Adolescent Literacy Policy

Do Undocumented Students “Play by the Rules”?  
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As we begin the 21st century, globalization patterns have changed the direction and composition of the movements of people around the globe. As such, developed countries in Europe, North America, and Oceania are dealing with an increased number of immigrants from the global south crossing their borders, with various resulting themes in debates, policies, and regulations. The way that immigration is talked about in the news has direct bearing on the ways that health, education, legal, and political institutions enact policies to deal with this phenomenon.

In the United States, among the various debates surrounding immigrants’ positions and access to societal rights are the policy debates affecting the educational opportunities of undocumented youths. Nationwide, there are an estimated 360,000 high school graduates between the ages of 18 and 24 and another 715,000 children between the ages of 5 and 17 who are considered undocumented youths (Van Hook et al., 2005). These young people are guaranteed access to a K–12 education, stemming from a Supreme Court decision against a Texas state statute that denied funding for education to children who were unauthorized immigrants. Although this court decision created some assurance of access to K–12 public school education, there is no parallel federal policy that establishes pathways for undocumented immigrant teens’ access to higher education. Furthermore, their documentation status relegates them to manual labor jobs with no benefits, compensation below the minimum wage, and no prospects of mobility.

Access to higher education in the current economic context of the United States is of key importance for any individual to obtain access to a professional career and fully participate in society. For adolescent immigrant students, access to advanced literacy practices provides one avenue to obtain the cultural capital necessary to advance beyond routine manual labor. Policy that denies higher education for a certain sector of the population creates an underclass forced to subsist on manual labor with no avenues for advancement.

Concerning state-level policy, eight states have passed legislation that allows undocumented students who have graduated from a U.S. high school to access in-state tuition rates: California, Illinois, Kansas, Nebraska, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Utah, and Washington. These states allow for access to in-state tuition rates regardless of immigration status on the condition that students attend an American high school for a certain number of years, obtain a high school diploma, and have the intention of becoming permanent residents. This policy,
as illegals or illegal aliens, assigning them an identity of criminality and therefore automatically questioning their rights to access the benefits of society. This frame has origins in the broader national debate over immigration policy and political organizing, as opponents have deemed it productive to garner opposition to immigrants’ rights.

The “illegal” frame was widely used by conservative political organizers in the 2006 U.S. election as a hot-button issue to drive voters to the polls. This frame is advocated by four organizations that have mobilized toward restricting the rights of undocumented immigrants—the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), Numbers USA, Center for Immigration Studies (CIS), and the American Immigration Control Foundation (AICF). The frame has wide repercussions, because it has changed the language of the pro-immigration or anti-immigration debate by the immediate assignment of negative characteristics to this population, helping sway traditional adherents of a pro-immigration stance.

Some proponents of the measures counter the illegal frame by finding alternative names for this population, such as immigrants, undocumented students, noncitizens, newcomers, and teens. Other proponents counter the illegal frame by placing blame not on the students but on the parents who brought them illegally into the country (e.g., “Children should not be held hostage for their parents’ sins,” Vennochi, 2005, p. A11), thus positioning the students more favorably but still within the realm of this constructed notion of legality.

### The Role of Frames and Ideologies

Journalists do not report the facts or the truth but rather present the news in the context of a frame, allowing them to process, report, and present large amounts of information in a quick and routine fashion. A frame calls attention to some aspects while obscuring others. To frame is “to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Proponents of the In-State Tuition Bill and the Educational Opportunity
Act call attention to the “American Dream” frame to position undocumented students favorably within public opinion, aligning themselves with a meritocratic ideology that judges membership in society not according to strict legal terms but to individual characteristics of hard work, appropriate values, and innate talents. Opponents of the measure highlight the issue of legality, attributing negative connotations and a moral evaluation to migrants who have not played by the rules.

In U.S. folklore, narratives around meritocracy and the American dream abound in discourses of immigration. They reflect an image of the United States as the land of opportunity, where “if you work hard enough and are talented enough, you can overcome any obstacle and achieve success without concern for where you started” (McNamee & Miller, 2004, p. 1). This narrative is rooted in the country’s historical experience of European immigration, where citizens of monarchic societies or hereditary aristocracies came to America to be free and achieve on their own merits. Intrinsically, these notions see success in society due to individual factors, which in the United States are closely aligned to notions of playing by the rules, working hard, having the right attitude, and having innate talents and abilities. As in all ideologies, meritocracy provides a simplifying perspective on a very complex issue and performs an important function: It not only gives justification to inequalities in society but also gives hope and motivation to the individual by placing the hope of success on oneself.

Proponents and opponents use different frames in the portrayal of undocumented students’ access to higher education in Massachusetts, but they rely on the same ideologies. Only by recognizing the limitations of the ideologies that surround these frames can a more informed discussion on immigration occur. Debates around policy for immigrant students, especially, need to be informed by the dangers of tapping into an ideology that stresses individualism, as undocumented students face a host of barriers that sit outside individual notions of success.

In meritocratic terms, this population will rarely “succeed,” because systematic barriers block access to higher education institutions and professional advancement. We must acknowledge, however, the ubiquity of individual narratives in the American conscience, as well as their common practice in journalistic genres, while recognizing that these are especially problematic for undocumented students as society for them is not a fair and equal playing ground. Such individualist renderings obliterate the fact that structural factors, such as social and cultural advantages, unequal educational opportunities, and discrimination in all of its forms, are barriers to this success.

Indeed, a much better understanding of the history of meritocracy is needed to comprehend the limiting aspects of this false consciousness. Historically, as an ideology of inequality, it served economically established populations who justified inequalities in society in a black and white America. Those populations could claim that minorities do not work hard enough, don’t have the right attitude, and lack the necessary innate talents. Meritocracy can and is now being used to justify the segregation of new waves of immigrants. To have a more informed debate on policy about immigration, stakeholders need to find a way to include structural views of how society operates, instead of relying on individual narratives that ultimately distort societal perceptions of equality.

References

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