Editors’ Introduction

Dissolving Boundaries: Understanding Undocumented Students’ Educational Experiences

Undocumented immigration is one of the most contested policy issues of our time. Although the number of undocumented immigrants has remained relatively constant in recent years (Passel et al., 2014), undocumented people continue to be stigmatized. Young undocumented immigrants, moreover, are caught in a particular paradox. Their right to an education at the K–12 level is constitutionally guaranteed through the 1982 *Plyler v. Doe* decision, and yet restrictions on their ability to legally work and receive financial aid stall, detour, and often derail their educational and socioeconomic trajectories. Young undocumented students are, as Leisy Abrego (2006) states, “caught in a limbo” (p. 219); they experience feelings of being legally and socially in between as they feel “American” but their documentation status tells a different story. Furthermore, at any time these youth can be deported to their “home” countries, which they may barely know. Growing up with such uncertainty and in an elevated climate of fear, many of these young men and women experience hopes and possibilities circumscribed by constantly changing immigration laws and policies at the local, state, and federal levels. These conditions have created a sizable vulnerable population that requires attention, including research and practice-based solutions in schools and communities.

Research in the growing subfield of undocumented immigrants and education has drawn attention to the repercussions of contradictory educational and immigration policies. Yet the varied experiences of undocumented youth importantly underscore that immigration status can be mediated at the local level and by institutions such as schools, universities, and community-based organizations (Abrego, 2006; Gonzales, 2010). For example, Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist and undocumented immigrant Jose Antonio Vargas (2011) has referred to a “21st century Underground Railroad,” with educators paving the way for undocumented students. But little is known about the school setting or how teachers and administrators interact with undocumented students. While undocumented immigrant students have a legal right to K–12 education,
Editors’ Introduction
STEPHANY CUEVAS AND AMY CHEUNG

Editors’ Introduction
STEPHANY CUEVAS AND AMY CHEUNG

a uniformly positive academic experience is not guaranteed. This Special Issue of the Harvard Educational Review (HER), Dissolving Boundaries: Understanding Undocumented Students’ Educational Experiences, delves into the “black box” of the school experiences of undocumented immigrants by exploring the important roles schools, educators, and communities play in shaping young undocumented immigrants’ childhood and adolescent trajectories, their experiences in higher education, as well as their transitions to adulthood.

From the very inception of this issue, the capriciousness of the policy environment has fueled us with a sense of urgency regarding the topic of undocumented immigration and education. Even in the short months from our call for papers to the final compilation of content, the policy landscape shifted multiple times. In November 2014, just several weeks prior to the issue’s submission deadline, President Obama announced the initiation of Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents (DAPA), an executive action that would halt deportations of undocumented parents of US citizens and lawful permanent residents. Simultaneously, the administration announced an expansion of the 2012 Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), which provides a temporary deportation reprieve for youth who crossed the border without documentation as children. Together, the DAPA and the expanded DACA programs are estimated to affect 4.4 million individuals, halting deportations and providing work authorization. Although arguably imperfect, DAPA and expanded DACA were heralded by undocumented immigrants’ rights activists as welcome news. Through this policy shift, it has become clear that the lives of undocumented students and their families are often in a fluid limbo.

Yet, in February 2015, as the HER Editorial Board was beginning to compile manuscripts for this volume, a ruling from a federal judge in Texas blocked the implementation of DAPA and the expansion of DACA. The federal government responded to the temporary injunction by moving forward with an appeal. At this writing, a panel of judges from the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals is deliberating on the arguments brought by the Justice Department in support of the constitutionality of the president’s executive action and those of an opposing twenty-six-state coalition challenging the programs. By the time this issue goes to press, it is likely a ruling will have been made. Regardless of the decision, however, the battle over the regularization of undocumented immigrants will endure. In attempting to set the contributions in this volume in the context of the contemporary moment, we editors are sympathetic to Joanna Dreby’s (2015) acknowledgment that “documenting the impacts of legal status on the lives of families at times feels like trying to capture a moving target” (p. 186).

