

DISSERTATION

DREAMs DEFERRED: TESTIMONIES OF THE UNDOCUMENTED LATIN@  
STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Submitted by

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Spring 2012

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## ABSTRACT

### DREAMs DEFERRED: TESTIMONIES OF THE UNDOCUMENTED LATIN@ STUDENT EXPERIENCE

According to Passel and Cohn (2008), in 2008, there were 1.5 million undocumented children under the age of 18 living in the United States. California housed 22% of the nation's total undocumented population (Passel & Cohn, 2008). Each year approximately 65,000 undocumented students graduate from United States high schools, and 25,000 of these students graduate from California alone (National Immigration Law Center, 2006).

This narrative study explores the meaning of the label “undocumented” as it is experienced by Latino/a undocumented college students in educational settings. Utilizing Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Latino Critical Theory (LatCrit) theoretical frameworks to analyze the participant's testimonies, this study illuminates the multiple forms of subordination that Latino/a undocumented students experience because of their race, language, socioeconomic background, gender, and immigration status.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This academic accomplishment would have never been possible without the support of many people. I would like to thank the Steel Magnolias for inspiring me to grow both academically and professionally. It has been a privilege to work with such talented women. I also want to thank Dr. Johanna Maes for the unconditional friendship and many motivational conversations throughout what could have been a lonely dissertation process.

To my dissertation committee Drs. Jim Banning, Timothy G. Davies, Norberto Valdez, and Antonette Aragon, I will forever be grateful to you for supporting my research. I admire all of you for your scholarly contributions to the academy, and admire you even more for your contributions towards educational equality and social justice.

To my work colleagues, thank you for being some of my strongest supporters. I especially want to thank Richard Regua for constantly editing my work, and always providing me honest feedback.

A mi familia, no hay suficientes palabras para decir les lo agradecida que estoy de tenerlos en mi vida. Gracias por siempre apoyar me y motivarme cuando no creía que podría completar esta etapa de mi vida. To the Burtons, thank you for all the encouragement, and care packages (Tim Tams) that always arrived when I needed them the most. I'm blessed to be part of the Burton Family.

Lastly, I would like to thank my husband and best friend Alistair C. Burton, for always reminding me that at the end of the day, regardless of my struggles or doubts, everything was going to work out. Your intelligence and humor inspire me to be a better person. Cheers!

## DEDICATION/DEDICACION

I dedicate this work to Alejandra, Cristal, Javier, Alejandro, and all other undocumented students whose DREAMs are deferred.

Le dedico este estudio a Alejandra, Cristal, Javier, Alejandro y a todos los estudiantes indocumentados que sus sueños han sido diferidos.

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## **Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION**

### **Background**

Out of the total population of unauthorized immigrants in the United States, four of five are from Latin American countries, which equates to 9.6 million unauthorized immigrants (Passel & Cohn, 2008). In 2008, there were 11.9 million people who were residing in the United States as unauthorized immigrants, making up 4% of the U.S. population (Passel & Cohn, 2008). Unauthorized immigrants are defined as “residents of the United States who are not U.S. citizens, who do not hold current permanent-resident visas or who have not been granted permission under a set of specific authorized temporary statuses for longer-term residence and work” (Passel & Cohn, 2008, p. 1). According to Passel and Cohn (2008), the majority of “undocumented immigrants either entered the country without valid documents or they arrived with valid visas but stayed past their visa expiration date or otherwise violated the terms of their admission” (p.1).

Immigration has social and psychological implications on individuals and their families whether they are documented or undocumented. Historically, people emigrate with hopes of a better life, better opportunities, and financial success (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). One of the primary reasons of parents emigrating with their families is to provide their children the opportunity of a better education (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Parents sacrifice their lives in order to provide something better for their children, which can generally be described as a life of choices and freedom. However, parents of undocumented children often are unaware of the academic obstacles that their children will face in the United States as undocumented students.

## **The Undocumented Student**

The National Immigration Law Center (2009) defines an undocumented student as “a foreign national who: (1) entered the United States without inspection or with fraudulent documents; or (2) entered legally as a nonimmigrant but then violated the terms of his or her status and remained in the United States without authorization” (p.1). According to Passel and Cohn (2008), in 2008, there were 1.5 million undocumented children under the age of 18 living in the United States. California housed 22% of the nation’s total undocumented population (Passel & Cohn, 2008). Each year 65,000 undocumented students graduate from United States high schools, and 25,000 of these students graduate from California alone (Passel & Cohn, 2008). Of the 65,000 students who graduate from U.S. high schools, 13,000 enroll in colleges and universities (Passel & Cohn, 2008). Most college bound undocumented students have lived in the U.S. the majority of their lives and were brought to the U.S. by their parents at a young age (Educators for Fair Consideration, 2012).

While most college bound undocumented students think of themselves as American, “one of the most demoralizing aspects of undocumented status is its effect on the educational aspirations of immigrant children” (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001, p. 34). Most immigrant children have high hopes of becoming highly educated and are shattered when they realize that their immigration status prevents them from pursuing a college education (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001).

## **The Undocumented Student and Legal Issues**

By law, undocumented students are entitled to a K-12 education; however, there are currently no state laws that provide a pathway to residency for students who pursue a higher education (Gonzales, 2008, p. 6). In *Plyer v. Doe* (1982), the Supreme Court ruling determined that a K-12 education is a fundamental and protected right and will be provided to all children in the United States, regardless of citizenship or residency status. The reasoning behind the Texas decision was that undocumented children have little control over their residency status and therefore while *Plyer v. Doe* (1982) determined that undocumented children legally had a right to a K-12 education, the law did not address higher education (Kaplin & Lee, 2006). This case attracted attention in California because undocumented college students who had been living in California for most of their lives were being charged with out-of-state tuition. In 1983, the California legislature passed a statute that stated, “an alien including an unmarried minor, may establish his or her residence unless precluded by the Immigration and Nationality Act from establishing domicile in the United States” (Kaplin & Lee, 2006, p. 838). This statute was not clear on how it would affect undocumented students in California who were seeking to establish residency for in-state tuition purposes (Kaplin & Lee, 2006). The Attorney General of California established an interpretation of the statute indicating that since undocumented aliens were not able to establish residence in the United States under federal immigration law, they would not be able to be classified as California residents for in-state tuition purposes (Kaplin & Lee, 2006). The University of California (UC) and the California State University (CSU) systems adopted this policy, thereby mandating that all undocumented states pay out-of-state tuition (Kaplin & Lee, 2006).

In 1985, in *Leticia A. v. Regents of the University of California*, four undocumented students challenged the state policies. The four students had resided most of their lives in California and had graduated from California high schools. Based on the *Plyer v. Doe* decision, the Leticia A. court decided that the Education Code, which prohibited undocumented students from establishing residency, was unconstitutional and that students could establish state residence for tuition purposes for the University of California and California State University (Kaplin & Lee, 2006). However, in 1990, *Bradford*, a former employee of the University of California, sued the institution requiring that it reinstate the pre-Leticia A. immigration policy (Kaplin & Lee, 2006). The courts favored *Bradford* which meant undocumented students were no longer eligible to pay in-state tuition or to receive any state financial aid (Kaplin & Lee, 2006).

Currently, 12 states have passed legislation that allow undocumented students to pursue a higher education and receive in-state tuition, and three states—Texas, Oklahoma, and New Mexico—offer state financial aid to undocumented students ([www.nilc.org](http://www.nilc.org)). In 2001, California Assembly Member Marco Firebaugh authored Assembly Bill 540, which Governor Gray Davis signed into law. AB 540 authorized undocumented students who met specific criteria to pay in-state tuition at California public colleges and universities. Prior to AB 540, undocumented students were charged out-of-state tuition fees, which made it nearly impossible for this population to pursue a higher education. In order for undocumented students to qualify for in-state tuition under AB 540, they must meet the following criteria: (a) have attended a California High School for 3 or more years, (b) graduated from a California High School or have attained a G.E.D., (c) have filed or will file an affidavit as required by individual institutions,

stating that they will apply for legal residency as soon as possible ([www.ab540.com](http://www.ab540.com)).

While this law allows undocumented students to pay in-state tuition, it does not provide students access to state or federal financial aid. It also does not change the student's immigration status. Federal legislation that could provide a pathway to residency for undocumented students is the Development, Relief, and Education for Minors (DREAM) Act.

The DREAM Act, introduced several times since 2001, has failed to gain cloture. The latest version of the DREAM Act was introduced in March 2009 by Senators Dick Durbin (D-IL) and Richard Lugar (R-IN). If the DREAM Act were signed into law, it would allow undocumented students who have grown up in the United States to apply for temporary legal status and to eventually obtain permanent status and become eligible for U.S. citizenship if they go to college or serve in the U.S. military, and the DREAM Act would eliminate a federal provision that penalizes states that provide in-state tuition without regard to immigration status (National Immigration Law Center, 2009). In order to be eligible for the DREAM Act, undocumented students would need to have good moral conduct, moved to the U.S. at the age of 15 or younger, and not be older than 35 years of age. During the 6-year period of conditional status, undocumented students would be required to complete a 2-year community college degree, complete two years toward a 4-year degree, or serve two years in the United States military. After the six-year period, undocumented students who complete one of the three conditions would be eligible to apply for permanent resident status (National Immigration Law Center, 2009).

## **Statement of the Problem**

Each year more and more undocumented students are graduating from United States high schools, and with only 12 states allowing this student population to pay in-state tuition, passing a law such as the DREAM Act would positively change the lives of many immigrant students. Undocumented students deal with the same challenges and risk factors as other immigrant youth; however, they also “face constant institutional and societal exclusion and rejection due to their undocumented status” (Pérez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, & Cortes, 2009, p. 150). Most undocumented students grow up thinking of themselves as American, yet “living with only partial access to the mechanisms that promote social mobility” (Gonzales, 2008, p. 7). Undocumented students are not eligible to receive any federal financial aid, are ineligible for most scholarships, are not eligible to apply for a driver’s license, and are not allowed to legally work in this country (Pérez et al., 2009). With these restrictions, undocumented students encounter many emotional and psychological experiences (Pérez et al., 2009). As Gonzales (2008) states, undocumented students “find themselves between two worlds, betwixt and between their country of birth and the country they call home” (p. 7).

Living in fear of deportation is one of the major psychological stress contributors that undocumented students encounter. Due to this fear, they are less likely to seek medical attention when needed because of the personal questions posed when being admitted into a hospital, are more likely to stay in bad job situations because of the fear of not being able to get another job, and are more likely to accept physical and mental abuse from relatives with whom they are residing due to fear of being asked to leave and even worse, fear of being reported to immigration (Dozier, 1993).

Despite laws such as AB 540 and House Bill 1403 from Texas that support undocumented students paying in-state tuition, these students are still left with few higher educational and professional options. Undocumented students must navigate the obstacles that are attached to being undocumented.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this narrative study is to explore the meaning of the label “undocumented” as it is experienced by the Latino/a undocumented college students in educational settings. It is my hope that by giving a “voice” to undocumented students, the academy and policy makers will learn about this student population. It is also my hope that utilizing a Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Latino Critical Theory (LatCrit) theoretical framework when analyzing the study’s data, the outcome will reject “the claims that a U.S. education system offers objectivity, meritocracy, color-blindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity” for People of Color and in particular undocumented students (Yosso, 2006, p.7).

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions frame this study:

- What role has the designation of “undocumented” played in the pre-collegiate educational experience of the Latino/a undocumented college students?
- What role has the designation of “undocumented” played in the collegiate experience of the Latino/a college students?
- How do Latino/a undocumented college students define their personal meaning of the label “undocumented”?

## **Summary**

In chapter 1, I began by defining and describing the undocumented student population. I also discussed legislation and immigration laws that have influenced current laws and laws that are currently up for debate.

Chapter 2 provides a review of literature that is divided into four categories, which are (a) Latino/a students in Higher Education, (b) Undocumented Students and Higher Education, (c) Undocumented Students and Higher Education and (d) Role of Stigma and the label “Undocumented” or “Illegal.” I discussed the roles of Latino/as in higher education and in particular focused on the role of undocumented Latino/as in higher education. Lastly, I discuss how undocumented Latino/a students feel about the stigma and stereotypes attached to their residency status.

In chapter 3, I describe the rationale for this qualitative study, and in particular I describe my rationale for a narrative study. I also describe in detail my methodological approach as well as the setting and participants, the sampling and data collection, the data analysis, and the trustworthiness of the data.

Chapters 4 through 7, I presented individual narratives of the four participants of the study, where they addressed how being undocumented (a) affected their pre-collegiate educational experiences, (b) affected their higher education experiences, and (c) defined their personal meaning of the label undocumented. I drew from their narratives and utilized Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) lenses to illuminate the uncertainties that each participant experiences due to policies and laws which restrict each of them from upward social mobility. With CRT



and LatCrit lenses I also illuminated the explicit forms of subordination that they individually experience because of their undocumented status.

In chapter 8, I focused on revealing the similarities and differences among the frequent themes that arouse from their individual narratives regarding their definition of “undocumented.” I presented the themes according to the research questions, which are organized according to their academic trajectory. I also presented reflections from three of the four participants who attended a focus group, and shared their experience with narrative inquiry.

Lastly, in chapter 9 I revisited the research questions of this study and addressed the research findings as compared to the literature review. I also provided recommendations for further research, and concluded with my reflections of the study.

## **Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction**

While there are various ethnic groups that make-up the undocumented student population, for the purpose of this study the literature review will be on the social, political, and educational experiences of the undocumented Latino/a population. To better understand the Latino/a undocumented population this literature review consists of four sections. The first section describes the status Latino/as have in higher education. Specifically, it describes the academic struggles and lack of degree attainment that Latino/as continue to encounter due to educational inequalities. The second section discusses the undocumented student population in the United States and the struggles they encounter due to their residency status. It also addresses how undocumented students are resilient and are able to navigate day-to-day life without legal legitimacy in this country.

The third section of the literature review provides in an in-depth description of the emotional struggles that Latino/a undocumented students encounter due to their residency status. This section also describes the contributing factors to their resiliency. Lastly, the fourth section describes the stigma that is attached with being undocumented.

### **Latino/as in Higher Education**

Latinos are the fastest growing minority in the United States, and it is projected that the Latino population will be the largest ethnic group in the near future. A study conducted by the National Council of La Raza (NCLR) states that Latinos have become the fastest- growing minority group in the U.S., rising from 12 % of the population to 14 % of the total U.S. population in 2004 (Lazarin, 2007). However, Latinos continue to be

plagued by low rates of high school completion, college participation, and degree attainment (Passel & Cohn, 2008). Latinos are often the least represented in the academic arena and continue to be the least educated minority group with the highest academic dropout rates. A report on Education Attainment by Race and Ethnicity conducted by the Pew Hispanic Center indicated that in 2006, of the 52,889,308 people in the United States who had earned a bachelor's degree 1,542,190 of the total were Latino/as (Passel & Cohn, 2008).

However, the lack of educational attainment does not begin at the baccalaureate level. While the number of Latino/as who pursue a higher education is dismal, the issue is beyond college admission eligibility. According to Nora (2003), the attrition rate of Latino students from eighth to ninth grade is between 46% and 50%. An additional 50% of Latino students are lost in the academic pipeline between the ninth grade and the twelfth grade, while more drop out before finishing the twelfth grade (Nora, 2003). Even more disheartening are the number of Latino students who apply to an institution of higher education upon graduation from high school. Only 35% of Latino students attend an institution of higher education right after high school (Nora, 2003). The institution of choice for the Latino/a student continues to be the community college. "Latino students are not evenly distributed among non-selective, selective, and highly selective institutions" and they "...represent 36% of the total community college enrollments" (Nora, 2003, p. 49). National transfer rates from two-year colleges to four-year colleges/universities is 22%, and for Latinos it is as low as 10% (Nora, 2003). According to Nora (2003), by the time Latinos reach the twelfth grade it is too late to change college

eligibility and the larger issues are the barriers these students had to face in their pre-college years (p. 48).

A pre-college barrier that Latino/a students face is educational inequities between affluent and less affluent school districts and schools, which then lead to this student population lagging behind other groups in subject areas such as reading, math, and science (Nora, 2003, p. 48). This deficit is noticed as early as elementary to middle school (Nora, 2003, p. 49). Predominately minority elementary schools are more likely to emphasize academic remediation and a slowing down of instruction rather than academic enrichment or an acceleration of curriculum (Solórzano & Solórzano, 1995). Also, the possibility of minority grouping is a much greater possibility at low socio-economic elementary schools, which leads to lower academic achievement for minority students (Solórzano & Solórzano, 1995). Minority elementary schools are more segregated, tend to be larger, and are more likely to receive less money per student from state and federal funding (Solórzano & Solórzano, 1995). Many of the schools where the majority of the population is Latinos are operating with less than perfect working conditions which include employing teachers without proper credentials, lack of computer technology, and lack of appropriate curricula (Nora, 2003, p. 49).

Latino students trail in higher education because they are not being placed in pre-collegiate programs or courses that prepare them for higher education (Nora, 2003). Nora and Lang (1999 as cited in Nora, 2003) found that a successful transition to higher education and students' decisions to stay enrolled in higher education are influenced by educational experiences they have early in life (p. 61). Pre-college psychosocial experiences have a tremendous impact on the retention of Latino/a students in higher

education. Even if quality educational programs are available at minority elementary schools, Solórzano and Solórzano (1995) found that Latino/as are less likely to participate than are White students because of (a) low educational expectations for Latino students, (b) the school staff takes less responsibility for educating Latino students, and (c) the educational quality programs are placed outside Latino neighborhoods (p. 295).

### **Undocumented Students and Higher Education**

Achieving the American Dream is often associated with economic success, and economic success is associated with educational attainment. According to the U.S. Department of Commerce (2010), the yearly earnings of a person by educational attainment were as follows: high school dropout - \$20, 241; high school graduate - \$30, 627, Associate's Degree - \$39,771; Bachelor's Degree - \$56,665; Master's Degree - \$73,738; and Doctoral Degree - \$103,054. Over a lifetime, pursuing higher education is economically beneficial and offers valuable rewards for people such as: (a) developing a skill or talent, (b) having the ability to think critically or analytically, (c) expanding knowledge of the world and its people, (d) and providing the opportunity to work with experts in their fields of interest (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2010).

According to Contreras (2009), the number of Latino students who successfully navigate higher education is very small in proportion to the Latino student population in the K-12 system (p. 2). Not only do undocumented students endure similar obstacles of other Latino and immigrant youth, they deal with constant institutional and societal exclusion and rejection due to their immigration status (Pérez et al., 2009, p. 150). One of the stressors that first generation minority students who immigrate to the United States have is acculturation because they have to integrate two cultural backgrounds (Gonzales

et al., 1997). The acculturation process is even more difficult for undocumented students because, while they consider themselves Americans, they do not have the proper documentation to live their day-to-day life such as having a driver's license, being permitted to work in the United States, or having the right to vote (p. 4).

About 10% to 20% of undocumented students who graduate from high school will go on to college, which is an estimated 7,000-13,000 students (Pérez, 2009). Annually California has the largest amount of undocumented students, with an estimate of 25,000 students who graduate annually from high school. However, fewer than 7,000 enroll in community colleges with an even lower enrollment in the University of California and California State University systems (Pérez, 2009). Undocumented students are less likely to pursue a higher education due to the lack of knowledge of how to navigate higher education and the lack of financial resources (Contreras, 2009).

It is extremely difficult for students to pay college tuition without financial resources such as federal and state financial aid, scholarships, or grants. In most states, undocumented students are not eligible for any governmental financial resources due to their immigration status. Also, as few as ten states have passed legislature that allows undocumented students to pay in-state tuition. Being identified as an international student for tuition purposes typically means a student must pay three times the tuition fees of a resident student, which becomes even more difficult for an undocumented student to pay without the assistance of federal and state financial aid (Pérez, 2009). Nearly 40% of undocumented children live below poverty level (compared to 17% of native born children), while the average income of undocumented immigrant families is 40% lower than that of either native-born families or legal immigrant families (Gonzales, 2009).

Contreras (2009) states that while some undocumented students “are savvy enough to navigate high school and complete the requirements for college, they are still left with the considerable challenge of financing their higher education” (p. 1). Undocumented students are then forced to work many hours to finance their education, but most important they become resilient and persistent when pursuing higher education (Contreras, 2009).

According to Alva (1991) (as cited in Gonzalez & Padilla, 1997), academic resilient students are those who “sustain high levels of achievement motivation and performance despite the presence of stressful events and conditions that place them at risk of doing poorly in school and ultimately dropping out of school” (p. 301). Minority students, in particular Latino students, tend to be at a higher risk of academic failure due to factors such as having low socio-economic status, being an English as a second language learner, attending alienating schools, and being the first in their family to attend school in the United States (Gonzalez & Padilla, 1997, p. 303). While there are several factors that put minority students at risk of academic success, low socio-economic status is one of the factors that time and time again is associated with poor academic performance (Gonzalez & Padilla, 1997, p. 303). Low socio-economic students often live in impoverished areas where schools lack funding to provide a high-quality education, therefore putting them at risk of pursuing a higher education (Gonzalez & Padilla, 1997, p. 304).

In states where the undocumented student population is larger, activism has become a means of resiliency (Contreras, 2009). According to Gonzales (2008), although undocumented students are at risk of deportation when participating in public

protests or activism events, undocumented students voiced the need to be able to tell the stories unfiltered (p. 21). Gonzales (2008) conducted a qualitative study where he interviewed and observed undocumented students from California who utilized activism to go from a “status of unwilling victims to active participants” (p. 3). Not only did undocumented students from Gonzales’ (2008) sample feel their participation in activism would have an impact on current immigration policies, they also felt that activism serves as an avenue to informing community members of their rights and current immigration policies (pp. 2-3).

According to Abrego (2008), in California the AB540 law provided undocumented students “a mechanism for student legitimacy” (p. 4). The law has also provided students “a sense of confidence and the fuel for student mobilization” (Contreras, 2009, p. 4). However, not all undocumented students are comfortable with disclosing their immigration status. While undocumented students in California find a sense of “legitimacy” due to the passing of AB540, it may not be the same for undocumented students from other states that do not have similar laws.

In a study conducted by Contreras (2009), 20 undocumented students from the state of Washington who attended both community colleges and universities were interviewed to assess their experiences as undocumented students in higher education (p. 7). Their parents migrated to the United States for “the desire to secure educational opportunities and economic mobility that did not exist in their home countries due to challenging economics, corruption, or limited social and economic mobility” (Contreras, 2009, p. 7). The study indicated undocumented students experience similar feelings about their immigration status which are: “(a) the pervasive presence of fear in the lives



of undocumented students, for themselves and their families, especially the prospect of separations; (b) the financial difficulty for paying for college with limited access for financial aid; (c) campus experiences that were often discriminatory, as well as exposure to resources and supportive individuals who students could trust to help them navigate college; (d) the will to persist, as seen in the determination to overcome challenges in their personal and academic lives as well as the determination to give back to their communities, and (e) concerns about the future” (Contreras, 2009, p. 7). Dozier (1993) also found that undocumented college students experience emotional stressors such as: fear of deportation, loneliness, and depression (p.33).

Undocumented students are constantly living in fear of deportation (Contreras, 2009; Pérez, 2009). The fear of deportation influences the undocumented students’ everyday lives. Undocumented students fear going to hospitals because they feel their immigration status may be questioned (Dozier, 1993). They fear they will be separated from their families or they will be deported to a country they no longer can relate to or call home. Undocumented students find it difficult to establish close emotional relationships (Contreras, 2009; Dozier, 1993).

Contreras (2009) reports that undocumented students feel isolated on their college campus or university and have difficulties interacting with school officials (p. 8). “For Latino students, specifically, perceptions of prejudice and discrimination on campus negatively affect educational aspirations and increase withdrawal behavior, ultimately harming degree attainment” (Cabrera, Nora, & Castañeda, 1993; Nora, Barlow, & Crisp, 2006; Contreras, 2009; Nora & Cabrera, 1996) and “the legal status of undocumented students has the potential to elevate levels of isolation and discouragement and incidents

of discrimination by individuals who possess anti-immigrant sentiments” (Contreras, 2009, p. 9).

Undocumented students are more likely to persist and succeed academically if they have the support of parents, peers, college faculty and staff, and are involved in extra-curricular activities (Contreras, 2009; Pérez, et al., 2009). Parental support and high parental involvement in school activities, especially from mothers, was reported to be extremely important to the resiliency of undocumented students (Muñoz, 2008). The degree of influence that family has on Latino/a students has been identified as one of the most important contributors of student persistence. According to Quirocho and Daoud (2006), dispelling the myth that Latino parents do not value higher education is critical in increasing Latino success in higher education. It is not that Latino parents do not value education; it is that many do not understand it (Quirocho & Daoud, 2006). Many Latino families who immigrate to the United States are in search of a better life than the one that they had in their native country. Parents bring their children to the United States to provide them opportunities both academically and economically. The family plays a very important role in the choices that Latino/a students take regarding which college they attend (Arellano & Padilla, 1996, p. 486).

According to Arellano and Padilla (1996) Latino/a college students’ academic motivation and success are largely affected by the emotional support and encouragement from parents (p. 486). Because family is a primary means of social support, Latino/as traditionally adhere to *familismo*, a strong sense of family centrality and importance (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000). According to Gloria and Rodriguez (2000) the “pervasiveness of *familismo* is manifested by (a) providing material and emotional

support to other family members, (b) relying primarily on family members for help and support, (c) using family members as referents for attitudes and behavior, and (d) placing the needs of the family or family members before individual needs” (p. 150). Strong family ties were the key predictor of academic resilience of Latino/a students (Arellano & Padilla, 1996).

A study by Olivérez (2006) reported that even though most parents were supportive of their children pursuing a higher education, most parents lacked familiarity of the U.S. educational system. Additionally, Olivérez (2006) found home environments were not always conducive for college preparation. Undocumented students are generally from low-income families who are forced to live in less than adequate conditions. Undocumented students often live in small rented apartments, which are often crowded, leaving little room for them to study or have their personal space (Olivérez, 2006). They are forced to study and to do their homework away from home or when everyone has gone to sleep (Olivérez, 2006).

Contreras (2009) identified that undocumented students found support from counselors who worked for the diversity office or special programs and were informed about undocumented student policies (p.10). Most Latino students who graduate from high school and enroll in college find “an invalidating and intimidating college environment coupled with a faculty that is predominately White with little understanding of minority cultures, a Euro-centered curriculum, racism, and a fiercely competitive learning environment” (Nora, 2003, p. 55). These issues lead to attrition and difficulty transitioning to higher education (Nora, 2003). Minority students need minority mentors, a curriculum that includes

minority issues, and support programs that address issues minority students face (Nora, 2003).

Mentoring students in an academic institution can be defined as a one-to-one learning relationship between an older person and a younger person that is based on modeling behavior and extended dialogue between the two (Castellanos & Jones, 2003; Decoster & Brown, 1982). Mentors perform roles such as guide, counselor, sponsor, and teacher. Mentors provide room for growth and encouragement to students. They drive protégés to their potential and bring forth their commitment to achievement. They also contribute to the academic perseverance of students helping them recognize their potential and providing opportunities in their field of interest (Castellanos & Jones, 2003).

Students who experience a high degree of faculty interaction take a more active role in their own education than other students (Castellanos & Jones, 2003, p. 9). According to Tinto (1993), frequent contact with faculty is a particularly important element in student persistence. Students who are mentored or have faculty interactions are often more interested in pursuing their education and are more actively engaged in using their university's resources (Castellanos & Jones, 2003, p. 9). Additionally, this is true when the student-mentor contact extended beyond the formal boundaries to various informal settings (Castellanos & Jones, 2003, p. 9).

Informal contacts of students and faculty are strongly associated with continued academic persistence (Castellanos & Jones, 2003, p. 9). It is particularly essential for Latino/a students to have mentors and role models. While it is important that all faculty

take the responsibility to mentor all students, the utter presence of Latino/a faculty who have navigated and succeeded within the educational system proves to Latino/a students they can also succeed academically (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000, p.84). Latino/a mentors can assist Latino/a students by providing them with guidance, accessing support systems, knowing about different academic or financial opportunities, and believing in their potential within the academic environment (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000). Latino/a mentors also serve as cultural agents who help alleviate feelings of alienation, cultural incongruity, and marginalization (Hurtado & Kamimura, 2003, p. 147). Mentor participation is essential to Latino/a student retention (Castellanos & Jones, 2003, p. 9). Contreras (2009) found that faculty, staff, and mentors who are sensitive to the undocumented student population are more likely to provide them with scholarship information, access to community resources, and help them navigate higher education (Contreras, 2009, p.10).

Along with support from family, peers, and college personnel, Contreras (2009) found that undocumented students succeed due to their own *ganas* or “the will or determination to succeed” (p. 12). Undocumented students demonstrate the *ganas* in many ways, and the first example is the work ethic of this student population (Contreras, 2009, p. 12). Many undocumented students will work long hours to finance their education and to simultaneously assist their family economically. They will work in restaurants as waitresses, in construction projects, in the fields, or clean offices in order to pay for their college degree (Contreras, 2009, p. 12).

The second example of *ganas* is the “passion and will to succeed in this country” that undocumented students have and the “determination to give back to their

communities” (Contreras, 2009, p.12). It is typical for undocumented students to go to school full-time, work, and still dedicate a lot of time to helping the community and educating others about how to navigate higher education. Undocumented students have the desire to succeed, and while the laws may damper their dreams, their desire and motivation give them the drive to continue with their education (Contreras, 2009, p.13).

While legislature exists in 10 states that allow undocumented students to pursue a higher education and pay resident fees, there is currently no law that provides a pathway to residency for undocumented students. Some undocumented students who may have pursued a higher education are discouraged because upon college graduation they will not be able to practice their profession without having a work visa, residency, or citizenship (Contreras, 2009). Undocumented students are not guaranteed a college degree will offer them the same economic opportunities that it could to college graduates who are residents or citizens. Also when choosing a major, undocumented students must ensure themselves that their degree completion will not require an internship or certification that requires legal documentation or identification. As Contreras (2009) states, undocumented students face many obstacles and *ganas* is a major factor to their academic success (p. 12).

### **Role of Stigma and the label “Undocumented” or “Illegal”**

Currently trapped in a legal paradox, undocumented students in the United States have the right to a primary and secondary school education, but then face uncertainty upon graduation from high school. While some states explicitly allow undocumented students to attend college, there are many gray areas that cloud the college admissions, financial aid and enrollment processes. (Gonzales, 2009, p. 4)

While the United States prides itself in its civil rights movements and laws that support marginalized populations, the undocumented population is unlikely to claim rights due to fear of deportation and the negative stigma associated with being

opportunistic (Abrego, 2008). Civil right and antidiscrimination laws unintentionally produce negative labels that categorize subjects as victims and associate them with weakness (Abrego, 2008). The law currently depicts undocumented immigrants as “criminals, fugitives, and illicit” (Coutin 2000, p. 167-68), yet “migrants inhabit legitimate spaces through practices that include work, paying for legal services, and sending remittances” (Abrego, 2008, p. 714).

According to Abrego (2008), “the case of undocumented students is arguably even more contradictory than that of adult undocumented immigrants. Because many arrived in the United States as young children, they were able to learn the language, absorb the customs, and make the culture their own in ways that are not available to those who migrate as adults (p. 714). Adult immigrants stand out to “others through their clothing and language practices that they are outsiders, undocumented students dress and speak English in ways that make them largely indistinguishable from their U.S. –born peers” (Olivas, 1995, as cited in Abrego, 2008, p. 714). In this sense, undocumented students are simultaneously included and excluded from U.S. society (Abrego, 2008, p. 714).

Undocumented youth are included in practices that make them part of the U.S. society such as being able to receive a K-12 education, and acculturating to U.S. customs and traditions, and the English language. However, ultimately they are also excluded from the U.S. society due to their immigration status (Abrego, 2008, p.714).

Undocumented students are able to overcome their illegitimacy in the country by focusing on meritocratic principles such as being productive members of society, earning above average grades throughout their education, and not breaking laws (Abrego, 2008).

Laws like Assembly Bill 540 have also contributed to giving undocumented students a legitimate space in U.S. society. “The law provided undocumented students with a new, neutral, and more socially acceptable label that subsequently changes their social identity and their potential for collective organization and further claims-making” (Abrego, 2008, p. 723). Prior to the enactment of AB 540, students felt a sense of embarrassment due to their undocumented status (Abrego, 2008). Undocumented students reported that they did not like being called “illegal aliens” as they do not have antennas and are not from outer space; therefore, the term “illegal alien” is demeaning to this population (Abrego, 2008). These labels also caused this student population shame and discomfort (Abrego, 2008).

The AB 540 law provided undocumented students with another label that made it more acceptable to be undocumented students and provided students with more confidence sharing their immigration status with fellow classmates and educators. According to Abrego (2008), undocumented students felt the title “AB 540” is more acceptable than titles such as “undocumented” or “illegal”, because it helps conceal undocumented student’s migratory status and provides students with credibility. Besides the intended purpose of laws such as AB 540, that have provided undocumented students the opportunity to pay in-state tuition, they have unintentionally provided more. Laws such as AB 540 have provided undocumented students with increased confidence, a more socially acceptable label, and “have allowed undocumented students to identify themselves publicly in an effort to find others who share their status” (Abrego, 2008, p.727). While this California law has transformed many lives and provided some undocumented students with a legitimate title, similar laws exist in 12 states, but they also do not provide students with a pathway to residency, therefore permanently



assigning a label to undocumented students regardless of whether it is demeaning or acceptable in society.

While there is some research about how undocumented students define their personal meaning of the label “undocumented”, it is very minimal. Most studies conducted about the undocumented student population relate to immigration policies, access to higher education, and student resilience; however, very little has been researched on how the designation of being labeled “undocumented” has affected these students’ academic experiences.

### **Summary**

According to Steele (1997, as cited in Gyll, Madon, Prieto & Scherr, 2010), stereotype threat is defined as the “fear that one’s behavior may confirm or be understood in terms of a negative stereotype associated with one’s social group” (p. 120). Undocumented students experience stereotype threat and have stated being labeled “illegal” or “undocumented” immediately puts them in a category of people who commit crimes and or different from their peers who are United States residents or citizens (Abrego, 2008). Regardless of laws that allow undocumented students to pay in-state tuition for higher education purposes, this student population continues to be disenfranchised and marginalized. Undocumented students encounter psychological emotions due to being labeled and living in fear of deportation (Abrego, 2008). This fear can lead to depression, social reclusiveness, and anxiety (Abrego, 2008). Undocumented students feel a sense of inferiority to their peers due to having fewer rights and feel disadvantaged when their academic merit has not been enough to grant them economic resources for their higher education due to their residency status (Abrego, 2008).

According to Gonzales (2009), if the laws do not change favorably for undocumented students, a generation of promise could be lost, and in the process run the risk of dragging down entire communities. “Based on the collective research it is evident that—at a time when the supply of available workers in the United States, especially highly skilled workers, is not meeting the demands of the U.S. labor market—providing undocumented students with opportunities to pursue a higher education and to work legally in this country would benefit U.S. taxpayers and the U.S. economy overall” (Gonzales, 2009, p. 7). Given the opportunity to receive additional education and move into better paying jobs, undocumented students would pay more in taxes and have more money to spend and invest in the U.S. economy (Gonzales, 2009). With changes in the United States’ economy, today’s labor market demands that people attain a higher education in order to be competitive and live a comfortable life (Gonzales, 2009). The attainment of higher education is often related to having a more prosperous life due to better health and pension benefits as well as the ability to command a higher income (Gonzales, 2009). “Workers with higher levels of education are more productive and are more likely to engage in organized volunteer work, donate blood, live healthy lifestyles and be more open to the differing views of others” (Gonzales, 2009, p. 14).

While research states that creating a pathway to residency for undocumented students could be beneficial to the economic well-being of this country, currently this student population has no legal pathway to residency. In 38 of the 50 states, undocumented students find it almost impossible to pursue a higher education because quite often they are from a low-socioeconomic backgrounds, they are denied state or federal financial aid, which makes it too difficult for them to pay an out of state tuition.

Undocumented students are constantly labeled “illegal,” and while some laws such as AB 540 provide undocumented students with a sense of legitimacy, it is simply another label that is placed on this student population. Stigma and stereotypes continue to arise and become another obstacle for undocumented students to overcome.

## **Chapter Three: STUDY DESIGN**

### **Introduction**

As the literature review in chapter 2 states, it is very difficult for Latino/a undocumented students to navigate everyday life, let alone higher education. They live in fear of deportation although for most of them the United States is the only country they know because they have spent a major part of their lives in this country. The current literature states that undocumented students deal with psychological and institutional issues that have not been studied in great detail. To explore the contributing factors of how undocumented Latino/a students define their personal meaning of “undocumented,” I have chosen a qualitative research method for this study, in particular, narrative inquiry.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

According to Creswell (2007), qualitative research is conducted when something needs to be furthered explored and/ or a group who may have been silenced needs to be given a voice. Creswell (2007) defined qualitative research as

An inquiry process of understanding based on a distinct methodological tradition of inquiry that explores a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting. (p. 249)

This form of research not only allows participants to discuss their stories, but it is inclusive of the participant’s surroundings which includes their home life, work, and family (Creswell, 2007). While various forms of research exist, qualitative was the most appropriate for this study due to sensitivity of the topic and the opportunity for the participants to share their voice.

## **Method**

### **Narrative Inquiry**

Narrative inquiry consists of stories, perspectives, and experiences. Stories “are aspects that surface during an interview in which the participant describes a situation, usually with a beginning, a middle, and an end, so that the researcher can capture a complete idea and integrate it, intact, into the qualitative method” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 2007, p. 235). According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), narrative inquiry is a “collaboration between researcher and participants” and “stories that are lived and told” (p. 20). And when properly used, life stories “provide researchers with a key to discovering identity and understanding it” (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998, p. 8). Narratives provide the researcher access to an “individual identity and its systems of meaning but also to the teller’s cultural and social world” (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998, p. 9). According to Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber (1998), narrative inquiry is a methodology that provides the researcher with rich and unique data that cannot be obtained from experiments, questionnaires, or observations (p. 9). “Narrative is not an objective reconstruction of life—it is a rendition of how life is perceived” (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 3). While sample size in a narrative study tends to be relatively small, the data that are gathered from interviews are usually quite rich, and no two interviews are ever the same (Lieblich et al., 1998, p. 9).

