 to June 2018, one or more members of the Knowles Teacher Initiative community will write a blog post each month exploring the role of small victories, mistakes and failures in their growth and learning. In this blog post, 2014 Knowles Teaching Fellow Nicholas Chan writes about his relationship with an emerging multilingual student that didn't end as expected.

Estuard¹ is shuffled into my advisory on February 22, 2016. Over the course of the next year, I try to teach him. Solve for x. Indent your paragraphs. Text your advisor if you're going to be late or absent (taking your girlfriend out for lunch doesn't count). But ultimately, Estuard will teach me that what a teacher wants and what a student wants are not always the same.



Estuard arrives towards the end of my third year of teaching. Huge numbers of undocumented immigrants are walking or riding up from Honduras, El Salvador and Estuard's home country of Guatemala. They come fleeing gang violence and poverty. Our countries are rich in resources, but poor in money, another student tells me.

Estuard is supposed to be in another advisory, but then we have to shuffle two Arabic speakers into that advisory. Our advisories are bursting with new kiddos² and advisors are stressing out, so, as our team's Student Support Liaison, I bite the bullet and shuffle him into my advisory instead.

Estuard likes fine arts. He and his family worked with *maquinas de tela* (in a cloth factory, as I understand it). After sixth grade, he stopped going to school for three years before returning to finish seventh and eighth grade, making him the third new student with interrupted formal education to join my advisory

(alongside Isaac and Francisco). He is the fourth student I know to be undocumented (we don't generally ask; there are probably more). He is over 18 and technically too old to enroll. Neither the District nor his sister, Yulissa, offer an explanation. We don't push for one.



Estuard walks into my room before advisory.

"Who start the class?" he asks me.

I am trying to shoo my third period students out into the hall while simultaneously wrangling my fourth period students into their seats and blocking other random students who should be in the room across the hall. I can't find my clipboard.

"I don't know," I admit.

"Maybe me?" asks Estuard.

Estuard is friendly and funny. His English is rapidly improving. Other kiddos listen to him, look up to him and like working with him.

"Maybe you," I say, handing him the cards to start class. (Side note: my clipboard ends up being on the projector where I left it. Go figure.)



Estuard's writing skills leave room for improvement, as I discover in his semester-end portfolio. Instead of our normal schedule, my 20 advisees spend the better part of the day in my room, writing and reflecting on what they've learned that semester. I spend most of the two weeks set aside to work on winter portfolios trying to cajole Isaac and Jose Roberto to get to school on time (or at all) or trying to quickly read (skim) through Irene and Andrew's second (and third and fourth) drafts. Estuard is generally there, but hides in between the cracks. At some point at the beginning of the second week, I read through Estuard's essays with him (while half keeping an eye on the rest of the advisory). While his writing is frequently out of order or unclear to me, he is able to explain to me what he is thinking. The ideas are there; he just needs help with structure.

One of our essays is a personal reflection about dreams for the future. At various points, Estuard wants to be different things. When I push him, he says he wants to be a history teacher (he just spent the day writing his history essay). The next day, he wants to be a lawyer (after he arrives from an appointment with his immigration lawyer). He doesn't seem to have a clear vision for his future. Shortly afterwards, two advisees escape from my classroom and I have to go track them down. I don't have time to return to Estuard's essays.

Estuard's attendance dips at the beginning of January 2017. He is in the class that I am most struggling to support and while I'm hoping that he can help pull the class together and get the semester off to a positive start, he doesn't show for the first few days. We call his sister Yulissa, who is also his guardian. I don't know much about Yulissa. I know she works and that she and Estuard get along, which is fortunate among our unaccompanied minors, who are often reunifying with family who they have not seen in many years (if ever).



Estuard hasn't been coming to school, we say. He's a good student. He has lots of potential. But he's working a lot. Does he have legal bills to pay? Is he contributing to rent? Yulissa shakes her head. He owes \$200 a month to help pay rent, but otherwise should be in school, she says.

He won an award for one of our school values last semester, we say. (He was not in school the day of the award ceremony, but we don't say that.) Yulissa's ears perk up. He does *not* need to be working that much, she says. He *will* be back in school. She takes a picture of a photo of Estuard holding the award on the way out of school. I secretly hope that it ends up all over [Snapchat](#).



Estuard stays in school for the rest of 10th grade but is noticeably absent on the first day of 11th grade. “¿Y Estuard?” I ask his girlfriend, Sarita, as she walks by. And Estuard?

“I don't know,” she shrugs as she goes to class.

His 11th grade advisor and I check in. We decide to call him if he doesn't show up. He shows up, unprompted, on day two. My fears of Estuard dropping out are

alleviated, at least for now.