In the last two decades, consideration of issues of immigration and education has been a mainstay in the pages of HER. The fall 2001 Special Issue, Immigration and Education, though, was the first to foreground the topic. In it, Marcelo Suárez-Orozco (2001) called for a new research paradigm to exam-
ine immigration and education in the frame of globalization and exhorted scholars to examine questions of belonging and identity development in the context of “multiple identities, indexed by multilingual and multicultural sensibilities” (p. 358). In their introduction to the fall 2011 Special Issue Immigration, Youth, and Education, the editors noted that enforcement and militarized policing of the US-Mexico border had become foundational to the nation’s strategy for addressing immigration and devoted a section of the issue to examining legal authorization and its attendant relationships on the civic and educational development of undocumented young people and those growing up in mixed-status homes. Further, building on a decade’s developments in research on youth and immigration, HER editors (2011) echoed the sentiment of the 2001 Special Issue and asked, for all immigrant youth, “While navigating geographic and linguistic borders and political and cultural boundaries, how do these young people contest, claim, and preserve their spaces of belonging?” (p. 401).

In 2015, “belonging” has taken on further significance as millions of undocumented immigrants await decisions that, in a breath, could adjudicate their legal status, assigning at least a technical belonging that had been out of reach. And yet, the subjective experience of belonging cannot be fully encapsulated or affected by a change in a legal category alone. Still, debates around documentation status are the flashpoint around which this nation currently understands and grapples with immigration and immigrants. Thus, we believe that in 2015 speaking of immigrant youth and education holistically requires concerted engagement with issues centered on the experiences of undocumented young people. It is with this intention and commitment that we present this Special Issue.

In assembling this volume, we sought to include research and firsthand perspectives that capture the range of actors and institutions involved in and concerned with the educational lives of undocumented youth. These include contributions by researchers, community organizers, teachers, and artists. We were also committed to presenting knowledge on this topic through prose, poetry, and photography—recognizing that the full range of human experience is made known through multiple forms of expression.

While united by vulnerability associated with unauthorized status, undocumented students’ experiences are hardly uniform. For example, the contributors to this volume demonstrate that schools can be sites of both inclusion and marginalization, that teachers can be perceived as both advocates and adversaries. Some undocumented youth find empowerment in reaching for higher education, yet older and more recent arrivals may instead aspire for economic mobility, not necessarily through the venue of tertiary education.

We open this issue with “Human Rights for Undocumented Students and Their Families,” a foreword by Mary C. Waters that invites readers to consider how we, as a society, frame our understanding and treatment of undocumented
Editors’ Introduction
STEPHANY CUEVAS AND AMY CHEUNG

immigrants. Setting an inquiring tone for this issue, Waters provocatively interrogates whether the movement for the rights of the undocumented should be understood as a question of human rights rather than a fight for civil rights. Her call to action leaves us to wonder: What is the role of education in defining the human rights of undocumented families and students?

To begin exploring answers, following the foreword we present “Untangling Plyler’s Legacy: Undocumented Students, Schools, and Citizenship,” a contextual piece by Roberto G. Gonzales, Luisa L. Heredia, and Genevieve Negrón-Gonzales that illuminates the fundamental contradiction undocumented youth face in reconciling the meaning of their inclusion in K–12 public schooling, as decided by Plyler v. Doe, on the one hand and, on the other, their legal exclusion from higher education and the labor market. The authors seek to ascertain whether and how schools can serve the purposes of “integration,” “citizenship,” and “engagement” for undocumented students. This article reminds readers that the provision of schooling opportunity alone does not necessarily ensure equity or equality for undocumented students, particularly as many of these young people also experience problematic learning environments, such as overcrowded, segregated, and underresourced schools.

To guide readers through the complex terrain of undocumented immigrants and education, we divide the remainder of the issue into two sections. In the first, “Telling and Disclosure,” we have collected articles and features centered on the experience of bringing issues of undocumented status into the open. For undocumented youth, finding the words to discuss their documentation status in educational settings can be difficult—not only because of the physical and psychological threats of mass deportation and enhanced immigration enforcement, but also because schools and teachers themselves feel uncomfortable with, and perhaps inept at, speaking plainly or openly about issues of legal status.