I relied on the method of narrative inquiry to help illuminate the way that undocumented students define their own personal meaning of “undocumented.” Narrative inquiry also helped illuminate the participants’ stories about living in the United States as undocumented students. This form of research allowed them to share their life stories and gave me the humble opportunity to write about them.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This narrative study explored the meaning of the label “undocumented” and/or “illegal” as experienced by the undocumented college student in educational settings. Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Latino Critical Theory (LatCrit) framework were utilized to explore how access to and retention in higher education for undocumented Latino students is formed by issues of race and ethnicity. CRT challenges “the ways race and racism implicitly and explicitly shape social structures, practices, and discourses” (Yosso, 2006, p. 5). CRT originated as a movement in the law with a group of activists and scholars that challenged and examined race and racism in the U.S. legal system and society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Yosso, 2006). CRT and LatCrit were chosen as theoretical frameworks because they examine the construct of educational and racial inequalities faced by Latino/a students while navigating the educational system (Villalpando, 2004). In particular, CRT and LatCrit focus on (a) race and racism, (b) content dominant ideology, (c) social justice and social practice, (d) recognize experiential knowledge, and (e) historical context (Villalpando, 2004, pp. 42-47).

However, CRT is now utilized in various disciplines, and in particular it is utilized to understand issues in education (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) identified five tenets of CRT that apply to education, and they are:

1. *The intercentricity of race and racism.* CRT in education centralizes race and racism, while focusing on racisms’ intersections with forms of subordination, based on gender, class, sexuality, language, culture, immigrant status,

phenotype, accent and surname (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2006).

2. *The challenge to dominant ideology.* Critical race scholars argue that traditional claims of race neutrality and objectivity act as a camouflage for the self-interest, power, and privilege of dominant groups in U.S. society (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 313; Yosso, 2006, p. 7)
3. *The commitment to social justice.* CRT is dedicated to advancing a social justice agenda in schools and society. CRT views education as a tool to eliminate all forms of subordination and empower oppressed groups—to transform society (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 313; Yosso, 2006, p. 7).
4. *The centrality of experiential knowledge.* CRT finds the experiential knowledge of People of Color to be legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 314; Yosso, 2006, p. 7). CRT scholars utilize alternative methods such as narratives and storytelling to teach or present findings from them (Yosso, 2006, p. 7).
5. *The interdisciplinary perspective.* CRT analyzes racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia from a historical and interdisciplinary perspective (Yosso, 2006, p.7). CRT also draws from various methods of listening to give voices to populations that may have otherwise not had one (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 314; Yosso, 2006, p.7).

I drew from these five tenets throughout my study to shed light on how undocumented students define the meaning of being labeled “undocumented.” The first tenet asserts that race and racism are intertwined. I utilized this tenet to analyze all the layers of racialized subordination that Latino/a undocumented students face. Not only do Latino/a undocumented students struggle to navigate their daily lives due to their residency status, but they also face other issues such as oppression related to gender, class, accent, and phenotype. Tenet two challenges the dominant notion that education is “neutral” and “objective” (Yosso, 2005). If education were neutral, undocumented students would be able to pursue a higher education and currently only 12 states have laws that support undocumented students pursuing a higher education. Also, while there are some state laws that provide undocumented students the opportunity to pursue a higher education, this student population is limited to the majors they can choose. Most importantly, even if undocumented students complete a baccalaureate degree, currently there is no federal or state law that allows them to practice their profession.

The third tenet of Critical Race Theory states that CRT is committed to social justice. As the researcher of this study, I utilized this tenet to analyze the data through a social justice lens. It is my goal that the reader understands that Latino/a undocumented students are much more than “illegal aliens.” Most children of immigrants who are undocumented have lived in the United States for most of their lives and consider themselves Americans. However, their residency status deters them from fully ever being American. By utilizing a social justice lens, I hope that I shed light to the readers that undocumented people deserve much more than being exploited while working in



unfavorable jobs and earning below minimum wage without commensurate rights and benefits.

The fourth tenet recognizes the centrality of experiential knowledge and I used this tenet to help validate the racial subordination that Latino/a undocumented students experience through the form of their personal narratives. I illuminated their stories and hope that this study will serve as a means of educating others of the injustices that undocumented students encounter. Lastly, by utilizing an interdisciplinary perspective, which the fifth tenet of CRT and education, I drew from various scholarly disciplines to better understand the various factors that contribute to how Latino/a undocumented students navigate and define their lives while being labeled “undocumented” or “illegal.” Narratives are sometimes challenged and not viewed as scholarly, but tenets four and five of CRT state the opposite. The five tenets of CRT “collectively challenge the existing modes of scholarship” (Yosso, 2005, p. 74). Collectively the tenets challenge the dominant ideology and give voices to People of Color and oppressed groups. It is my hope that the five tenets addressed and challenged people’s views and perceptions of undocumented students.

Latino/a Critical Race Theory is a branch of Critical Race Theory which addresses issues that may be dismissed in CRT such as immigration status, ethnicity, language, phenotype, and culture. “LatCrit attempts to link theory with practice, scholarship with teaching, and the academy with the community. It is a theory that elucidates Latinos/Latinas’ multidimensional identities by addressing the intersectionality of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression” (Solózano & Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 312). LatCrit is not intended to replace CRT; it is intended to supplement and/or

complement CRT (Solózano & Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 312). While the five tenets of CRT are the theoretical framework used in this study, LatCrit enabled the researcher to focus specifically on forms of oppression that Latino/a undocumented students encounter. According to Solózano and Delgado Bernal (2001), LatCrit “challenge the dominant discourse on race and racism as they relate to education by examining how educational theory and practice are used to subordinate and marginalize Latino and Latina student (p. 312). Both CRT and LatCrit were utilized in this study to analyze the race and racism issues that Latino/a undocumented students encounter, but most importantly they were utilized with the goal of working towards the elimination of racism. Applying a CRT and LatCrit lens to this study will hopefully “advance a social justice agenda in schools and society”, which is one of the five tenets and goals of Critical Race Theory (Yosso, 2006, p. 7).

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this narrative study is to explore the meaning of the label “undocumented” and or “illegal” as experienced by Latino/a undocumented college students in educational settings. The following research questions frame this study:

- What role has the designation of “undocumented” played in the pre-collegiate educational experience of the Latino/a undocumented college students?
- What role has the designation of “undocumented” played in the collegiate experience of the Latino/a college students?
- How do Latino/a undocumented college students define their personal meaning of the label “undocumented”?

This paper focused on exploring the meaning of each participant's definition of "undocumented." First, I will discuss the process of how the participants were chosen as participants for this study, and I will provide detailed information of how the data from the two interviews conducted were collected and analyzed. Following the research method section, I will discuss their personal stories and the common themes that repeatedly surfaced during our dialogues. Lastly, I will discuss the results of this study and provide my reflections.

### **Participants**

Although undocumented students can legally attend a California community college and or university without legal status, identifying undocumented students can be a sensitive matter. Therefore, when choosing participants for this study, I conducted a purposeful sampling. According to Creswell (2007) purposeful sampling in a narrative study is when the researcher chooses an interviewee based on one or more of the following strategies (a) their availability, (b) their political importance or marginalization, and/or (c) they are an ordinary person (p. 128). I selected interviewees from my former counselees who had self-identified as being undocumented. As a counselor for the Estrella Program at Pine Tree Community College (pseudonyms), I work closely with Latino/a students, helping students with academic and personal issues. I knew that the interview questions in this study were of a sensitive matter; therefore, I needed to have an established relationship with the students who were going to be interviewed for them to feel comfortable and safe disclosing personal information and perspectives.

Besides self disclosing they are undocumented, other criteria that I considered when choosing the participants for this study was that they were currently or had been a

student at a California community college or university, completed at least three years of high school in California, are of Latino/a descent, and have not immigrated to the United States within the last three years. I sent emails to several students who met the criteria requesting their participation in my study, and I interviewed four students for this study. I interviewed two females and two males.

To ensure strict confidentiality of the participants, they were given pseudonyms. Also, in order to ensure confidentiality pseudonyms were given to the colleges and universities that the participants attend.

### **Data Collection**

I interviewed each participant three times over a span of two months. The interviews were about 90-minutes each. I arranged the interviews via email, and the dates and times were chosen by the participant according to their school and work schedule. Due to the sensitivity of the subject matter, the interviews took place at locations where the participants felt comfortable disclosing their story. Reminder phone texts were sent to the participants on the dates of the interviews as confirmations. At the beginning of the first interview, the participants were given consent forms to sign and submit to me.

The first interview with the participants focused on their journey to the United States and their K-12 educational experiences both in their native country and in California. I asked the participants to share their memories and life stories before arriving to the United States. Then I focused my questions addressing their memories of their educational experiences in the United States K-12 system.

The second interview addressed my research questions in more detail. I utilized the first interview in order to learn more about the participants' background and to re-

establish a relationship. The second interview posed questions regarding navigating higher education as Latino/a undocumented students. I also utilized the second interview to address responses of the first interview that were vague or that I had follow-up questions on. Both interviews were digitally tape-recorded with permission of the participants and subsequently transcribed.

During the third interview, we met as a group and I shared the findings that came from the initial two interviews with the participants. We discussed the similarities, difference, and common themes amongst their lives as Latino/a undocumented students. Lastly, during our last interview we discussed our thoughts about the study, and the narrative process.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis involves interpretation. I analyzed the data in two stages. The first stage involved reviewing the data while looking for common themes and I built my analysis on issues that emerged as most relevant to identity formation of Latino/a undocumented students and their academic experiences. The second stage of analysis entailed the use of a Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) lens. Specifically, by utilizing a LatCrit lens I was able to identify common themes that race, immigration status, ethnicity, language, class, and culture surface in the participant's identity formation. It was my intention to review the data with a lens that is committed to social justice. I predicted that the participant's narratives would include traces of struggle, experiences with racism, and would challenge the dominant ideology and while analyzing the data I brought all their stories to surface.

I also utilized a critical events approach during this portion of the analysis. Webster and Mertova (2007) define a critical event as an event that is told through a story which reveals a change of understanding or worldview by the storyteller (p. 73). Critical events impact the story teller in several ways: (a) their professional or work roles, (b) have a traumatic component, (c) attract excessive interest by the public or media, and/ or (d) introduce risk in the form of personal exposure (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 74). However, the most important factor to making a critical event ‘critical’ is the impact that it has on the story teller (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 74). A critical event for an undocumented student may be the first time that they realize that they are undocumented and what it means to be undocumented. For the first time in their life, they may realize that they do not have rights that many Americans take for granted such having a driver’s license, voting, or being able to legally work in this country. A critical event may also be not being able to pursue a higher education due to not qualifying for federal or state financial aid or most importantly if they do complete a higher education not being able to practice their profession in this country due to their residency status. Lastly, a critical event could entail realizing that the United States is the only country that they know, but will never be able to fully immerse in society due to living in fear of deportation and separation from their family.

By following this process, I was able to understand how undocumented students define being “undocumented.” I was also able to understand what critical events have influenced this process. I analyzed critical events with a CRT and LatCrit lens in order to define commons themes and experiences amongst the participants of this study.

## **Trustworthiness of Data**

According to Creswell (2007), “reliability can be enhanced if the researcher obtains detailed field notes by employing a good-quality tape for recording and by transcribing the tape” (p. 209). To ensure reliability, I digitally tape-record both interviews and transcribed them. Reliability in narrative research is usually referred to the “dependability of the data and is achieved by the trustworthiness of the notes and or transcripts” (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 93). I reviewed the transcriptions from each interview at least twice to ensure accuracy.

Creswell and Miller (2000) developed a list of eight strategies that are often utilized by qualitative researchers as validation techniques. In this study I utilized three of the eight strategies as validation to this study. The first strategy suggests “prolonged engagement and persistent observation in the field include building trust with participants, learning the culture, and checking for misinformation that stems from distortions introduced by the researcher or informants” (Creswell, 2007, p. 207). Prior to my first dialogue with the participant, I had an established relationship with the participants as their former academic counselor. As a community college counselor, I have worked with many undocumented students; therefore, I am familiar with laws and policies that affect undocumented students. Most importantly, I have learned how to sensitively address issues of residency with this student population.

The second strategy utilized for validity is debriefing, which is defined as an external check of the research process (Creswell, 2007). After my first interview concluded, I discussed my experience as an interviewer with a classmate, and we discussed themes that I should be looking for. She provided me with honest feedback on

how to attempt to preserve my personal biases, and she provided me emotional support when I needed to someone to talk to. Lincoln and Guba (1985) state the “role of the debriefer is to keep the researcher honest; the debriefer serves as the “devil’s advocate” and asks hard questions about methods, meanings, and interpretations; and provides the researcher with the opportunity for catharsis by sympathetically listening to the researcher’s feelings” (p. 308). Debriefing provides the researcher with the opportunity to test steps in the emerging methodological design (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308).

The third validity strategy is “member checking”. Member checking is when the researcher shares their notes and requests input from the participants about the findings (Creswell, 2007, p. 208). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), member checking is the “most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that member checking occur prior to the proceeding session or meeting (p. 314). I provided the transcripts and codes to the participants one week prior to our second interview; therefore, allowing time for discussion and suggestions during the interview. Upon completion of the two interviews, transcripts and codes were once again provided to the participants to get clarifications and suggestions prior to writing the findings.

While the three strategies stated above were utilized as validation techniques, by utilizing CRT and LatCrit as theoretical frameworks, I was able to recognize the experiences and narratives of Latino/a undocumented students are legitimate and appropriate to understanding racial subordination (Yosso, 2005).



## Chapter 4: Alejandra

I first met Alejandra three years ago when she was a college freshman, and immediately I knew that she was compassionate, intelligent, and committed to everything to which she sets her mind. However, as the years have gone by and she continues to encounter obstacles that affect her day-to-day life due to her residency status, that hope and enthusiasm that she once had are no longer as evident. It is also evident that she no longer believes that meritocracy is equitably applied in this country. She has done everything in her power to be an excellent student, yet, as a result of the current immigration policy, she will never have the same opportunities as a young woman who is a United States citizen or legal resident.

Alejandra was born in Yanga, Veracruz, México. Alejandra's mother was a stay-at-home parent, while her father worked as a mechanic. Alejandra has few memories of her childhood in México; however, she recalls that her father immigrated to the United States several times prior to the entire family emigrating. Like many other families from México who struggle with poverty, her family emigrated for an opportunity for a better life. Because immigrants are more likely to leave their native country due to financial reasons and in search of a more prosperous life, the "undocumented migrant is often thought of as a young, male worker usually unaccompanied by a wife or children" (Passel, 2006, p. 6).

*I think one of the reasons why my dad left was because he was working as a mechanic and there is only so much work that you can do in Yanga. It's not like everybody has a car there, most people just walk or take the bus so there wasn't much job opportunity there. Another reason why he left was to support my family, and I think that's the main reason why people leave México because of economic reasons. There's not a lot of work over there and there's not a lot of support from the government. It's hard to be supporting a family such as your parents, your wife, and your kids. It's difficult to make enough money for food and things like*

*that. That's why my dad emigrated and that's why I think many people emigrate so they can have a better life.*

While Alejandra was only 10 years old when she first immigrated to the United States, she clearly remembers her emigration journey. Similar to other young immigrants she was able to cross the border with borrowed paperwork from a child who was a United States resident.

*My Tio took me to the home of the person who was going to cross me to the United States and left me there. He told me that he would meet me in a few hours, but that he had to leave me there for a while. The girl that I was borrowing a residency card from looked a lot like me, and so I went with her family and we got in the car and it was the dad, the mom, and their other child which was a boy. I just remember them telling me that we were going to cross the border, and so we crossed it and the officer asked all of us for our paperwork, and at that time they did not ask me directly for my paperwork. The family gave the officer the paperwork, and I think that the officer asked me, "How are you?" or something like that but I don't remember what I said. We crossed the first immigration stop without any difficulty, and I remember the mom telling me that we still had to cross another place. It was supposed to be another area of inspection, but when we passed by there was nobody there to check us so we passed through. They told me that we had crossed safely, and soon after they dropped me off at my uncle's house, and my mom was already there waiting for me. I don't remember how my mom crossed over, but they separated us. Then from my uncle's house we went to San Ignacio, but somebody else who I don't remember if he was related to us or not, but he drove us to San Felipe.*

Alejandra's mother and father did not have a similar immigration journey as hers. In fact, Alejandra has minimal knowledge of her mother's immigration journey because her mother has not shared it with her. Since Alejandra's father has immigrated to the U.S. on multiple occasions throughout Alejandra's young adult life, she recalls what he has shared about his immigration journeys. Alejandra describes her father's immigration journeys as much more complicated due to the dangers involved. She stated that he has risked his life several times during the immigration process, and he continues to do so because of the poor quality of life that they would have in their native country.

*The first time I think he said he crossed through the mountains. People have to run through the mountains so that they won't get caught, and they have to go over walls and stuff like that. That is the only time that he told me. The other times I do not remember, but about 5-6 years ago he returned to México. And he told me that this time he crossed through the mountains. He told me you have to be very physically fit and be in good shape to cross because it's a lot of work especially if you have to go over walls and you have to run on the mountains and do a lot of walking, so if you are older or not in good shape you will be left behind or the whole group has to wait for that one person so that they can all go. It's hard.*

The immigration journey can be dangerous, life threatening, and disheartening; however, people continue to risk their lives with hopes of a better future in the United States. Alejandra shares that while her father struggled with his immigration journeys, her aunt's experience was even worse. She shared that women are at a higher risk of danger when immigrating illegally. People place their lives in the hands of the *coyotes*, also known as human smugglers. While the person who wants to emigrate illegally typically hires a coyote, not all coyotes have the best interest of their clients. In fact, many murders and negligent deaths occur under the supervision of the coyotes.

*One of my aunts who emigrated from México was assigned with one coyote, and he really wouldn't do anything. He attempted to cross her over, but he wasn't successful, and so they switched her to another coyote. The new coyote just kept her in a house without telling her what was going on. I think that she was one of the few women in there and the rest were guys. They just kept her in there, and she kept asking them when they were going to cross her, and she kept telling them that they had to do something, and they wouldn't do anything. And so she said that one night she saw the coyote with some other guys just smoking, and of course it wasn't smoking cigarettes, they were smoking weed. And so she got paranoid and she escaped from there, which was pretty dangerous.*

Families immigrate to the United States in hopes of living a better life and while many believe that life in the U.S. will be easier, in most instances it is not. Yet families work through the struggles because often the quality of life in the U.S. is still significantly better than the life they have in their native country.

*Since my dad first immigrated to the United States, he started working in construction as a carpenter, and my mom was working as a janitor for back then it was called the San Felipe Arena and now it is The Studio. She worked there for a very long time. My mom worked at night, and my dad worked during the day, so they would take turns taking care of me. My mom finally stopped working permanently because my sister was born and she had to take care of us.*

According to Passel and Taylor (2010) in 2010, 1.1 million undocumented children were living in the United States (p. 1). Most immigrant children are brought to the United States by their parents at a very young age. While initially immigrant children struggle with assimilation, they typically assimilate faster than their parents because they are more exposed to the mainstream American culture and English language through school activities and policies. According to Daoud (2003), one of the forms assimilation occurs is by “developing English proficiency in the schools, while the overall academic and/or social needs of immigrant students receive less attention. Thus, many schools separate immigrant students both academically, from the school’s mandated curriculum, and socially, from other students by placing them in English language development (ELD) programs” (p. 293). Alejandra shared that she assimilated quickly and learned the English language in order to fit into the American culture.

*I know other people that have immigrated at an older age so they have a harder time adjusting to the culture and to the language because they are so used to their own culture and its harder for them to understand the language and know how to put the words together and know how to you know pronounce the words and understand the culture and how it functions. So I think I was lucky in that sense that I came at a younger age and I was able to understand the language right away and speak the language.*

Another important aspect of the American culture is living the American Dream. The American Dream typically entails prosperity and consumerism. Alejandra shared that her family has never been rich, but that at one point in their life they were

comfortable. She described what “comfortable” meant, and she also described how her living condition has changed since her father lost his job.

*We have never had our own home because we have always shared with other family members. We have only lived on our own once. We rented an apartment; it was a two bedroom apartment and at that point we were the most economically stable that we had ever been. My dad was able to afford to pay for the apartment on his own. My sister and I had our own room, and my parents had their own room. This is the only time where we have lived on our own. And then later because my dad had a good job he and my uncle decided to buy a home. In the beginning, we were ok. Ok meant that my dad had enough money to pay for his part of the mortgage, had enough money to pay for his car, pay for car insurance, and he had extra money to buy whatever things we needed such as food and school clothes. That’s what I am referring to economically we were “ok”. We weren’t suffering even though he was the only one working. Then everything changed when he lost his job.*

*All of a sudden he couldn’t afford the mortgage, and neither could my uncle. So they lost the house and after that we went back to renting a house with other family members. And at that point things slowly started going down hill. At one point the four of us had to live in one room because we didn’t have money. We couldn’t afford to rent an apartment or anything else on our own. It was stressful because it was the four of us and when you’re older and you’re in college you want your own space and your own privacy. But I had no choice, but to share the same room with my parents and sister. You do not get any privacy and you also do not have anywhere to study. It always works out that whenever you want to do your homework, your sister is watching t.v. and your mom wants to watch the novela. Also there are nights when you are tired and you want to go to bed, yet everyone around you is making noise by talking or other people that live in the other rooms in the house want to listen to music or watch t.v., and it makes it nearly impossible to get a good nights sleep. The entire living situation was just stressful. There were 10 people living in a three bedroom and two bathroom home. We had the master bedroom, but it wasn’t big enough for four people. Two other guys who were brothers occupied the second bedroom room. A lady and her daughter and son occupied the third room. As I mentioned earlier, it was stressful because living with ten people in one house, it’s always going to be super loud. It was never quiet and the only time that I could do my homework was when nobody was home, which was rare. When I had to study for a test, I had to go to Barnes and Noble so that I could study and have some quietness because I didn’t have that option at home.*

One of the many struggles that undocumented students encounter is living a transient life. They are constantly moving because their parent’s income fluctuates which

means that they are forced to live wherever they can afford, which then leads to undocumented students never having the opportunity to establish relationships at school or to form long lasting friendships. A transient life also affects a student's potential to succeed academically because without a stable and consistent learning environment, students may struggle with learning, studying, and with establishing relationships with teachers and students who may positively influence their academic experiences.

*Growing up we would move around a lot. I probably attended schools from every district in San Felipe. During my elementary years, I probably switched schools every year. I would switch schools because my parents could not afford rent and we had to move to less expensive places which meant a school closer to our new home.*

*This also meant that I never established a lot of friendships. I was recently telling my parents that you always hear people talking about how they have been friends with some of their friends since kindergarten or first grade and I don't really have that. I have always moved around. I felt like every time I was barely going to start a new relationship with a friend it was time to move. I never really had that, having a friendship with somebody for a long period of time. My longest friendship was in high school, and even though we moved while I was in high school, I was able to attend the same high school for three years because I started taking the bus on my own so I no longer had to depend on my parents dropping me off. The one year that I didn't attend the same high school, it was one of the most difficult years of my life.*

Alejandra attended a college preparatory charter high school located in San Felipe for three out of her four high school years; however, during her sophomore year in high school, Alejandra was forced to move yet again, but this time to another state. It had been four months since her father had worked, and they had exhausted their savings so they moved to Kentucky in hopes of a better life.

*It had been four months, and my dad hadn't worked, so we were staying with some family members in San Felipe. Some other family members from San Ignacio decided to move to Kentucky. My mom suggested that we move there as well. My dad and I didn't want to move, but my mom was convinced that it was the best choice for us as a family. My godfather had lived there, and he convinced*

*my father to try it out. Once we arrived in Kentucky, my dad couldn't get work as a construction worker. There was literally no construction happening. It was really bad. He then started working in the tobacco fields, and he said that they were horrible working conditions. Most of the day he was in the field in scorching heat while carrying stacks of tobacco which were really heavy. He was working really hard, but still not able to make ends meet.*

*It was a real stressful living situation living in a studio with eight people. I think that was the only time in my life where I have been really depressed. I didn't want to move there to begin with because I had been living in California my whole life and having to move to a place where you didn't even know was not a positive experience. I gained a lot of weight because of the depression. I went to high school there, but it was not the same. I didn't like it because it was not ethnically diverse. It was really stressful to deal with that. I had always been really outspoken, and I was known as being energetic, but when I went to school over there I was really quiet in classes, and I wouldn't really participate. I would just do my work and go home. After living in Kentucky for almost a year, my mom finally decided that it was time to move back to California. Kentucky was a place we should have never moved to.*

While Alejandra understood and experienced the struggles of being undocumented, she never truly understood how being undocumented would affect her young adult life. Her family had experienced economic hardships due to their immigration status, but for the first time Alejandra understood how her immigration status would affect her dreams and academic goals.

*It really hit me that because you are undocumented you are not able to attend your top choice university and because you are undocumented you are not able to get a job like your other classmates are.*

*I had the GPA to go to a university, a good university or at least to a university that I would want to attend, but because I am not eligible for financial aid due to being undocumented I wasn't able to go. I thought that it was not fair, and I was mad about the whole issue. I felt that it wasn't fair that my other classmates that had lower gpas and didn't have good grades were getting into universities that they wanted or at least a university, and I on the other hand had a 3.8 gpa during high school, and I had to attend a community college.*

When Alejandra realized that even though she had done everything that she could to excel academically in high school, but due to her residency status she would not be

able to attend the university of her choice, she felt many emotions; initially she felt resentment and anger. Not being eligible for federal or state financial aid limited Alejandra's higher education options, particularly due to her low socioeconomic background and her limited opportunities for financial assistance.

*I guess for a little bit I was angry with my parents. I was angry with my dad because I thought "why couldn't he of brought my mom to the U.S. when she was still pregnant?" I was angry at the whole institution, angry (getting teary eyed) at how the whole system works. I was just angry. I don't think it was particularly at just one person or one thing, I think it was a whole mix of emotions and I felt so helpless. I felt like I couldn't do anything about it; I couldn't do anything to fix it. I think that was why I was so angry and upset about it. Then I just thought about it, and I realized that being mad was not going to solve anything.*

While Pine Tree Community College was not Alejandra's first choice of higher education, she has continued to excel academically. She started her college education as a Mechanical Engineering major but found her true passion as a Peace and Conflict Studies major. She is soon approaching the transfer process, but is still unclear about how she will fund a university education.

*I have thought about how I will pay for university, but I am not 100% sure. I have thought about taking a year off after I graduate from Pine Tree Community College and finding ways to just come up with the money. I was thinking of working a part-time job as a babysitter. I don't know or maybe finding other scholarships. I plan to apply to as many scholarships that I can.*

*Some people don't understand and don't see the struggles that undocumented students go through. They don't see that it's not just about going to school and being an undocumented student, it is also about having to help your family that constantly struggles economically. It's about not being able to work legally, therefore not being able to alleviate those economic struggles. Undocumented students can seldom afford university tuition; therefore, people start getting frustrated and end up dropping out of school.*

Alejandra has clearly stated that she does not enjoy lying about her residency status to potential employers, and she especially does not enjoy having to work while she knows that she cannot legally work in this country. However, she works out of necessity



because she would not be able to pay for college if she did not work, and most importantly she would not be able to survive if she did not work. She needs money for her everyday necessities such as housing, food, and school expenses. She lives in constant fear of deportation because she knows that she legally cannot work or drive in this country, but she knows that she does not have any alternatives. Alejandra utilized public transportation for many years, but there came a time where the bus routes were no longer conducive to her class and work schedule so she began to drive without a license.

Anytime Alejandra drives she is at risk of either being pulled over by a police officer or potentially being involved in a car accident, and she fears, that if either of these situations were to happen, she is at risk of being deported or of being cited, which in California being convicted of driving without a license could lead to a criminal record. A criminal record could then negatively affect her opportunity to apply for legal residency at a future date. Alejandra is at a similar risk when working without a legal social security number. She is at risk of being charged with fraud if employers were to find out that she is working illegally, and these types of charges could also potentially lead to a criminal record, which again could deter her opportunity of ever gaining legal residency. However, even with the negative repercussions that driving without a license or working illegally can cause, Alejandra is forced to drive and to work illegally in order to exist.

*It's not the best feeling and not the best position to be in to be undocumented because you feel like you have to be looking out for yourself every minute. In the back of my mind I am always thinking that I am not supposed to be working. The thought of someone finding this out makes me worry about what would happen to me. I think about what if I get deported and it appearing on my records. All the hard work that I've been doing would be ruined if I were to get in trouble or be caught working illegally. However, I have no other choice but to work because like I said, I tried to follow the rules and follow the law, but there comes a time*

*where you, you have no other choice. I need to work or how else would I support myself? How would I pay for college? I have no other option, but to work. Hundreds of students have to go through the same thing, not just students, but also people that are undocumented. Undocumented people have to work to support their families. Working illegally is not something I wanted; I wish I could have done it a different way, I wish I could have done it legally, but, unfortunately, because of our broken system, I can't do it, so I have no other choice but to just work.*

*I've been working since I was 18 years old because my parents do not have money to help me with my daily expenses. They also can't help me pay for school. I need to support myself and to help them also.*

*I first started working for a non-profit organization, and they knew of my status so they paid me in cash. The second job I had I worked at one of the mall kiosks. They also paid me in cash, so they didn't require me to provide any personal information, or they didn't conduct any type of background check. Now I am working at another non-profit organization, and I've been working there for almost five months.*

*I love my job, and I would hate for them to find out about my status and fire me. I would hate for other problems to arise and it's stressful to live in fear, but I try not to let it get to me. I just go to work every day and do my best and do what I have to do, and hopefully it all works out in the end.*

*For a long time, I didn't drive because I can't get a license and I was afraid of driving without a license because I know it is something that I should not be doing. Even though I'm undocumented, I've always followed the rules. I've always felt like and lived like I was a U.S. citizen. I have gone to school and followed the rules that school imposed. So as person that follows rules, I didn't want to be driving without a license, but because school was further from home and I made the decision to start driving without a license. I know that it's risky, but I am very careful when I drive and I don't speed and I try to follow all the driving laws.*

Most recently Alejandra's economic situation has worsened. In fact, in the past months her income has become the primary source of income for the entire family.

Alejandra's father had always been able to provide economically for the family; however, since the economy took a turn and the house market crisis in California, her father has been unemployed for months.

*He was a carpenter until about two years ago. Two years ago the jobs started slowing down and he stopped working for four months, and then he went back to*

*work for a few more months and then last year he stopped working again for a couple months and ever since then work has been really slow. His employer kept telling him “we’re going get a new job site” or “a new job is going start” but it never really did. So in order to make ends meet he has done whatever possible to provide economically for the family. He started going to Home Depot and places like that to see if he could get daily work. And works in anything from yard work to building fences, or just labor job that he is hired to do. He earns between \$60-\$80 dollars daily depending on the job that he has to do. So it’s been stressful because he went from working, having a good job, to now wondering how he will provide for the family.*

Alejandra has shared that she constantly worries about her father and his well-being. She fears that as a day laborer his life is in danger for many reasons. Day laborers are at risk of being physically mistreated, exploited, and being targeted by anti-immigration people and/or organizations. Alejandra shared that you do not know what the intentions of people who hire day laborers truly are. She fears that her father could be deported while being on one of these jobs or simply while waiting outside of a Home Depot. Alejandra noticed that over time her father became more and more stressed with being unemployed and with the minimal opportunities that being a day laborer employed.

*I think it stressed him out knowing that there were days when he would wait outside of Home Depot for hours and would not find work that day. Sometimes he could not find a job because there were 10, 20, maybe 30 people trying to get that one job. It was stressful having to be there for hours and knowing that getting a job would be like the lottery. He had to be there at the right time and the right place for that one job, so I think that’s what stressed him out. There were times when he would only work 3 or 4 days in one month and maybe earn \$60 each day. That was not enough to pay the rent or the bills and I think that’s what really stressed him out and made him feel like he could no longer provide. He felt that no matter how hard he was trying he was just not going to make the money he was making when he was working in construction.*

Alejandra feels saddened that many times her father comes home exhausted after working all day, while not even earning a minimum wage. It was these economic struggles that forced the family to separate and to seek housing independently. Alejandra was forced to make an even more difficult decision; she needed to decide whether or not

it was time for her to live on her own. And after much deliberation, she chose to move out on her own because she could no longer handle the instability of her living conditions.

*We were struggling to pay for rent and my parent's decided that we were going to leave the house that we were renting with my uncle. We had decided we were going to leave, but we didn't have anywhere else to go. My dad had exhausted his savings and I was working, but I wasn't making enough money to help them pay for all of the rent. We couldn't afford our house, but we also couldn't afford anywhere else. This became a very stressful time for me. We could have ended up in the streets. At this point, my dad told my mom and my sister that it would be best if they left back to México, but my mom didn't want to leave which was even more stressful. She wasn't working and was not contributing economically or supporting us emotionally. She was trying to keep the family together, but I couldn't handle the stress any longer. That is when I had to make the decision that I was going to move out on my own. I felt that I needed to separate from my parents.*

*I had no other choice, but to move out. Or maybe I did but at the time I felt like I had no other choice. I think it looks wrong, the way people saw it was like "How can you leave your family at a point when they're struggling and suffering?" but at that time I felt like it was my only option. My mom was not helping us economically or supporting us emotionally. I felt that if she went to México she wouldn't have to pay for rent, and she would have a place to live because she would live with my grandparents at their house. She would be okay and so would my sister. Whereas here, anywhere she went even if it was a small room she would still have to pay rent. And my dad and I didn't have money to be paying for rent or at least for the four of us. Even if we had enough money for rent, we wouldn't have money for anything else. I felt that by moving out, I would no longer be their responsibility, and for the first time I would have more privacy and the ability to grow up.*

Alejandra shared that while moving out was a decision that she made, it was not something that she took lightly or that came easy. She felt that she went against the beliefs that she was raised with. In the Latino culture one of the most important values is family, and in traditional Latino families, females are raised to give higher regard to family needs over individual needs (Guzmán, Grayshield, & Jezzini, 2008). This Latina gender role is often referred to *marianismo*, which is a role that encompasses both Latino

cultural values and Catholicism (Guzmán et al., 2008). *Marianismo* also encompasses concepts of “self-sacrifice, passivity, duty, and caretaking ...” (Guzmán et al., 2008, p.

1). By moving out on her own, Alejandra challenged both Latino culture gender roles and her religious upbringing. It took a tremendous amount of emotional strength to make the decision that she did, but she shared that emotionally and economically her decision made sense.

*In the Latino culture we're taught that no matter what you're always stick together as a family. Even after you marry, the eldest daughter is expected to take care of the family. At first my mom thought I was just kidding about moving out, but then when she saw that I was serious she wanted me to change my mind and she didn't want me to leave. When she couldn't convince me to stay she pulled the guilt card. She was saying "How are you going to leave us?" and "How are you going to leave me alone?" or "How are you going to leave your sister?" I think that's what made it a difficult decision because I really didn't want to leave my sister. I had wanted to move out many times before this instance because I was tired of having to come home and hear my parents argue about something. They have been arguing for years whether it is about money or about my father's drinking. Most of the time they are just verbal fights but at times they have been physical. So every time it was something to worry about.*

*It was difficult moving out because I knew it would split up the family. I also knew that the whole family would judge me for it. It was not a decision that I fully wanted to make, I still feel guilty about making because as I said in the Latino culture you are raised to believe that you need to stick with your family no matter what. However, I'm not going to lie and say that part of me has not been liberated. I feel like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders. It's not as stressful as what it used to be back then. I definitely have more freedom and privacy, and I can focus on other things now.*

While Alejandra feels somewhat liberated after moving out, she also shared that her stress-free life was short lived. Alejandra's family living conditions have not improved; in fact, they have worsened. These living conditions are affecting the entire family emotionally and physically; however, the one person that Alejandra feels is really being affected is her younger sister.

*My dad was staying with a friend, and my mom and sister went to stay with my uncle, who has his own apartment. My mom moved in with him, but he told her "You can only stay for a week" because it's a one-bedroom apartment, and he doesn't want to get in trouble for having so many people in one apartment. So I guess her plan is to live there for a while until she figures out what to do. I think she would like to stay with him until my sister gets out of school, but that won't be possible. I think her plans are ridiculous because my sister gets out of school in the beginning of June, which means she's not going to have a permanent home for the next two months. My uncle's apartment is in another city; therefore, my mom and sister take the bus to school. My sister wakes up at 6:00 in the morning in order to make it to school on time. It is stress that she doesn't have to be going through, but my mom refuses to go back to México. The lack of sleep and the fact that she does not have her own home is causing my sister to not focus in school and she is constantly tired. My sister's grades are slipping, and I know it is because of everything she is going through. She has been doing her homework at Barnes and Nobel, and it hurts me because she has to be wandering around like if she's some kind of homeless street person. It's just so stressful that they have to experience all of this.*

Alejandra does not have the solution to her family's living situation, but what she does know is that she doesn't want her family to suffer. She especially does not want her sister to go through the struggles that she has been through. Alejandra never wanted her family to separate and live in separate homes, let alone different cities, but she is not optimistic that her mother and sister can continue to stay in San Felipe. Alejandra feels that if her mother and sister moved with family members that could assist them financially, whether it is in another city or country, they would be better off.

*I think the reason my mom doesn't want to move to México or to San Ignacio with my aunt that has offered to help her out is because she thinks she's going find a job in San Felipe. She thinks that if she's able to find a job she'll be able to work a few hours and make enough money to rent a room or rent a garage. She feels that these struggles we are going through are only temporarily. She feels that my dad is going to start working again and start making money again and that everything will go back to normal and I don't agree with her. If she didn't work when the economy was better, what makes her think that she's going be able to find a job now when the economy is so bad and people are getting fired or laid off. But she's hopeful and I think it's just better for me to like not even argue with her about it and just let her make her own decisions, but it does stress me out.*

Alejandra feels that the economic stressors have placed a damper on her parent's marriage. She also feels that if it weren't for her sister, her parents would have separated a long time ago. Marriage can be difficult for most couples, yet when you are dealing with stressors that affect your every day survival it can be even more difficult for a relationship to stay strong.

*My dad was always the provider for the home. He always felt so proud about being able to provide for the family. Being the one that gave us everything, and I think that was what made him feel proud of himself and going from that to having nothing has really damaged him. He went from providing for the family to not having anything in his bank account. He couldn't provide for the family because he didn't have a job and knowing that he didn't have money to pay for things started causing him more stress, which caused him to start drinking more. He's always had a drinking problem, but it's worsened over time, which has caused more problems with my mom. My mom also does not contribute to the situation. As much as my mom doesn't want to admit it, their relationship is only existent because of my sister.*

Even with the multiple issues and constant turmoil that being undocumented has caused Alejandra, she identifies as American. She was raised in this country, and the American culture is all that she knows. However, because of her immigration status she is not considered American. She does not have the rights that American citizens have, and she lives in the shadows due to fear of deportation. She grew up believing that America is a country of opportunities and that all dreams come true, but through time she has realized that as an undocumented student those opportunities may never be available to her.