Estuard's initials are the subject line of an email I receive on October 4, 2017. Instead of going to class, he went to the Wellness Center and said he was going to drop out. Our amazing head counselor tried to sit him down and meet with him, but she also had to give two back-to-back presentations. By the time she was done, he was gone. His advisor, the head counselor, another Student Support Liaison and I email and huddle and come up with a plan to try to get Estuard in for a meeting. Schedules are complicated, but we decide that Estuard will meet with another teacher he trusts, his advisor and his lawyer.

It comes out during the meeting that Estuard's dream is to return to Guatemala to buy a house and open a business. It will cost him 500,000 Quetzales (\$70,000), which means leaving school and working two full-time jobs for three years. His lawyer (who I don't think speaks Spanish) weighs in that leaving school will hurt his immigration case.

They draft a plan where Estuard can quit one of his two jobs and adjust his course load to graduate under a special plan for students with interrupted formal education. Even with this plan, he seems resistant. Hopes are not high for Estuard's return. "I have no idea. What should we do?" reads his advisor's last email on the matter.

I have no idea either.

We do not see Estuard for a while.



Estuard is, coincidentally, in the subway station as I race to make my flight to my Knowles Fall Cohort Meeting. "Are you coming back?" I ask. "*¿Vas a regresar?*"

"*Yo pienso...que no,*" he admits, reluctant and proud, all at once. He doesn't think so.

We talk a bit more while we wait for our respective subways. He is working. It is his day off and he is accompanying Sarita on the subway back to her house, one county over and an hour away. He says things are going OK. I tell him, resigned,

that he should text us if he needs anything. I tell him we will do anything to support him. I bite my tongue and do not pressure him to come back (though I am thinking it the entire time).



“Estuard is in the office,” says the chemistry teacher, breathless from running down the hall. It is 2:10 and I am starting the opening for sixth period. “You should go talk to him. I’ll cover your class.”

I rush downstairs. It has been almost a month since Estuard was last in school.

Estuard is sitting in the counseling office, talking to the counselor. He is no longer at his second job and is thinking of returning to school. We talk a little bit longer and agree that he should come back to school tomorrow, with an adjusted schedule.



Estuard is not in school the next day. I poke my head into what is supposed to be his second class. Estuard’s cousin Juan is there as well as Katy, a former student of mine.

“Y Estuard?” I ask, scanning the room.

Katy shakes her head.

I send him a quick text at lunch, but don’t have time to check my phone during class. I see a message from Estuard after school, a few hours after he sent it.

“Mister llegare en 10 minutos pero mejor firmare el papel de salida.”

Mister, I’ll be there in 10 minutes, but it’s better that I sign the exit papers.

His last official day in our attendance system was November 7, 2017. He had stopped attending long before then.



When I mope about Estuard’s story to those I trust, it is largely couched in terms of failure. The failure of our city to provide affordable housing and reasonable wages to all its inhabitants. The failure of the American education system (both

North American and Central American) to support its most vulnerable students and create actual incentives to pursue further education. My own failure to detect Estuard's desires to drop out and head them off at the pass. But every time I start down this path, I hear the voice of our head counselor, who also came to the United States as a teenage immigrant, in my head.

"Estuard is an adult," she says, repeatedly and correctly. "He has to make his own decisions."

She's right. I hate that she's right. But she's right.



There are, of course, upsides to Estuard's story. In the year and a half that I taught him, Estuard never really had a clear path. He was good enough at school and was able to earn some money, but never really seemed fully invested. Now, he has a clearer and attainable vision for his future. While some of our students dream the biggest dreams of overcoming all obstacles (i.e., financial, political, socioeconomic) to become the first in their families to graduate from a four-year college in the United States and to become a doctor or lawyer, the gaps in Estuard's education as well as his precarious financial and legal situation make a dream like this possible, but extremely challenging. On the other hand, returning to his homeland, where the majority of his family still lives, and building a house and opening stores seems both possible and attainable.

Should that vision falter, he has options. Until last year, there were few viable continuation options for emerging multilinguals³ who were not succeeding at high school and were not on track, credit-wise, to graduate. Eighteen year old students (multilingual or not) who dropped out of school in our district were dropped forever, unable to return. But recently, a new program was launched to provide more individualized support to students who are 18 years old and older that have dropped out, but want to return to complete their high school education.

It is precisely this that one of Estuard's trusted teachers (the one who was at the conference with his lawyer and advisor) reminds me of as she hands me his 11th grade school portrait. Unlike his 10th grade portrait where he is staring blankly and startled into the camera, he is smiling. Confident. Knowing.

"You can give it to him if he comes back to the continuation program," she says. I

put it in a drawer of photos of advisees who have left school before their time.

I wish he were the one telling this story.

¹ Not his real name.

² Our principal says “kiddos,” so I say “kiddos.”

³ Rochelle Gutierrez’s term for English Language Learners.