We begin this section with an understanding that “telling” may be achieved in a medium other than speaking or writing, particularly for a topic fraught with complexity and uncertainty. In the photographic essay “The Unlikelihood of Family: A Photographic Essay on Transnational Experiences,” teaching artist Cristina Llerena Navarro captures through the intimate eye of the camera what seem to be prosaic lives but are, in fact, exceptional circumstances of separation through deportation and forced migration as a result of fleeing violence. Llerena Navarro’s photos are portraits of individuals and families “yearning for opportunity to be united, and their struggle to achieve that dream.”

In turn, we present “Diles la verdad: Deportation Policies, Politicized Funds of Knowledge, and Schooling in Middle Childhood,” in which authors Sarah Gallo and Holly Link urge educators to consider the “politicized funds of knowledge” students may carry with them to classrooms and other spaces. In focusing on the case of one child, Ben, and his family’s experience with
the ramifications of his father’s deportation, the authors propose that teachers must not turn away from their students’ “experiential knowledge”; rather, they should leverage it for authentic learning in the classroom, for example, through incorporation of these experiences into the curriculum. Yet, Gallo and Link acknowledge that engagement with political issues in the classroom can feel fraught and that teachers and other school-connected personnel are sometimes ill prepared to help undocumented students and their families even when sympathetic to their specific challenges.

Building on this conversation, in “’My Student Was Apprehended by Immigration’: A Civics Teacher’s Breach of Silence in a Mixed-Citizenship Classroom,” Dafney Blanca Dabach presents a study of a teacher who purposefully breaks her classroom norms by forthrightly engaging her students in discussions around immigration and deportation. Dabach finds that, through intentional and structured pedagogy, students felt supported within the classroom to share their personal experiences with and perspectives on immigration status. From witnessing their teachers’ willingness to divulge her own political views, students expressed feeling that the classroom was a safe space for them not only to explore their personal experiences but also to voice their thoughts and confusions about the topic.

Through Dabach’s case study of the “breach of silence,” we are able to envision opportunities for students when teachers openly engage youth in difficult and potentially uncomfortable conversations on immigration, belonging, and deservingness. In his poem “The Art of Unlearning,” Clint Smith gives a personal account of fostering a space for undocumented students and their peers to explore their identities, engaging in a pedagogy similar to the one Dabach describes. Smith’s poem illuminates the power of writing as an avenue for disclosure and support for students.

When educational settings do not provide students spaces for telling and disclosure, students may experience a silencing of not only their status but also their lived experiences. In his personal essay “On the Grammar of Silence: The Structure of My Undocumented Immigrant Writer’s Block,” Alberto Ledesma describes the long tail of silence left from negotiating undocumented status that was not easily banished even when he was ready to tell his story as an emerging writer. Reflecting on what he calls a “pattern of predictable silences,” Ledesma complicates the act of writing as possibly both empowering and inhibiting and invites us to think about the implications routinized schooling activities—such as writing personal essays in freshman college writing classes—may have on undocumented students. As educators and scholars, then, it becomes our duty to reflect on what silence itself might communicate.

The issue’s second section, “Undocumented Students and Higher Education,” focuses on the experiences of undocumented students as they consider, pursue, enter, and navigate tertiary education. Over the last few years, despite growing numbers of undocumented students matriculating to colleges and
universities across the United States, others have faced increasingly restrictive laws and environments. Most educational stories that have been brought to public attention, largely by journalistic accounts, focus on high achievers—leaders on their campuses and in their communities who are often described as “worthy” citizens and whose talents are “wasted” because current laws do not allow them to pursue their dream careers (Abrego, 2006; Chang, 2011). While this is an important part of the story, there are much larger ones missing from the popular discourse: the experiences and perspectives of undocumented students who struggle to graduate high school; youth and community organizers who have been invested in the undocumented student movement for decades; and the families, parents, teachers, counselors, and allies who champion students throughout their educational trajectories. Although their stories are not regularly told, their accounts provide important perspectives on how many people, including educators, play a role in supporting and guiding students.