*I consider myself American because I came here when I was little, and this country is all I know. I have stay connected with my family from México, but I've lived here all my life, so if I had to return, I don't know what I would do. I could continue going to school over there, but it's not the same. It's not going to be the same type of education and it's going to be a different structure.*

*When I was younger, I easily integrated to school. I learned the English language right away, and learned about the U.S. educational system. I did everything that I*

*was supposed to do, such as go to school, did the homework, did well in class, behaved, and was an honor roll student. I did the same in high school. I felt like I was a U.S. citizen and I still feel like I am. I know that I'm undocumented, but I still feel that I'm a citizen because this is all I know and this is where I have lived the majority of my life. I have been following the American values and following U.S. ideology. Yet, it is now that I'm in college that I have learned about the injustices and the discrimination that occurs in this country. I don't see this country as the greatest country like I used to. People move here to achieve the American Dream, but not everybody gets that American Dream. Some immigrants work ten times harder than some Americans or U.S. citizens; yet, they will never reach their American Dream.*

*While I don't agree with some of the injustices that happen in this country, I can't go back to México, because it's not good either. I just take one day at a time and I fight for what I believe in and fight against the injustices that I see. I wonder why couldn't have I been born here? It's not that I am saying that I don't like México or that I don't like being a Latina but it makes it difficult not being able to do things because of my residency status. I'm a stronger person because I've gone through all these struggles and I don't think it can get any worse than everything that I've gone through.*

Additionally to living with minimal rights and in constant fear of deportation, Alejandra has also had to live with being labeled as an “illegal” and/or “illegal alien”. Being labeled with a negative connotation can be emotionally difficult and scarring. It is especially difficult when the label that you are being given is dehumanizing and degrading. Being labeled “illegal” or “illegal alien” constantly reminds immigrants that they are not equal to U.S. citizens, and that they are often viewed as criminals or less than human. Alejandra shares her sentiment about what it feels like to be labeled and how she navigates life while being stereotyped.

*When I hear illegal alien or illegal it used to make me really mad, but now when I hear those terms I try to not let it bother me because now I think how can you call somebody an illegal alien, it's not like we're not from another planet. I am not green or I don't have only one eye. I'm not an alien and I'm not from another planet. We're from the same planet, I'm from earth and have two arms and one head and two legs.*

*Being called illegal makes me feel like I am doing something bad. It feels like I am being accused of a crime such as killing somebody. It feels that I am accused*



*of constantly breaking the laws. I do everything that any citizen is supposed to be doing, but yet you're considered illegal because you immigrated to this country without the proper documentation. I wasn't asked if I wanted to move here. I did not have the option and I especially didn't make the choice of coming here illegally. I was brought here. My parents were just looking out for me and they wanted the best for me so that is why they moved here. Most undocumented students come as young children and like I said, we had no other option and it is not our fault that we immigrated illegally. We shouldn't be punished for something that we had no say in. We shouldn't be punished for decisions that our parents made, which I believe were good decisions because our quality of life and opportunities in our home countries were really bad.*

*I feel that when people think about immigrants, immediately they think that they are all Mexican. And that's not that's not the case. There are so many people that are undocumented and who have emigrated from Africa, Vietnam, and the Philippines and so on. They are from all over the world, but for whatever reason when people talk about immigrants or undocumented people, everyone assumes that they are all Mexicans. There's a lot of racism against Latinos just because of our skin color. Look at what just happen in Arizona, there is a racial profiling happening that is affecting all Latinos.*

Like many other undocumented students, Alejandra is hopeful that the DREAM Act will someday become legislation. The DREAM Act would extend legal status to undocumented youth who meet several criteria. The criteria are that the individual must (a) have entered the U.S. before the age of 16; (b) have been present in the United States for at least five consecutive years prior to enactment of the bill; (c) have graduated from a United States high school, or have obtained a GED, or have been accepted into an institution of higher education (i.e. college/university); (d) be under the age of 35 at the time of application; and (e) must have good moral character (Fisseha, 2011, p. 1). The DREAM Act provides an opportunity for undocumented students to receive some federal financial aid, and most importantly it would allow undocumented students to legally work in this country and to exercise their profession upon earning a higher education degree.

*The Federal DREAM Act which would help hundreds of undocumented students with the pathway to legalization to becoming U.S. citizens. It's what hundreds of students including myself hope that it will be passed. It would allow students to become citizens and to go to college and get a job after college, because currently we can earn a higher education degree, but then if we're still undocumented students upon graduation we are not able to legally work. What currently occurs is that we earn the degrees and end up working in jobs that do not require a higher education. Several students that I know who are also my friends have already graduated from a university but because they are undocumented they can't do anything with their degree and they are working at restaurants or just have ordinary jobs. They have their Engineering degrees or other prestigious degrees and they can't do anything with them. So we all are hoping for the DREAM Act to pass.*

*Hopefully one day The DREAM Act will pass, and I'll be able be on my way to becoming a citizen and eventually being able to work after I graduate from a university. I would also be eligible to receive financial aid and upon graduation I would continue to support this country by paying taxes like I have been doing all along.*

*There are a lot of people that don't want The DREAM Act to be passed because they think that we're taking the rights of other students and that we just come to this country to take their benefits. But we're not taking anything. We do the same thing that other people are doing; we work and we pay our taxes. People say that we take their jobs, but it's like, what jobs? Most of us can't work in an office or in any other nice job so we are taking jobs that people don't want. We're janitors or working in the fields or things like that.*

*A classmate once shared that "we barely have enough money for students attending college that are legal in this country and imagine if all these other students came and started asking for financial aid also, they would take my money" and so I replied to her that it's not just her money. I shared with her that if the DREAM Act were to pass it would basically just put us on equal playing grounds because right now, we pay our taxes when we buy things and we pay our yearly federal and state taxes, but we don't qualify for any of the benefits. I don't know why people say we don't pay our taxes because we do.*

Alejandra is not just an undocumented student. Alejandra is a daughter, a sister, a friend, a tax payer, and a human being with a promising future. However, if the DREAM Act does not become legislation, she will never reach her fullest potential. The DREAM Act would allow her to live a life without fear of deportation and most importantly it would provide her a real opportunity at socioeconomic mobility by allowing her to

exercise her profession. The DREAM Act would give her the opportunity to exist in a society that often forces undocumented students to live in the shadows.

### **Analysis –Through a CRT and LatCrit Lens**

Undocumented students encounter multiple forms of oppression, and while many times they are aware of how they are being oppressed, other times they are not because of internalized racist nativism. According to Pérez Huber (2009), “racist nativism attempts to expose the racialized perceptions of a White American identity and deconstruct the false notions of White Americans as the native people of America” (p. 60). Through out Alejandra’s narrative she shared the difficulties of navigating day-to-day life as an undocumented student and many of her negative academic and personal experiences have been in part to the perceptions that some people have regarding people and immigrants of color.

I will be analyzing Alejandra’s narrative through Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Latino/a Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) frameworks. CRT and LatCrit “challenge the dominant discourse on race, gender, and class as it relates to education by examining how educational theory, policy, and practice subordinate certain racial and ethnic groups” (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 109). CRT and LatCrit also validate the experiential knowledge of students of color through the use of narratives (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 110). Through Alejandra’s narrative, I hope to unveil the various forms of subordination that undocumented students face due to their immigration status, economic status, language barriers, and ethnic background.

## **American Culture and English Language Dominance**

Alejandra often stated that she identified as being American. At an early age she realized that in order to be native of this country, speaking English and following the American culture were important.

*I remember my first day in school. I just sat there and colored and pretty much just did what the other kids were doing, but I didn't understand what the teacher was saying. I think that if it weren't for the other students that were in my class that spoke Spanish I would have probably freaked out and started crying. Little by little I started understanding the language. I think it's better when you come at a younger age because your brain is like a sponge. You suck in everything that you hear and learn faster, whereas I know other people that have come when they were older and they had a hard time adjusting to the culture and learning English. It's harder for them to put words together and to pronounce words. So I think I was lucky in that sense.*

Educational institutions reinforce the perceptions that undocumented students like Alejandra have; they are led to believe that the English language is more valuable and important than their native language, which in Alejandra's case is Spanish. Immigrant students who do not speak or understand English when they arrive to the U.S. are often excluded and undermined in the educational system. Alejandra internalized the dominance of the English language and stated that she felt "lucky" being able to adjust and learn English quickly. She learned early on that if she were going to survive in school, and if she wanted to be treated with high regard by her native peers and teachers, she needed to learn English and assimilate to the dominant culture. While it was not specifically implied, the actions that the educational system took clearly demonstrated that they had no intention of providing Alejandra with an equitable education.

According to Daoud (2003), the academic experiences of immigrant students are heavily influenced by the cultural transmission of schools (p.294). Daoud (2003) states "culture is transmitted both through the formal curriculum (what is taught) and through

the hidden curriculum, which encompasses the practices, activities, and norms of the school. Students who do not belong to the dominant group are at a disadvantage because the culture and linguistic practices of the school are unfamiliar to them” (p. 294). By sitting in a classroom for weeks without understanding anything the teacher was lecturing on due to her lack of English comprehension, Alejandra was clearly at an academic disadvantage and excluded from an equitable education. She was excluded from being able to participate in classroom activities, such as reading groups and critical thinking activities, due to the delivery of the instruction, which was in English. Race-neutral instruction and English language dominance are two forms of implicit subordination that undocumented students experience. According to Ladson-Billings (1998), CRT challenges the dominant discourse in education that suggests that academic deficiency is an individual phenomenon (p. 22). CRT also acknowledges that generic instruction does not work for every student and rejects academic policies that imply that when “strategies or skills fail to achieve desired results, the students, not the techniques, are found to be lacking” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 22).

Undocumented and English learning students like Alejandra have a desire to learn and to pursue a higher education; however, practices the U.S. educational system has in place make it extremely difficult for this student population to be academically prepared and to accomplish their academic goals. Most importantly, an immigrant’s native language or culture should not be viewed as a deficit; rather it should be embraced and integrated into a student’s learning experience. Federal law states that undocumented students have the right to the same quality K-12 education as a U.S. resident under *Plyer v. Doe* (1982); yet, Alejandra’s academic experience clearly states the contrary.

Dissident to what the media, political leaders, or some educators may think, Latino parents do value education and Alejandra's parents are not any different (Brown, Santiago, & Lopez, 2003, p. 3). However, unlike other immigrant groups, most Latinos immigrate to this country with minimal or no formal education, which makes it even more difficult for them to guide their children through the U.S. educational system (Brown et al., 2003, p. 3). Alejandra's parents experienced similar difficulties as they lacked knowledge on how to assist their daughter with navigating the U.S. educational system, not understanding or speaking English, made it difficult for them to fully be involved in their daughter's education.

*My parents always told me that school was my priority. School, school, school. I was always the good student. I always got good grades and I was part of clubs. I was also in the school band. I never had any bad reports. My mom said that she would go to the conferences physically, but mentally she wasn't there because she couldn't understand. She spoke English, but not enough. Whenever she had a teacher parent conference she would just go so that they could mark down that she went but she didn't really understand what they would tell her so sometimes I had to translate for her or she would just be like "uh huh", "yes", "ok". Or she would just nod when she didn't understand and I would have to tell her when we got home what my teacher had said.*

When sharing this experience, Alejandra never questioned or demonstrated any frustration with the way that her school had handled their unwillingness to provide an appropriate parent-teacher conference. Alejandra accepted that there wasn't a translator available to assist her mother in understanding what the teacher was trying to relay. This experience not only cheated Alejandra from having a positive parent-teacher conference, but it also cheated Alejandra's mother from fully being involved in her daughter's education. Upon not understanding the teacher's comments, and simply nodding or using gestures of acknowledgement, Alejandra's mother also accepted the school's unwillingness to provide a translator for the conference. Most importantly, when

Alejandra's mother attended the parent-teacher conference and did not understand what was being communicated to her, but still verbally acknowledging that she did, she took all responsibility away from the school of providing her a meaningful conference. CRT states that racial actions are so enmeshed in educational policies that they sometimes seem "normal" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p.12). The parent-teacher conference that Alejandra and her mother attended may have been an experience that was "normal" to them, but not only should it not be accepted as a normal occurrence, it should also not be happening. Once again the school places a value on English language dominance while devaluing the Spanish language, but most importantly it sends a message that it's acceptable to treat immigrant parents and students inequitably.

According to LatCrit theory, social justice is attained by eliminating subordination acts, and most importantly validating the Latino language and culture; however, instead of embracing her native language and being provided with an equal educational experience, Alejandra is assimilated in the United States by being asked to identify within the racial hierarchy system, which is the Anglo culture (Trucios-Haynes, 2001, p. 37).

### **Educational Access – Available, but not Equitable**

The parent conference was not the last time that an educational institution failed Alejandra. Alejandra continued to excel academically, and when it was time for her to attend high school, she applied for admission to a public college preparatory charter high school. She applied knowing that she would need to travel over an hour each way to and from school on public transportation; because she felt that attending this particular high school would improve her chances of being admitted to a top tier university. Alejandra

was accepted to Prep Academy, and her first two of years of attendance went well. She shared that she had positive relationships with schoolteachers, and she had done everything required of her to be a competitive student for admission to the university of her choice. It was not until her senior year when Alejandra realized that being an undocumented student caused many more constraints on access than she had ever imagined.

*I think it was during my senior year that I realized that I couldn't do things like everyone else...the normal things... because I am undocumented. I was already 16 or 17 and some of my classmates were already working at McDonald's and I wasn't able to do that.*

*Then later that school year it really hit me that I was 'undocumented when I was applying for universities my counselor informed me that I could apply to universities and that I would probably be admitted, but that I would probably not be able to attend the university I had wanted to go to because I would not have the money to pay for it.*

Although Alejandra was an honors student and had done everything possible to attend a private university, she was faced with the harsh reality that as an undocumented and low-income student who was not eligible for federal or state financial aid, she would now have to reconsider what college or university she could attend after her high school graduation. Alejandra was not only an excellent candidate for merit based financial aid, but she was also an excellent candidate for need based grants such as the Pell Grant which was created in 1972 as an amendment to the Higher Education Act, to provide aid to students who otherwise wouldn't be able to afford a higher education (Bennett, 2010, p. 1). Alejandra exemplifies the true meaning of a student who otherwise would not be able to afford a higher education without financial aid, but once again current immigration policies exclude students like Alejandra from the opportunity.



Alejandra experienced various emotions after speaking with her counselor about her academic future. She felt frustration and disappointment with the educational system because she felt underprepared on how to navigate higher education as an undocumented student. Alejandra suggested that if she would have been informed earlier about the academic inequities that undocumented students encounter, she could have prepared differently. According to Delgado Bernal (2002), “the majority of Euro-Americans adhere to a Eurocentric perspective founded on covert and overt assumptions regarding White superiority, territorial expansion, and American democratic ideals such as meritocracy, objectivity, and individuality” (p. 111). Delgado Bernal (2002), suggested that this “Eurocentric perspective either subtly (or not so subtly) shapes the belief system and practices of researchers, educators, and the school curriculum while continuing to adversely influence the educational experiences of Chicanas/Chicanos and other students of color” (p.111). Alejandra’s frustration and comments align with the Eurocentric perspectives that have been deeply embedded in her curriculum at school. She was led to believe that if she worked hard enough in school that she would have equal academic opportunities as her White and U.S. born classmates. She also believes that if undocumented students take individual responsibility of their higher education goals at a younger age, they are more likely to struggle less while navigating higher education. However, CRT challenges the claim that educational systems offer meritocracy and equality to students of color (Yosso, 2006, p. 7). “CRT and LatCrit acknowledge as their basic premise that race and racism are a defining characteristic of American society and, by extension, are embedded in the structures, discourses, and policies that guide American higher education” (Villalpando, 2004, p. 43). LatCrit suggests that regardless

of when undocumented students realize the difficulties of navigating a higher education, they will still experience systemic racism. In fact, informing an undocumented student at a young age of their future academic struggles only empowers the dominant discourse as it sends message to this student population that regardless of their academic accomplishments, because of current immigration and educational policies, they still will not have a right to an equitable education.

*Educators don't really understand what undocumented students go through. They don't understand our struggles and what it is to be an undocumented student. I think if they were to understand it and talk to undocumented kids at a younger age, by the time they get to high school the undocumented students will know how to cope with their status and it will help them prepare for their future. I had to wait until I was a senior to really understand what it meant to be an undocumented student and all the obstacles that I would have to face. I had to come up with solutions and figure out what I was going to do after high school. I think that's something our educational system does not do.*

Alejandra's narrative clearly demonstrates that race and racism shape America's educational system. As an immigrant student who is undocumented, Alejandra has had to deal with numerous challenges while navigating higher education. Alejandra excelled academically, and bought into the idea of meritocracy only to discover that the Eurocentric perspective does not apply to undocumented Latino students. Alejandra's financial resources limited her attendance to a community college.

*I was really upset about it for a while. Then I thought about it and I am like you know, it is not that bad. I have to continue getting my education whether it is at a community college or somewhere else. I am not just going to stop (getting teary eyed) and not go to school because I can't go to a university.*

While initially Alejandra felt discontent and anger about having to attend a community college, her feelings eventually changed. Alejandra stated that once she came to terms with the fact that she could only attend a community college upon high school graduation, she accepted the outcome because not pursuing a higher education was not an

option. While the community college tends to be the system of choice for many undocumented students because it's affordable, it was not Alejandra's first choice. In fact, once again Alejandra's life was dictated by educational and immigration policies that are not equitable to immigrant students of color. Alejandra stated that she has found support from academic programs at the community college she attends.

*I have enjoyed being a part of the Estrella Program because they have been really helpful since the first day. My counselor has been very supportive and has guided me. Through the community college experience, I have been able to network with other people and I have been involved with other organizations that help people.*

Alejandra attributes her participation in the Estrella Program, a program that assists first-generation and low-income Latino/a students, as one of the contributing factors to having a positive community college experience. She clearly values connections and relationships, as she also shared that another contributing factor to her positive community college experience is being able to network on campus and her involvement with community organizations. However, Alejandra also explained that while she enjoys participating in college extra-curricular activities, it was not always easy for her to do so. A major constraint of being an undocumented student is the inability to get a driver's license. Not being able to legally drive and having to depend on public transportation affected her college experience. She shared that making decisions such as choosing her class schedule or attending early morning or night functions was always dependent on whether or not they worked with the bus schedule. She also shared that while she did not want to drive without a license, she had to out of necessity.

Throughout Alejandra's narrative it has been evident that she has continuously been restricted from educational opportunities because of her residency status. Another restriction was the opportunity of participating in an internship. The majority of

internships that align with her major are typically through government agencies; however, government agencies typically require legal documentation and/or background checks from their interns, and Alejandra could not fulfill either of those requirements.

*I have the talent and the ability to do internships. I've always been told that I have all the requirements that are needed for an internship or certain scholarships, but because of my status I'm not able to qualify for them. So I've given up and I've had to sacrifice all of those things.*

Additionally, when discussing other college experiences that she feels that she has had to sacrifice she shared the following,

*People say that college is supposed to be the best four years of your life, where you get the opportunity to move away from home and live in the dorms, but I will not have the opportunity to do that. Even if I wanted to, I can't study abroad. I can't leave the country like other college students can. During spring break, I can't even travel somewhere within the United States let alone somewhere like Cancun or Cabo.*

Alejandra is accurate in believing that the college experience can be one of the most positive life changing experiences a person encounters. Higher education is a place where students are taught to think critically, independently, and intellectually. It is a place where you can learn skills in the classroom that eventually you can apply to the workplace. College is also a place where you can learn about cultural competency and can apply what you learn in a foreign country while studying abroad or through participation in an internship. College should not be a place where you are forced to take courses because they are the only ones that align with public transportation. Most importantly, college should not be a place that limits certain majors to students due to their residency status. As an undocumented student from a low socioeconomic background, Alejandra is right to assume that her college years will not consist of similar opportunities as her classmates who were raised with White privilege. As an

undocumented student, Alejandra's academic opportunities were dictated from the very first day she attended school in the U.S. and continue to be dictated through her college years by educational structures and policies that favor the dominant discourse. The educational policies and race-neutral curriculum that she was exposed to influenced her to believe that in order to be accepted at school she would need to assimilate to the U.S. culture and to learn the English language. She was also influenced to believe in an educational system that claims to be equitable, yet even after all her efforts to assimilate, Alejandra is left with the harsh reality that the educational policies she once believed in, are not equitable and consist of discriminatory practices.

LatCrit theory would suggest that the educational opportunity constraints that Alejandra has experienced intersect with the race and racism that she experiences in her everyday life. LatCrit theory examines the racialized layers of subordination that Latino/as experience based on immigration status, culture, and language (Yosso, 2006, p. 6). The multiple layers of subordination that Alejandra experiences not only influence her educational experiences, but also influence her ability to exist in a society that constantly oppresses her. Current immigration legislation restricts Alejandra from legally participating in two of the most important factors of American life, which are driving and being employed. Alejandra lives in constant fear of deportation because she drives and works knowing that she could be cited or arrested for either of those actions. However, she is left with no other choice, but to work and drive illegally as a means of survival. As an undocumented student, Alejandra lives in constant emotional distress and is constantly treated inequitable because current immigration legislation works against her in every which way possible. If immigration legislation does not change, Alejandra will always be

restricted. She will be restricted from the opportunity of living outside of poverty, restricted from an equitable education, and most importantly restricted from ever accomplishing her dreams.

Throughout her narrative, Alejandra has shared how she has had to grow up much faster than the average person her age. And while some students in her situation may have already given up with their dreams of pursuing a higher education, Alejandra has hope that immigration legislation will change and that some day she will be able to live in this country legally, and also work in a profession that is related to her field of study. It is her hope and her strength that allow her to take one day at a time.

## **Chapter 5: Javier**

As an educator, one of the greatest moments of the profession is to witness the success of my students. While success can be measured in various ways, one of the most obvious and meaningful ways to measure the success of a community college student is when they earn an Associate's degree and/or transfer to a four-year university. For more than 20 years the Estrella Program at Pine Tree Community College has recognized the success of their graduates by hosting a yearly convocation. The convocation recognizes not only the students graduating but also the parents and family members of the graduates. Not long ago Javier participated in the Estrella convocation as both a graduate of Pine Tree Community College and a transfer student. He walked across the stage, and when given the opportunity to address the audience, he thanked everyone who had impacted his life in one way or another. While his address of gratitude was humbling, his surprise for everyone who attended the Estrella convocation dinner was even more humbling. As everyone was sitting and enjoying their dinner, the sound of trumpets, violins, vihuelas [five-string high pitched guitars] and classical guitars became louder and louder. Suddenly everyone realized that they were about to be fortunate enough to be entertained by an amazing mariachi. While everyone was surprised about the mariachi, I was not, but I was equally as excited as the rest of the guests. I knew that the amazing mariachi who was about to grace us with one of the most beautiful aspects of the Mexican culture, mariachi music, consisted of Javier playing the violin accompanied by the rest of his family members playing other instruments. Javier had decided that in celebration of his graduation and of the other students he wanted everyone to enjoy the music that he so dearly loved. According to Collins (2007), "Mariachi goes beyond

music; it is the sum of a cultural revolution expressed through a group of musicians, which encompasses the essence of México and its people. It is something cultural, spiritual and traditional” (p.1).

This was yet another way of Javier thanking everyone for contributing to his academic success. Javier had not only excelled academically at Pine Tree Community, but now he also demonstrated to everyone how equally talented he was artistically and gracious in his appreciation of what others had contributed to his success.

Javier was born in Guadalajara, Jalisco México. Jalisco is also where it is believed that mariachi music, one of the most popular Mexican traditions, originated; therefore, it is of no surprise that most of Javier’s family are part of a mariachi. While Javier was born in Guadalajara, his family resided in small town near Guadalajara with unpaved roads and modest homes. Javier’s memories of México are positive. He shared that he never lived long enough in any given place in México to consider it home; however, when he did live there he felt like he was on an extended vacation. His family was constantly moving between the United States and México because Javier’s father works as a mariachi, so they moved wherever employment was available.

With hopes of improving his life economically, Javier’s father had immigrated to the United States multiple times prior to marrying Javier’s mother and starting his family. Javier’s father emigrated to the U.S. for the first time at a very young age with minimal work experience and very little formal education. The struggles of working in inconsistent low paying jobs influenced Javier’s father to join his family in the mariachi business; therefore, he has been in the profession since a very young age.

*My dad is the oldest in his family, and he has been working his entire life. He only has a sixth grade education because he had to drop out because he had to work.*



*He came to the United States by himself for the first time when he was 18 or 19 years old.*

*He came not knowing anybody [in the U.S.], but he came with a friend. Back then my dad wasn't working as a mariachi. He worked in random jobs. He worked as a dishwasher, he worked as a janitor, and also worked in a factory. It wasn't until he was about 25 years old when one of my uncles, saw that he [Javier's father] was struggling economically when he went back to México and so he convinced him to become a mariachi. Most men on my dad's side are mariachis.*

*My uncles made my dad practice every day, and once he started working, he [Javier's father] liked it because he got work all the time. So he was better off being a mariachi versus working any other type of job.*

Mariachi music has not only been a big part of Javier's father's life, but it has also been influential in Javier's life. Javier learned to play the violin when he was 10 and began playing with his father soon after. Javier credits his participation in the mariachi for gaining skills such as discipline, confidence, and dedication. Working as a mariachi has not only contributed economically to the family's well being, but it has also contributed to Javier's cultural background and family ties.

*Being in a mariachi for most of life has contributed to me always doing the best that I could. It has taught me a lot of discipline, because I started working when I was in middle school, but I started playing the violin when I was in elementary school. I was ten years old when I started working. My dad took me to my first event when I was ten years old and I have been going with him ever since. Before I started playing officially with the group, I practiced for two years. He [Javier's father] got me my own private [music] teacher.*

*When my dad talked to me about the mariachi, he didn't even ask me if I wanted to be a part of it; he just asked me what instrument I wanted to play? So being in a mariachi wasn't an option, my only option was the instrument I wanted to play. At first he wanted me to play the trumpet, but it's really hard. It takes a lot of energy when you're blowing on a trumpet, and it also takes a lot of practice and discipline. The violin is also difficult to learn, but once you learn it, it's easy and you don't get tired of playing it. The only reason that you get tired is because you're standing for a long time. And your fingers don't get that tired, because with even with the guitar you get tired because your fingers are picking on the strings. So violins are the easiest ones to learn and you play. I practiced for two years like, but at first I wasn't learning mariachi music; I learned classical music. I learned how to read music first then I started learning*

*mariachi music and then my dad took me out to work. Now my brother also plays with us. We have our own group.*

Javier's family had immigrated to the United States twice before deciding on their third journey to permanently reside in the U.S. Javier was nine years old when his parents decided to permanently immigrate to the U.S. because of Javier's father's job as a mariachi, and because of his mother's potential job in a trailer park that would require her to clean restrooms in exchange for affordable housing and a minimum wage salary. While an employment offer such as the one that Javier's mother had may not be appealing to many, Javier shared that it was not an opportunity his family wanted to pass up. It was an opportunity for the family to finally call somewhere home. However, their decision to emigrate also meant once again having to risk their lives during the emigration journey, which was dangerous and emotionally difficult.

*We immigrated to the U.S two times before we finally stayed. Before that I remember going back and forth between México and the U.S. When we lived in México, it felt more like we were on vacation. I think the most we lived there at once was three years and so the majority of my time I've lived here.*

*The third time that we crossed I remember pretty well. It was about 11 years ago. We left Guadalajara in a bus, and it was my younger sister, dad, my mom and I. By then I also had two younger brothers, but they flew over separately because they're natural born citizens and my mom's brother, picked them up in México two weeks before we left Guadalajara. We took the bus from Guadalajara to Tijuana. It was a long ride and I had fun because we were watching movies, and it was the first long bus ride I had been on. It was a little sad because, well, my brothers were already over here and it had been two weeks since we'd seen them and that that was the first time we were separated. The same day that we got to Tijuana all of us went with my dad to try to find the coyote. We met him and we were going to cross the following night at around 11 p.m. because he [the coyote] said that was the best time to cross because that's when I guess there isn't as much surveillance going on. So, we stayed in a hotel in Tijuana until it was time to cross. My uncles were there also, although they didn't travel with us from Guadalajara to Tijuana, we were all going to cross together. It was two uncles from my dad's side, and we were going to cross walking, so, I remember, that it was dark because it was around 11 p.m., and we had to walk with no lights so we wouldn't get caught. I think we had just a backpack; we didn't have that much*

clothes because it's too hard to cross with too many things. My sister was small, so she was like six or seven, and my dad was carrying her. I was walking. I was having fun because I thought it was like a little journey, but we were only supposed to walk for like two hours. That's what the coyotes told us, that we were going to walk a couple of miles and that at one or two in the morning we were going to wait for a taxi, and they were going to pick us up and we were going to go to a house. It sounded pretty simple, so, yeah we were walking and I remember walking more than two miles and then we stopped in an area where there was a lot of trees. We were waiting for about two hours and people were getting frustrated because there were about 20 people with us trying to cross. We were all sitting in the cold. There were also two coyotes with us, one was in the front, and the other was in the back. Finally the coyotes told us that everything was good and that the cars would be picking us up in a couple more minutes. But all of a sudden trucks came out of nowhere with bright lights and it was la Migra [U.S. border patrol]. People started running, and they [U.S. border patrol officers] told us not to run. My mom just said okay and we didn't go anywhere and they got us. The thing was that my dad already had a record, because in the past he had tried to cross with a mica chueca [fake residency card] and he got caught. He was told that if they got him again that they were going to lock him up for ten years. So he was thinking of running but because we were there, he just stayed with us. There were 2 trucks there and since they got most of us, because there were a lot of immigration officers, they put us in the van and then they took us. They put us in jail, and they separated all the women and the children in one part of the cell and the men on the other cell. While we were waiting there, they gave us kids little juice boxes, and I think cookies and some crackers. After a while they started calling people up and started taking their huellas [finger prints], and taking pictures of them, so when they got to my dad, his record came up, and it came up under a different name. My dad was trying to tell them that he wasn't lying, and he was giving them his real name. So they told him that because his name, did not match their records, they were going to lock him up. I remember crying and that they [U.S. immigration officers] had him sitting down in a chair and my mom was just hugging him. We were all hugging him. We were begging them to not take him. We were also telling them that we were not going to do it [attempt to emigrate] anymore, but they said that they couldn't let him go and that they had to take him. My dad was locked up and they let us go. My mom, sister, and me took a plane back to Guadalajara. My uncles stayed because they didn't let them out right away. My dad wasn't locked up for very long either. After all that happened, we were back to Guadalajara for I think three weeks. We were still deciding what to do to because my two brothers were in the U.S. with my uncle. That same uncle told us that we still needed to come. He said, do it again, try it again. He told my parents about how good he was doing economically. He lived at a trailer park, the same one where we still live in, and he was working there and wasn't paying rent. He was working there and they just deducted the rent from the paycheck, and they were hiring so he told the owner that he had a sister that needed work also. So the only reason we were coming was because he had a job lined up for my mom, and she'd be getting free rent and

*that it was a nice place. The work that she was going to have to do was clean the restrooms and showers in the trailer park.*

*Finally my parents decided that it was time to try to cross again so my mom called her friend, the one that had crossed us last time, and asked her if she could cross us again. My dad was already out of jail, but he wasn't going to cross with us because it was riskier. This time the lady [her friend] didn't want to risk crossing us again, but my mom assured her that this would be the last time. So we ended up borrowing papers from some other friends and we crossed the same way as the last time. This time we took a plane to Tijuana to make it quicker. We stayed there [Tijuana] for one night, and we crossed the following morning. I remember when we were in la linea [in line to cross the border] in the car, my mom was really nervous. She was so nervous that her friend, I think did some sort of witchcraft. She [mother's friend] went to a palm reader because she believed in that stuff, and she brought us some necklaces that she said had some kind of water that was supposed to bring us good luck. She put the collar [necklace] on us before we crossed.*

*We fell asleep because the lady and mom told my sister, and I to fall asleep. Finally when we got to the check point, I remember the guy [immigration officer] just looked at the papers and looked at us and he asked us, Do you guys have any food or alcoholic beverages? and I think she said, Only two bottles and he said, oh, okay...and we just passed like that because the border patrol officer did not ask any more questions.*

*The lady had told us to memorize the names of the kids we borrowed the papers from, and so we tried to memorize the names and the address where they lived, but they didn't ask us anything so we crossed without many complications. The lady took us all the way to Monte Vista, and it is where we still live.*

Javier's family not only had to endure the psychological experience of the immigration journey, but they also had to endure the traumatic experience of being detained by United States border patrol. Javier's family was at the mercy of the border patrol, and Javier clearly remembers the sadness he felt when his father was arrested and questioned by the border patrol officers. He also remembers the family being in complete distress about the thought of Javier's father being in prison for 10 years. Yet, even after such a traumatic experience Javier's family followed through with their immigration. According to Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2001) immigrants are derived by

“powerful socioeconomic factors as well as individual agency and motivation” to leave their native country (p. 20). Javier’s family’s need for a better socioeconomic life was influential to their immigration. Their need for stability and a healthy well-being were also influential factors.

Javier’s father decided that it would be best if he immigrated to the U.S. on his own in order to put his family in the least danger possible. Javier’s father could have never imagined that his last and final immigration journey would be the most dangerous of them all.

*My dad crossed a different way. He found a coyote that drove him in a truck but instead of driving through la linea [immigration check-points], they drove through the desert. He [Javier’s father] said the coyote was driving with his lights off through the desert, and when he was just driving la migra [border patrol] came. The migra [border patrol car] pointed the lights at them and the coyote just stepped on it [car’s accelerator]. He kept on driving, and he hit a ditch or something and they got stuck there. The guy [coyote] told my dad that the migra [border patrol] was coming and that the truck he was driving was stolen. So they were trying to get out, but the door wouldn’t open. Finally they opened a door and the coyote told everybody else in the truck to go out through the one door and, he told my dad “You come with me” and he [Javier’s father] said, they said they just started running. They had la migra [border patrol] running behind them, and he [Javier’s father] said that they were lucky because I guess he was a little chubby [immigration officer], and they could hear him coming because he was breathing hard. My dad and the man [coyote] just kept on running.*

*He [Javier’s father] said that he ran up a hill and that the guy [immigration officer] just stopped after a while of running and was just flashing them with his flashlight, and he kept telling them to stop and to give up. He [Javier’s father] said that both [coyote and Javier’s father] of them just kept running. Finally they lost them [immigration officers], but now they were in the desert alone. My dad and the coyote were lost in the desert for about two days. They were just walking across the desert without any water. He [Javier’s father] said that during the day it was so hot that he started imagining stuff. He was hallucinating and then he [Javier’s father] said he became so desperate that they started drinking their own urine. The coyote was actually drinking his own urine, my dad said that he tried but he just couldn’t. He just tasted it and just threw up. He [Javier’s father] couldn’t take it, and he said he got to a point where he just took off his clothes, because he was so hot, and he just threw himself to the ground and he said, “I give up, and I can’t go anymore.” The other guy was like “No, no you gotta keep*

*on going and we're almost there" and my dad was like, "No I can't", and I don't know what happen all of a sudden, but he got up and he started walking. Then he [Javier's father] said that like some of miracle they came across a river, and so I guess that's what saved him. They got to the river and started to drink water but that he remembered not being able to drink it at first. I don't know, maybe it's because he was so thirsty. Right after they finished drinking water from the river they got to a little town, and from there the guy called the other coyote because I guess they work like in teams, and I guess somebody else in charge of taking them to a drop-off house. So they picked them up, and they took them to a house. My dad said that was pretty close, and that he almost didn't make it across. It took my dad almost a week to cross and to reunite with us in Monte Vista.*

Javier's family like many other immigrant families risk their lives to immigrate to the U.S. because their native country has failed them by not providing the lower and middle classes an opportunity at upward social mobility. While a janitorial job and working in a mariachi may not seem like jobs worth risking your life and the lives of your family members, for Javier's family it was. Emigrating meant the possibility of earning a livable wage, and it also meant the possibility of Javier and his siblings being able to receive the education that his parents never had the opportunity to receive. Families endure many psychological and traumatic hardships during the immigration process, but even more unfortunate is that the traumatic and negative experiences will never disappear while living in the U.S. as an undocumented person. Undocumented immigrants move to the U.S. with hopes of a better life, and while most immigrants will be better off economically than they would have been in their native country, it is not achieved easily and without constant turmoil.

One of the first struggles that Javier experienced with his transition to the United States was his lack of comprehension of the English language. Javier had attended schools in the U.S. and México for the first nine years of his life; therefore, he constantly had to adjust to the different educational systems and the different languages of

instruction. Javier had not had the opportunity to excel academically because he had not lived in one country long enough to consistently develop his language comprehension and mathematical skills. He had also never had the opportunity to establish relationships with teachers, staff, and classmates. He shared the following about his transition to school in the U.S.

*When we last emigrated from México, I started school as a fourth grader. I had a hard time with English because I couldn't speak or write it. I guess because we never stayed in one place for too long. We first came here [U.S.] when I was little so I went to pre-school here, but then we went back to México for three years, so I didn't go to kindergarten in the U.S. The second time we came to the U.S. we lived in San Felipe and then we moved to San Ignacio because my dad heard that work was pretty good over there, with the mariachi. But I don't think that we were in San Ignacio for long. I think the most was like a year. Then we came back to San Felipe for a bit before going back to México. And so then finally the third time that we came to the U.S., we moved to Monte Vista, and I have lived there ever since. So moving all over the place didn't really help me learn English. I spoke Spanish well because that is what we spoke at home and because I learned it in school in México. In México I struggled in other school subjects like math because it was a little tougher over there, and I would get behind when I lived in the U.S. I remember they held me back a grade the last time that I was there because I was behind in math. They're more advanced in the math so they put my younger sister and me in the same grade. But when I came back to the U.S. they raised me a grade and held my sister back two grades, so that's why she is two grades lower than I was.*

Javier has always had the desire and motivation to succeed academically, but in middle school he experienced what many English language learners experience: he experienced self-doubt. Javier doubted his intelligence because he was struggling in courses that he had excelled in when he completed them in México, but was now struggling in the same courses because of his English language deficiency. Javier's academic trajectory was pre-determined by current educational policies and curriculum that are created by the dominant culture and are not inclusive of English learning immigrant students. Inevitably Javier experienced self-doubt because U.S. educational

policies promote English language dominance while disregarding an immigrant student's native language and culture. Javier shared about feeling both alienated and unintelligent.

