
Book Review

We ARE Americans: Undocumented students pursuing the American dream

William Perez

Stylus, Sterling, VA, USA, 2009, paperback, 161pp., ISBN: 1579223762

Latino Studies (2010) 8, 421–423. doi:10.1057/lst.2010.31

In this pioneering text, *We ARE Americans: Undocumented Students Pursuing the American Dream*, William Perez presents the touching narratives of undocumented students who are being denied the opportunity to pursue their dreams because of their immigration status. Using these narratives in conjunction with social, economic and civil rights arguments, he demonstrates the need for a pathway to legalization. Having spent a majority of their lives in the United States of America, 1.8 million undocumented children (ages 0–18 years) and 3.4 million undocumented young adults (ages 18–29 years) have been educated in US educational institutions, and socialized to believe in meritocracy. They grew up thinking that they would be able to pursue their American Dreams, much like their documented and citizen peers. Yet, on completing their legally guaranteed K-12 education, they are faced with a choice to pursue their educational dreams or to join others in the undocumented shadows. For the 20 individuals featured in this book, and the 10–20 per cent of their undocumented peers who choose to pursue a higher education, this meant facing financial,

psychological and social challenges as they attempt to wind their way through educational institutions and find ways to put their educational credentials to use.

After a brief introduction that lays out the legislative and demographic foreground, Perez presents 20 narratives – 16 undocumented students and 4 formerly undocumented individuals. Seeking to portray the experiences of undocumented students at various points in the educational pipeline, Perez tells the stories of undocumented students who are in high school, community college and 4-year university, as well as some who have already graduated from college. The final four stories are from formerly undocumented individuals who were able to pursue their education and eventually put their hard-earned degrees to use, as they serve their communities as educated professionals. By presenting these additional narratives, Perez paves the road for a clear argument: the first 16 stories are representative of those of thousands of other undocumented individuals, and they can all have the same outcomes as these now educated professionals, who were also formerly undocumented, if the



federal government creates a pathway to citizenship. At the end of each narrative, and in his conclusion, Perez makes an impassioned plea for readers to get involved in passing the federal Dream Act, which would enable talented undocumented youth to legalize their status.

Overall, Perez' book is innovative because of its narrative structure and policy-based focus. Presenting each narrative separately, he recounts the specific experiences of each individual. In the midst of hearing about their educational experiences, future plans and dreams, we read about their families, friends, teachers, community service commitments, financial difficulties, jobs, grades and scholarships. By choosing this format, Perez allows his readers to get to know each individual, to feel their pain as well as their success. He is hoping that we are moved enough by these stories that we will take action and become advocates of the Dream Act. By having this specific policy focus, the book is a timely example of how academics can take their work out of the ivory tower and into the streets. Because of its simple, narrative structure, each chapter can be used independently as an educational resource in classrooms and workshops as well as for a variety of audiences. In addition, the book has been taken up by undocumented students themselves as an educational resource to use in their own campaigns for the Dream Act.

Although hearing one heartbreaking story after another can seem repetitive, it drives home the point that arbitrary immigration statuses effectively limit the opportunities of these talented youth. While this perceived repetition is partially the result of hearing Perez' voice narrating each story, rather than having each individual telling his or her own story, it is also because the lives of all undocumented students are limited in similar ways. Inevitably, their

stories resemble one another. Yet, some of this overlap could have been avoided had Perez used interviews from a wider demographic sample. Although he pays particular attention to representing each level of the educational pipeline, his sample does not reflect the diversity present in the undocumented student experience. It appears as if most of the students are of Mexican origin, and clearly all of them are of Latino origin. While the majority (56 per cent) of undocumented individuals are of Mexican origin, 2.5 million originate from other Latin American countries and another 2.5 million are not of Latino origin (Passel, 2006). By leaving out the racial/ethnic and national origin diversity of the undocumented population, Perez misses key factors that could, and most likely do contribute to the educational experiences of undocumented students. For example, by featuring stories of undocumented immigrant students from different racial backgrounds we would be able to see how race plays a critical role in these experiences.

In addition, by starting his analysis with high school seniors, Perez misses the narratives of those undocumented youth who have been pushed out of the educational pipeline early on. Although this traditional post high-school focus is partly the result of when undocumented students realize the actual effects of their legal status, it does not excuse the need to consider those undocumented individuals who, for whatever reason, do not pursue their education. In general, we need to see these stories of undocumented Latino students as a subset of the larger experiences of Latinos in the educational pipeline. The same factors that preclude documented and citizen Latinos from accessing higher education, affect their undocumented Latino peers.



Overall, Perez groundbreaking book paves the way for more research in the area of undocumented immigration. *We ARE Americans* serves as the perfect introductory text to the topic of undocumented immigrant youth, because of its clarity and narrative structure. In addition, it demonstrates the ways in which we, as academics, can speak to and make a difference in the communities we study.

References

Passel, J. 2006. *The Size and Characteristics of the Unauthorized Migrant Population in the US*. Washington DC: Pew Hispanic Center.

Laura E. Enriquez
University of California, Los Angeles,
California