“Undocumented Undergraduates on College Campuses: Understanding Their Challenges, Assets, and What It Takes to Make an Undocufriendly Campus,” by Carola Suárez-Orozco and her colleagues from the University of California, Los Angeles, opens this section. This article highlights the diversity of undocumented undergraduate student experiences and draws from survey data of more than 900 participants from 264 two- and four-year colleges and universities across the United States. While undocumented students can face serious obstacles to college completion, including a lack of financial aid and sense of belonging, this article emphasizes the assets they bring to their respective campuses. Undocumented students often develop their own mechanisms for success within institutions, such as organizing to demand change along with “undocufriendly” allies. Drawing from their rich sample, the authors present a robust series of recommendations that can help create an undocufriendly campus that is attentive to the needs of undocumented students.

Following this research article, Ruben Elias Canedo Sanchez and Meng So give a firsthand account of their work with an organization that exemplifies the kind of program Suárez-Orozco and colleagues would identify as contributing to an undocufriendly campus. In “UC Berkeley’s Undocumented Student Program: Holistic Strategies for Undocumented Student Equitable Success Across Higher Education,” the authors trace the roots of the current Undocumented Student Program back to community organizing and advocacy. They present practical strategies that have proven successful in realizing their mission to not just support students toward graduation but also to “take care of the person.” The authors stress the importance of identifying and developing allies of undocumented students within institutions of higher education. This article directly addresses educators who are wondering where to begin in changing the culture and environment of their institutions for full inclusion of undocumented students.
Finally, we close this section with Elaine Allard’s discussion of the unique circumstances of undocumented youth who migrate to the United States during their adolescence. In “Undocumented Status and Schooling for Newcomer Teens,” Allard presents findings from an ethnographic study of undocumented newcomer youth primarily from Mexico. These youth typically migrated on their own without their parents and thus had to assume adult responsibilities on arrival in the US. As such, they were concerned with developing work skills and securing an immediate livelihood, and they primarily found learning English valuable in a high school education, as opposed to preparing for college. Allard notes that, for these undocumented newcomer youth, incorporation into the DREAMer movement that has coalesced around college-going aspirations may be more fraught than for their non-newcomer peers. Instead, advocating for these students entails taking into account their unique concerns around self-sufficiency. Allard calls on educators to think creatively about differentiated pathways to high school graduation as well as career- and vocation-focused options that can leverage the resilience and persistence these students have exemplified through their experiences crossing the border and living on their own.

We conclude this Special Issue with an afterword by Roberto G. Gonzales that reflects on the developing scholarship on undocumented students and a growing interdisciplinary subfield. Rightfully describing this body of research as “shedding light rather than heat” on a topic often considered controversial, Gonzales asks scholars to think about the nature of this work and its evolution—what are the models and theories being developed and challenged, who is not represented, and what is the appropriate relationship to develop with research participants? Finally, Gonzales asserts that although policy implications emanating from research on undocumented populations are critical, research should not be held captive by political agendas that may seek quick fixes or unidimensional answers. Research should take into account the diversity within undocumented populations and continue to attend to the nuance and complexity of their lived experiences.

While we are proud of the voices and perspectives we have captured in this Special Issue, we are conscious that there are different voices and experiences not featured in these pages. Thus, we invite readers not only to engage with us as we learn about and from the experiences of undocumented students, but also to consider what may have been left out. As such, we encourage educators, practitioners, and researchers to deeply and sincerely listen to undocumented students and their families and to reflect on what silence may entail. What potential do we miss if we turn away from undocumented students and the stories of challenge, resilience, and aspiration inherent in their experiences? To share in their knowledge is essential, and their lessons must be ours as well.

Stephany Cuevas and Amy Cheung
Special Issue Editors
Editors’ Introduction
STEPHANY CUEVAS ANDAMY CHEUNG

References

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