*I don't remember feeling any different in elementary school from any other student beyond having a language barrier. It wasn't until I went to middle school that I became more aware of or more specifically, felt segregated or different from other students. I was placed in an ELD [English Language Development] class where I found a group of friends who were more like me and it was then that I started seeing cliques and separation. The entire ELD [English Language Development] program was frustrating for me because I was not only put into lower levels of English classes, but also for all of my other classes such as math and science. I knew that I could do better than what I was placed in. For instance, the math class I was put into was a lot easier than what I should have been taking but since it had lots of word problems, it was a struggle because of the English comprehension portion, which is what I struggled with. I ended up getting a C in math for my 7<sup>th</sup> grade year. I remember feeling unintelligent and just frustrated. I saw that predicament with many of my other friends also.*

*I also remember that in middle school there was a little graduation, and I remember that I got some awards, but they were most improved awards. I didn't receive any awards for academic excellence.*

While Javier's academic experiences were less than positive during elementary and middle school, they began to improve when he entered high school. He credits the improvement of his academic experience to both his participation in the AVID program and to his AVID teacher. Not only did she introduce him to higher education, but also she was also instrumental to Javier being able to navigate high school as an undocumented student.

*In 9<sup>th</sup> grade I was chosen to be apart of the AVID program and that helped me a lot. The AVID teacher that we had was great. She pushed me a lot, and she's the first person that started talking to me about college. It was also in 9<sup>th</sup> grade when my grades started going up because before that I was doing poorly. I wasn't getting good grades in middle school because I didn't understand when the teachers taught in English. I was averaging Cs, especially in English and History. In 9<sup>th</sup> grade I started getting As.*

The AVID program "is an elementary through postsecondary college readiness system that is designed to increase school wide learning and performance"



([www.avid.org](http://www.avid.org)). It is a program that promotes higher education and that prepares high school students with the university admission process. Javier knew that he had immigrated to the United States without legal documentation, but it was not until his sophomore year in high school that he realized how being undocumented would affect his pursuit of higher education. It was because of an assignment from his AVID teacher that required him to complete a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), that Javier realized that being undocumented meant that he was ineligible for federal or state financial aid. Not being eligible for financial aid would limit Javier's higher education options because his family did not have the economic means to support him.

Javier shared that while he was disappointed about his ineligibility for financial aid instead, he chose to focus his energy on being optimistic and proactive about the DREAM Act becoming legislation. With the support of fellow classmates, teachers, and staff Javier not only led two campus political rallies, but he also became very involved with immigration reform. Javier's activism not only gave him a sense of belonging, but it also gave him hope. If the DREAM Act became legislation, it would open doors of opportunity for him and his family, so it was important for Javier to have hope. Javier describes his experience with organizing the political rallies and educating people about the DREAM Act.

*It wasn't until the end of my sophomore year that I realized that my status would factor into me continuing my education. I was filling out a FAFSA application for one of the components of my AVID class and was stumped when it came to the part about the social security number. I didn't really know what it was and went home to talk to my mom about it and ask her what it was. It was then that I began my journey in finding out that I couldn't be like everyone else. After talking to my mom, I talked to my AVID teacher and explained my situation to her. She had no idea about my status, and she gave me more information about what it meant. She also told me about the DREAM Act which was about to go before Congress. It was during that time that I became optimistic about my future and the possibilities*

*once it passed. It was during that time that I became optimistic about my future and the possibilities once it passed.*

*I became involved in local organizations from marches to walk outs in support of the DREAM Act. I wanted to be a part of the solution. Most of my friends knew that I was undocumented, and I had a lot of friends who were in similar situations. There was a marcha [political march] going on for the undocumented students, in like 2000, and I was part of the group that organized the walk out at my school. It was like four students including me that led the walk out. We actually went to each class to make presentations, and to talk to them [students] about the DREAM Act and about undocumented students. We talked to the principal and to a couple of professors, and they actually ended classes like ten minutes earlier, so that we could walk out. They gave also let us do our signs during lunch and we hung our signs up at school so everyone could see them when students were getting picked up.*

*I remember that I was shaking because I was really nervous to speak. First of all I hate making presentations and also I'm not a good public speaker. But I wanted other people to know [about immigration reform], and I wanted to get as many people as possible involved. In the past, there had been a walk out, but only about 20 or 30 students participated. We walked to downtown and it wasn't really that far, but we were still marching and screaming. However, there were students who walked out that didn't even know why they did, so that is why we made the presentations so students would be informed. We also wanted a peaceful walkout. The second walk out actually went well and the news came out. They wrote an article about it. They mentioned how we went to the classes to present about the purpose of the walk out and about what was going on with the DREAM act. My AVID teacher really supported us. I also had a couple friends who were actually born here and they also supported.*

After an admirable attempt from thousands of students and DREAM Act supporters across the nation, the DREAM Act failed to become legislation. Javier had worked incredibly hard to educate his community and peers about the benefits of supporting the DREAM Act. Javier not only stepped out of his element by making classroom presentations in a language that was not his native language, but he also shared his personal story about the difficulties of navigating life as an undocumented student. Not only did he risk his safety by exposing his residency status in front of the media, but he also risked being deported. However, he sacrificed his safety for a cause that kept his hope alive, which was passing the DREAM Act. Javier shared that when the DREAM

Act failed to pass through Congress, his hope was shattered and his life changed. The first change that he made was to drop his AVID course because he knew that academic success and higher education knowledge was not enough for undocumented students to attend the university of their choice. It is ironic that AVID was created to support students like Javier who are first-generation college students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds; however, the messages of access and opportunity to higher education that AVID promotes often do not apply to undocumented students. Javier had been failed by both immigration laws and educational policies, and not even his participation in AVID could change his academic trajectory.

Javier felt disillusioned when the DREAM Act did not become legislation, but he felt even more defeated when he was denied the opportunity to attend the university of his choice upon completing high school. Javier had dreamed of attending SCU, a private university, after high school. He was admitted to the university, but the only way he could have attended was if he would have been awarded a full scholarship to SCU. While SCU awards a few full-ride scholarships to undocumented students, Javier was not one of the recipients the year that he applied. Upon receiving the news about not being the scholarship recipient, he lost all hope of attending a four-year university after high school.

Javier was not only college-ready, but he had also fought for social change. He no longer believed in the idea of meritocracy that he once bought into. He was a victim of the imbedded racism that exists in U.S. educational policies due to his immigration status, his native language, his socioeconomic background, and his race. Javier shared how he coped with the DREAM Act failing to pass and not being awarded the SCU scholarship.

*Unfortunately, the bill [DREAM Act] failed, and I finally saw what my future would be like. It was toward the end of sophomore year after the whole FAFSA and DREAM Act experiences that I decided that there was no use for me to continue in AVID. It was then that I resigned myself to the idea of attending community college after high school because I could not afford to attend a 4-year.*

*However, I decided to apply to SCU for a lot of reasons. One of the reasons was because I wanted to see if I could get accepted to such an esteemed college that I had admired. I also wanted to be able to be like my peers who were going through university application process. Another reason was that my AVID teacher had told me that private schools were funded differently, and there was one full ride scholarship available for Latino students. I applied for the scholarship, but I knew that it was like buying a lottery ticket. That it would be like 1 in 72,934,003 chance of being awarded the scholarship. When I applied to the school, I understood that if I didn't get the scholarship that there was no way I could attend SCU.*

Although Javier felt disappointed that he could not attend SCU after high school, he knew that giving up on higher education was not an option. Javier is like many other undocumented students who are university-ready, yet are restricted to attend the university of their choice because it is financially inaccessible. They are forced to make the choice of either attending a community college due to affordability or giving up on higher education all together. Javier decided that he was not going to give up on higher education and attended a community college. He shared that his motivation to succeed were his younger siblings and his parents. In particular he wanted to be a role model for his sister who is also an undocumented student.

*While I was disappointed about SCU, giving up on college was not an option. My motivation to continue with school and to always do well academically is that I am the oldest in my family and I have a younger sister who is also undocumented. I need to be a role model for her and for my younger siblings who are U.S. citizens. My parents are also my inspiration. They've been a lot of great support to me. Also, my friends in high school would always tell me that I was the smartest one out of the group and I guess they pushed me to do better. I didn't want to let them down, and I wanted to show that they're right. I've been lucky to have a lot of family support and lucky that I have had some great professors and counselors who have helped me. I have had help throughout high school with programs like AVID and other great teachers.*

Javier began his college education at Gaucho Community College (GCC); however, he only attended GCC for one academic year. He initially chose to attend Gaucho because it was the closest college to his home and because most of his high school friends had chosen to attend it as well. Javier described GCC as welcoming, but he still chose to transfer to Pine Tree Community College (PTCC) because he wanted to meet new people and to get a glimpse of the college life. Javier shared that his experience at GCC felt too similar to his high school experience and since he could not afford to attend a university, he decided to at least attend a community college outside of the city he lived in. Fellow classmates had informed Javier that Pine Tree Community College had numerous programs that supported undocumented students, which was influential to his decision of transferring to another college.

Pine Tree Community College resulted in a positive community college experience for Javier. He felt supported by professors and counselors. He excelled academically in both general education courses and major prerequisites. Javier also credited his positive experience at PTCC due to having many cultural and socioeconomic similarities with his peers. He found that there were many students in similar situations to his who were also undocumented and were struggling to navigate higher education. Together they participated in rallies and demonstrations that supported the DREAM Act and a pathway to legalization for undocumented students. Javier's academic success and participation in events that promoted social justice gave him a sense of legitimacy within an academic environment that often excludes him.

*Besides not liking Gaucho CC because it was dead and because it felt too much like high school, I also decided to transfer to Pine Tree Community College because someone had told me that there was a program that helped AB540 students. When I started Pine Tree CC, I got really involved because there were a*

*lot of other students who were in the same situation [undocumented] and they were student activists. They got me going to marchas [political marches] and protesting and advocating for undocumented students. I even came out in the news. I don't know, but I just became pretty active again about fighting for immigrant rights and AB540 students. My involvement really helped me stay motivated in school as well.*

According to Gonzales (2010) “school tracking shapes student access to information and resources by structuring student learning environments and thus the relationships they form with peers and school personnel” (p. 476). Javier had participated in the AVID program during high school and also participated in the Estrella Program at Pine Tree Community College, which according to Gonzales participation in such programs are a form of positive tracking and can positively influence the academic experience of immigrant students. Both academic programs provided Javier with learning environments that promoted higher education and also introduced him to other high achieving students. Gonzales (2010) also states that positively tracking students gives them the affirmation needed to gain confidence and gives them the ability to build close relationships with school personnel (p. 477). Positive tracking also “mediates some of the negative effects of undocumented status” (Gonzales, 2010, p. 477). Javier was able to mediate the negative effects of his undocumented status at Pine Tree Community College because he had built relationships with faculty, staff, and peers who supported him and regarded him as a high achiever and social activist. Unfortunately, while some negative effects of living as an undocumented student in the U.S. can be mediated with academic success, they can never be avoided. Javier encountered an obstacle that many undocumented students encounter during the university admission application process.

After completing his general education and major pre-requisite courses at Pine Tree Community College, Javier applied to California State University (CSU) as an

upper division student, where applicants must submit an online admission application. There are several residency questions on the application. If a student is unable to provide a social security number the application is considered incomplete until an admissions counselor manually reviews the application and confirms that the undocumented student is eligible to pay resident fees under the AB540 law. Javier applied to CSU during the first week of the admission application period; however, he was not notified about his admission to the university until almost 8 months after his submission which was almost three months after his native born peers had been notified. For several months Javier lived in fear and distress because of his uncertain academic future. While Javier was eventually admitted to CSU, his U.S.-born peers who had also applied to CSU with the same major and who had lower cumulative grade point averages than he did were admitted prior to because U.S. citizen and resident applicants have the ability to be auto admitted by the online application software while undocumented students must be manually reviewed by a university admission counselor. Once again Javier was a victim of U.S. academic policies that are discriminatory to students based on their immigration status. Javier was treated inequitably during the admission process because the online application should allow undocumented students to also be auto admitted. Additionally, in a state where the majority of undocumented students reside and are legally eligible to pursue a higher education there should be no reason why undocumented students are evaluated at a later time than U.S. citizens and residents. Instead of being commended for his outstanding academic record and for applying early, Javier was discriminated once again because of his undocumented status.

*I wasn't able to fully apply online and had to apply by paper because of my residency status, which had a longer process. I was not admitted on the same*

*timetable as most other students and was one of the last people to know that I had been accepted. It was just frustrating because I was one of the first people to apply in the beginning when applications opened up. I just felt like it was a moment thinking that my status would always hold me back despite of how hard I worked and everything that I had been through to get to that point. Since it took so long for me to get accepted, I had to go to the last possible orientation, which was a requirement for me to be able and register for classes. By the time I had orientation, most of the classes were already filled. I was only able to register for 2 classes. Since I was only able to register for 2 classes, the first week of school was a hectic mess of trying to add classes. I was finally able to add 2 more classes to my schedule after the first couple of days.*

Not only had Javier been treated inequitably by the university application process, the differential treatment which he experienced during the matriculation process also negatively affected his first semester as a university student. The university's unwillingness to process Javier's admission application in a timely manner affected his transfer student orientation date and eventually his course registration date. CSU transfer students must attend new student orientations prior to being designated a course registration date, and because Javier was not admitted to the university until the end of the admission cycle, he was forced to attend the last available transfer student orientation, which resulted in his being forced to choose courses from a bleak selection. Javier excelled academically at the community college. He applied to CSU and submitted required documents in a timely manner, yet inequitable institutional policies continue to punish undocumented students by denying them equal opportunities and access to higher education. Javier was denied the opportunity to be admitted to the university in a timely manner because the online application is fairly designed to meet the needs of undocumented students and most importantly administrators in higher education have not done anything to remedy the faulty process and to streamline the admission applications of this student population.



In addition to experiencing exclusion during the matriculation process at CSU because of his immigration status, Javier experienced exclusion in his business courses because of his race.

*The first week at CSU I remember looking around at my classes filled with primarily White and Asian looking faces and very few Latinos. I felt out of place. I almost felt like I didn't belong. I felt alone. I felt like I was by myself. I felt like to the teachers I was just another number. To the counselors I was just another appointment they had to get through to finish the day. I felt like I was on my own. I felt like it was me against the world, or at least me against CSU. Now I realize that if you don't ask for help, and they [instructors] see you struggling, they don't say anything to you. There are few professors that if you talk to them and interact with them during their office hours, and they see that you're a student that wants to do good, and that you do well in their class then they'll help you out. I had a professor who when I asked for his help would not really pay attention to me, but half way through the semester he saw that my grades were good that's when he started acting differently.*

According to Diaz-Strong, Gómez, Luna-Duarte, and Meiners (2011), “undocumented students are being systematically purged from the higher education system, additionally immigration policy and financial aid regulations are working to constrain vulnerable populations deemed undesirable and undeserving” (p. 117). Javier’s academic experience clearly demonstrates that undocumented students are constantly negatively affected by institutional constraints that shape their academic trajectory. Undocumented students continuously struggle to navigate a system of higher education that is often unwelcoming, but struggle even more navigating a life with minimal rights. Undocumented students live in constant fear of deportation because they cannot legally drive and work in the U.S but often have to do both as means of survival. Javier described the constant fear that he experiences.

*Being undocumented not only affects my education. When I found out about my status, I became kind of frightened. I was scared that I might be deported because I'd see in the news that the migra [U.S. border patrol] were raiding homes and people's jobs. I even heard that they [U.S. border patrol] were in Monte Vista,*

*and they came and just took people. So I became pretty scared and I realized that I could be gone any time and that's pretty hard.*

*Also not having a license makes me feel like I don't belong here. It makes me feel like I'm less than other people because I don't have papers. When I'm driving and I see a cop, I'm afraid that I will get pulled over and that they'll report me to immigration. I'm scared for my family too, because neither of my parents have papers, and I have three younger siblings that do, but what if they were separated because my parents got deported. I feared many things when I realized that I didn't have any papers. I constantly live in fear.*

Along with constantly living in fear, Javier is excluded from the opportunity of fully integrating in the American culture. Abrego and Gonzales (2010) state that undocumented youth are excluded from “routine tasks and social events such as buying cell phones, establishing credit, applying for library or movie rental cards, and even going to R-rated movies or bars” (p. 145). Javier shared how his residency status has limited his social life and how it has affected his ability to take part in something as simple as going to a movie theatre.

*It's also been pretty hard socially, because sometimes my friends will ask me to go to certain clubs, but I know because other friends have told me that I can't go there because I don't have a California ID and like sometimes I just don't go because I'm kind of embarrassed to when they ask me for an ID and I can't show them one. Even when I take my little sisters to the movies it's embarrassing because they ask me for an ID, because she needs to be with somebody that's over 18, and I show them my matricula [consular identification card] and they look at it like, what is this? That's just, like another punch, like saying, oh, yeah, you don't belong here and it's pretty hard.*

According to Abrego and Gonzales (2010) undocumented students are faced with structural barriers which contribute to young Latino/a men and women entering the work force at a young age and causing them to work and drive illegally; while other undocumented students hold out as long as possible from engaging in either activities with hopes of immigration reform and a change in their status (p. 152). Javier shared that he avoided working as long as he could because he did not want to break any laws or lie

about his identity. He shared that he was left with no choice but to work and drive because he could no longer afford to pay his education with the money he earned from playing in the mariachi. Javier is fearful of the legal troubles that may arise from working without legally being able to do so.

*I haven't applied to many jobs because I do not like lying about my identity. I don't like using a fake social security number. I don't like feeling like someone else. I wasn't planning on working outside of the mariachi, but I was forced to. The money that I was making was not enough to pay for CSU. The first time I filled out an application, it was hard because I was lying. I had to put down a social that wasn't true. I was forced to do because I needed to work. So I got a job and my boss doesn't know my status, and I kind of have fear that he might one day get a paper saying that is something wrong with my social security number.*

While Javier avoided working without legal documentation for as long as he could, he couldn't avoid driving without a license. As the eldest sibling Javier has had to assist his parents with the day-to-day responsibilities of the household, which includes driving his siblings to school. Additionally, he has been forced to drive in order to continue with his higher education. The community college that Javier attended and the university he now attends is located about 20 miles from his home. Public transportation is limited and Javier's daily commute time would be an estimated four hours. However, being undocumented and driving without a license does not come without the possibility of legal implications and expensive fees. Javier has already had to deal with the implications of driving without a license. He described how he felt and how he dealt with the situations.

*I feel a lot of anger, I feel sad, and I feel fear not being able to get a license because driving without it is stressful. Every day when I get into my car I hope that I don't get in an accident and hope that I don't get pulled over because if I get pulled over there goes my car, and I will need to pay a big fee to get it back. I know it's a big fee because I have had two tickets.*

*The first ticket that I got was because I crashed. I went up the road, and I got stuck in the mud, because it was raining that day. I didn't hit anyone, but my car slid and the cops came. They gave me a ticket for driving without a license, and they took the car; it got impounded for a month. I had to pay for the 30 days that the car was stored in the tow yard, the tow fee, and a ticket for driving without a license. When I went to court the judge helped me out. At first he was pissed off, he asked me why I was driving without a license? I told him my situation and his attitude changed completely. He was like, oh, I'm for you guys getting a license, and I think the governor should give you a license, and so he told me that I should not be driving and he let me go. The fine for driving without a license was supposed to be around \$600, but he reduced it by half so I paid \$300. The second time I got pulled it was also during high school. I had all my brothers and sisters with me. During that time they [police officers] were pretty hard on high school students driving other students around so that was the reason I got pulled over. The police officer asked me for my license and I didn't have it. This time he [police officer] didn't take the car away from me because it was right in front of my house's driveway where I got pulled over. But then I had to go to court and it happened that I met with the same judge from the last time I went to court, for driving without a license. He forgot at first who I was and that I didn't have a social and that was the reason I didn't have a license. He scolded me again for driving without a license. I reminded him that I couldn't get a license or else I would so he told me again to stop driving without a license, and I had to pay another \$300 dollars.*

Javier, like many other undocumented students, is forced to participate in activities such as driving and working illegally in order to circumvent this society. While undocumented immigrants cannot legally drive in California, they are eligible to purchase car insurance, which on average the insurance rate is 20% higher than most California drivers (autoinsurancetips.com). Javier has not only paid more than the average California driver for car insurance, but he has also paid over two thousand dollars in fines for driving without a license. He is at risk of even harsher legal repercussions, such as getting a criminal record or being deported, if he continues to drive illegally, but Javier is left with no other choice. Current California driving and federal immigration laws are created in such way that students like Javier have minimal to no opportunity at upward social mobility. The extraneous fines that are attached for driving without a license and

the psychological effects of constantly living in fear of being pulled over are just additional constraints that undocumented students encounter.

Javier shared that there is nothing more that he desires than to be given the opportunity to fully integrate in American society. He does not enjoy driving or working illegally, and most importantly he finds it incredibly distressing to constantly be labeled illegal and to not be socially accepted by a country he calls home.

*It's pretty hard being called an illegal. People believe that we don't belong here, and that we are criminals. Like they are saying that we broke the law because we're here, but we're not here because we chose to, we're here because our parents brought us here. I was brought here at a young age and I consider myself an American. I don't see myself as a Mexicano. I wasn't raised in México, like this is my home. When I hear the word illegal, I just don't know where I belong. Going to school in the U.S. has had a big impact on me because you I've had to learn U.S. History, I've had to read books about the American culture, and I learned the English language. Also I have watched American television so I consider myself American. I guess the only culture from México that I have retained to is my participation in the mariachi and speaking the Spanish language.*

*When people think about undocumented people, they think that we're all free riders and that we're taking their benefits. They don't think that we contribute economically to society. They see us like pesticides or leeches that are feeding off the government. That we're here applying for welfare getting benefits at school. They see us as criminals who don't belong here. Also that we are lazy and don't work. We do work and we pay our taxes even though we don't get tax refunds. We don't claim our refunds in fear that we might get in trouble and get deported.*

According to Abrego and Gonzales (2010), “undocumented youth have internalized American values and expectations that equate academic success with economic rewards and stability” (p. 147). However, “their social incorporation sensitizes them further to the contradiction that despite their academic success, they are barred from the opportunity to integrate legally, educationally, and economically in U.S. society” (Abrego, 2008; Abrego & Gonzales, 2010, p. 147). Javier is one of the many undocumented students barred from integration into U.S. society. Javier has had to

constantly compromise his educational aspirations regardless of his academic success. His residency status not only restricts him from federal or state financial aid, but his status also restricts him from the opportunity of upward social mobility. Javier is a victim of laws and policies that negatively affect his daily life. He is forced to drive in order to exist in U.S. society; however, his decision to drive illegally and being cited for doing so has led to him having to pay fines that have placed an economic burden on him and his family but even more importantly they have psychologically affected Javier. Javier is constantly reminded by systemic racism that he is not welcome in the U.S. and even worse he is forced to navigate life being labeled with terms that have negative connotations, which refer to undocumented immigrants as being less than human.

### **Analysis- Through a CRT and LatCrit Lens**

According to López and López (2010), “children of undocumented migrants in the United States are trapped at the intersection of two systems: the public education system and the immigration law system” (p. 1). Additionally, López and López (2010) state that undocumented youth are brought to the U.S. against their own will and decision, but are still forced to experience and navigate a life full of uncertainties because of “harsh laws, policies, and rhetoric that currently pervade public education and immigration law systems” (p. 1). Javier is 22-years old and his life has always been affected by uncertainties and without immigration reform his future is also uncertain. Utilizing a CRT and LatCrit lens, I will illuminate the uncertainties that Javier experiences due to laws and policies which restrict him and other Latino/a undocumented students from navigating their lives and bans them from the opportunity of upward social mobility. Also with a CRT and LatCrit lens, I will draw from Javier’s narrative the

explicit forms of subordination that he has been a victim to because of his undocumented status.

### **Academic Trajectory**

Pérez Huber, Johnson, and Kohli (2006) state, “youth often fairly accept responsibility for the lack of their educational opportunities without any critique of the system that has failed them. When Latina/o and African American students believe that they have failed due to their own inadequacies, rather than inadequate schooling, they have internalized racism” (p. 199). Javier internalized racism early in his academic trajectory, and it continues to shape his higher education. Javier shared that in middle school he experienced feeling unintelligent and frustrated because he had earned a C in a math course that he had already completed in México. Javier attributed his average grade to his lack of knowledge of the English language and blamed himself for not dominating the English language. Not once did Javier question whether or not the educational system had failed him. Javier’s grade in math was not a reflection of his mathematical knowledge; it was, however, a reflection of a language barrier that many other immigrant students also encounter which causes them to feel inadequate and excluded from U.S. schools. To avoid feeling “different” because of a language barrier, Javier bought into the idea of English language dominance and academic meritocracy.

While there have been numerous experiences in Javier’s life that clearly suggest that meritocracy does not exist for Latino/a undocumented students, Javier consistently bought into the idea. As an undocumented Latino student, Javier has constantly experienced racism, is socioeconomically disadvantaged, and lives life in fear of deportation. He succeeded academically in high school but was still forced to attend a

community college because he could not afford to attend the university of his choice. He succeeded academically at the community college, but was admitted to the university after less qualified U.S. born students were admitted. Javier has always done everything in his power to be an outstanding student, supportive son and brother, and acceptable member of society; however, his undocumented status restricts him from fully integrating and succeeding in the U.S. CRT and LatCrit theories not only challenge the dominant ideology, but also challenge the empty promises of meritocracy and neutrality that are imbedded in U.S. school policies, which often negatively affect the lives of undocumented students.

Even after all the obstacles that Javier has encountered and continues to encounter because of his residency status, he shared that he no longer identifies as a victim of inequitable laws and policies. Javier shared that one of his peers was influential to the transformation of his attitude and the way he now navigates life as an undocumented student. The irony of Javier's story is that his peer/mentor is a U.S. citizen who has never been undocumented. While his peer/mentor may have also experienced subordination because of his race or socioeconomic background, it is evident that he also has bought into the idea of meritocracy and cannot fully understand the struggles of undocumented students.

*I used to think about my residency status daily. I saw myself as a victim. When I was going to Pine Tree Community College, I saw students that were getting help [financially and institutionally] that didn't have as good of grades as I did and they were getting scholarships to go to great schools. They were being accepted and I knew that if only I had papers I could be like them. I could be going to the same schools, but now that I go to CSU and being a member of the LBSA [Latino/a Business Student Association], I've learned from another member who actually has been like a mentor to me, to not feel like a victim. He says, don't be a victim because that only pushes you down and you need to do your best to be all that you can. He tells me, if you want to be a CEO someday then learn what it*



*takes to be a CEO and act like a CEO. Now, I tell myself I'm going to be a CEO, so I dress like if I were a CEO and I act like a CEO, and I try to think positive. My friend from LBSA has also shared that he knows other people that are in similar situations [also undocumented] that have succeeded. He told me about a lady who was also undocumented, and that a company sponsored her for U.S. permanent residency. So I guess hearing that gives me hope.*

*I stopped thinking about the negative stuff, of being the victim, so it's been changing my life. I now know that CSU has a great business school, and I think I'm lucky to be attending that school. I could have gone somewhere else, but I think CSU was meant to be, especially because of the friends I have met, and the people I've gotten to know there.*

Javier may no longer identify himself as a victim of anti-immigration laws and policies, but the reality is that he is. Javier has made many compromises in order to continue with his higher education, and he has also been excluded from many academic opportunities because he is undocumented. CRT and LatCrit acknowledge that Javier is a victim of academic policies and ideologies that were created by the dominant culture to continue subordinating people of color and immigrants. His academic trajectory has been influenced by educators and curriculum that promotes meritocracy; however, LatCrit not only challenges the dominant ideology, but it also exposes the truth about the inequitable life that undocumented students live. While Javier's friend may have had the best of intentions when he suggested to him that feeling like a victim is not the remedy towards navigating life as an undocumented student, the reality is that as a U.S. citizen or resident his friend cannot truly understand the discrimination that Javier experiences on a daily basis. CRT would suggest that Javier's friend has also bought into the idea of meritocracy because he is unable to acknowledge the racist policies that are deeply embedded in U.S. higher education and current immigration legislation. Javier is denied basic rights that are essential in order to exist in this society, let alone to ever reach his highest potential academically, professionally, and economically.

Javier has had to sacrifice the opportunity to intern with companies of his choice because of his residency status. He shared that while he would like to focus on the financial aspect of business, his opportunity to intern at any company, especially at a Fortune 100 company is non-existent. Javier stated that he will most likely attempt to intern at non-profit company, which was not his first choice. Javier is clearly a victim of the laws and educational policies that are restricting him of a comprehensive educational experience and a pathway to practice his profession.

*As a business student there are lots of options for jobs and internships. But the options aren't really there for me. I'm struggling to find something because I don't have papers. It's pretty hard, but I have faith that one day something will change.*

*I hear of a lot of students that graduate, but because they don't have documents, they cannot apply for a job or that they have to change their career because there no way you can you can be a doctor or work for the state without residency status Some people will graduate with lots of degrees and many of us will end up working at like McDonalds or other jobs that have nothing to do with our majors.*

*Before graduating I want to get an internship with a non-profit because that's where I see some hope. I'm thinking of working for a non-profit or maybe going into finance. Or if not, I'm going to get my bachelor's degree and maybe go higher. I don't know how high I can go, but I've been looking into a master's degree in business.*

Besides restricting Javier from ever legally practicing his profession, current laws and policies also restrict Javier from the opportunity of getting a drivers license. This law has affected Javier multiple times because he has been forced to drive without a license, and has had to deal with the repercussions of his decision. Undocumented immigrants who drive without a valid driver's license and are cited, are responsible of paying outrageous vehicular violation fees and are susceptible to legal troubles. However, Javier drives in order to get to work and school and public transportation is not fully accessible from his home. Once again Javier is a victim of policies that restrict him from legally

driving and working, but if he does not engage in either of those activities he cannot exist in this society.

Javier shared that recently he had been pulled over a third time on his way to school, but that luckily he was not cited for driving without a license. While it was fortunate that Javier was not cited for driving without a license, but he has been affected and influenced by so many racist laws that Javier failed to acknowledge that he had been pulled over without probable cause. According to Romero (2006), “CRT theorists have applied the concepts of micro-aggressions and macro-aggressions to characterize the racial affronts minorities encounter in the criminal justice system and in the use of racial profiling” (p. 1). Javier’s last encounter with the law was an example of macro-aggressions that undocumented Latino immigrants encounter based on their ethnic background and gender.

*I got pulled over again the other day and I don't really know why. I guess he [police officer] was following me because he thought that I looked suspicious. I was on my way to school. The cop was actually pretty nice, and he asked me if I had a license. I said, no, and he told me to step out of the car and he tested me to see if I was drinking. He then asked me, why do you not have a license and I was afraid to tell him. I was afraid to tell him because I thought he would take me to immigration, but then I thought that it's better to tell him the truth than to lie. So I told him the truth, that I don't have papers, and then he started asking me, how can you get your papers, and I told him, oh, I might be able to get papers through my brother, and he just said, alright, have a nice day, and he let me go. He was pretty cool.*

Undocumented students are not only victims of racist systemic policies; they are also victims of negative stereotypes and labels that are inhumane and inaccurate. Romero (2006) states “a history of immigration laws based on racial exclusions reinforces stereotypes that Mexicans and other third-world immigrants are inferior and alien” (p. 451).

Javier shared about his frustration and sadness about being labeled and stereotyped as a criminal or someone who is less deserving because he is undocumented.

*Being undocumented is very difficult and frustrating. It hurts when you see people that have papers and they do not take advantage of it. They don't go to school and they break the laws. It's like seeing someone that is starving and you just throw away your sandwich in front of them.*

*Being undocumented means that you can't get a license and you can't apply for a job even though you're qualified. Also most times you can't attend the university of your because it comes down to money and also not being able to apply for the financial aid and other support programs.*

*Being undocumented means that most of time you're afraid to ask people for help because you don't know what will happen. I avoid applying for special programs and certain scholarships because I'm always afraid to ask if undocumented students are eligible and often I am embarrassed of disclosing my status. You just never know if people are willing to help or that they might report you to immigration.*

*I used to think about the DREAM Act and even advocated for it, but I haven't really thought about it anymore. I have kind of been losing hope in it because of all the things that I have been on the news lately [anti-immigration movements].*

Both his resistance and acceptance of the dominant ideology have shaped Javier's academic trajectory. He demonstrated resistance to anti-immigration laws and sentiment by educating his community of a population that constantly lives in the shadows because of the fear of deportation. He also resisted the dominant culture by actively organizing and participating in rallies, which supported immigration reform. Javier also managed to retain his native language and his culture, which is demonstrated through his love for Mexican music and his participation as mariachi.

While resistance to the dominant discourse is evident in Javier's academic trajectory, acceptance is even more evident. He learned the English language, excelled academically, and believed in the ideologies of meritocracy; however, his academic trajectory solidified the empty promises of meritocracy and demonstrated the inequities

for immigrant students within American educational systems. The dominant culture has been so influential on Javier that he no longer identifies as a victim of laws and policies that restrict his from social equality. He is also losing hope in the DREAM Act ever becoming legislation. CRT and LatCrit would suggest that the layers of subordination that Javier has experienced based on his immigration status, cultural background, and Spanish language dominance not restrict him from ever fully integrating into U.S. society, but they also damage him psychologically. Javier is one of the thousands of undocumented Latino/a students who have the potential, and talent to succeed in this society; however, without immigration reform their talents are in jeopardy of being wasted.

## **Chapter 6: Cristal**

Unlike many undocumented students who immigrate to the United States at a young age who have few memories or connections to their native country, Cristal's background is much different. Cristal immigrated to the United States at the age of 15 years old and the family's abrupt decision to leave their native country was not influenced by the desire of achieving the American Dream. Cristal's family left México for safety reasons and as a means of survival. Cristal's father was assassinated when she was 14-years old and her family's destiny took a turn after his death. As the primary emotional and financial supporter of the family, the death of Cristal's father immediately changed the lives of Cristal and her family forever.

Cristal is now 25-years old and for such a young person, she has experienced hardships and emotional turmoil that most people do not experience in a lifetime. In a matter of a year's time she lost one of the most influential people in her life, her father; and she was forced to move to a country where she never imagined living. When I first met Cristal almost five years ago I would have never imagined that she had suffered emotionally as much as she had.

Cristal was an outgoing student, who excelled academically. Cristal's dedication to higher education was transparent and her dedication to social justice was unyielding. She was committed to educating people about the struggles that undocumented students encounter, and an advocate for immigration reform. Cristal inspired everyone that came in contact with her. As her former counselor, she also inspired me to not only be a better educator, but to advocate for social justice. I admired her passion for creating positive change, her compassion towards others, her dedication to higher education, and her

optimistic personality. I met her during her last year at Pine Tree Community College and it was of no surprise to me that Cristal was accepted to a four-year university that academic year. While I was fortunate enough to work with her for one academic year, after she transferred to California State University (CSU) we lost contact for some time. Two years later I contacted Cristal with hopes that she would share her narrative about how she navigates life as an undocumented student and she kindly agreed. It was to my surprise that Cristal was no longer the student full of optimism and hope for immigration reform that she once was. During the two years that we lost contact, Cristal experienced multiple hardships due to her residency status, and had also experienced a major psychological trauma that impacted her and affected her everyday life.

As a child Cristal never imagined living in the United States. Even more importantly she never imagined that she would be forced to leave her native country in search of a safer and stable life. She never imagined that she would be moving to a country that makes it nearly impossible for undocumented students to survive. Cristal vividly remembers her childhood in México and she shared some of her positive memories.

*When I was growing up my family was not poor, but we weren't rich either. We had a house, one of those houses that look like a ranch because it was huge. I was always surrounded by cows and pigs because that was our lifestyle. I was the typical girl from the ranch. I always had a lot of friends and I was very outgoing. I was one of those students who sat in the front of the classroom because the teachers had placed me there. I was extremely loud so they liked keeping an eye on me. I was also the type of student that the teachers chose to participate in a dance or to act in a comedy. I completed elementary and middle school in México.*

*I am the oldest in my family. I have two sisters and two brothers. We are five siblings and I saw all of them grow up. We also had family in Aguascalientes and in the capital of Durango. We would get together during holidays and other*

*occasions. I consider my childhood to be a great childhood. Like when people say those were the good old days, those really were the good old days to me.*

*My dad worked as a policeman for the municipal government, which was located about an hour away from our ranch. He drove there every day. My family also owned two lands and we worked them both, meanwhile my mother was also a housewife. Because we had a lot of land, we harvested corn and beans every year. That was my dad and grandfather's responsibility. We also had horses, cows, pigs, and whenever we needed money we would sell one. My mom would milk the cows every morning and we would sell the milk. My mom also made cheese, jamoncillos [candy], and cuajadas [curd] and we would also sell them. We would sell the jamoncillos for ten cents and the cuajadas for fifty cents. I would go around on my bike selling them house-to-house. Our sales from the milk and the milk products were additional income for the family.*

In a one-year span, Cristal's life changed dramatically. The happy and stable family life that she had lived unexpectedly took a turn due to the deaths of her paternal grandfather, grandmother, and even more unexpectedly the death of her father. Cristal shared that her grandfather's death was the first time she had experienced grieving a death of a loved one and she found coping was extremely difficult. She was close to both grandparents, but even closer to her grandfather. His death took an emotional toll on the entire family, and she believes that her grandmother passed away soon after her grandfather because she also couldn't take the pain of the loss.

Cristal shared that grieving for her grandparents was extremely difficult, but that grieving over her father's death is explainable. Cristal's father was murdered and until this day, she still does not know why or who murdered him. What Cristal does know is that after her father's death, her mother was left with the responsibility of raising 5 children as a single parent. It was after her father's death, that Cristal's mother made the decision that it was best for her and her family to immigrate to the United States because she needed the emotional support of her family.



*In 2003, my dad lost his job. He had worked as a policeman under the PRI [Institutional Revolutionary Party in México] and when a new president was elected from a different political party, he resigned from his job. The different political parties are constantly fighting, and he didn't want to get involved, so that is why he resigned. He then dedicated himself to raising and selling the animals that we owned. It was also during those times that my father's father, my grandpa passed away. It was the first death that we had experienced and my dad really struggled. I also didn't know what death meant until my grandpa passed away, so it was extremely hard for everybody. I was used to seeing him [grandfather] everyday, we went to his house a lot. I was so close to him that I didn't want to let go of him. For a while after his death I felt his presence and I could hear him walking around the house.*

*Soon after my grandfather's death, my grandma, his wife, got extremely ill. She used to smoke a lot and was constantly sick because of it. Six months after my grandfather died, she also passed. We experienced one family death after another. Everyone in the ranch felt that my grandfather did not want to leave alone, so he took my grandma along with him. That thought made it more romantic and it made it easier for us to handle the loss.*

*Four months later [after her grandmother's death], something very unexpected occurred, my dad passed away. We were left completely alone. My mother who had never worked before was left with five children and the youngest was five years old. We were left with a house and two lands. I was in my last year of middle school. After my dad's death we had no idea what we were going to do. All of my mother's family lived in San Felipe. So when that happened, my grandparents, my mother's parents, moved in with us because we were alone, completely alone. The person that supported our family emotionally and economically was gone. I don't like to share with people how my dad died because it is difficult. But my dad died because somebody shot him [sobbing]. And whatever the reason why he got shot, I don't know. I don't want to know because I do not want to live with hatred. I know that my dad was not a bad guy, but being involved in the politics of México can be dangerous. He worked for the good guys, but there were many bad guys.*

*After my father passed, my mom decided that we could not stay in Durango because we were all alone. She told me, we are going to go live in the United States with your grandparents because we have nobody here. She felt that she needed my grandparent's help to get through this situation. And that's why we ended up moving to the United States.*

*Prior to my father's death, moving to the United States was never an option. Even though we didn't earn much, we still had beans on the table everyday and that was all that mattered. Our house was great for the family. My mom and dad had their own room and my sister and I had our room as well. We had a living room*

*and a kitchen; we also had a small house to wash the clothes. We were content with our lives, but everything changed.*

It is difficult to be emotionally prepared for the death of a loved one, but it is even more difficult for a child or teenager to unexpectedly lose one of their parents. Cristal had not only lost her father, but she was also forced to leave the country that she loved and that she called home. Cristal was 15 years old the day that she left México and her immigration journey was one of the most difficult and frightening experiences that she has encountered. She feared being detained by U.S. Border Patrols, but also feared being raped or killed. Cristal found the experience so traumatic that she shared that if she were ever deported, she could never go through that again.

*The day that we permanently left México was hard. I remember when we got in the truck to leave I was crying and crying because I was not going to see my friends for a while. I always thought that I was going to go back. I thought moving to the U.S. was not going to be so bad because I will eventually come back. We left by bus from Durango all the way to Sonora. That's a part of my life that I want to forget [referring to the immigration journey].*

*A lot of people cross by swimming and other things like that. When you get to the city where you are going to cross from you begin to think, my God what is going to happen to me? We were also wondering what was going to happen to us and if they caught us. We were traveling on the bus and that is where I saw the Harry Potter movie in Spanish. We arrived in Nogales with my grandfather, who is a permanent resident. When I got out of the bus the first thing that I thought was how can people live like this? There were houses all over the mountains, but they were like shacks. There was a lot of poverty and everything very ugly. Although my ranch was small it wasn't that ugly. At least there were paved roads in my ranch and even though we had farm animals, we still did not live in such filth as this city.*

*We had to go to the house of the person who was going to cross us over in Nogales, el coyote [human smuggler]. Someone from the United States had recommended the coyote to my grandfather and so we went to the house. My younger sister and I were going to cross with an identification of a U.S. born girl, but my eyes are hazel so it was decided that I would have to cross after my sister and in the evening because my eyes were not the same color of the girl on the i.d. My sister Rosa looked like the girl in the photo, because she was light skinned and*

*had the same color eyes. We first arrived in Nogales at night, so my grandfather, sister and I stayed together. There were scorpions in the home and it was ugly.*

*The person in charge was one of the ladies who lived in the house. She gave us a little bit of confidence about crossing with safety because she would say things that made it seem like she knew what she was doing. The following morning they gave us breakfast and they took Rosa by herself. Rosa has never told me how they crossed her over. Rosa left and I stayed with my grandfather. Rosa went with one of the ladies because my grandfather wanted to stay with me to make sure that I was going to be ok. We were waiting to get the call from the coyote to make sure that she had crossed safely. Soon after they called my grandfather to tell him that everything was fine.*

*I was waiting and waiting to be crossed, but since my eye color didn't match the i.d. that I was going to use, I waited until nighttime. Before we crossed they took me to another house. Finally a girl showed up with her boyfriend, and they were going to cross me. She told me to remember the name on the i.d. because that was not my name. She told to remember where I was born, which was where the girl was born and that if I was asked any more questions to say that I did not know. I said ok, but I never learned the name because that's how nervous I was.*

*We finally arrived to the U.S. border inspection points and we opened the car window and the man [border patrol officer] began talking to us. He spoke Spanish and he flashed the light at us. He asked us, "Can I see your papers?" and they handed them their own. I was the only one who didn't have any papers that were actually mine. Then he asked me, "Show me yours." So then I lifted mine up really quickly like I didn't care, as if I had done this a lot of times. He asked us, "Why are you coming here?" and the girl responded, "Our niece is visiting and we are going to take her shopping." Then the man [United States Border Patrol officer] said its fine, go ahead and go through. We had passed. I so happy and I felt relaxed but then I thought hopefully they [the couple who crossed her] take me to where they need to take me.*

*They took me to some mobile homes that were across the border [U.S.] and the old lady who was in Nogales was there waiting for me. The mobile home belonged to the lady's ex-husband. Her ex-husband's son and his granddaughter lived in the mobile home. The granddaughter stayed with me and kept me company. Soon after I got there they ordered pizza and that was what I ate. They told me that I was going to stay there until the next morning and that I would get onto a bus that would take me to the city where Rosa and my grandfather were. My grandfather had already crossed to be with Rosa. I was alone with these people and no one knew where I was for about 24 hours. They told my grandfather that I was still at the house and that he would have to wait to see me because they were waiting for more people to cross. They are coyotes [human smugglers] so they need to distribute a lot of people at once in order to make money. I was really scared when I was waiting in the mobile home because more*

*people kept on arriving all night and they were all males. There was young boy who arrived and was fourteen years old and the first thing that he asked me was, if I had ever had sexual relationships. Can you imagine? I was fifteen years and I had not even thought about things like that and I had no idea what he was talking about. I was really scared. The next morning before we were ready to be released to our family, the lady told me that they were going to leave me alone with the guy that had asked me about my relationships and her stepson because she had to do some things. I got even more scared and I thought to myself, what if they end up raping me? The granddaughter was also there, but then she told me that she had a friend that lived near by and that she was going to go visit her. I convinced her to stay because I felt that I would be safe if she was there. I really disliked the girl because I was so nervous and I had to depend on her in order to feel safe.*

*While we were waiting for the lady some more guys showed up. There were two of them and one of them started talking to me. I don't know why, but I trusted the guy who was talking to me a little bit. Finally a white van arrived with other coyotes and they said they were there to pick us up. Then the guy [who she trusted] asked me, you're not coming with us? I didn't know what to do. They all said goodbye, and I was left by myself just waiting. I thought, well I have to wait here until someone comes to get me. However my grandfather could not come get me because it is not until the delivery that they can release you. It's all a process because it is how they receive the second part of their money. So the guys that I had just met got onto the truck and I don't know what they told the coyote, but he got off and asked me when I had arrived. I told him that I had arrived since yesterday and he told me, then you have to come with us as well. I got into a white van with tinted windows and they took us to a parking lot where there was another van waiting for us. We all had to get into the new van. There were more people in that one. There were about eight of us in the van, but now there were both women and men. The coyote started dropping people off in different places. No one was saying anything because of fear. There were four of us left and we arrived to another place where we were told to get into a car. It was really cramped. Then they dropped me off at another house. I believe that the old lady owned this house as well. They told me that my grandfather was going to pick me up at this location. When I went into the house, my grandfather was already there waiting for me and Rosa was with him. My grandfather told me they were worried because no one knew where I was and no one would tell them anything. Poor Rosita, she was crying and crying when she saw me.*

*She is two years younger than me; therefore, she was thirteen back then. After that my mom's cousin came to pick us up and took us to his house. It felt good to finally be with family that we trusted. I remember that we slept at his home and it was the first time that I tasted crunchy tacos from Taco Bell. It was the nastiest thing I had ever tasted in my life because the tacos were soggy. But I ate them because I was that hungry. I also remember how good it felt to shower because I hadn't taken one since we left Durango. It had been about three days. I lasted about thirty minutes in the shower. Then the next day, a cousin that lived in San*

*Felipe picked us up and brought us San Felipe. We arrived at three in the morning and I remember my grandmother opening the door and hugging her. That was also when I met my aunts who I had only known through photos.*

*The same coyote [human smuggler] crossed the rest of my family. They gathered passports for my siblings of kids that also looked like them. They also crossed at night. They flew from Durango to the border. Then from the Mexican border to the U.S they crossed like we did.*

*The immigration process was a total nightmare that I would never do again. If for some reason I were to get deported, I wouldn't come back. It was the worst experience of my life. And you may not think that it was much, but for a 15 year old crossing by herself, it was scary.*

Cristal shared that the immigration journey was one of the most dangerous and psychologically difficult situations that she has encountered; however, never imagined that it would be as equally traumatic to navigate life in the U.S. as an undocumented immigrant. Cristal never imagined having to constantly live in the shadows because of fear of deportation. She also never imagined that she would have to navigate life with limited socioeconomic opportunities. Cristal's family had left their native country to accomplish the complete opposite; they had hopes of living a life that involved safety, economic security, and personal growth.

When Cristal's family emigrated from México, not only did they leave behind family members, friends, and memories, but they also left their home. They left a home that they called their own which is something that they have not been able to do in the U.S. While her immediate family has been able to rent their own apartment, the living space does not compare to the one that they left behind. While Cristal's mother knew that they were leaving behind their home and extended family members, she was still forced to make the difficult decision to leave their native country and material belongings because she did

not want to raise her family on her own and in a city where they could potentially be harmed.

*When you first arrive to the U.S., you think that the crossing was the hardest part about immigrating and you think that things will only get better. But no, they don't! You never imagine that you are going to have to live in a house with ten other people. You never imagine that you will not have any space for yourself. When I lived in México, people who had emigrated from México to the U.S. would go back and brag that there was a lot of work in the U.S. and that there are a lot of good things. Every time they would go to México, they would take and wear their good things. They would show off all of their things. So naturally you start to believe that money grows on trees in the United States. That's the mentality in México, and that is why everyone wants to come over here.*

*I do have things like a laptop and an iPhone, but those things have cost me a lot of money and I struggle to pay them every month. The reality is that I am so poor right now that I can't even go to school. But when you are in México because everyone struggles with not having enough money, seeing people that have come to the U.S. and are now doing better makes you want the same. But I now know that we didn't see how hard it really was over here. I had no idea that it would be so difficult in the U.S. and that even going to the movies is difficult because I do not have the time because I'm always working. The truth is that almost everyone has two jobs. I thought that because we had family in the U.S. that we would be fine. That's how I felt.*

*When we first arrived in the U.S., we lived with my grandparents, aunts, and uncles. My mother, my two sisters, and I slept in one room. My little brothers stayed in another room with my aunt. My grandparents stayed in the other room. At first our living conditions were fine because we are family. Even though we lived in a small and tight space, overall we didn't have any problems. We only argued about small things like who would get to watch the television. It was, however, difficult to live in constant fear. We stayed in our room all the time because my grandparents were paranoid of something happening to us so they wouldn't let us go out. I would ask them to take us to Target or to just go and walk and my grandfather would say, "No mija because the intersection that we have to cross to get to the store is too big and something can happen to us." So I wouldn't argue with him. I understood that they wanted for us to be safe, but they were too much. Eventually my mom was able to save enough money to buy us a TV, so that is why we stayed in our room most of the time. After several months, my mom saved even more money and we ended up moving to our own apartment.*

Besides economic struggles, Cristal has also struggled with the acculturation process. According to Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001), "acculturation is the

process of learning new cultural rules and interpersonal expectations” (p. 73). Cristal immigrated to the U.S. as a teenager, and enrolled into the 10<sup>th</sup> grade upon arrival to San Felipe. Not only did she have to navigate a new system of education, but she also had to learn a new language. Cristal struggled with understanding the English language, but she struggled even more with the fact that she sat in a classroom for almost a year without any direction from her teacher because of the language barrier. Out of fear of embarrassment that her classmates would find out that she initially did not understand English, Cristal answered most of her teacher’s questions with a “yes” response when, in fact, most of the time she had no idea what she had just affirmed. Because of embarrassment and false affirmations to questions that she did not understand, Cristal made her high school teachers less accountable to assist her with the transition to high school; however, it was also the responsibility of her high school educators to academically challenge her regardless of her native language. Cristal shared about how she coped both academically, and emotionally her first year in high school.

*Starting school was very scary. Living in another country where I didn’t speak the language was also scary. I didn’t even like going to stores because everywhere I went everyone spoke English and I didn’t understand. I started school in tenth grade because I brought all of my school documents and transcripts from México and they accepted all of my coursework and placed me in that grade. I started Pueblo High School and I remember that the first class I had in the morning was Art. My teacher was Mrs. P and she was Vietnamese. My aunt took me, and I believe she told her that I didn’t speak English. There were a lot of students in that class that didn’t speak English. The only place I could speak Spanish was in the ELD [English Language Development] class. Learning English was really hard.*

*My entire 10<sup>th</sup> grade, I had a lot of nightmares because I had to go to school. I feared people laughing at me and not understanding what I was trying to say. I also feared teachers asking me questions and me staying quiet because I didn’t understand, and then everybody just looking at me. I hated that. The only word that I knew was ok and I used to say ok to everything. That is why people would laugh at me, because I would say ok to everything. So I learned to read people’s*

*faces. By their expression I was able to figure out whether using ok was right or wrong. Teacher did nothing about the fact that a lot of did not understand anything that they were teaching. They didn't accommodate anything so I started asking the Spanish-speaking students who knew more English than I did to explain the assignment to me and help me. Math was the only subject that was easy because everything the teacher was teaching I already knew because I had studied it in México so that class was extremely easy.*

*I only had 2 friends that were like me who were undocumented. I am sure there were more, but those are the only ones that told me. With time, I started to get more confidence and I asked questions. The first year I just wanted to go back to México. I missed my friends. It was also so hard to sit in a room all day and look and listen to a teacher that you just don't understand. I don't know how I did it, but eventually I got confidence and I wanted to learn English. School started to grow on me.*

During her sophomore and junior years in high school, Cristal navigated high school by relaying on her native born classmates who were bilingual in English and Spanish. Initially she did not like high school because she missed both her native country and her friends. She also struggled with learning the English language, and it negatively impacted her day-to-day life and her high school experience. She shared that her first two years of high school were years of assimilation, and she never considered pursuing a higher education or thought about her future goals.

Cristal was always aware that she was undocumented and she knew that undocumented students did not have the same legal rights as native-born citizens or naturalized residents. She knew that she was not eligible for any state or federal financial aid, and she knew that without any financial assistance it would be very difficult for her to pursue a higher education. Cristal's perspective changed when one of her high school counselors presented her with the possibility of attending a community college upon high school graduation. She shared how her decision to attend Pine Tree Community College came about and how Ms. P influenced her decision.



*I always knew that I was undocumented because I knew how I had crossed, but in high school I didn't experience a lot of fear because of my status because nobody talked about things like that. But then my senior year I started wondering what I was going to do after high school. I thought if I couldn't get scholarships or financial help how could I go to college. The last 3 months before graduation, I decided that I was going to find a job once I finished school. I also thought that everything would be simple. I thought that I would just go and get a fake ID and I thought that the fake ID would be good for everything. In high school I didn't worry much about that. A lot of kids don't worry about it until the day that they graduate. You worry until you realize that you do not know what you are going to do. So the fact that I attended college after high school was not something that I had planned. I never decided it. Somebody else decided it for me.*

*My ELD [English Language Development] teacher was the person that influenced my decision to attend a community college. Sometimes I still go and see her. Her name is Ms. P. She is a White woman that really helped me. I had a counselor who I was assigned to and his name is Mr. Ruedas. I hated going to his office because he used to talk to me and I didn't understand anything he would try to tell me. So every time he used to call me, it was as if the Virgin Mary would help me and something would happen where I wouldn't have to go to his office. I felt that he [Mr. Ruedas] was fake. I don't know, but I never liked him. From the first time he talked to me to give me my schedule, I didn't understand anything. He gave me pavor [dread/fear] and you know when someone scares you, you don't want to go back.*

*Next his office was Ms. P. She was also a counselor who was White, but she spoke Spanish. So one day I walked into her office and I said "Hola" [hello] and she responded "Hola" [hello], which surprised me because she was White. I told her I had an appointment with Mr. Ruelas, but that I didn't want to go meet with him because I didn't understand when he talked to me. Although he was a Latino, he always spoke to me in English. I asked her not to tell him. I thought he spoke too fast and there were certain words, like educational words that I didn't understand. I asked if she could help me. Then she sat me down and asked me, what are you going to do? She asked me, are you going to go to college? I told her no because I couldn't because I was undocumented.*

*Then she informed me that I could attend college as an undocumented student. She then explained to me the AB 540 law, but I really didn't understand it. I just understood that I could attend college. She said, "To start we are going to enroll you at Pine Tree Community College." You are going to have to sign up to take the placement test. She told me that they were going to come to the high school and that I had to show up to take the test. So I took the placement test and then Ms. P informed me about a scholarship that was available for students regardless of their residency status. She said that she was the person who chose the student who would get the scholarship. She told me that she wanted me to apply for the scholarship, but that I would have to write a personal statement. She said, "Write*

*it and give it to me.” I was like “Oh, how do I start?” I wrote my first draft and then she corrected it. I wrote my second draft and she corrected it again. So she was the first person to ever help me write a personal statement. She submitted my essay and because of my good grades and her help I got the scholarship. I ended up getting another scholarship because another teacher nominated me for it.*

*Ms. P did all the work so I could enroll and attend Pine Tree community college. I went to orientation and from there I was on my own. My mom was really excited that I was going to college and she was also excited because she didn’t have to pay anything. She didn’t even know that I could go. I wasn’t going to go to school, so I had no expectations all through high school.*

*Everyone said that it was easy to get a job at McDonald’s, so I was going to do that. Then if I could save enough money from working at McDonald’s, I thought that I would go to college. That was my thought because no one in my family had gone to college. I am the first in my family to go to college so nobody knew how to help me go to college.*

With the assistance of Ms. P, Cristal matriculated at Pine Tree Community College. As a first-generation college student from a low-income background who does not qualify for financial aid, Cristal funded her first academic year with the money she received from multiple private scholarships. Cristal shared that she was excited about the opportunity to attend a community college because all through high school she did not have any expectations of attending any system of higher education. Cristal described her pathway as a transfer student to California State University.

*My first semester at Pine Tree Community College (PTCC), I knew somebody else who was also attending so I used to hang out with her. Her boyfriend was already attending PTCC so since I hung out with her, he would explain to us how everything worked. He showed me how to register for classes on the phone and he showed me where to go. He was a big help. He was showing his girlfriend, but since I was their chicle [gum] I learned everything from them.*

*At first I didn’t know what I wanted to study. I knew that I had always been really good in Math, but it wasn’t my thing. I was thinking about Business because I think that it’s interesting. I focused on my general education and I ended up graduating with an AA in Business; however, one day I was talking to a friend and I was telling her that I wanted to find a major that focused on tourism and hotels and customer service. I told her that that was my thing, but that the community college didn’t have it. We were both transferring to the same*

*university and she said, you know what there is something called Hospitality Management and that could be your major. So thanks to her I started to do research and it became my major. People are always deciding things for me and influencing my decisions. She influenced me to choose that major.*

Cristal has consistently struggled emotionally and economically with navigating higher education as an undocumented student; however, it was not until she transferred to California State University where her emotional struggles became so severe that they caused her to lie about her identity, and even more importantly she began to realize that regardless of her academic potential without legal residency she will never have the same opportunities academically or professionally as her U.S. resident or citizen classmates. Cristal's undocumented status not only prevents her from ever practicing her profession in this country, but it also inhibits her from fully taking advantage of internship opportunities that are awarded to her U.S. born classmates. As a hospitality management major, Cristal must complete an internship in her field in order to earn a baccalaureate degree; however, the fear of disclosing her undocumented status has precluded her from seeking out the guidance from her advisor regarding internship opportunities or placements. There is nothing more that Cristal would like than to have the opportunity to intern in a resort in another country, yet that is not an option because if she leaves the country she will not be able to legally return to the U.S. Interning in a hotel or resort in the U.S. may also not be an option because quite often interns must present a valid social security number and identification; which Cristal does not have. If Cristal cannot complete an internship or find an educator who can assist her with this graduation requirement, it will be impossible for Cristal to earn the two bachelor's degrees she has worked to so hard to earn. She will be forced to give up her primary major, and once again be a victim of racist policies that affect undocumented students on a daily basis.

*I have declared two majors at CSU [California State University], which are Spanish and Hospitality Management. It's weird because in my hospitality management classes all my classmates are White. There are one or two African Americans and Asians. You don't see many Latinos in my classes.*

*I feel like an outsider in my hospitality management classes. In order to survive in my classes and to not feel as such an outsider, I have started pretending that I am just like my classmates. I pretend that I have a California i.d. in my bag. I try to convince myself that I am one of them because if I didn't I wouldn't be as confident in classes. I would feel even more powerless if I didn't pretend that we were similar. If I did not pretend that I was like my classmates, I would always be tense and I would be reminded even more than I already am about the jobs and internships that I am not eligible for.*

*I struggle with hearing about how my classmates are traveling all over México because of internships they have done or vacations that they have taken. They say, They talk about going to Cabo, going to Cancún, or going to Acapulco, and I can't help but think about how I was born there and raised there, but even if I wanted to go back and visit I can't because I cannot come back. Most of my hospitality management classmates are constantly traveling to other countries and doing internships at hotels all over the country. They always ask me if I have gone to certain locations and I just say no I haven't been there. I try to change the topic because I feel bad that they can do so much and I can't do anything. I wish I could travel and experience the world, but I can't. I can only experience it through books. I know that there are so many things that I am capable of doing, but I can't. I know that I have the potential and that I have what it takes, but I just can't. Like the Tigres del Norte [Mexican music group] say, "Aunque la jaula sea de oro no deja de ser jaula" [even though the cage is made out of gold, it is still a cage]. I can have an Iphone, a good car or many other material things, but if I can't do exactly what I want to do in life then all of this is not worth it. I won't be able to practice my profession without legal residency. I feel like this country has given me so much, and I would like to have the opportunity to be able to return it by continuing to contribute to the economy and to my community. I know that I could do so much only if they would give me the opportunity because if I am doing this without a real opportunity, imagine what I could do with one. I just need that opportunity to complete my internship so I finish my degree, but I don't know where to start.*

*The only CSU faculty that knows that I am undocumented is my Spanish teacher and advisor. I have been planning to talk to one of my hospitality management teachers because she is very open. Her name is Dr. K. She is not even my advisor. I have an advisor assigned to me, but I really do not trust her. I want to go to Dr. K and tell her [about being undocumented], but I don't know how. I don't know if she is a Republican and will end up not liking me. I just don't know. I am so afraid of telling her. I am afraid of telling anyone in the hospitality field because I don't know how they will react. What if they tell me, there is nothing we can do*

*for you. I need to participate in an internship in order to graduate. It doesn't matter if I don't get any money, but I need the credits. I want to tell them that I can work for free as long as they let me intern. I swear I will work for 24 hours, what ever they need me. I just need somebody to guide me to find an internship. I want to approach her [Dr. K] and I want to ask her, but I don't know how. I have had 3 classes with her and I always sit in front of the class. Also when I have taken her class, she always chooses my notes as examples of what notes should look like. I also invited her to my scholarship reception and she attended. I think she likes me somehow and I like her. She is good teacher and I like her for everything that she does, but I don't know if I am going to approach her because I am not sure what she is going to say. I am pretty sure she doesn't know what an AB 540 student is.*

*I really need to decide soon what I am going to do because I have a lot questions about my hospitality management major. I need to ask her about the amount of internship hours that I must complete and what classes I still have to take in the major in order to complete the degree. I also want to meet with her because she knows a lot of people. She knows people that may be able to help me out and get an internship. But I have so much fear to approach her. I don't know why, but after my situation with Wonderland I just started fearing disclosing my status. They used to invite me to do conferences and to tell my story and I was always willing and open about my residency status. Now I am so terrified of talking at AB 540 conferences. I am no longer as open about it. When they ask me for my testimony I will no longer participate because of fear. I fear that if I am pulled over the cop will recognize me from a conference that I have spoken at. I fear that the cop will take my car away for not having a license. I fear everything! I guess everyone just has their moments when they experience fear and their moments where they just don't care.*

Cristal was not always as reserved about disclosing her undocumented status.

While she was a student at Pine Tree Community College she advocated for social justice and she was optimistic about immigration reform. After living in the U.S. for several years, she began to identify with the American culture and believed in the ideal of meritocracy. However, due to a traumatic experience while seeking employment Cristal's life and ideology completely changed. Cristal was humiliated when a human resources representative confronted her for using a social security card that was not valid. She shared that not only was she humiliated because she knew that she could not legally work and was still seeking employment, but also because everyone in the waiting room

who was seeking employment heard that she was undocumented and that she presented a document that was not valid.

*In order to finance my education and to contribute to the well-being of my family, I started working at the Flea Market ever since I was in high school. I was making \$100.00 dollars for working Saturday and Sunday. I was working in a stand where people get their ears pierced. It was a good job. I have always been really good with words and communicating with people so convincing people to buy things was easy. That was good and then I started Pine Tree Community College and I saw a student that I knew from high school who told me that he was working at Wonderland [amusement park] and that they were hiring. I told him that I was going to apply and I asked him if I could write him down as a reference. He said yes, and I applied and when they asked me to present my i.d. I showed them my school i.d. and my fake social. I worked for one season and everything was good. Not only was I making money, but the job also forced me to be more outgoing since I dealt with mostly English speaking customers. I just loved that job so much. That was one of those jobs that I loved going to and I was always on time. And if they asked me to stay longer, I would always stay. That is how much I loved that job. Then the next season I applied again, and the same thing, I loved it. I was promoted to a Lead. I was learning something new and I liked it.*

*The third season that I applied was a completely different story. The day that I applied again they told me that they were going to promote me as a supervisor. I was super, super, super excited. I was like oh my God. I got home telling everyone about what happened. But sometimes you have feelings, weird feelings that something is going to happen. The day that I had to go to submit all my paperwork, you know the social and i.d., I just had a feeling that something was going to happen. When I got to the human resources office, I signed in and I completed all my paper work. When I was done I handed the paperwork to the girl that was at the counter. She was African American and she asked do you have your i.d. with you? I'm like yeah so I pulled out my school i.d. and the social. She didn't even look at it for long, and she said "You are going to have to bring me a real social security card because this one is not going to pass." And she was so loud and the place was super full and I felt so bad [getting teary eyed as she told the story]. She brought my self-esteem to the floor. That was one of those moments that you want the Earth to open and eat you. I stood strong and I said, "Oh, I can check to see what is wrong with it." She was like, "Yeah this is not real and you have to go get a new social."*

*I left and I couldn't stop crying. My boyfriend took me and I couldn't stop crying. That was the first time that somebody had stopped me like that because of my status. Even though I was crying and I felt bad, I always knew that I was doing something wrong so instead of being angry with the girl that helped me I tried to*

*see the other side of this argument. I know what some U.S. citizens think about undocumented people coming to this country illegally. I know that they think that we just come and take resources. But that day was awful. I had never felt so rejected. It was that day when I started thinking that I don't need this. I don't need people telling me that I can't do stuff because of my residency. If experiences like that one continues to happen to me, I will not be able to be whatever I want to be. It was terrible because that situation made me experience fear that I had never experienced. I feared that I would never be able to apply for another job and that I would never be able to work in my career [tearing up and clearing throat].*

The humiliation that Cristal experienced when she was unable to present legal documentation to advance employment had even more repercussions for her than not being employed. This particular experience tarnished the fearless attitude that Cristal once had. Cristal was emotionally damaged for many months, which resulted in her not having the courage to seek employment. Being unemployed not only affected her economic well being, it also affected her ability to pay her university tuition. Cristal was forced to take one semester off from California State University because by the time she found the courage to find new employment she did not have enough time to save money and to attend school. The emotional set-back affected her confidence and solidified the lack of acceptance of undocumented students in U.S. society; however, she remains committed to earning her baccalaureate degree. Even after the traumatic experience that Cristal experienced, her dedication to her higher education has never rendered.

Cristal attributes her resilience to her mother's sacrifices of working numerous low-paying jobs in order for her children to have a better life. Cristal has also decided that she cannot live in the shadows much longer, and if immigration legislation is not passed by the time she graduates from CSU, she will look for avenues to practice her profession even if it is not in this country.

*After the Wonderland embarrassment, I stopped working for a while. My mom was always asking me when was I going to go to work? I knew that I needed money to pay my tuition for the following semester, but I had a horrible feeling that if I applied at other places they were going to say “no”. In fact, because I did not work for several months I was forced to take a semester off from CSU.*

*After many months of fear, I found a new job. Once again I was forced to lie about my status, which I do not like doing, but I needed to work in order to survive and to pay for school. I work at a grocery store and I feel that I can be myself. I also feel that I do well in the job and my boss noticed as well because now I am a supervisor. But I still wake everyday and fear that I someone will know about my status at work. Every time that I am stressed or that my head is hurting because of work, I remind myself that this all for school. This money is for school. This motivation helps me to keep on going and to forget what has happen in the past.*

*Even though it has been really difficult to go to college as an undocumented student, I try to stay motivated. My passion for school inspires me to work hard. This semester I had to take the semester off because I could not afford the university tuition and I really wish that I were the one taking a final because I know that it is finals week at CSU. It’s true what they say that when you start learning you realize that you really don’t know anything. You want to continue learning. I also want to get a good career that when I wake up, I feel like oh, yes God thank you because I am going to work to a job that I love. If I do that, maybe I can earn enough money to support my mom. I don’t need to make that much, but enough to help her out. She is my number one inspiration because every time I accomplish something and I look at her face, I can see how proud she is of me. I love that feeling. I love seeing her smile. I love making her happy and I know that every time I get a good grade, or get an award, or a scholarship, she is proud me and I love that. She feels that she has accomplished her life’s goal, which is to raise me well.*

*My mom has made so many sacrifices so we could have a better life. She works at a taco truck. She wakes up at 4:00 a.m. and works there until 3:00 p.m. Then she goes to another job at 6:00 p.m. and she is there until 8:00 p.m. I don’t think that she likes working so much, but she does it out of necessity. Because of her we have our own apartment. We have our own life and we don’t have to ask anyone for anything. But it saddens me because I feel that she is not living her life. She is living our lives. She wants to protect us and she lives for us.*

Cristal’s mother immigrated to the U.S. along with her children with hopes of being able to provide them a better life. She works multiple low-paying jobs so her children can get the academic and economic opportunities she never had. Cristal shared



that her mother's sacrifices have not been in vain because her children have always worked hard both in and out of the classroom. Cristal's inspiration to succeed academically has always been her family, in particular, her mother. However, the emotional setbacks and limited socioeconomic opportunities have caused Cristal to no longer be as optimistic of reaching her full personal and professional potential in this country. She cannot fully integrate in U.S. society because she cannot legally drive, vote, work, or ever live without the fear of deportation. Cristal shared that the only way that she can reach her full potential in this country is if immigration legislation like The Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act passes and becomes law.

*If the DREAM Act passed, it would change EVERYTHING! I would have endless options. I would have so many choices and I can say, "yes" to all of them. I really don't know, and I really try not to think about that because I am going to start dreaming and what if nothing happens. It's better to stay grounded because I tend to go to the moon and end up disappointed. But definitely it would change so many things. I would quit my job. That would be the first thing I do. I would quit and go to school full-time and finish. I could do so many things, I could get a driver's license, and I could look for a job in a hotel and any other place that I would like to work at. I would work in 3 jobs at a time. I would work 3 jobs because the more that I do the better. I want to do so many things and go to so many places.*

*If policy makers would just listen to my story as an undocumented student I would tell them I am not trying to steal anything from U.S. citizens. I just want an opportunity to show this country what I am capable of doing. I would tell them that I want to give back to this country. I would also like them to just imagine what it is like to be undocumented and to be in my position. I have experienced so many obstacles, I have cried so much and I have suffered and lost so many things. After all my struggles, how can they still tell me, "You don't belong here and you have to go back to your country." They would understand how difficult it is to live like this if they [policy makers and anti-immigration communities] had to live in my skin. It's just hard. It's not easy. But if they could just stop thinking that we just want to take people's benefits and a seat in a classroom that would be easier.*

*I don't like to lie. I don't steal. I like to do things right and I know that living in this country undocumented is not right because according to the laws of this*

*country I am not doing something right. I always feel like I am committing a crime. When I am referred to as an illegal alien, I feel that I am being referred to as criminal. I am not a criminal because I am pursuing an education. The fact that my mom crossed and brought us here, that does not make her a criminal. I think that the word criminal should be used for people who have harmed someone else. I haven't done anything bad to anybody. I have never killed someone, nor have I ever stolen from someone.*

If the DREAM Act becomes law, the 65,000 undocumented students who graduate yearly from United States high schools, will have the opportunity to convert their dreams into a reality. They will be able to pursue a higher education, and to eventually practice the profession of their choice. Navarette (2011) refers to this student population as the “dreamers” because many undocumented students have big academic and professional dreams, but cannot reach them because of their immigration status. Cristal is one of the many dreamers, whose life would dramatically change if the DREAM Act passes. Cristal would no longer have to live in fear of deportation, she would no longer have to experience humiliation when seeking employment, and she would be able to be the optimistic student that I once knew. The DREAM Act would not only open doors of opportunity for Cristal, but it would allow her to experience life in the United States in a completely different way than she ever experienced. Cristal identifies as being American, and shared that she loves this country; however, current immigration laws have no room for students like Cristal. Not only do current immigration laws discriminate undocumented students, but they also fail to recognize the social, cultural, and academic capital of talented and extraordinary human beings like Cristal.

### **Analysis –Through a CRT and LatCrit Lens**

According to Gonzales (2011) “it is in school that immigrant youth develop academic knowledge and, just as important, form perceptions of where they fit in the social reality and cultural imagination of their new nation” (p.604; Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco, and Todorova, 2008). Cristal was 15 years old when she immigrated to the United States; and has vivid memories of both the traumatic immigration journey, and the difficult transition to the United States educational system and culture. Utilizing a Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) lens I will draw from Cristal’s narrative to discuss and illuminate the traumatic and systemic racism that she has endured while attempting to fit in a society that criminalizes Latino/a undocumented immigrants. According to Casas and Cabrera (2011), “anti immigrant actions are attributed to ever-changing economic conditions, when the United States needs cheap labor they import people, and when it doesn’t they deport them” (p. 290). Unfortunately, the United States is experiencing negative economic conditions which only contributes to anti immigrant sentiments, which results in the passing of anti immigrant policies at the state and federal levels.

Cristal is a victim of anti immigrant policies that have never allowed her to fully integrate into U.S. society. She is also a victim of academic policies created by the dominant culture that have cheated her from a comprehensive education. The first day that Cristal attended school in the United States, she learned the importance of English language dominance and for the first time in a long time she no longer felt like the accomplished student that she had been recognized as in her native country.

*I clearly remember my first day of school. My aunt took me to my first class and my teacher was Vietnamese. As soon as I sat down she asked the class, "Who in here knows Spanish?" and a girl named Stephanie raised her hand and I sat with her and she was the one who would translate everything the teacher said to me. I was super embarrassed that she had announced to the classroom that I did not know English. I was like, oh my god, now everybody knows!*

*This teacher not only embarrassed me, but whenever she wanted to talk to me about something she would tell me very slow like I had a learning problem. I didn't know how to tell her that I wasn't dumb; it was just that I didn't understand English. She just made me feel weird.*

According to Ladson-Billings (1999) intelligence testing and current instructional strategies created by the dominant culture legitimize the labeling of "raced" children as deficient (p.22). Cristal shared that her teacher made her feel "dumb" or "deficient" because she did not know the English language and did not understand what her teacher was trying to explain. Using a CRT lens, Villenas, Deyhle and Parker (1999) argue that "deficit explanations on the part of teachers and school administrations are patterns connected to White strategies of maintaining privilege" (Villenas, Deyhle, & Parker, p. 38). Cristal not only dreaded attending school due to the fear of having to speak in a language that she did not dominate, but embedded racist policies and a curriculum that does not support non-native English speaking immigrants caused Cristal to question her intelligence.

Although Cristal eventually learned the English language, a dysfunctional K-12 curriculum and lack of support for undocumented immigrant students, resulted in Cristal being placed on the English Language Development (ELD) instructional track which automatically eliminated her eligibility to attend a university upon high school graduation. Cristal mentioned that it was her ELD teacher who saw her academic potential and who suggested that she attend a community college upon high school

graduation. Cristal shared that while some of her high school teachers who were bilingual in Spanish and English who could have assisted her with the transition to a new school, they did not do so because district policies prohibited them to teach in a language other than English. CRT and LatCrit theorists would argue that the educational policies failed Cristal, and also failed her teachers who could have utilized their bilingual ability to improve a curriculum that is not inclusive to all students.

*Although my first year at Pueblo high school the math teacher knew a little Spanish and she could have helped us understand, she told us that she wasn't supposed to speak to us in Spanish because we were in the United States and we had to speak English. The math teacher was Mexican-American.*

*However, the following year I had her for math again and she was different. Because I was a really good student in 10<sup>th</sup> grade, in 11<sup>th</sup> grade she would talk to me in Spanish when I didn't understand her. I was the best student in the math class both years so I guess that is why she treated me differently the second year I had her.*

Cristal's resiliency and passion for learning allowed her to successfully graduate from high school. She also successfully completed an associate's degree at a California Community College. She shared that she felt supported by faculty, staff, and fellow classmates as an undocumented student at Pine Tree Community College. The support influenced her passion to help other undocumented students. She was an agent of social justice while she attended Pine Tree Community College, but her perspective completely changed after transferring to California State University and experiencing traumatic experiences both in academic and personal settings.

Cristal once identified higher education with social and economic mobility; however, her university experiences have proved to be completely different from what she once believed. As an undocumented student, Cristal has consistently struggled to finance her education due to being ineligible for financial aid. She has sacrificed

involvement in extra-curricular activities due to her having to work full-time in order to finance her education, she is not eligible for most internships that align with her major because they require proof of U.S. residency or citizenship, and she has had to turn down valuable learning opportunities such as studying abroad because if she were to leave the United States she cannot legally return. CRT and LatCrit theories suggest that as an undocumented student from a low-socioeconomic background Cristal never had an equal opportunity at meritocracy. In fact, educational policies, which are created by the dominant culture, are not only discriminatory, they are also inequitable to undocumented students. Cristal has sacrificed a comprehensive university education because her talents, academic accomplishments, and passion for learning are not enough to overcome the fact that she is undocumented and lives in country where she has minimal rights.

*I wanted to study abroad so bad, but it's another thing that I cannot do because I am undocumented. One of my instructors invited me to go to Portugal. Not only can I not study abroad, but I am also ineligible for other things such as scholarships and internships.*

Additionally, when discussing other experiences that prohibit her from socially integrating into the college experience Cristal shared how she felt about attending social events, and the fear that she constantly experiences that she will be denied entrance to places that require a legal form of identification in which she cannot provide.

*When I have to use my credit card and I am asked for my ID, I don't like getting my Mexican ID out and I don't know why. I feel like they will know that I am not documented. And that's part of the fear. Every time they ask me for my ID I pull out my school ID and I pull out my Mexican ID at least as possible. Maybe that's why I don't drink. Because every time I order a drink they will ask for my ID and they will ask my age so instead I avoid going out all together. I don't go dancing or to clubs. I fear that someone is going to laugh when they card me, and that they will tell me that because I am undocumented that I don't belong. I know that by being here I am doing something wrong.*

Cristal never imagined that she would experience such traumatic experiences that would affect her everyday life. The humiliation that she experienced while trying to gain employment at Wonderland not only deterred the confidence that she once had, but it also inflicted fear and self-doubt. According to Casas and Cabrera (2011), “undocumented youth undergo trauma as they move from childhood to adolescence to adulthood” (p. 295). Cristal was traumatically affected when she attempted to partake in one of the many responsibilities that are related to adulthood, to gain employment. She never wanted to work illegally or have to drive without a license, but she was forced to do so in order to survive in this country. She shared that there is nothing more that she wants than to be accepted by a country that she now feels like her own.

*In the last year I have changed a lot. I just can't tell you how affected I was by what happened to me at Wonderland. I just don't know who I am anymore. I just want to be me in every sense of the word, but I can't because there are so many things that stop me. I have barriers in my everyday life and that stupid fear. I would like that stupid fear to go away. I just try to feel like I belong here, but it's hard.*

*After living in the U.S. for so many years, you start thinking that you are American even if you don't want it. During the Olympic games, I cheer for the U.S. That is when I realized México doesn't interest me anymore. You know! After living here so many years you have so many connections to the U.S. culture.*

Even after risking her life to immigrate to a country that has never fully accepted her and has often created laws that discriminate undocumented students, Cristal accepts responsibility for the lack of opportunities that she has experienced by believing that her struggles are a result of God's desires for her to learn from them. Systemic barriers are so deeply embedded that rather than acknowledging that the U.S. educational system has failed her time and time again, she places her struggles on God's will.

*I think that everybody has a purpose in this life and I think God wanted me to learn from my struggles. Dios aprieta pero no ahorca [God will test you, but*

*never kill you]. I believe one day he will let me go and bring complete happiness to my life. I feel that he [God] is saying you have to go through this and suffer before you can get happiness. After the storm comes the sun. This is a dark part and I don't know if I have passed the darkest part and if my sun is going to come out or if I still have a little bit left. But it's okay. I know I can do it. After that I know that there is going to be no stopping me. And if my sun is passing the DREAM Act, I will take it. Completely. But if my sun is leaving this country and moving to another place then I will do it.*

*As soon as I finish school, if something [immigration reform] doesn't happen I will move. I do not like living like this. Maybe the fear will go away, but if it doesn't I do not want to live like this forever. I want to be free. I don't want to be afraid of a cop and I don't want to be afraid of someone inviting me somewhere and not being able to go. I can't explain how I feel.*

*I always knew that I was undocumented, but it is now that it is hitting me emotionally and it was because of that situation where I literally felt like a criminal when I was simply trying to work. I was denied the opportunity to the greatest job ever because I was going to be a supervisor. And that got me really down and really blue. I used to cry a lot. All of this happened 7 months ago.*

According to Abrego and Gonzales (2010), “undocumented Latino students face a complicated maze of contradictions, misinformation, and numerous roadblocks to education and prosperity” (p. 147). Cristal has consistently faced contradictions and complications while navigating life as an undocumented student. While in high school she learned early on that in order to succeed in the world of academia, she needed to learn English and to assimilate into the United States culture. Cristal learned the English language, successfully completed a community college education, and transferred to a four-year university; yet, her academic accomplishments and integration attempts are not enough for societal acceptance. Being undocumented has always restricted Cristal from basic rights such as legally driving, working, voting, but after numerous traumatic events, she now navigates life with minimal self-esteem and minimal hope of a prosperous future. She no longer believes in the idea of meritocracy for undocumented students. Pérez, Cortes, Ramos, Espinoza, and Coronado (2009) state, “along with fear and



uncertainty, some undocumented students develop feelings of shame for having to live in the shadows of society” (p. 39). Cristal lives a life of uncertainty because of unstable employment, she does not know whether or not she will be able to find an internship and complete the hospitality management major graduation requirements, and even more uncertain is whether or not she will ever be able to legally practice her profession in this country. CRT and LatCrit theorists would suggest that Cristal is a victim of layers of oppression based on her race, gender, socioeconomic background, and immigration status. CRT and LatCrit scholars would also argue that traditional claims of neutrality and meritocracy are camouflages for the self-interest of the dominant culture in U.S. society, and were never intended to benefit undocumented students like Cristal which is unfortunate because she is one example of the many talented students who can positively contribute to this society if they were simply given the opportunity (Yosso, 2006, p. 7).

## **Chapter 7: Alejandro**

I have known Alejandro for several years; it was not until I had the privilege of hearing his life story that I truly understood who he is as a person, as a student, and as a member of our society. The first time I met Alejandro he stood out academically, and while I believe the community college system offers academic opportunities to many, I couldn't help wondering why Alejandro did not attend a university directly after high school. He always presented himself as an articulate critical thinker, and he demonstrated his ability to succeed academically. After several meetings with Alejandro I realized that it was not his lack of desire to attend a university after high school or his lack of preparation for the academic rigor of a university level education; attending a university directly after high school was not an option for Alejandro because he is an undocumented student who lacks the necessary financial resources. Alejandro's family could not afford to pay his university tuition, and his ineligibility for financial aid due to his residency status, made it impossible for him to attend a university. However, his passion for learning and his desire for upward social mobility led Alejandro to attend a community college and to continue his education. It is my hope that someday this country recognizes Alejandro's academic aptitude, and passes immigration legislation that will allow him the opportunity to reach his full potential both academically and professionally.

Alejandro was born in Villa Guerrero, México, a small town in the state of Jalisco. Although he was born there, he has no recollection of the town or the family that he left behind. Alejandro was 3 years old when his mother decided to emigrate from México and leave her unhealthy marriage. She had visited the United States multiple times with her husband, but he never had any intention of ever immigrating permanently.

Alejandro's mother on the other hand viewed the United States as a country of opportunity, therefore when she made the decision to leave her husband she decided that the U.S. would be the ideal place to raise her children in a safe environment, and a where they may have economic and academic opportunities that she did not have.

*My parents would come to the U.S. while they were married to visit family, but they always visited on a temporary visitor's visa. My father was very proud of his Mexican heritage, so he wanted his three children to be born in México. He had no aspirations of wanting to come [to the United States], and I don't think my mother did either; it was just the last resort due to a bad situation.*

*While I do not remember our immigration journey, I do remember hearing that one of our uncle's wife, who was my aunt, but not by blood, who lives in San Ignacio was willing to help my mother out [emigrate from México] because my mother was not in a decent relationship with my father. That is what I was told, but I wasn't there so I can't say for a fact what was happening. I do know that it affected her life a lot, enough to where she knew that she needed to get out of that relationship in order to live a productive life and to take care of us. Since at that time a lot of people from México were coming over to the United States illegally because it was relatively easy to get employment because companies were willing to hire people and immigrants were willing to work for relatively low wages. So we moved to the U.S. and ended up spending a few months in San Ignacio, until we eventually came to San Felipe because my mother's sister had moved here with her husband a few years prior. We lived with them for probably about five years until my mother remarried.*

When Alejandro's immediate family arrived from México, they lived with his uncle and aunt until his mother was economically stable enough to rent an apartment on her own. As an undocumented immigrant, Alejandro's mother worked long hours in low paying jobs in order to provide financially for her family. The jobs she worked in were typically janitorial because there was minimal risk of her being fired for not being able to provide the necessary documentation to legally work in this country.

According to Alejandro, his mother always provided her children with a home in a safe community and because of the areas they lived in he was able to attend high achieving elementary and middle schools. He also shared that by the time he started

school, he had already learned to speak English from his older siblings; however, he was still placed in Dual Language Immersion classrooms where most of his classmates were English Language Learners (ELL).

*When my mom first arrived, she did a lot of janitorial work such as cleaning houses and working at the fairgrounds during county events. She worked at places and jobs that did not require that she provide a lot of documentation or places where people did not ask too many questions about her residency status. She worked hard and provided for us as best as she could.*

*I grew up in a very good neighborhood. The neighborhood was racially mixed. The majority of the people were Mexican because there were apartment complexes, and across the street on the other side were houses and the majority of people who lived in the houses were Caucasian. Growing up I had a mixture of friends. I had both Mexican and White friends, but the majority of friends that I would hang out with were Mexican. However, at that age, kids don't see race; they just see other people. You know that people look different, but you don't treat people differently when you're a kid because you still haven't learned all the injustices that go with being from a different background.*

*I first attended Sycamore Elementary School, which was a predominantly White school. In first, second, and third grades I was in classes that had students who didn't speak English all that well, and they weren't just Hispanics/Latinos. I remember in third grade that an Asian girl in my class had a really difficult time because she didn't know English all that well, and I remember helping her out one day when we were reading. I tried to tell her what the words meant and stuff like that. In fourth and fifth grade, I was also in classes with students who did not speak English well.*

*From very early on I knew who the smart kids were or who the kids that did well [in school] were. I saw how they did it. They asked questions and they paid attention in class. At first I really didn't see it because I was always in the kind of like an ESL [English as a Second Language] class, no it's not ESL, it, it was some kind of program where from first grade on they kind of mixed Spanish in a little bit for students who didn't speak it [English] very well, but my English was good.*

Even though Alejandro was enrolled in classes where most of his classmates were ELL students, he described Sycamore Elementary School as not being ethnically diverse. He also shared that he felt a disconnect from some of his classmates; however, it was not because of his ethnic background instead it was because of his perception that certain students were smarter due to their study habits and their English language dominance.

*In elementary school, I kind of felt disconnected from some groups. I had different groups that I would hang out with, and then I also had my main friends. But I wanted to be like the kids who were good in school and my main friends weren't always good in school. They were involved in social activities, but I wanted to imitate the kids who I thought were the kids who got good grades because the teachers were proud of them. They carried themselves like they knew what they were doing.*

*They [kids who earned good grades] were a big inspiration in and out of the classroom. In PE classes, if they ran faster, then I thought, the next time I'm going to beat him. That's the mentality that I have where, I want to be better than average. I just want to be the best that I can be. I want to prove to myself that I can accomplish that threshold of excellence.*

Along with observing and following the study habits of students who excelled academically, Alejandro credits his inspiration to excel academically to being selected in second grade, to participate in the Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) program. While he enjoyed the higher expectations teachers placed upon him for being a GATE student, he also felt that most of his classmates in the program were at an academic advantage because it was material that they had covered in the English only curriculum as well as in their homes.

*My introduction to learning, but not learning necessarily in a structured classroom, was with my participation in the GATE program. We took a test and I was in the second or third grade, but I didn't even know what it was for. However, I scored good enough to where I was placed in the program with other kids. I'm pretty sure most of them were White, and maybe one Asian kid, but I was the only Hispanic kid there. Through the GATE program we would have an instructor who had different activities for us where he would get us to think critically and learning about different subjects.*

*I had never come across so much information before [participating in GATE]. I'm sure some of the other students already knew more or less about what we were learning because it's part of [their] heritage.*

Participation in the GATE program was not the only time that Alejandro felt different from his peers. He shared that while he had his regular set of friends with whom he socialized, he wanted to be different. Alejandro wanted to be like the students

recognized by teachers for their academic accomplishments. Aspiring to do as well or even surpass his White and Asian classmates, Alejandro's drive became somewhat competitive.

Not only did Alejandro attend a predominantly White elementary school, but he also grew up in a community where Latinos were the minority group. He shared that not only was he a minority because of his ethnic background, but he was also a minority because he was the only person amongst his friends who lived in an apartment rather than a home. And while his friends never intentionally treated him differently because of his ethnic or socioeconomic background, on occasion they would state things that caused Alejandro to feel uncomfortable and to feel different.

*I did feel a bit different in certain situations. For example when I was around friends that lived near me, about a mile away, but we had mutual friends so we hung around together. I remember one instance where I went over to their house and it was three or four White kids, me and an Asian kid, but the Asian kid had a similar life as them, he lived in a house, in fact, they all lived in houses, and I lived in apartments, so, from that aspect I was already an outcast. I remember we were in front of one of their house's door and the mom didn't know me and she asked, "Who's this?" She asked, "Who's your friend?" and the Asian kid said, "Oh, we found this Mexican and we brought him", and they started laughing and I didn't understand how something like that could be funny and looking back on it, it wasn't nothing personal. I just didn't understand what the need to make that distinction between my race and my nationality.*

After living in the west side of San Felipe for many years and attending Sycamore Elementary School, Alejandro had assimilated to his academic and community environments. He had established friendships and excelled academically, but in the eighth grade his family moved because his mother got a new job, and he was forced to start over in a different school. A constant struggle for undocumented students is the ability to establish meaningful relationships due to living a transient life.

Alejandro's family moved to the east side of San Felipe, where the racial demographics and socioeconomic backgrounds of students differed from his former school and neighborhood. While most schools located in the east side of San Felipe are composed of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, Cardinal Middle School, which is the school that Alejandro transferred to is the exception. The majority of students who attended Cardinal Middle School come from homes that have college-educated parents and where English is the primary language. Alejandro did not fit either of the school's demographics as he learned English as a second language, and his mother does not have more than an elementary school education. Alejandro vividly remembers the matriculation process to Cardinal Middle School and he shared his experience.

*When I transferred to Cardinal Middle School, they had me complete a transfer application, and because I put that Spanish was the primary language spoken at home, they wanted me to take a test to see if I could read English at an appropriate level. Because it was a different district, they didn't know where I was in terms of English, so, for the first couple weeks they took me out of my English class to test me. I thought that I was already in trouble when they would take me out of class. When I went there was a person sitting down with a book that had pictures on it and he had a tape recorder that played the story that coincided with the pictures in a series. Once the tape recorder stopped, he asked me, to repeat what happened in that story and relate it to the picture. I was like "really"? "This is what you're making me do?" So I just did it and it was a real cinch. I didn't struggle with the task at all.*

*In all honesty they were doing the right thing, they wanted to make sure that I was at the appropriate reading level, if not then, they would put me in a class that would be more suited for me, so I don't I didn't take it as an insult. The experience just sticks out in my head because it's one of those checks that they have to do to make sure that students are prepared to be in whatever class they have to be in. I was probably bothered at first by it, but not so much anymore.*

The actions that Cardinal Middle School took during Alejandro's matriculation process align with the experiences that many other undocumented students have encountered which reveal that American educational institutions value English language

dominance and consider Spanish proficiency a learning deficit. Alejandro stated that it did not bother him that the school had given him additional English assessments; however, the experience still resonates with him, which is an indicator that this experience made him feel different and inferior. Educational policies and procedures are created and implemented in such way that minority students constantly have to navigate their education while feeling different or less competent.

As a form of survival in a new school that consisted of predominately White and Asian students, Alejandro emulated the study habits and classroom behavior of his peers who were academically successful. His attempt at assimilation occurred at the expense of his losing aspects of the Latino culture such as utilizing the Spanish language less and less; however, Alejandro was simply doing what he explicitly learned from educational institutions, which was to conform in order to do well academically. According to Villenas, Deyhle, and Parker (1999), “at the curriculum level, the absence of Chicano/Mexicano culture and language makes Latino children and their families invisible” (p. 36). Alejandro was being taught by the dominant culture that meritocracy exists and that both the English language and American culture are more valuable than an immigrant student’s native language and cultural background. Rather than validating the cultural backgrounds of immigrant students, U.S. academic policies and procedures are created in such a way where immigrant backgrounds’ are often viewed as insignificant and as deficits.

*When I first started Cardinal Middle School, I noticed that there were a lot more Asian American students and Indian American students [compared to Sycamore]. Before that, I had never really came into much contact with students from those ethnic backgrounds because over on the west side [where he formerly lived] it’s mostly all White kids and Mexican kids.*



*After a while, I started making a lot of Asian friends. I started meeting new people in my classes and at the bus stop that picked us up. A lot of my Asian friends lived near me because there was a large Vietnamese population near my home. I'd just see them [his Asian friends] doing their thing, getting good grades and they weren't arrogant or they wouldn't brag about it. I knew that they do well in school so I thought, Why can't I? So I did well and in some occasions I could even surpass some of my friends. I got top grades in certain classes, like Math was one of those subjects where I knew I could get the highest score if I just gave it enough effort.*

After attending one year at Sycamore Middle School, Alejandro transitioned to high school. He shared that it was in high school where he started to realize that even after he had attempted to assimilate as an undocumented student, he did not have the same opportunities as his classmates and friends. The realization caused him to reevaluate his academic goals. His goals were to excel academically in high school and seek employment upon graduation. Alejandro did not intend to pursue college because he did not foresee it being possible because of his residency status and socioeconomic background. Also, Alejandro had done well academically his entire life, yet the first person who mentioned college to him was a friend, not a teacher, not a counselor. It is unfortunate that even though Alejandro had worked incredibly hard to excel academically, not one educator, teacher, or counselor, had realized his college potential or had taken the time to encourage him to pursue a higher education. Alejandro was raised believing the American ideal of meritocracy, yet he was clearly excluded from that ideal.

*When I started high school, I didn't prioritize education because I didn't think I was going to go to college. In fact, even from a young age I never thought about college. I remember having a conversation with one of my really good friends when we were in elementary school and he asked me, "When you get older where are you going to college?" He shared that his sister was going to go and that he was going to go someday. That was a whole different way of thinking for me. I didn't know that you could keep going to school after high school. I thought that after you finished high school that you started looking for work. I thought this*

*because that's what I saw my family and other relatives do. I thought that once you are of working age, then you start working and all you had to do was finish high school 'cause that's what the law dictates. So in high school I didn't think I was going to college. I didn't struggle too much academically because the workload wasn't bad and it was relatively easy, so there was no need to put forth my best efforts.*

*Teachers had always mentioned to me that I was bright, and that I picked up on things quickly, but they never discussed college with me. It was never a one-on-one discussion that we had. I had heard about college through discussions that were addressed to the entire class, but never individually. I don't want to say that I wasn't given attention, but no one ever singled me out and asked, what are planning on doing once you're done with school? What interests you?*

Alejandro shared that he had never considered the idea of attending college, because educators had never specifically approached him about his higher education plans. During his sophomore year, Alejandro was approached for the first time, by Mr. L, a teacher, who saw his academic potential and presented him the idea of attending space camp, an extra-curricular activity that he thought could benefit Alejandro both intellectually and academically. While Alejandro was excited about the opportunity presented to him, he chose not to pursue the offer of applying to the space camp because of financial constraints. He informed his teacher that he would discuss the opportunity with his mother, yet he never approached his mother or spoke to his teacher about the subject matter again. Alejandro did not discuss the opportunity of attending camp with his mother because he knew that she could not afford to pay the registration. Alejandro also shared that his teacher never contacted him again about future activities, and the reality is that his teacher could have made the assumption that Alejandro did not have any follow through with completing the application. The lack of follow through on Alejandro's behalf could have easily been mistaken as laziness. As an educator Mr. L

failed Alejandro by not following up with him and continuing to offer him additional opportunities.

*Mr. L was probably one of the first teachers that were interested in helping me out. He showed me a brochure for space camp with hopes that I would apply. It was some kind of space or science camp where you would go and spend a few weeks learning about space and science. I remember he gave me the paper, and I said, oh yeah, this is interesting. Let me go home and talk it over with my mom. For whatever reason either I didn't tell her [his mom], or I told her but we didn't have the money for it so it was just something that wasn't going to happen. I knew it wasn't going to happen and that's probably around the time when I also started thinking about the fact that I don't have my papers. I don't have legal residency, so I've got to be careful about what I start committing to and what I start signing up for because I don't know if I'll be able to do it or not. At that point, I did still not fully understand the severity of not being a legal resident, but I started thinking, you gotta be aware of this. After he talked to me about the space camp, Mr. L and I never spoke about it again. I kind of got lost in between the crowds.*

Along with being discouraged about his academic future due to his residency status, Alejandro struggled with the fact that being undocumented restricted him from one of the most exciting experiences in a teenager's life, which is the ability to legally drive. Being undocumented not only restricted him from participating in Driver's Education but also from many of the social aspects associated with driving. The inability to drive legally made Alejandro feel different from his friends. He felt embarrassed and at times he felt like an outcast among his friends. It made it clear to him that not only does being undocumented affect his social life, it affects his ability to simply exist in the U.S. society.

*I started realizing that being undocumented was going to affect me when I was about to start taking driver's education. I knew I couldn't take the class because in the past ten or fifteen years, more and more regulations and stipulations have been imposed to keep undocumented people from doing stuff like that.*

*I started realizing that my life was different than other kids my age and people that I went to school with because I started thinking more and more about my living conditions. I realized that my mom doesn't have a driver's license and she's not supposed to be driving, but she's still driving because she needs to get to*

*work. I remember her having to learn how to drive so she could get to work and she would always worry about it. I realized that other families didn't go through this and this is something different that doesn't happen to all families.*

Over time Alejandro started realizing that there were more and more discrepancies between his U.S. born friends and him. He knew that American legislation excluded him from the opportunities awarded to U.S. citizens and legal residents such as being able to legally work and drive. He also knew that there were many negative perceptions about undocumented people, so he chose to keep his residency status confidential from both educators and his friends for as long as he could. It was during his senior high school when Alejandro's counselor realized that such a promising student such as Alejandro was not pursuing higher education because of his residency and socioeconomic status. While Alejandro is forever grateful that his counselor informed him about the opportunity of attending a community college, and about the scholarships available which covered his first year of registration fees, he also recalls the embarrassment that he felt having to talk to her about his residency status.

*I didn't tell anyone about being undocumented, but my family knew, but it was not something that we talked about all that much. It was something that the family took lightly [his immediate family being undocumented], they were okay with it. But I'm not okay with it, so I hardly discussed my situation with anyone until after high school. In fact, I only told one person that I was undocumented in high school, and it was my counselor.*

*I told my high school counselor [about residency status] during my senior year because she saw my grades, and noticed that I had a cumulative g.p.a of 4.0 or a 3.9. It was like two to three months before graduation, and I already had filled out my graduation slip and she was like "Why aren't you applying to any colleges?" She was a real cool lady, and she didn't right out ask me about being undocumented because she she's a counselor, so she knows the ethics behind stuff like that; however, she hinted that she understood. I was very embarrassed to talk about it and to mention it to her. She suggested that I could attend Pine Tree Community College. She said, "Pine Tree is really close by and if money is the reason why you don't want to go to college because you definitely have the grades to go, then a community college would be a good fit for you if money is an issue".*

*I also have scholarships that can cover your first semester of tuition. She printed them out and I applied for them. By that point I knew where all my friends were going to college. I never talked about it and I always avoided the question, where do you plan on going to college? I just thought, don't ask me that of all things in the world, don't ask me that because I'm not going anywhere. So once that whole thing happened with my high school counselor, then I could openly tell people that I was going to attend Pine Tree Community College.*

*I ended up receiving the scholarships that I applied for and if I had never gotten I would have never attended Pine Tree Community College because I wasn't working. I also knew my mom didn't have money to pay for college, even if the tuition is not that much, it's still a big difference between whether or not we're going to have money for the rent, food, and things like that.*

Alejandro not only felt embarrassed to discuss his residency status with his counselor, but he also felt embarrassed to discuss his residency status with his closest friends. Alejandro shared that his two best friends constantly asked him about why he was holding back from getting a driver's license. Alejandro avoided having to tell his friends about his ineligibility to get a driver's license for as long as he could, but he realized that he would not be able to avoid telling them the truth forever.

*My best friend José is Mexican, yet he's really White washed. He barely knows Spanish. He knows it and he tries to pretend that he doesn't speak it, but I've heard him speak phrases. He was the one that once he got his license, started pressuring me to get a license. Once he actually came to my house with the driver's license application insisting that I submit it because at the time he didn't know that I couldn't. I just kept putting the topic off and telling him that I would complete the application later. In his mind, I'm just like him in that we have the same rights. He didn't know about my residency status because it's just something we don't talk about. There are other things that are more important, and I really avoid the topic and the situation entirely as much as I can.*

*My other best friend Andrew who is half Persian and half White, would do the same thing, and ask me all the time, "why don't you have your license"? I would try explaining it to him without really telling him why, and I just explained that I couldn't get one. He always wanted to talk about it and I would be, just drop it. It probably frustrated him a lot and I didn't want to lose those friendships so, finally I told them, but I didn't tell them in person because it's real embarrassing. You never know how to approach that situation. Telling someone, I'm undocumented, I don't even know how to approach that. I don't know how to say it without making it seem like I'm a bad person or that I'm somehow less of a person. It's real tricky situation because it tortures you internally and you just don't know*

*how to approach the situation. You don't know how to bring it up, and in what manner, it's just difficult.*

*My best friends finally got it [how much it bothered him to talk about it]. But one of them still asks, why didn't your mom get you residency? I tell him that, Ignorance is bliss and it's better that you don't know about our situation, because if you knew, you're going to think that my life sucks even more so. And I don't want to be seen different. My friend José has been more like out of sight and out of mind about my situation. It doesn't matter to him, and he's apathetic about it. He's apathetic about it because we have other things in common and there's so much more we could be doing than just talking about my residency status. He also got the hint that it was something I didn't want to talk about, whereas, doesn't know many other people in my situation. And José knows what an illegal is and what it means to be illegal. He personally doesn't know, but I'm pretty sure he has some undocumented people in his family.*

Alejandro shared that he understands that undocumented students cope with being undocumented differently; some students are extremely vocal about the injustices that they encounter while others avoid taking a stance against injustices. He shared that as a form of coping he preferred not to discuss his residency status. He stated that by not discussing his residency status he avoided people knowing that he was different. He did not want to be negatively labeled or judged because of his residency status. He also shared that he is fully aware that change doesn't happen until people voice and fight human injustices, but at that point in his life he was not prepared to be the person who advocates for himself or other undocumented students.

*I know a lot of other undocumented people that handle their situation in a complete opposite way. They talk about their status openly, and they mention it to their friends because they want their friends to understand and possibly because they feel that sharing their story will cause change. But, I see politics in a really different way than some people. I've read on how and why things are the way they are, and I also know from reading Martin Luther King, Jr. and through class discussions that things don't get done until people speak out. Unfortunately, most of the time the people that speak out are middle class White women. However, my way of dealing with change is to just avoid it and not talk about it. I let it go to the wayside. Probably my way of handling it has rubbed off by the way my brother and sister handle their residency status.*

Unfortunately, Alejandro has realized that ignoring his immigration status has been very difficult as it affect his everyday life. Being prohibited from driving legally is one of the many restrictions that he faces daily. Being undocumented also prevents Alejandro from legally working in the U.S. Alejandro shared that he had several jobs between the ages of 13-18; however, they were jobs that did not require that he provide a social security number or that required a background check.

*It used to bother me a lot that my mom and brother constantly reminded me that I needed to get a job because they approached me in a real forceful manner. They kept telling me, you're 18 now, and you have to go and find a job. However, I've been working since I was 13 at a batting cage. I picked up baseballs and placed them into the machines. I was constantly running, because the machine doesn't stop. I didn't deal with any of the mechanical stuff. I was real thankful to have that job because you know as a kid regardless if you are getting paid really, really bad, it seems like a lot of money.*

*I was making about \$4 an hour, but my boss was a really cool boss. He was real nice, but at the same time I know he was benefitting from hiring me rather than hiring a real worker that he would have to pay more. The job was also cool because I got to meet new people, and even though they were all older, they always treated me with respect, and they were always recognized that I worked hard. I had a scooter and that is how I got to and from work. Everyone liked me there but when I ended up leaving because we [family] moved.*

*The second job that I got was with one of my younger sister's dad. I was working with him throughout high school. I worked mostly summers because I wasn't in school and that's the time of the year when he had a lot of business. He would sell furniture at the flea market. It was the early 2000s and that's when a lot of people were making money, and people could afford to buy stuff. He was doing relatively well.*

*Finally, I was getting ready to leave high school, and I knew I had to find full-time work. I knew that I didn't want to go back to work with him because I'm not a sales person. I don't like trying to convince people that they need things, especially when I know that they can't afford or shouldn't be buying things. So I knew I would have to find work doing something else. And I thought that it was going to have to be some kind of retail job because that's what most people do. And my brother and my mother were real forceful, to the point where it annoyed me that they would tell me that I needed to be looking for work daily. Now, I'm thankful that they were like that with me, because I was real stubborn and I just wanted to do what my friends were doing, which was to work minimally and to earn enough just for spending money. But the difference was that their parents had bought them all cars, and I didn't have that.*

Throughout high school Alejandro had worked in numerous jobs, but always for short periods of time. After being encouraged by his family for several months about looking for a job, Alejandro decided that it was time to look for his first job as an adult. He went through many different emotions about having to find a job. He was conflicted because he knew that his family expected him to work; yet he also knew that because of his residency status working was against the law. While Alejandro managed to get his first job, this employment experience also resulted in being one of the most humiliating experiences in his young adult life.

*My initial reaction towards looking for a job was, I'm doing something that's against the law, but I have to do because my family will be disappointed in me if I'm not working. After sometime of looking for a job, I got called from a local movie theatre for an interview and I reminded myself that I needed to pursue the job because it would make my family happy if I were working and making an income so I could at least help out and pay for my own things.*

*When I was preparing for the interview, I asked my mom a lot of questions. I listened to her suggestions and once again obeying her was finally ready for the interview. I was real nervous and was dreading the interview the entire way there. I was afraid that they would ask me for my papers that are required to work in front of everyone and that something would not come up right. I was afraid because it's not socially acceptable to be considered an outsider, to be undocumented. I didn't want to be placed on the spotlight if one of the managers mentioned something like, you're documentation isn't proper. But luckily, they didn't do that and they took my false paperwork and made photocopies outside of the training area. I worked at the theatre for a few weeks before they figured out that I did not have the legal documentation to work. I don't know if was the fact that my birth certificate was from a different country that their human resources department verified something through social security administration, but somehow, they found out that something was not right. The day they spoke to me, God that was one of the worst days of my life. I was at work when one of the managers called me into the office and told me, you're social doesn't match up with your other records and at that point I didn't know what to say. What am I supposed to say that they were wrong? I just kind of played like I didn't know what was happening and that maybe my mom made a mistake. I told her, maybe it's my brother's. And then she was like, Yeah, it happens. I don't know if she really knew what was going on because she was in her mid to late 20s and was also White, so I don't know if she knows that this happens to undocumented*



*people. She made it seem like it was something that I could get fixed and then still keep my job.*

*She was not disrespectful at all when she approached me and I played along, so I told her that I would get the situation fixed by the next day. After I left her office, I called my uncle to pick me up, and when he came I more or less told him what happened. He just told me that things like this were going to happen and that I just needed to keep my head up and that I need to keep finding ways to make it. I was just disillusioned by the whole thing, what had happen felt surreal. It didn't feel like it was real, and it felt like this isn't something that happens to other people that I know.*

Besides being embarrassed and disillusioned by his first attempt at employment, Alejandro also felt angry. He shared that at the time when he couldn't provide verification that he could legally work in the U.S initially he felt angry at his mother and blamed her for not taking the proper steps to immigrate legally. He also shared that many years later he realized that his mother was not at fault for their immigration status, and he feels that she couldn't have done anything differently; however, initially he did not understand the process to legal immigration and the limited opportunities awarded to Mexican citizens of becoming legal United States residents.

*I was angry with my mom, because I was thinking this is something that she did. I was angry with her for immigrating to the U.S. the way that she did, thinking that she could have done it another way. I was taking into consideration, that politics are set up in this country in a way that people coming from México, don't have as many opportunities to come here legally. The last time where there was an amnesty was in 1986 and I was born in 1988, so I missed that boat.*

For a long time Alejandro was emotionally distressed by the humiliation that he felt for being confronted by the movie theatre manager for not having the documentation to work legally. After being unemployed for several months, he knew that he could no longer depend on his mother economically. He also knew that there was always going to be the possibility that he would be confronted by another employer for documentation.

So he decided he needed to move beyond his first negative experience and find a new job.

*I knew that I was living under my mom's roof, so I had to respect her wishes about being employed, so even though I had a bad experience with what happen at the movie theatre, I needed to find another job. And so I went and I applied a few places, one of the places I applied to was a hardware store.*

*When I submitted my application, they didn't ask for a California ID and they accepted my college student ID. I told them that I had just finished high school, but I was going to college, and so they accepted my college id. They do background checks, but they're not thorough. They just check to make sure that you're not a criminal, and that you don't have any felonies or anything like that. I passed all those requirements and their drug test too. After I had cleared all the background checks, I got the job. They hired me at a pretty decent rate, and I initially thought that the fact that I don't have legal status was not going to be an issue because I was able to get the job. I thought now that I got work, my mom and brother are going to get off my back for a while at least. I also thought now that I'm working I'm gonna be able to continue going to school. I thought life was good because they loved me at work, and I got moved up to customer service, like within one or two months.*

*This job was a lot different than anything I had ever done. I learned that there's a certain way you have to treat customers, that even if they're wrong, you don't tell them they're wrong. I liked working there a lot; I liked talking to people, and I liked fixing problems. I liked learning about all aspects of the job, and that is the reason why I got moved up to customer service in such a short period. One day another worker did not show up and one of my managers knew that I was a quick learner, so she put me up in the front, and I started working in customer service. I knew how to use computers, and their system was relatively easy, so I liked it. It was fun, and eventually I was employee of the month.*

*I thought that job was pretty cool, but then that's when I started getting letters in the mail from the Social Security Administration, telling me that my social security number wasn't matching up with my information and that when I retired this could be a big problem. They were basically trying to tell me, you've got to fix this issue so you don't have any problems later. I thought, Alright the gig is up, and I gotta quit now. I thought I don't have the right papers, so I better quit. My brother and my mom then told me that they get those letters all the time and there's not much you can do about it. They told me that you can reply to them, but they're just going to keep sending them to you and that I should just ignore them. Basically, that I should ignore them because there's nothing you I can do about it.*

*I was scared because I thought that I was going to get fired. I thought that letter meant I was fired, but since the letter came from corporate no one at my job*

*actually knew that I got this letter. At first I thought they did know; I thought they were the ones that sent it, but then once I learned what corporations were and that it wasn't directly from my immediate supervisors, I just put it [the letter] away, and didn't think much of it. I was hoping they'd just go away, and that I would fall between the cracks, but the letters did not stop coming and I kept getting them over and over. Finally one day I got a different letter that seemed like it was the next step, like they were going to take additional actions. Until this day, I still have the letter at my house. The way I took it [interpretation of letter] was that the next step would be getting fired, but I didn't want to get fired. At that point I had also stopped going to school because I was earning money, and I was working quite a bit. I liked the money that I was earning and I thought, why am I going to school if I'm already working. And then that's when I got that other letter and I thought, I may not be able to find another job all that easily, but I also do not want to get fired. So I decided I would quit before they could fire me.*

Alejandro's happiness working at the hardware store was short brief. Once again his residency status restricted him from working in a place that he enjoyed and most importantly from earning money that was crucial to his family's livelihood. Alejandro had not only lost his job, but he had also sacrificed attending college because he had hoped that his employment at the hardware store would be long term. After leaving his job, Alejandro reached a turning point when he realized that regardless of his residency status he needed to pursue a higher education. He realized that he had no control over immigration laws and their effect on his residency status. But he did have some control over his education.

*Through time and experiences I have realized that if I am going to get where I want to go, I'm going to need to do it through school because it's just not going to be possible any other way. I did well in high school and the fact that I earned the high grades only reinforced that I'd be stupid not to go to college. So when I started Pine Tree Community College and I started to do well again, I started contemplating the idea of transferring to a university one day. I thought that if I got two scholarships to attend Pine Tree, then maybe I could be awarded one that could pay a four-year degree.*

Attending a new school, especially a new college, was a major adjustment for Alejandro because of the lack of high school college advisement. He was the first in his

family to pursue a higher education; therefore, navigating the matriculation process was one of Alejandro's first academic challenges. He described his first encounter with a community college counselor as uneventful and disheartening. The community counselor not only provided mediocre counseling services to Alejandro, but he or she also contributed to one of the many barriers that he has encountered throughout his academic trajectory.

*When I first enrolled at Pine Tree Community College, they [counselors] didn't want to put me into English 1A [college level English] at first, because I'm not good when it comes to timed tests. So in order to take college level English, I had to take another test so they could see more of my writing. The Math placement test was not a problem. I scored high enough to take pre-calculus, which I had already taken in high school. After taking the placement tests, a counselor was supposed to help me start picking classes. Those counselors were just paid to be there, they didn't care what we took. They kind of just asked really general questions and through those questions they recommended some classes. I think I only took half of the classes that the counselor recommended. I didn't take the other half of the classes because it seemed like a lot of classes, and I didn't think that I could pay for all them. I mean I could have paid them with my scholarship that I had won, but I was thinking ahead. I thought, this money needs to last me for awhile and I can't just use it all up. Also, I didn't know what books cost so I didn't know what I could afford.*

Besides struggling with the college matriculation process, Alejandro also struggled adapting to his college environment. He became a commuter student on campus only to attend classes. He did not partake in any extra-curricular activities, and more importantly he did not attempt to establish friendships or relationships with faculty and staff. He avoided making new friendships because he did not want to be placed in a situation where he would have to disclose to classmates his undocumented status. Also, he did not have a car or a driver's license; therefore, he was limited in the activities that he could partake in without having to rely on a ride from someone or on public transportation.

*College is a lot more different than high school. In high school, you have a break in between classes and you talk to people. Here, at least my experience was, I just came to class, got out of class, and then got picked up, and went home. So I didn't really try to make friends with people because I already have my friends, and I was just anti-social at that point. I didn't want to complicate my life more by making new friends. I didn't want to deal with people asking, Let's go do this or that and me having to say, Well I don't drive, can you give me a ride. I already had enough of a problem asking my old friends [for rides]. It bothered me to always have them drive me. It bothered me so much, to the point where I just didn't even want to hang out sometimes because it's just painful to always be the one that needed to get driven somewhere. So that was part of the reason why I didn't really want to make new friends because it's hard when questions come up and questions come up all the time and you can't avoid them forever. My main friends, they kind of got the hint that it was something that I didn't want to talk about, and it was something that didn't matter because they've known me for such a long time.*

The immigration laws not only restrict undocumented students from legally working and driving, but they also isolate this student population from creating meaningful relationships and academic experiences. Alejandro had no intention of making new friendships at Pine Tree Community College because he did not want to add any complications to his life. The complications entailed being invited to events where he would have to drive without a license and risk being pulled over, being invited to events or locations where he would have to present a legal identification card as a form of entry, or having to spend money on social activities that he could not afford. Being undocumented not only restricts Alejandro from basic rights, it also systemically deters him from fully integrating into any part of society.

Alejandro's resiliency and the cultural similarities with students from the Estrella Program, which is an academic program that assists Latino/a students complete the academic core and navigate higher education, influenced him to change his mind about the risk of complicating his life and creating new friendships. He felt comfortable around the Estrella Association students, which influenced him to actively attend their meetings.

*As the semesters have gone by, yeah, I have felt more support [academically], especially once I started coming around the Estrella Program. I see how people interact with each other, and other Latino students have invited me to go hang out. One student in particular, knew about the DREAM Act and civil rights so, because of that I didn't feel outcasted because, I felt like oh, okay, well I just feel like I belong more or less. This last semester I've felt that even more so [a part of the Estrella Student Group] because I just started going to the meetings more often. I feel like that I can relate to them more, because I relate more to their generation. Like I had mentioned, I don't approach people and try to make friends because I'm always afraid they're not going to want to talk to me. I just have a fear of rejection, so if someone approaches me and shows interest that they want to get to know me, then that's when I'll give it more effort. In the past I hadn't been so open to relate to people as I do now.*

Alejandro has managed to step out of his comfort zone and make new friendships at Pine Tree Community College; however, he shared that his long-term friendship with Andrew has suffered over time. It has not suffered because Andrew has treated Alejandro differently for being undocumented. It has suffered because their lives have changed, and Alejandro can no longer participate in the same social and academic activities that Andrew can because he does not have the access or the financial resources to do so. Alejandro also feels a disconnect with Andrew's new circle of friends because of the different lives that they lead. Alejandro does not have the typical college student life. Alejandro was not able to move away for college, he cannot legally drive, he cannot travel outside of the country, and the most significant constraint according to Alejandro is that he cannot attend most social events that take place in a bar or in a club which require legal California identification for admission. Alejandro's consular identification card, which is an identification card issued to Mexican nationals by the Mexican government through its consulate offices, is not always accepted as a legal identification, and so instead of putting himself through the humiliation of being denied admission; Alejandro chooses not to go out with people who may not be familiar his residency and the

restrictions he faces. Being undocumented not only affects Alejandro's ability to live the life of a typical college student, but it also reinforces his belief that he is not equal to his U.S. born peers.

*Over the years, I have started hanging out less and less with my best friend Andrew. He went to Durant Community College and then transferred to the University of California. I went to visit him once [to the UC] and I felt really, really out of place around other kids. That goes back to the whole like not wanting to interact socially with college students, because it feels different. I feel that I'm so different [because of his residency status] that if they knew [that he is undocumented], they probably wouldn't want to hang out with me or want to be my friend, because I wouldn't be able to partake in anything they do, either financially or socially. I turned 21 and this birthday was a really big one, but I can't go to any clubs because they're just not going to let you in [without an i.d.]. I just don't want to go hang out because what if people want to go do something where I'm going to need to present ID, I don't want to have to do that in front of everyone, because then it's going to be embarrassing if my México municipal i.d. is not accepted and I am asked to leave. I just avoid it all. And like I said, my other best friend, José, he just likes hanging out at his house. He's like, just come over whenever you want and we'll just hang out and watch TV, play video games, do whatever. He doesn't really go out that much so that makes it easier to hang out.*

*I think he's apathetic about it [Alejandro's social limitations due to his residency status]. He doesn't have an opinion either one way or the other, about me being undocumented. But that's the last thing I want to be thinking about when I am with friends. My friend Andrew constantly brings it up, almost every single time I see him or we go hang out. He's not doing it to be disrespectful, I think he genuinely wants to learn more [about what it means to be undocumented] because he doesn't come from that that background. He comes from an Anglo background, even though his dad's Persian, they are very Americanized. His dad is an immigrant, and he was in the Air Force, but he's very Americanized. I've been to their house many times and they're great people, but he [Andrew] doesn't know people in the immigrant community except for me. It baffles him how I got insurance on my car, without being able to get a driver's license. He's just ignorant, and just doesn't know [about laws that apply to undocumented drivers]. So that's why he asks me so many questions and it's something that I don't want to talk about with my friends because I want to escape that life. I want to escape from having to be worried about it. And even, right now as we're speaking, like I want to do it [share his story] because you asked me to and I feel I'll be showing you respect and I know that you genuinely want to know more about my life, so I want to tell you about my life, but it's hard to talk about it.*

While it has not been easy for Alejandro to balance numerous family and academic responsibilities while navigating his day-to-day life, which is filled with numerous constraints due to his residency status, he has managed to stay focused on his higher education. Alejandro has the intellectual capability and the inner drive to succeed in any major; however, one of the careers that he would have liked to pursue would have been becoming a police officer in a special victims unit. However, U.S. laws prohibit non-U.S. citizens from pursuing careers in public safety, therefore restricting Alejandro from this career path. Rather than giving up on education, Alejandro was forced to pursue a different major, Business Administration.

*Business Administration is my major and the way it was presented to me [by his counselor] made a lot of sense as to why I should pursue it as a major. Since I don't have legal documentation [to work], the chances of me getting a job in a specific field [would be more difficult], than if I have a Business degree where it can be applied to different things. And, I would focus on the administration aspect of Business specifically because I feel that I am good with management. I am good at time management, and I can multi-task. I can do a lot of different things at once and I'm detail oriented, so if I was put in charge of a whole bunch of people or a whole bunch of projects, I know I can manage it all at the same time without diminishing the value of the work, and that's why Business Administration is my major. There are just so many things that I could do [with the degree], and I would do if I had the opportunity.*

*If I would have had the opportunity I would have also liked to pursue a degree in public safety. I would have liked to work for a special victims unit, however I know that I can't do that anytime soon.*

Business Administration may not have been Alejandro's first choice as a major, yet once again he has excelled academically. He is one semester away from graduating with an Associate's degree in Business Administration. He has been in the Estrella Honors Program and on the President's and Dean's list throughout his entire community college career, yet upon graduation he will not be transferring to a university. He will not be transferring not because he is not prepared or because he does not have the desire to



do so, but rather because he cannot afford to. Alejandro is not eligible for any state of federal college financial aid due to residency status, and the money he earns from his employment is not enough to cover his expenses.

*My short-term goal is to earn an Associate in Arts degree in Business Administration. I want to eventually get a bachelor's, master's, and a Ph.D. But I know that I can't right now. I know that I am eligible to pursue a bachelor's degree soon [because he has completed the major pre-requisites and general education], but it would be a real big struggle, and I would have to set aside other responsibilities that I'm not willing to right now. My priorities are my little sisters and being at home to help them as much as I can with their education. My other priority is helping my mom more financially. I know that I can apply for scholarships that pay for my four years of tuition, but I've got to think about what I would do once I'm there. How am I going to live? I know that I would have to work on weekends, but then I would have the same problem with finding work [due to residency status]. So my main concern is to finish my AA and then find full-time employment somewhere relatively close to home. I'm almost 23 years old and I don't want to still be living at home. I just want to live on my own or with friends.*

*I'm ready to be financially independent because I'm already independent in almost everything else. Well, almost everything because my mom still cooks for me and I love my mom's cooking. I can cook easy simple stuff, but she can cook my favorite meals that I just love.*

Lack of financial resources has not only restricted Alejandro from transferring to a four-year university upon his community college graduation, he was excluded from the opportunity of moving away for college and experiencing the college life. While Alejandro highly values his family, he shared that he yearns about the day that he will be able to move out on his own. However, for the meantime he cannot afford to move out and he will continue to support his family as much as possible.

Throughout his narrative Alejandro shared that his family is his first priority in life. He credits his mother for his work ethic and for his desire to be the best that he can be. He shared that his mother has given up much in life to provide for her children. And while his mother was not always available to attend school functions because of her work

responsibilities, Alejandro feels that she was never too busy to acknowledge her children's academic accomplishments and to worry about their well being. Alejandro's mother does not have a higher education, yet she always instilled in her children that education is essential to improve their quality of life. Alejandro shared that his mother has been working in the same line of labor intensive work since the family first emigrated to the U.S., but she continues to do so because the employment opportunities are limited for undocumented immigrants, and she wants to provide for her family. She wants her children to have the life that she never had. Pursuing an education is one of the opportunities that she never received, so she has always encouraged her children to do well academically.

*I don't know a lot about my mother's young adult life, but I do know that she never went to high school. She probably only made it up to the third grade. She can read, but, at a very slow pace. In the 70s, [when his mother was growing up in México] there was not a lot of opportunity to go to school. Children would attend school for a little bit, but only to learn the basics.*

*I always did well in school because that's something that my mom taught me from a young age. She taught me to follow the rules and do well in school and that things will work themselves out. That's just what I did and I always liked excelling academically because I felt like I accomplished something and my reward was to go and have fun.*

*My mother instilled in us that before anything came schoolwork, well probably besides helping her out with chores. That was probably the first thing, or the most important thing that she wanted us to know. She also wanted a structured household, such as not having a messy house, not having people over when we shouldn't have people over. We always to run things by her first otherwise we would get in trouble.*

*She is probably supportive of our education because she never got to go to school and maybe she wanted to. Maybe she had aspirations of furthering her education and her father prevented it because he was such a strict and overbearing man. She mentioned it all the time that he was a very cruel man to her. My mom wanted a different life, so when she left my dad, she decided that the U.S. would be the place where she could accomplish her American Dream.*

*She works really hard, but it's a job that is taken lightly. People think that anyone can do it [her job], but in reality not everyone can. The fact that she has worked so heavily also meant that she didn't have very much time to be involved in my education. I remember her trying to or wanting to go to our field trips and, but she just couldn't because she was either working in the day or working at night or doing both some days, so, she, she didn't get to help out as much as I would have liked.*

*I always knew from a young age that if she didn't attend my school events, that it didn't mean that, she didn't care. I just knew she just didn't have the time and that it was something that she was not capable of doing, not something that she didn't want to do. I know whole-heartedly that she was interested in what we were doing at school because she would always listen to us.*

Alejandro's mother moved her family to the United States with hopes of providing them a better life than she could have in México. She believed in the American Dream and the idea of meritocracy. Early in his life, Alejandro also believed in the American Dream. In fact, he saw himself as an American. He was educated in America's schools, observed American holidays, and has fully integrated into the American culture. Yet, Alejandro does not have the same rights or opportunities as an American citizen, and he has to navigate life being labeled and stereotyped for being undocumented. Alejandro identified as being American but came to the realization that no matter how great of a son, student, or person that he is, the American Dream is not available to him because he is not a U.S. citizen or resident.

*I consider my life to be like any other American person in my community or my state or in this country. I know American ideology and I know American history. I grew up doing the pledge of allegiance on a daily basis, and it was okay because I thought this is my country. I believed everything that they're telling me, that if you work hard, you will get the American dream. But that's a whole 'nother topic, because most people will never reach the American dream because it's blocked, but I believed it at that time.*

*I am the textbook example of assimilation. However, there is an undocumented/illegal label attached next to my name. Being undocumented and having that attached to your name, I feel that less is expected of you in this society because you're always hearing the negative [about undocumented people]. Being*

*called an illegal automatically implies that you are involved in criminal activity or something like that. I always try to surpass [people's perceptions of undocumented students]; I always try to be the paradox. I want to be the opposite of what is expected and educate others about the prejudice that goes along with being undocumented. Being undocumented has helped motivate me to be the best that I can be in different parts of my life.*

*Not to quote the military, but I want to be the best that I can be and that is what motivates me to succeed in life. I want to be the best, that I can be in all aspects of my life, not just education, everything. I'm not trying to be perfect, because there's no such thing as a perfect person or perfect life, but I want to live my life according to my standards, my ethics, and my morals.*

Alejandro has always aspired to excel both at home and at school. He believed in equality and meritocracy. However, his academic trajectory has been based on an illusion that equality exists for undocumented students. Alejandro was forced to give up his native language and culture in order to fit in with the dominant culture. Alejandro has experienced embarrassment, neglect, discrimination, and inequality due to his residency status. Unless federal immigration legislation passes that supports the pathway to residency for undocumented students, there will continue to be many more young talented students like Alejandro who will be oppressed. If given access to the opportunities and resources available to citizens and documented resident, these students could be a tremendous asset to the American society and economy. Alejandro's life is clearly an example of one of many undocumented students who has all the potential to succeed in this society, but whose talent is being wasted.

### **Analysis- Through a CRT and LatCrit Lens**

Alejandro does not have the legal documentation to prove that he is legally American; however, he has done everything that has been asked of him to be accepted by American society. Alejandro learned the English language, bought into the American ideal of meritocracy, and in his words he attempted to become the textbook definition of

assimilation. Yet racist acts are so embedded into American laws and policies that as an undocumented student, he will never be able to fully assimilate to the American culture. According to Waters and Jiménez (2005), the “standard measures of immigrant assimilation are (a) socioeconomic status (SES), defined as educational attainment, occupational specialization, and parity in earnings; (b) spatial concentration, defined in terms of dissimilarity in spatial distribution and of suburbanization; (c) language assimilation, defined in terms of English language ability and loss of mother tongue; and (d) inter- marriage, defined by race or Hispanic origin, and only occasionally by ethnicity and generation” (pp. 107-108). Rather than discuss Alejandro’s lack of opportunity to American assimilation, I will discuss how policies and laws created by the dominant culture have failed Alejandro by rejecting his cultural background, native language, and denying him an opportunity at upward social mobility.

Utilizing a Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Latino Critical Race (LatCrit) Theory lens, I will draw from Alejandro’s narrative to discuss and illuminate the systemic racism that he has endured as an undocumented Latino from a low socioeconomic background. I will discuss how his attempt to assimilate to the U.S. culture has been at the expense of losing the desire to maintain his native language and culture. I will also discuss how his experiences have affected him emotionally and psychologically.

### **Attempt at Assimilation, But Excluded Academically**

According to Villenas and Deyhle (1999), “Consistently, researchers have pointed out that the loss of culture and native languages often hinders, rather than enhances school success”; however, in middle school Alejandro was forced to form a contradictory opinion (p.430). Alejandro immigrated to the United States at the young age of 3 years

old and was immediately introduced to the American culture. He began learning English by watching television and by communicating with his siblings. By the time that Alejandro started elementary school, he felt he was proficient in English; however, when he started elementary school he was placed in English as a Second Language (ESL) courses, and he continued to be enrolled in ESL courses throughout his elementary school education. Over time Alejandro became discontented with ESL courses as he felt that the smart kids were enrolled in the English only courses. A young child should never have to feel that he is less intelligent because he is bilingual.

According to Yosso (2005), “one of the most prevalent forms of contemporary racism in US schools is deficit thinking and deficit thinking takes the position that minority students and families are at fault for poor academic performance because students enter school without the normative cultural knowledge and skills” (p. 75). U.S. academic policies and curriculum continue to fail immigrant students such as Alejandro as they are not inclusive of this student population, causing the students to internalize that the English language is superior to their native languages. According to Ladson- Billings (1999), “Critical Race Theory see the official school curriculum as a culturally specific artifact designed to maintain a White supremacist master script” (p. 21). Rather than allowing Alejandro to psychologically convince himself that all the smart kids were enrolled in English only courses, educators could have reinforced the value of his native language and culture while assuring him that he had the potential of succeeding academically regardless of his background. “At the curriculum level, the absence of Chicano/Mexicano culture and language makes Latino children and their families invisible” (Villenas, Deyhle, & Parker, 1999, p. 36). The ties that Alejandro had to

México and the Spanish language were weakening due to the lack of exposure to his native culture and language in addition to institutional factors. This weakening of his native culture and language coupled with the supremacist script, inevitably caused Alejandro to assimilate to the curriculum and policies created by the dominant culture. He relied on his U.S. born friends to help him navigate a system of education that is not prepared to serve immigrant and English as a Second Language students. Alejandro eventually transitioned successfully into the English only curriculum pattern. One of the key factors that contributed to his academic success was his embracing the value of academic competition and meritocracy. It was that competition that led him to excel academically throughout his K-12 education. It was also that competition among peers and his that motivated him to enroll in advanced placement (AP) courses.

*I took several AP courses in high school and I took two of them my senior year, but I didn't take them because I wanted the college credits. I didn't have many friends that continued taking AP classes during our senior year. I knew that the smart Asian kids who were applying to the University of California were going to continue taking the AP courses. I also took the AP test because low-income students can take the test for \$5.00 dollars; where as the full amount of the test was like \$70 dollars. I thought, I'm not going to pay \$70 dollars just to take a test, when I had no aspiration to use the results for college credit. It was just something that I wanted to do and accomplish because I knew I could.*

Alejandro explained that while he had no intention of pursuing a higher education because he could not financially afford to, he still completed the university track curriculum, including advanced placement courses, and he even took the required university entrance exams. He completed all the university admission requirements because he wanted to be challenged academically and because some of his friends were preparing for university, and he did not want to stand out as being different. Yet all Alejandro's accomplishments went unnoticed by educators until three months prior to his

high school graduation. While conducting his high school exit evaluation, Alejandro's counselor questioned why such an accomplished student was not attending college. During that counseling session Alejandro decided that he would attend a community college upon his high school graduation. Unfortunately many undocumented students like Alejandro are faced with the harsh reality of navigating higher education on their own or simply giving up on higher education due to the lack of institutional support. Unlike other undocumented students who are eligible for university admission, but are disillusioned because they cannot attend the university of their choice due to lacking financial resources, Alejandro was never given the opportunity to imagine attending the university of his choice. Instead, he was presented by the counselor with his only alternative for a higher education, which was to attend a community college.

Alejandro has described his community college experience as positive, fueling his desire to continue learning. The affordability of a community college has made it possible for Alejandro to soon complete an associate's degree in Business Administration. While the community college system becomes the only choice of higher education for many undocumented students due to location and affordability, it is still part of the larger system of American higher education, and it too can fail this student population.

Alejandro shared that he has enjoyed studying Business Administration; however, if given the opportunity he would have pursued a degree in public service. But one of the reasons he chose Business as a major was because of how his counselor presented the major to him. CRT theorists would argue that systemic policies not only failed Alejandro, but they also failed his counselor. Alejandro was forced to choose a major that was not restricted to undocumented students. As a result, his counselor was forced to recommend



majors that incorporated his academic strengths, but not necessarily majors aligned with Alejandro's initial career interests.

### **Attempt at Assimilation, But Excluded Socially**

According to CRT and LatCrit, race and racism are embedded in structures and policies that guide America's educational system (Villalpando, 2004). That same race and racism exists in current immigration laws. Undocumented students are constantly marginalized and excluded from American society. Alejandro has not only been marginalized and excluded by America's educational system, he has also been excluded from basic rights such as legally driving, working, and even voting. According to Abrego (2008), "aside from the instrumental effects of marginalizing immigrants and denying them basic rights and protections, navigating life with an undocumented status—created by immigration laws—can also be internalized to affect a subject's sense of self and social identity" (p.724). Being undocumented has clearly affected Alejandro's sense of self and social identity. It has also affected his opportunity to establish relationships in and out of an academic setting.

Alejandro shared that he has always had a close group of friends, yet he never felt comfortable discussing his residency status with them because he was concerned that they would treat him differently for being undocumented. While Alejandro's friends may have never deliberately treated Alejandro differently if they would have known about his residency status, American laws and policies solidify that he is different because he does not have the same rights or opportunities as his U.S. born friends. As Alejandro mentioned in his narrative, the lack of opportunity to experience the typical college life, such as moving away for college or participating in social activities, has contributed to

the loss of commonalities between Alejandro and his best friend Andrew, which once again proves that systemic racist policies oppress undocumented students at many levels.

*They didn't treat me differently than they did any of the other friends, except for the lighthearted Mexican jokes. I never felt like an outcast. Internally in my own head, I knew I was an outcast. I knew I wasn't on the same level as they were in terms of political and economical status. I knew we were on different playing fields, and that I needed to finish school, and start working.*

Alejandro's attempt to assimilate to the dominant culture did not prevent Alejandro from being treated inequitably and from feeling different from his native born peers. Alejandro's attempt to assimilate to mainstream society was influenced by his desire to fit in academically and socially with his native born peers. Additionally, his assimilation was influenced by educational institutions that educate students of color and immigrant students to a curriculum that was created by and for the dominant culture. CRT and LatCrit challenge race-neutral instruction and English language dominance and view both as forms of subordination (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Alejandro actively rejected his native language and culture in order to fit. This rejection has ultimately resulted in a regrettable disconnect between him and his family.

*As a family, we don't talk much and that's the real interesting dynamic of my household. I don't talk much with my mom or my sister because we don't have all that much in common in terms of our interests and they have never really made that much of an effort to get to know what I like. I was always against like Mariachi music and stuff that interests them. I always just wanted to be American. I always wanted to do American things, and not stuff that related to my Mexican heritage. Which is sad, I know it's sad, but I just never liked it the traditional Mexican music.*

*I'm not that in line with my heritage, which is unfortunate. I don't feel a connection to México because I've never seen México. I want to see México, but I try not to think about it. I don't want to isolate myself from the American culture because I so desperately want to be part of it [American culture]. I don't want to be out casted so, I've neglected the Mexican culture for the most part. My Spanish has suffered over the years. It's gotten worse and worse 'cause I just don't speak it as often as I should be. I also don't know what's going on in Latino pop culture*

Alejandro firmly believed that assimilating to the mainstream society would automatically result in his social acceptance. Assimilation occurred at the expense of weakening ties to his native language and culture, and ultimately it was not enough to be accepted by the dominant culture. CRT and LatCrit would suggest that Alejandro's assimilation was influenced by policies created by the dominant culture in order to promote monolingualism and monoculturalism, which continue to uphold White privilege (Villenas & Deyhle, 1999, p.427). Anti- Immigration legislation also contributes to upholding White privilege, but most importantly it also contributes to the marginalization of undocumented students. It affects the self and social identity of undocumented students because they are constantly viewed as criminals and negatively stereotyped. Alejandro shares his frustration about being stereotyped for being undocumented.

*The stigma that goes along with being undocumented is that I'm either a drug dealer or a drug user. It bothers me that it always gets projected through the mainstream that all undocumented people are criminals and use or sell drugs. I'm not going to sit here and say that it doesn't happen; I know full right that it does happen, but that's not the majority of the population. The majority of the undocumented population, in my opinion, are hardworking people that take on some of the hardest jobs, some of the most labor-intensive jobs because that's how badly they want to make it and they want to live.*

*Another stereotype that bothers me about being undocumented is that I just came yesterday [immigrated] and that I don't understand English. I know English and I can speak English just as good as any other person and it's an assumption that bothers me.*

While Alejandro has experienced many forms of oppression, he shared that the most difficult aspect about being undocumented is feeling like a social outcast.

Alejandro's narrative clearly demonstrates that he did everything he could to belong to American society. However, current immigration legislation restricts Alejandro from furthering his education and from ever practicing his profession.

*I believe the U.S. system has failed me. But you see that's the thing, I was never meant to be part of this system, 'cause I'm undocumented. I feel it's failed me in that I'm not able to pursue the careers that I want to because I'm undocumented. For the most part your career is how you're defined in social realms. People want to know what you do for a living and not so much who you are as a person. I am a social outcast because I am working in a job that a typical immigrant works in. I could be doing more with my major, but my [residency] status restricts me from doing so.*

CRT and LatCrit would also suggest that Alejandro has been failed by current United States educational policies and immigration legislation. LatCrit theory acknowledges that undocumented Latino/as experience layers of subordination based on immigration status, culture, and language (Yosso, 2006). Alejandro and many other undocumented students have and will continue to be marginalized by racist systemic policies unless immigration reform occurs.

## **Chapter 8: Findings**

### **We Wear the Mask**

We wear the mask that grins and lies,  
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—  
This debt we pay to human guile;  
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,  
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise,  
In counting all our tears and sighs?  
Nay, let them only see us, while  
We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries  
To thee from tortured souls arise.  
We sing, but oh the clay is vile  
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;  
But let the world dream otherwise,  
We wear the mask!  
- Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906)

### **Introduction**

Alejandra, Cristal, Alejandro, and Javier are four completely different human beings; however, their struggles with navigating life as Latino/a undocumented students are overwhelmingly similar. Alejandro compared his life and the life of most undocumented students to the poem “We Wear Our Mask” written by Paul Laurence Dunbar. The poem was written as a representation of the pain and subordination that African Americans masked during the era of segregation, and now a century later this poem resonates to another minority group who are also victims of the dominant culture. According to Alejandro, this poem represents the Latino/a undocumented students who have to navigate life in fear and in constant disillusion of policies that inhibit their existence in this country.

In the previous four chapters I presented individual narratives of the four participants of the study, where they addressed how being undocumented (a) affected their pre-collegiate educational experiences, (b) affected their higher education experiences, and (c) defined their personal meaning of the label undocumented. I drew from their narratives and utilized Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) lenses to illuminate the uncertainties that each participant experiences due to policies and laws which restrict each of them from upward social mobility. With CRT and LatCrit lenses I also illuminated the explicit forms of subordination that they individually experience because of their undocumented status.

This chapter will focus on revealing the similarities and differences among the frequent themes that arouse from their individual narratives regarding their definition of “undocumented.” I will present the themes according to the research questions, which are organized according to their academic trajectory. I will also present reflections from three of the four participants who attended a focus group, and shared their experience with narrative inquiry.

## **Pre- Collegiate Experiences**

### **Border-Crossing Experience**

Alejandra, Cristal, Alejandro, and Javier immigrated to the United States at different ages and in different manners, yet the motives for their immigration was similar. They were all brought to the United States by one or both of their parents with hopes of providing their children a better life that consisted of socioeconomic stability, opportunity, and safety. As single parents, Alejandro’s and Cristal’s mothers brought their children to this country because they needed the emotional support from extended

family members to provide for their family who were already residing in this country. They felt that their children would be raised in a safe environment, in a country that could provide more opportunities than their native country could. Unlike Alejandro and Cristal, Javier and Alejandra immigrated with both their parents; however, they also immigrated because their parents felt that residing in the United States would open doors of opportunities that would never be available to them in México.

The border-crossing experience was similar for Alejandro and Alejandra because they were young when they last immigrated to the United States. They clearly remember the experience, and while the way that they physically crossed was safer than then the way most immigrants cross, it does not minimize the potential dangers and psychological trauma that the immigration journey causes. Javier and Cristal experienced firsthand psychological trauma due to their immigration journey. Javier shared that it was both an emotional and frightening experience to be detained by the United States Border Patrol. Javier's family was locked up in a detention center, and their lives were at the mercy of a United States judicial agency. It is emotionally damaging for any child to be incarcerated and even more damaging to have to hear that his family may be separated because his father could have been detained for numerous years because of his multiple attempts to immigrate illegally to the United States.

Cristal's immigration journey was equally traumatic, but for different reasons. Cristal immigrated when she was 15 years old; therefore, the risk of being caught by United States Border Patrol and being deported was greater than the risk faced by a young child. Along with having a higher probability of being deported, Cristal was at a higher risk of physically being hurt or sexually abused by a coyote [human smuggler],

immigrant, or other person of power. Because Cristal immigrated alone, she was at the mercy of the coyote, who in most instances are not typically concerned with the physical and emotional well being of the immigrants. Cristal described her immigration journey as traumatic, frightening, nerve wrecking, and so emotionally damaging that if she were ever deported from the United States she would never immigrate to this country illegally again.

Cristal, Alejandra, Javier, and Alejandro are four of the millions of undocumented immigrants who risk their lives to come to this country for an opportunity at economic stability, and safety, and to achieve the American Dream. The participants never imagined that achieving the American Dream is something that most families in this country will never achieve, especially undocumented families.

### **English Language Dominance and Attempt at Assimilation**

Regardless of the age when the four participants first attended school in the United States, they all shared feelings different from their native born peers because of their initial inability to speak English. At one point they all felt shame and felt less intelligent for being classified as English Language Learners. In elementary school, Alejandro made the connection that the smart kids in school were the students who knew English and were enrolled in English only courses. Alejandro felt that English Language Learners were viewed as inferior and that they were not expected to do well academically; therefore, he bought into the racist academic policies and procedures created by the dominant culture which enforce the ideal of meritocracy and English language dominance. Alejandro believed that in order to be socially accepted, he needed



to learn English and immerse himself completely into the American culture even if it was at the expense of losing his native language and background.

Cristal shared that she immediately felt a sense of exclusion and inferiority due to not knowing the English language. During her first day of high school in the United States, her teacher ridiculed her by presenting her to all her peers as the new student who did not know English. Cristal was mortified that she would be known as the new girl who didn't understand English. To make matters worse, Cristal described her first year in high school as alienating and uneventful. She was unable to communicate with her English-speaking teachers, and the teachers who could speak Spanish did not communicate with her in her native language because they were instructed by their supervisors not to do so. In México, Cristal had consistently been a high achieving student, but because of a language barrier she became a victim of an inequitable education.

Javier also felt a sense of inferiority and self-doubt because of his inability to understand English. He felt frustrated because he was placed in English Language Development courses for all subject matters when in fact the math and science curriculum he was being exposed to in the U.S. he had completed one-year prior in his native country. He felt that he could have done better academically than what was expected of him, but his teachers could not see past his English language deficiency. Struggles with word problems caused Javier to earn a C in math, which was a subject he had always excelled in. This experience only solidified to Javier that he needed to learn the English language as soon as possible and caused him to doubt his intelligence. He believed that to become that exceptional student that he had always strived to be, he

needed to master English and to be removed from the English Language Development program as soon as possible.

Similar to Cristal's experience, Alejandra also remembers that her first day of school in the U.S. was far from being academically stimulating. She shared that unable to comprehend her English-speaking teacher, she spent the entire day coloring. Alejandra described herself as being lucky that she was young when she first immigrated to this country because it allowed her to learn the English language and to integrate quickly into the culture with ease.

Discriminatory educational policies and inequitable actions taken by faculty and staff consistently excluded the four participants from an equitable education and caused them to at one point of their academic trajectory feel inferior to their native-born peers. They felt inferior because their Spanish language dominance and accepted that in order to fit into the American culture and excel academically, they had to learn the English language. Unfortunately, in some instances their attempt at assimilation was at the expense of feeling shame about their native culture and language.

### **Institutional and Social Barriers**

The institutional and social barriers of being an undocumented student became an unfortunate reality to the four participants at similar times during their lives. While they did their best to assimilate to the U.S. culture, they realized that no matter how much they excelled academically or identified as being American, as undocumented students they were never going to be treated equally like their native born peers. They learned that meritocracy did not exist for undocumented students and that they would be excluded institutionally and socially because of their residency status.

For all participants realizing that not being eligible to get a driver's license or to legally work, was life altering. Alejandro defined not being able to get a driver's license as "torturing" because he was excluded from social activities, and even more difficult was explaining to his friends why he didn't have a driver's license. Alejandro was forced to lie to his friends about why he did not have a license, so he would not have to disclose his undocumented status. It was also during high school when Alejandro realized that he needed to find a job in order to assist his family financially, and although he knew that he couldn't legally work and that he didn't want to break any laws, he was left with no other choice but to seek employment. He needed to contribute to his family's expenses and to finance his college education.

Javier and Alejandra also found it difficult to not be able to legally drive and work, but the institutional barrier that most drastically shattered their dreams and solidified the inequalities that undocumented students experience was their not being eligible for financial aid. Javier and Alejandra had excelled in and out of the classroom during high school. They both graduated in the top of their class and were accepted to the university of their choice, but the reality of paying \$35,000 dollars a year for tuition while being from a low-socioeconomics background and not being eligible for state or federal financial aid made it impossible for them to attend. Javier and Alejandra became disillusioned about their academic future, but rather than giving up on higher education all together, they decided to attend a community college upon graduating from high school.

Cristal and Alejandro also attended a community college upon graduating from high school; however, they never intended to pursue a higher education. They had

excelled academically in high school, but unlike Alejandra and Javier they were not presented with the idea and possibility of attending college until their senior year in high school. Cristal and Alejandro were victims of a broken educational system that often fails to acknowledge talented students like them. Their high school counselor who evaluated their academic records and determined that they were high academic achieving students, who could be successful at an institution of higher education, presented them both with the option of attending a community college. Their counselor also presented them with a scholarship opportunity, which they were awarded, utilizing the funds to pay for their first year of community college tuition.

Whether or not they had followed a college preparatory curriculum in high school, the four participants attended a community college after their graduation. For Alejandra and Javier, attending a community college signified disappointment and ultimately a form of settling because their undocumented status restricted them from any other institution of high education. For Alejandro and Cristal, attending a community college was something that occurred unexpectedly, and while it was their only choice for higher education, it was a choice they had never considered.

Throughout their narratives the participants shared the multiple pre-collegiate experiences that were impacted by their undocumented status. They attempted to assimilate to the dominant culture, learned the English language, excelled academically, and bought into the ideal of meritocracy; but time and time again they were explicitly excluded from the opportunity of an equitable education and viewed as inferior because of their non-native background.

## **Collegiate Experiences**

Institutional and social barriers became evident to the four participants during the latter years of their high school education, but even more evident during their collegiate years. While were legally entitled to a K-12 education because of *Plyer v. Doe* (1982), exclusion and differential treatment based on their undocumented status influenced their academic trajectory. Race-neutral instruction and academic policies created by the dominant culture mask the explicit forms of subordination that undocumented students encounter; however, at the collegiate level discriminatory practices are no longer masked which makes it nearly impossible for undocumented students to experience a comprehensive collegiate experience or even more disheartening is that these practices make it nearly impossible for undocumented students to ever earn a baccalaureate degree.

## **Financial Aid**

One of the most challenging collegiate institutional barriers mentioned by the four participants throughout their narratives was their inability to qualify for federal or state financial aid because of their undocumented status. They are all from low-socioeconomic backgrounds with families struggling to make ends meet; therefore, financing a higher education becomes an even bigger challenge for the family. Although undocumented students in California can legally pursue a higher education and pay in-state tuition under state law AB540, the fees are still unaffordable for most immigrant families. To not place additional economic burdens on their families, the four participants have financed their higher education with merit-based scholarships or with the earnings from their employment. They shared that unlike their native born peers who qualify for financial aid and have the opportunity to fully integrate into the collegiate life, as undocumented

students they do not have the luxury to participate in extra-curricular activities as much as they would like because of time constraints. Along with working a minimum of 20 hours a week and attending college full-time, they all have responsibilities at home, which include taking care of their younger siblings.

### **Social Integration**

Time constraint is one of the factors that the participants mentioned limiting their integration into the social aspect of college life, but another factor that was identified to their limited social integration was that their inability to present legal identification cards during social outings at adult only locations. In order to avoid the embarrassment of being denied admission to such settings, they simply avoid participating in social events, which require an identification card. However, the repercussion of not having a valid identification card or driver's license is much more than being denied admission to adult only locations. Not having a valid driver's license or identification card excludes undocumented students from basic rights such as voting, opening bank accounts at most financial institutions, establishing credit, going to R-rated movies, buying cell phones, and it is even complicated receiving official documents such as academic transcripts (Gonzales, 2011; Abrego & Gonzales, 2010;).

The embarrassment of being restricted admission to locations where valid identification cards are required, and not being able to legally drive excludes undocumented college students from socially integrating, but even more victimizing is that undocumented students are cheated from the opportunity of establishing and maintaining meaningful friendships. Alejandro shared that being restricted from attending a university due to lack of financial resources and not being able to partake in

most adult only outings for not having a valid identification card has damaged the childhood friendship that he once had with Andrew. They grew apart because Andrew had the opportunity to move away to a university, and he was able to fully partake in all aspects of the university experience. It is unfortunate that the cause for the deterioration of Alejandro and Andrew's friendship was caused by institutional barriers, which restrict undocumented students from living an equitable life.

### **Internships and Study Abroad**

Leisure time and social integration is something that the four participants have sacrificed at some point during their higher education trajectory, and while it has been difficult for them having to sacrifice such important aspects of the college life, they have found it even more difficult to sacrifice participation in internships and study abroad programs because of their undocumented status. They all have excelled academically and quite often are more than qualified to participate in an internship, but they are dismissed from the opportunity because they do not have a valid identification or the ability to legally work in this country.

Not having legal documentation also prohibits the students from participating in study abroad programs because they are not able to legally enter the U.S. upon completion of the study program. Victims of an inequitable collegiate experience, they find exclusion from internships and study abroad programs demoralizing and discouraging. Being restricted from such educational experiences explicitly deters them from a comprehensive higher education experience.

## **Professional Employment**

An even harsher reality for the participants and a recurring theme throughout their narratives is that without the passing of the DREAM Act or another immigration reform that leads to a pathway of legal U.S. residency, their baccalaureate degree will simply be another academic accolade. Without the ability to gain legal U.S. residency, undocumented students who earn a baccalaureate degree will not be able to reap the intended benefits of earning a four-year degree, such as upward socioeconomic mobility and full integration to U.S. society. This unfortunate reality is extremely apparent for Cristal and Javier whose graduation is soon approaching. Javier shared that as a Business Administration major it will impossible to find employment without legal documentation. Even though his interest is in corporate business, he shared that if given the opportunity he would work in any aspect of business in order to be able to practice his profession. Compromise is yet another sacrifice that undocumented students often make because of the restrictions they face within their academic and personal lives. Javier stated that if he were unable to gain employment within the business realm, he would be forced to continue playing in the mariachi in order to economically survive in this country.

Unlike Javier, the reality of being unable to gain employment in her field of study has caused Cristal to reconsider her future. Cristal was once optimistic about the future of undocumented students in this country, but traumatic psychological events that she has endured in recent years drastically eroded the resiliency that she once had. Cristal identifies as being American and aspired to achieve the American Dream, but now realizes that for undocumented immigrants the American Dream is not attainable. She shared that she is tired of living in fear of being deported and living in the shadows. She



is also tired of being identified as a criminal for being forced to work and drive illegally in order to exist in this society. Cristal has experienced multiple forms of oppression and subordination as an undocumented student in the U.S but she desires nothing more than to be given the opportunity to legally live and work in this country. Yet she is fully aware that immigration reform may not occur by the time she earns her undergraduate degree, and if that is the case, she is considering moving to another country where she may be eligible for basic rights such as driving with a license, legally working, and having health care.

Cristal, Alejandra, Javier, and Alejandro are all at different levels in their higher education seeking distinctive degrees, but being undocumented has caused them to experience similar forms of institutional and societal exclusion and subordination. They are victims of institutional barriers such as ineligibility for financial aid, exclusion from internship and study abroad opportunities, and the ability to legally practice their profession. Although their collegiate experiences have consisted of many obstacles and unfortunate revelations because of their undocumented status, the most inspiring commonality among their lives is that their dedication to higher education has never wavered.

### **Definition of Undocumented**

As Abrego and Gonzales (2010) state, “undocumented Latino students face a complicated maze of contradictions, misinformation, and numerous roadblocks to education and prosperity” (p. 147). Alejandro, Javier, Cristal, and Alejandra have excelled academically throughout their educational trajectory; however, it has not been an easy road. When asked about how they navigate their lives in the United States as

undocumented students, they shared personal stories about moments and situations where they have all experienced shame, humiliation, self-doubt, fear, marginalization, and alienation because of the multiple forms of oppression that academic and institutional policies subordinate this student population. They have all felt less intelligent than their native born peers because of their Spanish language dominance. The shame of being viewed as different or non-native influenced the level of secrecy that the participants took on disclosing their immigration status.

Alejandro navigated his K-12 education as an undocumented student by disclosing his residency status the least possible. He made every effort to ignore his immigration status, and instead focused on assimilating to the American culture.

Alejandro described feeling like a social outcast for being undocumented, which resulted in him feeling shame and reserved about his residency status. However, institutional barriers such as not being able to legally work or drive made it impossible for Alejandro to keep his undocumented status from his close friends. He indicated that it was not until he attended community college where he felt comfortable enough to disclose his status to peers with similar backgrounds or who are sensitive to the struggles that undocumented students encounter.

Unlike Alejandro, Cristal, Alejandra, and Javier were more open about disclosing their undocumented status to teachers, staff, and peers during their K-12 and community college years. They found that interacting with other undocumented students and participating in immigration reform rallies or conferences not only served as motivation to them, but they also felt that it was their responsibility to educate individuals with anti-immigrant sentiment about the needs and benefits of passing reform such the DREAM

Act. Unfortunately their openness about disclosing their undocumented status and their participation in immigration reform rallies has slowly diminished due to the aggressive anti-immigration sentiment acts that have occurred such as the passing of Arizona's Senate Bill 1070 (SB 1070) and the multiple immigration raids conducted in the cities that they reside in by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). According to Fisher, Deason, Borgida, and Oyamoto (2011), SB 1070 "demands that Arizona police attempt to determine a person's immigration status if there is reasonable suspicion that the person is an illegal immigrant" (p. 286). "SB 1070 not only enables, but compels severe penalties for illegal immigration: It prohibits state, county, or local officials from limiting or restricting the enforcement of federal immigration laws to less than the full extent permitted by federal law" (Fisher et al., 2011, p. 286). Laws like SB 1070 open the doors of opportunity for law enforcement to racially profile Latino/as as criminals, which puts innocent undocumented students at a higher risk of deportation.

Cristal and Javier expressed that another factor that contributed to their lack of involvement in immigration reform activities was that they no longer felt that their institution of higher education was a safe environment. While they attended Pine Tree Community College (PTCC), they felt comfortable advocating for immigration reform because they felt the climate at PTCC was welcoming and safe because of the large Latino/a immigrant student population. Additionally, they credit the safe and welcome environment to numerous clubs and organizations on the PTCC campus, which focused on serving the academic needs of immigrant students. Cristal and Javier shared that similar immigrant advocacy clubs and organizations are non-existent at California State University, which is the university they both attend. They felt that it was challenging

enough to navigate the transition from a community college to a university as a Latino/a first-generation and low-income student, adding the additional stress of focusing on immigration advocacy was something neither could continue investing their time in. As Hospitality Management and Business Administration majors, they have both experienced explicit exclusion from academic opportunities, which only contributed to their hesitation and fear of disclosing their status.

Alejandra is the only participant who continues to actively advocate for immigration reform. The passing of anti-immigrant laws and recent U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids has not deterred her from advocating for social justice, but it has influenced her to take precaution about what she participates in and to what extent. She is no longer comfortable speaking in front of the media or allowing her real name to be printed in publications that disclose her immigration status.

Alejandra continues her advocacy work by volunteering with immigrant groups, and by educating her classmates through classroom discussions. As a Peace and Conflict Studies major, she shared that discussions regarding immigration reform are well received by her instructors and non-native born peers. Unfortunately, Cristal, Javier, and Alejandro have not felt that same acceptance by their teachers or peers in their major courses.

Whether they serve as advocates for immigration reform or not, the reality for Alejandra, Cristal, Alejandro, and Javier is similar. They are victims of a broken immigration and educational system. They have lived in the United States for the majority of their lives and consider themselves American, but anti-immigrant sentiments and policies prove to them otherwise. Through their individual narratives they defined

“undocumented” by illuminating discriminatory practices and barriers which denies them the opportunity to upward social mobility and to barely exist in this country.

Alejandro, Javier, Cristal, and Alejandra have experienced many moments of academic self-doubt, exclusion, and discouragement, but there is no doubt that the most prevalent theme among their narratives is their resiliency. The common motivator to their resiliency and constant drive to succeed academically is their family. They acknowledge that their families have many multiple sacrifices to immigrate and to live in the U.S. in order to provide their children an opportunity at a prosperous life. While none of their parents have a formal education from their native country, the four participants shared that when they succeeded academically, it brought great joy and pride to their parents which was an inspiration for the participants to continue being resilient to the obstacles that they face daily. They were all able to reframe the negative experiences of being viewed as less- than or treated inequitably to their native born peers because they all believe that the knowledge that comes from education is power, which is something that their parents were never able to attain and had hoped their children could. They also credited their resiliency to wanting to serve as role models to their younger siblings. Javier, Alejandro, and Alejandra shared that while they have struggled to navigate higher education as undocumented students, it is their hopes that their struggles will serve as motivation to their native-born siblings. They want their siblings to pursue a higher education, and to not settle by being an average student. They want their siblings to take advantage of all the academic opportunities that they were excluded from for being undocumented. The participants want their siblings to reach their highest academic and

professional potentials because as undocumented students they were cheated from those opportunities.

### **Conclusion**

There is no doubt that American society has established covert and overt policy that borders on entrapping undocumented citizens to make choices of having to work and drive illegally because of economic burdens. Undocumented Latino/a students encounter a myriad of social and institutional barriers, which result in feelings of exclusion, shame, anger, fear, doubt, and marginalization. The findings of this study were consistent with the limited literature which is available regarding how Latino/a undocumented students navigate higher education. The findings demonstrate that most undocumented Latino/a students found being “undocumented” demoralizing because despite their academic achievements and attempt at U.S. assimilation, they are faced with the reality that meritocracy and equality is non-existent for them.

During their K-12 education, they experienced exclusion because of their Spanish language dominance, low socioeconomic background, ineligibility to various academic programs, and exclusion from getting a driver’s license. At the collegiate level, the exclusion they encountered was even more explicit. The participants continued to excel academically at the community college and university levels, but regardless of their academic accomplishments they are excluded from receiving financial aid, study abroad, and internship opportunities. Their entire academic trajectory was at the mercy of inequitable academic policies. The participants were forced to choose class schedules according to the availability of public transportation, forced to choose majors which are not restricted to internship or licensing requirements, and even more unfortunate most of

them were forced at one point or another to stop out from attending college for one to several semesters because of their lack of financial resources. The financial burden of not being eligible for financial aid and having to pay for a higher education not only negatively affects the undocumented students, it also their families. According to Diaz-Strong et al. (2011) few undocumented students are able to gather enough financial resources, even with the sacrifice of the entire family, to pursue higher education (p. 117). The undocumented students who do access higher education struggle to persist as the expenses are not limited to tuition. Lack of financial resources affects the number of classes they take, whether they have books, whether they have the means to afford public transportation, or money for gas and parking (Diaz-Strong et al., 2011, p. 115). Higher education persistence is also a struggle for most undocumented students because family financial need forces them to contribute economically. Alejandro is an example of an academically talented undocumented student who because of his familial responsibilities, and ineligibility to receive financial aid he will not be transferring to a university upon completing his Associate's degree at Pine Tree Community College. According to Gonzales (2010), "as family need requires undocumented youth to make significant financial contributions and to assume, considerable responsibility for their own care, they become less likely to linger in adolescence" (p. 605). The need to financially and emotionally contribute to their family's well being forced Alejandro, Javier, Cristal, and Alejandra to transition from adolescence to adulthood very early in their lives. However, on the other hand institutional barriers restrict undocumented students like Alejandro, Javier, Cristal, and Alejandra to fully participate in adult activities, which ultimately prohibit them from fully transitioning to adulthood (Gonzales, 2010).

The four participants of this study shared that out of necessity they matured at a faster pace than most of their peers. They also shared that they felt that they had more financial and familial responsibilities than most of their native born classmates, but because of their undocumented status they are excluded from the rights and benefits that are awarded to U.S. born citizens or residents. They are excluded from being able to legally drive, are excluded from entering most establishments such as nightclubs or bars, and even more unfortunate they are excluded from practicing their profession after graduating with a baccalaureate degree. As a result of current immigration laws that prohibit undocumented students to practice their profession, their “options are to remain chronically unemployed in the illegal labor market, return to their country of origin, or continue education at great personal expense until laws change” (Ortiz & Hinojosa, 2010, p. 63-64).

Regardless of their uncertain future and the various forms of subordination and psychological trauma that the four participants encounter, Alejandro, Javier, Cristal, and Alejandra continue to identify with the American culture and yearn for an opportunity to gain legal residency in the U.S. so they can reach their highest academic and professional potential in the country they have lived in for the majority of their lives. The participants’ resiliency is fueled by their desire to make their parents proud and to serve as role models for their younger siblings. Their resiliency is also fueled by their desire to learn and to be accepted as educated and contributing members of society. The four participants also found that having familial and navigational support from family, faculty, staff, and peers has made it possible for them to psychologically overcome the constant obstacles that they are faced with.



## Focus Group Reflections

During our last encounter, where we met as a group, three participants shared that their participation in this study reminded them that they were not alone, and that many Latino/a undocumented students are experiencing similar forms of subordination and psychological trauma. Javier shared that our individual meetings and our group meeting reminded him that he was not alone and it inspired him to continue his higher education.

*I felt empowered [after the individual meetings]. Especially during our second meeting when we discussed what I would want other undocumented students to know. When we discussed the fact that being undocumented should not be a barrier to doing something with your life. You shouldn't be like porque no tengo papeles no puedo hacer ciertas cosas [because I do not have papers, I can't do certain things]. Mas bien [rather than thinking that because he does not have papers], after our meetings I felt pretty good. I felt uplifted. I also felt like weight was lifted off my shoulders because I don't really talk to people about my status. So it felt good to talk to someone about it.*

*This focus group has made me realize that I am not alone. Hearing each other's stories gives me inspiration to keep going. It just reignited my flame. I have been feeling pretty low the last couple of semesters being at California State University. It's a lot different to being at Pine Tree Community College. You feel a lot more support for undocumented students at PTCC and you know of a lot more students who are undocumented. You are able to talk to them and at CSU you feel more alone because no one is going to share if they are undocumented or not. I feel good that someone else will read our stories who are probably feeling the same thing that I am feeling right now and who may learn from our struggles or relate to them.*

Similar to Javier, Alejandra experienced feelings of relief after participating in this study and being able to share her life story. She also shared that reading her own narrative reminded her that being undocumented is much more than being treated inequitably in an educational setting, its about always having to navigate social and institutional barriers.

*I felt relieved after our meetings. I felt like weight was taken off of my shoulders. It's different knowing your story than sharing and talking about it. I have been really open about my status, but it's still a relief every time I get to talk about it*

*because for that moment when you are sharing you don't feel like you are living under the shadows. You get to share what you are going through and it was a stress reliever. I felt good!*

*I thought it was interesting and realized after reading my narrative how I define being undocumented. Being undocumented is more than not just having papers. It's more than that, its about all the struggles and obstacles that we have to go through on our daily lives. Not just big things, but also the small ones like driving or taking our siblings to school. Being undocumented is more than just the academic aspect of it. When I was younger I thought that being undocumented only affected my ability to attend a university after high school. After reading my narrative and getting older, I realize it is way more than that.*

Alejandro described his participation in this narrative study as an inspiration to reflect on his life. He realized that he was not as in touch with his Mexican heritage as he would have liked. He updated the group on the changes he has made in order to be more connected to the Mexican culture. During the focus group meeting, Alejandro realized that he was like many other Latino males who were raised to be private about their personal struggles because discussing them can be viewed as a sign of weakness.

Alejandro made this connection after hearing Javier share his story.

*It may be a guy thing, but I don't usually like talking about my feelings, much like Javier. I especially don't like talking about my status. I think that is the way that society teaches us that guys don't cry or are supposed to be emotional, but its concepts that we really need to move away from. Immediately after our meetings I don't remember much, but when I go to sleep I process things. When I was processing I realized that a lot of things I shared were bad traits. I shared that I don't listen to a lot of Spanish music and I don't speak Spanish as much as I should. I reflected that I needed to be more into my own heritage and that everyone should try to do the same. After our first meeting I changed one of my radio stations in my car to a Spanish station. At work most of the people speak predominately Spanish and they listen to Spanish stations like Piolin. I started to really listen to the music and liked some of them and that's how it starts off. You like one song and then you start to like more little by little. I also started to be more open about my status after our meetings. It's frustrating when people constantly ask me why I don't do certain things like apply for certain jobs or do certain things. After a while I don't want to hear it and I think I would do things if I could, but I can't. So instead of avoiding the questions, I have started to be a bit more transparent by letting people know of my situation and help them understand what I go through. So hopefully when they go home they can think or reflect that their life is not as bad as they think that it is compared to ours. And*

*that works vice versa as well. For example I have a classmate from one of my accounting courses who shared that she was attending a California State University, but is now attending PTCC because her mom had some kind of surgery and she had to move back home to help her mom with the recovery. Not only does she have to take care of her sick mom and dad, but also has to pay for her school expenses and take care of lots of responsibilities. That makes me think like wow I am fortunate that no one in my family is ill right now. I realize that it can happen at any time, but I have to appreciate the fact that they are not. I have to be thankful that I have good health and my family does also. I now talk to people more about life and aware of what's going on.*

The focus group served as a safe place for reflection. The participants reflected on the similarities and differences of how they navigate life as undocumented students. They also reflected on their experience with their participation in this narrative study. The focus group also served as the space where I shared my reflections about the narrative process from a researcher's perspective. Utilizing narrative inquiry allowed me to illuminate the stories and struggles of the four participants in this study. Analyzing their narratives with Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) theoretical frameworks opened my eyes to the inexplicit and explicit institutional injustices that undocumented students encounter. CRT and LatCrit acknowledges that educational policies are inequitable and often discriminate students based on their race, gender, socioeconomic and immigration status; therefore, utilizing these theories as theoretical frameworks allowed me to analyze the participant's individual narratives without reservation or having to be apologetic. I was humbled by this research experience, and while sometimes frustrated and upset that I could not do more for this student population I realized that by illuminating the forms of oppression that Alejandro, Javier, Cristal, and Alejandra go through, it will someday impact social change.

## **CHAPTER 9: DISCUSSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Discussion**

In chapter 8, I presented a thematic analysis of the narratives of the four participants of this study. This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section will revisit the research questions of this study and will address the research findings as compared to the literature review. The second section will provide recommendations for further research, and lastly the third section will conclude with my reflections of the study.

### **Research Question 1**

**What role has the designation of “undocumented” played in the pre-collegiate educational experiences of the Latino/a undocumented college students?**

Several themes regarding navigating a K-12 education in the U.S. as undocumented students emerged from the narratives of my four participants. They shared similar academic and social experiences facing discrimination, subordination, and exclusion because of their undocumented status. They also shared similarities of how they academically and socially persisted.

According to the four participants, one of the greatest educational challenges they encountered as immigrant students was exclusion because of their initial lack of English language knowledge. Current U.S. K-12 curriculum does not support English language learners and also often excludes the cultural backgrounds of immigrant students (Gildersleeve & Ranero, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Villenas & Deyhle, 1999). Alejandro, Javier, Cristal, and Alejandra learned early on in their academic trajectory that neither their native language nor cultural backgrounds were validated by academic policies or personnel. They all felt incompetent at one point or another as English

learners and made every attempt to assimilate to the American culture as soon as they could. However, even with their numerous attempts at assimilation, they were excluded from academic opportunities awarded to their native-born peers. They are all examples of how being an academic honors student does not guarantee an equitable education.

Alejandro, categorized in elementary school as an academically gifted child, continued to excel throughout high school, yet he was not approached about the possibility of pursuing a higher education until his senior year in high school. Cristal was also a victim of the educational pipeline as she was not approached with the option of pursuing a higher education until the end of her senior year, which resulted in community college being her only option for higher education.

Alejandra and Javier believed in the idea of meritocracy early on in their education. While they knew they were undocumented, they believed that by excelling academically and being university-ready they would be able to attend the university of their choice upon high school graduation. The harsh reality of being ineligible for federal or state financial aid and being from low-socioeconomic backgrounds solidified to Alejandra and Javier that meritocracy and equality do not apply to undocumented students like them. The privately funded merit based scholarships they had been awarded were not enough to finance the tuition for their first quarter at the university of their choice, let alone an entire academic career.

The four participants were not only excluded from receiving financial aid during their pre-collegiate years, but also discovered they were excluded from numerous rites of passage associated with adulthood. During their high school years, they realized that as undocumented immigrants they were not eligible to legally drive, work, or even vote.

According to Gonzales (2011), undocumented youth experience three transitional periods between adolescence and adulthood. The discovery period occurs between the ages of 16 to 18, which is when undocumented students realize they will encounter extreme legal limitations that negatively alter their lives (Gonzales, 2011, p. 608). Between the ages of 18 to 24 undocumented youth transition to the learning to be illegal period, and during this period undocumented youth “struggle with the new restrictions in their lives and struggle to mitigate their newly stigmatized identities” (Gonzales, 2011, p. 608). Lastly, between the ages of 25 to 29, undocumented youth enter the coping period, which involves “adjusting to lowered aspirations and coming to grips with the possibility that their precarious legal circumstances may never change” (Gonzales, 2011, p. 608).

During the discovery period, Alejandro, Javier, Cristal, and Alejandra experienced anger and frustration with laws which restricted their opportunity at upward social mobility (Gonzales, 2011). They also experienced frustration with their parents for bringing them to a country they have learned to love as their own, but as they have transitioned to adulthood they realized that it is also a country that makes it extremely impossible for undocumented students to fully integrate socially and to prosper economically.

The implication of being undocumented for the participants was no longer just limited to being ineligible for financial aid or not being able to attend a university upon high school completion. According to Alejandro, Javier, Cristal, and Alejandra, being undocumented meant they had to face the reality that out of financial necessity for them and their families to survive in this country, they would have to eventually work and

drive illegally. They also realized that being undocumented would adversely affect their adult lives (Gonzales, 2011).

Legislation, such as *Plyer v. Doe* (1982), which granted undocumented students the legal right to a K-12 education, and acts such as the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, which prevent schools from releasing personal information from students' records to immigration authorities, for the most provides a protected space for undocumented youth (Gonzales, 2011, p. 605). However, the protected space diminishes when undocumented adolescents transition to young adulthood (Gonzales, 2011). According to Alejandro, Javier, Cristal, and Alejandra, their protected space diminished markedly during their collegiate years. They expressed that their transition from adolescence to adulthood was filled with numerous contradictions and disappointments.

## **Research Question 2**

### **What role has the designation of “undocumented” played in the collegiate experiences of the Latino/a college students?**

As Latino/a undocumented college students, the pursuit of higher education has been emotionally and economically challenging for Alejandro, Javier, Cristal, and Alejandra. Their college experience has been influenced by numerous institutional barriers, which have cheated them from an equitable education. “Undocumented Latino students in higher education are the most vulnerable student population within the Latino college population because their status, both as resident and as students, is constantly in flux and at the will of the policy and legal communities” (Contreras, 2009, p. 628). It has been emotionally difficult for the four participants to deal with the fact that even though they are honor roll college students and often ideal candidates for academic opportunities,

such as study abroad, internships, merit and financial need scholarships, and other extracurricular programs, they are often excluded because of their undocumented status. They have consistently been forced to make compromises which have negatively affected their collegiate experiences. Not being able to legally drive and being dependent on public transportation limited their options for course selection and limited their participation in extracurricular activities. Their limited time to participate in extracurricular activities also affected their ability to establish meaningful relationships with faculty, staff, and peers.

While the participants found it challenging to be dependent on public transportation, they found it even more difficult confronting the reality that out of necessity they needed to start driving without a license. As described by Gonzales (2011), it was during college where the four participants were forced “to learn how to be illegal” (p. 608). They did not make the decision to drive without a license to improve their ability to participate in academic or social extracurricular activities. They were forced to start driving without a license because of work, school, and family responsibilities. Family financial need and tuition costs also forced the participants to start working illegally. However, driving and working illegally does not come without implications. Alejandro and Cristal have both experienced humiliation and psychological trauma after being denied or losing employment after they were exposed for presenting false employment documentation. And Javier has experienced economic and legal problems after being cited for driving without a license.

Alejandro, Javier, Cristal, and Alejandra navigate life on campus and in the community in constant stress and fear. They fear encountering legal problems as a result



of driving and working illegally. An even greater fear for them is being deported and separated from their family. However, they continue to pursue a higher education they hope that their academic accomplishments will lead to earning a job where they will financially be able to assist their families and ultimately improve their socioeconomic backgrounds.

### **Research Question 3**

#### **How do Latino/a “undocumented” college students define their personal meaning of the label “undocumented”?**

Alejandro, Javier, Cristal, and Alejandra defined undocumented as much more than being restricted from attending the university of their choice. They defined being undocumented as constantly being restricted from all aspects of U.S. integration and being denied the opportunity at upward socioeconomic mobility. The participants also shared that as undocumented immigrants they are constantly stereotyped as criminals or less than humans.

They have experienced subordination and exclusion because of their unauthorized status. They believed in the idea of meritocracy and aspired to succeed personally, academically, and professionally in this country, but social and institutional barriers have slowly diminished their aspirations (Gonzales, 2011). The participants also believed that the pursuit of higher education would positively impact their lives socially and economically. But without immigration reform, Alejandro, Javier, Cristal, and Alejandro will be prohibited from legally practicing their profession and will face the same limited employment and socioeconomic opportunities as their parents (Gonzales, 2011). Javier and Cristal are soon approaching the reality that they will graduate from a university but will be unable to legally practice their profession in the U.S. They are now both

transitioning into the coping period of being undocumented (Gonzales, 2011). Javier plans to continue working as a mariachi upon graduation, and Cristal is considering moving to a country where she can fully integrate socially, professionally, and economically. While growing up in the U.S. as undocumented students, they never imagined that attaining the American Dream was not going to be an option for them.

Alejandro, Javier, Cristal, and Alejandra defined undocumented from a deficit perspective as being treated inequitably. They are restricted from opportunities and basic rights which influence their everyday existence. They are restricted from legally driving, working, voting, and many other academic and social opportunities. Regardless of their academic successes, attempts to assimilate to the American culture, and continuous efforts to be productive members of society, they have not been accepted by society. They grew up believing in the country's ideals of equality, opportunity, and meritocracy and identified themselves as being American. They learned the English language, excelled academically, and aspired to give back to this country economically and socially; however, policies and laws created by the dominant culture fail to recognize and nurture or sustain or develop the human capital of Latino/a undocumented students (Gonzales, 2011).

## **Recommendations**

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

This study examined how Latino/a undocumented students navigate higher education while being confronted with institutional and social barriers because of their residency status. Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Latino/a Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) frameworks were utilized to analyze the multiple forms of subordination Latino/a

undocumented students encounter throughout their academic trajectory. According to Solórzano, Villalpando, and Oseguera (2005),

College and university structures, practices, and policies, claim to be objective, meritocratic, and color blind in its pursuit of equal educational opportunities for all students, but CRT points to how in practice, higher education adopts practices, norms, and policies, that clearly inhibit the success of Latino/as and other students of color. (p. 287)

Utilizing a narrative inquiry approach and CRT and LatCrit framework, this study illuminated the multiple forms of oppression Latino/a undocumented students are victims of, and illuminated numerous explicit academic practices and policies that discriminate Latino/a undocumented students based on language, socioeconomic background, immigration status, and gender.

Many Latino/a undocumented students will never earn a baccalaureate degree due to the multiple systemic barriers; however, this study demonstrated that with the support of family or other influential people, Latino/a undocumented students are more likely to successfully navigate higher education and earn a college degree. As if it were not challenging enough to navigate higher education as first generation Latino/a college students with limited financial resources due to being ineligible for financial aid and being from low-socioeconomic background, the four participants are forced to choose majors not restricted to undocumented students. They are restricted from pursuing majors which require special credentialing, background checks, and they are restricted from specific internships that require U.S. residency. They are clearly victims of discriminatory policies that restrict undocumented students from an equitable education. Rather than give up on higher education, they are forced to compromise by choosing majors that they are eventually be able to complete. The unfortunate reality is that,

regardless of their earning a baccalaureate degree, current immigration law restricts undocumented students from legally practicing any profession. Without immigration reform in the U.S., Javier and Alejandro may never be employed by a fortune 100 company; Cristal may never work in the hospitality management industry, and Alejandra may never manage a non-profit agency. Without immigration reform it is highly likely Alejandro, Javier, Alejandra, and Cristal will be forced to work in low-paying jobs similar to those of their parents. Once again the talents and potential societal and economic contribution of undocumented students will be wasted.

The research questions of this study addressed how pre-collegiate and collegiate experiences affect the academic trajectory of Latino/a undocumented students. The study did not address how Latino/a undocumented students navigate life after earning a baccalaureate degree. It is important to conduct further research, which addresses the professional and social outcomes of undocumented Latino/a students who earn a bachelor's degree or higher. It is also important to evaluate how denying undocumented Latino/a students the ability to practice their profession upon earning a degree affects this student population socially, economically, and psychologically. Rather than denying undocumented college graduates the opportunity to practice their profession, further research should be conducted on the benefits of permitting undocumented college graduates to practice their profession. It is important to evaluate the outcome of the futures of students like Alejandro, Javier, Cristal, and Alejandra because as a country we should not allow talented individuals to continue living in the shadows

The findings of this study are consistent with Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Latino/a Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) in education literature which suggest that U.S.

academic policies, procedures, and practices are created in a way that marginalize and subordinate students of color (Fernández, 2002; Pérez Huber, Benavides Lopez, Malagon, Velez, & Solórzano, 2008; Pérez Huber, 2009; Solórzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005; Villenas & Deyhle, 1999). While existing data from a study conducted by Perez Huber (2011) illuminates “the institutionalized ways people perceive, understand and make sense of contemporary U.S. immigration, that justifies native (white) dominance, and reinforces hegemonic power—emerge in California public K-12 education for Chicana students,” the findings of this study suggest that it would be beneficial to make sense of how and why the dominant culture justify creating and maintaining academic policies that subordinate Latino/a undocumented college students (p. 379). It is important to understand why the dominant culture fails to acknowledge the cultural and human capital of Latino/a undocumented students and Latino/a undocumented college graduates.

### **Recommendations for Policy Makers**

Findings in this study revealed that immigration reform is needed. With an estimated 65,000 undocumented students graduating annually from United States high schools, changes need to be made to policies that restrict undocumented students from pursuing a higher education, prohibit undocumented students from receiving federal and state financial aid, and even more marginalizing, prohibit undocumented students from legally working in their profession after earning a baccalaureate degree. As discussed in chapter 2, it is imperative that proposed legislature such as the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act be passed into law because it would provide eligible undocumented students the opportunity to receive federal financial aid, and it

would provide a pathway for undocumented students like Alejandro, Javier, Cristal, and Alejandra a pathway to legal United States residency and eventually citizenship.

### **Recommendations to Practitioners**

A recommendation for K-12 academic institutions is that they reevaluate and modify existing policies which subordinate and marginalize Latino/a undocumented students. The findings of this study revealed current academic policies do not support the cultural background of English Language Learners. Rather than viewing Spanish as a deficit, academic policies and curriculum should be created that will be inclusive of English Language Learners and immigrant students of color.

The findings from this study also demonstrated that while undocumented Latino/as students can legally pursue a higher education and pay in-state tuition in California, undocumented students continue to be restricted from a comprehensive college education. Administrators and faculty need to work together when creating the schedule of courses. Often times undocumented students have limited choices when choosing their courses because they are forced to enroll in classes offered during times that align with the public transportation schedule, rather than choosing courses of interest.

As a result of the findings it was also evident many counselors, advising faculty, and staff are still unclear on how to advise undocumented students. It should not be the responsibility of one individual to advise the undocumented student population. It is imperative that all educators have a background on how to better serve this student population. Administrators or seasoned faculty can provide training on policies and laws that affect undocumented students in California. Undocumented students should be informed of the majors which are limited to U.S. residents or citizens early in their

university experience, and there should more internship opportunities for undocumented students.

More importantly, training educators on the cultural background of undocumented Latino/as students is crucial. With cultural competency training, teachers and counselors will have a better understanding of how to work with such a vulnerable student population.

### **Conclusion**

Conducting this research has been one of the most enlightening and humbling experiences of my life. It has been an honor to work with the four participants of this study. I cannot imagine living a life of fear, doubt, disappointment, and disconnect, but that is the life of thousands of undocumented Latino/a students who navigate life in the United States. Prior to working with Alejandro, Javier, Cristal, and Alejandra, I thought I understood the academic and social struggles of the undocumented student population; however, after completing this study, I realized my knowledge was only superficial. The participants' testimonies made me realize that as a counselor I will need to find a balance between providing emotional and institutional support to undocumented students, while keeping social and institutional barriers in mind. The participants' testimonies made me realize that as a counselor I will need to find a balance between providing emotional and institutional support to undocumented students, while keeping social and institutional barriers in mind. This revelation challenged my personal and professional values because, just as the participants, I too had bought into the idea of meritocracy for all. I failed to acknowledge overt and covert institutional and societal racism that oppresses undocumented students of color. According to Scheurich and Young (1997), institutional

racism “exists when institutions or organizations, including educational ones, have standard operating procedures hurt members of one or more races in relation to members of the dominant race” (p. 5). Societal racism “exists when prevailing societal and cultural assumptions, norms, concepts, habits, expectations, favor one or more other races” (Scheurich & Young, 1997, p. 6).

The findings not only solidified my initial assumptions of the subordination that undocumented students encounter, it also illuminated institutional and societal racism that I had initially failed to recognize. I had assumed the passing of Assembly Bill 540 (AB 540) resolved many of the social and financial barriers that undocumented students who wanted to pursue a higher education encountered. I also believed the open access and affordability of the California community college system was the ideal alternative for undocumented students who otherwise could not afford to attend a university upon high school graduation. While I still believe that AB 540 and the California community college system has opened doors of opportunity for undocumented Latino/a students, the findings of this study illuminated that much more needs to be done. The findings demonstrate that regardless of the supposed equity of our postsecondary educational system, undocumented Latino/a students are victims of an inequitable education. As an educator, I believed that regardless of residency status, academic success and degree completion would improve the lives of undocumented students both economically and socially. The findings made it clear that without courageous immigration reform that offers a pathway to residency, undocumented students like Alejandra, Cristal, Javier, and Alejandro will always be nine digits away from fully integrating into this country and from realizing their dreams.



California is gradually acknowledging the importance of providing undocumented students an equitable education as reflected by recent legislation Assembly Bill 130 (AB130) and Assembly Bill 131 (AB131). Effective January 2012, AB130 authorizes AB540 students to apply to privately funded scholarships provided by a California public college/university (Official California Legislative Information, 2011). In January 2013, AB131 will authorize AB 540 students to apply for (a) board of governors' fee waiver, (b) institutional aid, and (c) cal grants (Official California Legislative Information, 2011). While laws such as AB130 and AB131 are excellent strides towards an equitable education for undocumented students, they do not provide a pathway to residency for undocumented students.

After the meetings I had with the participants of this study, I felt mixed emotions. I was inspired by the participants' courage and resiliency towards navigating life as undocumented students, but I also became hopeless and disappointed because current immigration laws fail to acknowledge such talented students who if given the opportunity could continue positively contributing to this country's economy and culture.

Narrative inquiry as the methodology of this study with Critical Race Theory and Latino/a Critical Race Theory as theoretical frameworks illuminated how Alejandro, Javier, Cristal, and Alejandra define being "undocumented." Narrative inquiry validated the participants' stories. The analysis of their personal stories through CRT and LatCrit lenses solidified the reality that the U.S. educational system does not offer "objectivity, meritocracy, color-blindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity" for People of Color and in particular undocumented students (Yosso, 2006, p.7).

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## **APPENDIX A: INITIAL CORRESPONDENCE TO POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS**

Dear Participant,

My name is Mirella Medina Burton, and I am a researcher from Colorado State University in the Education department. We are conducting a research study on how undocumented Latino/a students navigate and define being “undocumented”. The title of our project is “DREAMs Deferred: Testimonies of the Undocumented Latin@ Student Experience.” The Principal Investigator is James H. Banning in the Department of Education and the Co-Principal Investigator is Mirella Medina Burton in the Department of Education

You are receiving this email because throughout the years during our conversations you disclosed that you were undocumented and I would like to invite you to participate in my study. If you agree to participate in the study, you will be asked to participate in two one-on-one 90 minute interviews at places convenient to you and a 2 hour group meeting with 3 other participants at a place convenient to all of you. The first interview will focus on your journey to the United States and your educational experiences both in your native country and in California. The second interview address issues about race, equality, and your experience as an “undocumented” student. The two individual meetings will be digitally recorded and transcribed by me. And in our third and final meeting, I will share the findings that came from the initial two interviews to you and to the other participants in a group setting. I hope that collaboratively we identify themes from the findings and work together in the analytical process of this study. Please keep in mind that you are free to decline to answer questions at any time and you can also stop participation at any time.

Because I understand the sensitivity of the nature of being an undocumented Latino/a student, please know that I will do my best to keep your identity confidential. You will be given a pseudonym, and the college or university that you attend will also be given a pseudonym. Digital recordings, transcriptions, and data collection will be kept in a locked file cabinet at all times. Your agreement to participate in this study also requires that you keep confidential the identity of the other participants of this study.

The benefits of your participation in this study are that you will have the opportunity to educate the readers about what it is like to navigate life as an undocumented student. Also, you will get the opportunity to examine how you define being “undocumented”.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to sign a consent form at our first meeting. As previously stated, you are free to stop participation in this study at any time. Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions about the study, you can contact me at XXX-XXX-XXXX or medinamirella@gmail.com. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact Janell Barker, Human Research Administrator at 970-491-1655.

Thank you,

James H. Banning  
Instructor

Mirella Medina Burton  
Co- Investigator

## **APPENDIX B: FOCUS GROUP EMAIL CORRESPONDENCE TO PARTICIPANTS**

Hello All- I hope that you are having a great semester! First and foremost, I can't thank you enough for participating in my dissertation study and allowing me the opportunity to document your stories. I am extremely humbled and honored.

With that said, the final research step to my study is to host a dialogue session where the five of us can come together and identify common themes amongst your narratives. I will be emailing you your individual narrative prior to our group meeting, so we can discuss your thoughts and reflections about your personal story and how it may be similar to other students in the group.

I am proposing that we meet on Friday, November 11<sup>th</sup> in the afternoon. I am sure that some of you work, so I am proposing 6:00 or 6:30 p.m.? I will provide dinner for all of you. Since the 11<sup>th</sup> is a holiday, we can meet in a classroom near my office that afternoon because classes will not be in session. If the 11<sup>th</sup> does not work for all of you, the second date I am proposing is Saturday, November 26<sup>th</sup> at 11:00 a.m. We can also meet in the classroom near my office on that date. The group dialogue will only be between 60-90 minutes.

Just as a reminder, due to the sensitivity of the topics that will be discussed at our meeting, I ask that you please keep everyone's identity confidential. Thank you again, and I look forward to meeting with all of you.

Mirella

## **APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR UNDOCUMENTED LATINO/A STUDENTS**

### **Session 1**

#### **Interview Questions for All Participants**

1. Please tell me about your childhood memories?
2. When and how did you and your family immigrate to the United States? Where did you immigrate to, and do you remember how you felt? Please explain.
3. Please share about your earliest memories of school in the U.S.
4. Please share about your high school experience?
5. When did you first realize you were undocumented? How did you feel, and how did it affect you?
6. How and when did you decide you were going to college? What obstacles did you encounter with your pursuit of higher education?
7. How and why did you decide to attend the institution of higher education that you did?
8. Describe your community college experience.
9. What is your major and what do you want to do with it?

#### **Interview Questions for University Students**

1. What motivated you to complete your general education and transfer? What are the obstacles that you overcame?
2. Please tell me how your university experience has been?
3. Have you felt supported? What have you done to keep motivated?
4. When do you anticipate graduating?
5. What are your plans upon graduation?

## **APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR UNDOCUMENTED LATINO/A STUDENTS**

### **Session 2**

#### Interview Questions for All Participants

1. Having realized your residency status, how has that shaped you?
2. How has being undocumented shaped who you are in your personal life?
3. What are thoughts about the labels the government utilizes for undocumented students? (i.e., Illegal Alien, Undocumented, Unauthorized, etc.) How have these terms affected you?
4. Have you felt discriminated against in an academic and/or social setting? Please describe how you felt.
5. How did your family influence you in your view of identity?
6. What personal experiences have contributed to your racial identity?
7. How would you describe your integration into the American Culture?
8. How do you think educators, peers, and other community members view undocumented students?